

# Raising Pragmatic Awareness in the EFL Context

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## 1. Introduction

In order to be successful in communication, it is essential for second language learners to know not just grammar and text organization but also pragmatic aspects of the target language (Bachman 1990)<sup>1</sup>. ‘Pragmatic competence’ can be specifically defined as “knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to context” (Kasper 1997). Previous studies in ‘Interlanguage Pragmatics’ (Kasper and Rose 1999; Cohen 1996; Ellis 1994; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993) have shown that differences and similarities exist in how to carry out communicative actions between language learners and native speakers of target languages.

One of the controversial questions is whether ‘pragmatics’ can be taught in the language classroom, especially in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language)<sup>2</sup> context. As pragmatic competence has a close relationship with sociocultural values and beliefs of the country or the community where the target language is spoken, ESL (English as a Second Language) learners certainly have an advantage in acquiring this knowledge. ESL learners have a better chance of having adequate and abundant input than EFL learners. Kasper (1997) and Rose and Kasper (2001) extensively discuss results of previous studies on pragmatic instruction and concludes that pragmatics can indeed be taught. Tateyama et al. (1997) examined the

effects of instruction in pragmatics and demonstrated that Japanese pragmatic routines such as *sumimasen*, which is commonly used for getting attention, apologizing, and expressing gratitude, are teachable to beginning foreign language learners. Kondo (2001) administered Oral Discourse Completion Tasks both before (pre-test) and after (post-test) explicit pragmatic instruction. Comparison of the results of the tests indicated the instructional effects on the development of refusal performance by Japanese EFL learners.

One of the approaches that can be used for teaching pragmatics is awareness-raising. Rose (1994) introduced active video-viewing activities and suggested that an approach using pragmatic consciousness-raising had the distinct advantage of providing learners with a foundation in some of the central aspects of the role of pragmatics, and it could be used by teachers of both native speakers and non-native speakers. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) in her endeavor to bring pragmatics and pedagogy together, stresses the importance of helping learners increase their pragmatic awareness, over a teacher-centered classroom where the teachers “tell” and the learners “receive” the information.

## **2. The Present Study**

### **2.1 Research Goal**

The goal of the present research is to explore what kinds of pragmatic aspects the learners become aware of through explicit instruction in pragmatics. The content of classroom discussion that is intended to raise pragmatic awareness in conducting ‘refusal’ in English is analyzed.

## **2.2 Subjects**

The subjects of the study were 36 Japanese learners of English who majored in English at a junior college in Japan. They were taught in two separate classes, and 18 students were in each class. They were given pragmatic instruction described below as one part of their Integrated English Class, which was a required subject intended to teach the four skills of English.

## **2.3 Instruction**

The students received instruction on speech acts<sup>3</sup> once a week for 12 weeks. Each lesson was 90 minutes long. The content of the twelve lessons were, 1) Compliments & Response to Compliments, 2) Thanking, 3) Interaction (Compliments & Response to Compliments and Thanking), 4) Request, 5) Refusal, 6) Interaction (Request and Refusal), 7) Complaint, 8) Apology, 9) Interaction (Complaint and Apology), 10) Proposal, 11) Disagreement, and 12) Interaction (Proposal and Disagreement).

### **2.3.1 Teaching Material**

The textbook titled *Heart to Heart*, which was developed by the Sophia University Applied Linguistics Research Group (Yoshida et al. 2000), was used for instruction. The book specifically aims to teach cross-cultural pragmatics in the English classroom in Japan. Each lesson is organized progressively in five phases: Feeling, Doing, Thinking, Understanding and Using. These phases are organized to help students to become aware of pragmatic aspects of language use by analyzing their own language use and by looking for aspects of conducting speech acts that are in common or different between Japanese and Americans.

### **2.3.2 Goals of Instruction**

- (1) Raising awareness that misunderstandings between Japanese and Americans can be caused by differences in performing speech acts
- (2) Making learners aware of what they know already and encourage them to use their universal or transferable pragmatic knowledge of their first language in the second language contexts
- (3) Teaching the appropriate linguistic forms that are likely to be encountered in performing speech acts

### **2.3.3 Procedure from Speech Act Chapters**

Each speech act chapter in the textbook uses the following instructional procedure:

- (1) Feeling (Warm-up) phase
  - (a) Listening to two different dialogs and answering questions
- (2) Doing phase
  - (a) Discourse Completion Task and role-play on a new situation
- (3) Thinking phase
  - (a) Looking at the classification of different types of a given speech act
  - (b) Listening to model dialogs and writing down key expressions of each type
  - (c) Analyzing their own speech act performance according to types
- (4) Understanding phase (Cross-Cultural Communication Notes)
  - (a) Using graphs presented in the textbook and making comparisons of speech act performances by Japanese, Americans, and

Japanese learners of English.

- (b) Discussion in class (The target of the present analysis)
- (5) Using phase
- (a) Listening and role-play practice of the model dialogs
  - (b) Discourse Completion Task and role-play tasks on new situations

### **2.3.4 Description of the Activities in the Refusal Chapter**

The present study will analyze the discussion of the ‘Understanding phase’ in a refusal session. The following is a description of the activities in the refusal lesson, which was used in the fifth week of instruction:

#### (1) Feeling (Warm-up) phase

The listening comprehension task in this phase is designed to help students to get the feeling of the speech act ‘refusal.’ The students hear two different dialogs in a sample hypothetical refusal situation and are asked to answer questions about what is happening and how the student feels about the two dialogs. One of the dialogs represents a typical American way of conducting the speech act concerned, and the other one represents how Japanese learners of English typically respond. In this activity, students become aware that refusal can be expressed in different ways, and that students do have certain preferences in the way it is conducted.

#### (2) Doing phase

The students are presented with another hypothetical refusal situation (called situation 1) in which they are asked to respond in a way similar to a discourse completion task, and to role-play the

situation with their classmates. The aim of this phase is to see what each student can do with his/her present knowledge prior to any instruction dealing with cultural differences and linguistic expressions.

### (3) Thinking phase

In this phase students are asked to analyze their own speech act performance. The textbook presents the students with various ways of refusing. These classifications (also called “speech act strategies”) are simplified versions of ‘semantic formula’ and ‘adjuncts’ (Beebe et al. 1990)<sup>4</sup>, which are often used in the research of refusals in Inter-language Pragmatics. With these, the learners can examine the strategies they used in Situation 1 in the ‘Doing phase.’ An exercise is provided here to help students understand which expression falls into which type before they analyze their performance. The textbook says, “Most refusals include expressions stating the reason why you are refusing. The following types of expressions can be used together with expressions stating the reason for refusing” (Yoshida et al. 2000. p. 32). Then the following five types of strategies and expressions for each strategy are introduced.

Type A: Positive Opinion	That sounds wonderful, but ... I'd like/love to, but ... I wish I could, but ...
Type B: Thanking	Thank you for the invitation. Thanks, but ...
Type C: Apology	I'm sorry, but ...
Type D: Alternative	Maybe some other time.

	Perhaps next time.
Type E: Direct Refusal	I can't go.
	I can't make it.
+ Reason	I already have other plans.
	I have to ...

(4) Understanding phase (Cross-Cultural Communication Notes)

In this phase the students are encouraged to discover the characteristic differences that exist in Japanese and American English when various speech acts are performed. The data presented here in the form of a graph (Figure 1) come from the following three groups of college students who filled out Discourse Completion Tasks for situation 1.

- 1) 50 Americans speaking English (A)
- 2) 50 Japanese learners of English speaking English (JE)
- 3) 50 Japanese speaking Japanese (J)

[Situation 1]

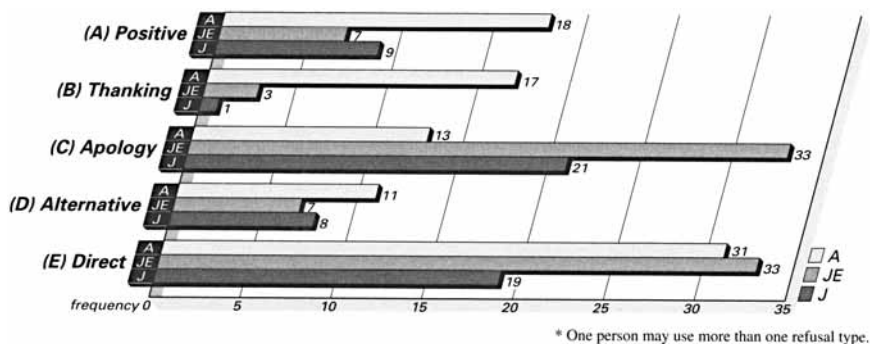
A friend of yours, Jennifer, asks you to go on a ski trip with her and her friends next weekend, but you don't feel like going because you don't like some of the people who are going.

Then comes the discussion part, which is the target of the present study. Students are asked to look at the graph (Figure 1), compare these three groups and discuss in Japanese similarities and differences among the three groups in their way of conducting

speech acts. The important point in this phase is that the task is designed so that the students can be involved in active thinking instead of passively reading descriptions on cultural differences. Analyzing the graph also has the merit of helping the students to avoid extreme stereotyping, as the graphs show certain tendencies rather than simple black and white differences.

After discussion in small groups, group leaders are asked to share what they talked about with the rest of the class.

Figure 1



(From Yoshida et al., 2000, p. 34)

## (5) Using phase

The aim of this phase is to provide sufficient spoken activity based on the knowledge students have acquired up to this point. The students will practice some model dialogs and create their own dialogs in English in new situations.

## 2.4 Data Acquisition

The classroom discussions in the Understanding phase, conducted in Japanese, was audio-taped. First a tape recorder was



placed in one of the discussion groups. Next, all the presentations by each group leader on the content of their group discussion were audio-taped. The same procedure was followed in both classes. The recordings were transcribed for analysis.

## 2.5 Result and Discussion

Usually students start out their discussion by talking about what they saw in the graph. They talk about the frequency of speech act strategies used by Americans speaking English, Japanese learners of English speaking English, and Japanese speaking Japanese. Almost all the groups mentioned that Americans use the strategies of 'Positive Opinion,' 'Thanking,' and 'Alternative' more frequently than Japanese speaking English and Japanese speaking Japanese. They mention that, on the other hand, Japanese use an 'Apology' strategy much more often than Americans do. The following excerpt from the discussion of one group, especially lines 1, 2, and 3, which are at the very beginning of their discussion, illustrates the point. (Examples from [1] to [8] were translated from Japanese by the author of the paper. The letters in bold are the pragmatic aspects that are the points of analysis.)

[1]

- 1 S1: Americans use strategies such as [Thanking] and [Positive  
2 Opinion] often. On the other hand Japanese like to apolo-  
3 gize.
- 4 S2: We apologize. That's right.



The next excerpt indicates that these students have become aware that Japanese learners do not know English refusal strategies.

[2]

- 1 S1: Japanese learners know few refusal expressions. They  
Lack of Knowledge  
2 know only “I’m sorry.”
- 3 S4: That’s right. And it sounds somehow cold.  
Politeness
- 4 S2: Japanese learners use [Direct] strategy. They say, “I can’t”  
5 directly, because “I’m sorry” is the only expression they  
Lack of Knowledge  
6 know.

Both [S1] (line 1) and [S2] (lines 5 and 6) agree that one of the reasons why Japanese learners do not use various refusal strategies is their **Lack of Knowledge** about American English refusals. Again, the possibility of threatening others’ face by being impolite is brought up here by [S4].

Another pragmatic aspect brought up in their discussions was **Pragmatic Transfer**, an influence from learners’ native language and culture on their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge and performance (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993). The following excerpt illustrates the point.

[3]

- 1 S1: Japanese learners don’t say “thank you.” They just say, “I’m  
Strategy

- 2        sorry.”
- 3 S2: Even in Japanese we don't say “*arigato* (thank you).”  
      Pragmatic Transfer
- 4 S1: No, we don't say that.
- 5 S4: We don't say “*arigato* (thank you).”
- 6 S3: I wonder if Americans who speak Japanese say “*arigato*” in  
      Pragmatic Transfer
- 7        refusal situations.
- 8 S1: I wonder if it is so.
- 9 S3: This book doesn't tell us about that.
- 10 S1: I think it would be interesting to see the same kind of data
- 11        taken from American learners of Japanese. We can request
- 12        Ms. Kondo to have research on Americans who speak
- 13        Japanese. It's our request to Ms. Kondo.

[S1] brings up on lines 1 and 2 that Japanese learners of English do not say “thank you.” Following it [S2] points out in line 3 that Japanese speaking Japanese do not say “*arigato* (thank you)” either, suggesting the possibility of pragmatic transfer from the native language. They expand their discussion further and talk about the reverse possibility that Americans might transfer their native language behavior in refusal in speaking Japanese (lines 6 - 13).

The discussion on “thanking” strategy continues and it provokes awareness of still other pragmatic aspects. The following comes directly after their discussion in [3].

[4]

1 S4: We don't say "arigato" much even in Japanese, so we can't  
Pragmatic Transfer

2 say it in English.

3 We just say "*Gomen, gomen.* (I'm sorry, I'm sorry.)"

4 S3: That's all we say.

5 S2: It sounds blunt.  
Politeness

6 S3: But it would sound strange if we say "*arigato*" in Japanese  
Appropriateness

7 refusal.

8 S1: If we hear "*arigato*", we feel that the person is accepting, not  
Misunderstanding

9 refusing.

10 S3: So these expressions are different among cultures.  
Culture

In discussion [3] the students bring up the fact that Japanese do not say "thank you" either in English or Japanese. Then [S4] in line 1 uses a discourse marker 'so' to mark a causal relation between Japanese behavior when speaking in their native language and English, and confirms that it is a **Pragmatic Transfer** from Japanese. [S3] (line 6) adds that saying "*arigato*" in Japanese refusal is not **Appropriate** and [S1] (lines 8 and 9) follows that such inappropriate use can cause **Misunderstandings**. [S3] (line 10) concludes this discussion by saying that these pragmatic features are **Culture**-specific.

It was repeatedly mentioned by the students in class that Japanese use an 'apology' strategy often both in Japanese and English. The following excerpt shows an analysis of why Japanese

prefer this strategy.

[5]

- 1 S3: Japanese learners like to use [Apology] strategy most.  
Strategy
- 2 They are obedient.
- 3 S1: Are they obedient?

[S3] (lines 1 and 2) says *sunao dane* (“They are obedient.”) to explain why Japanese learners prefer apology. She probably feels that in Japanese culture it is valued to be obedient, and that is the reason why the Japanese say “I’m sorry” often. The previous studies on apologies (Kumatoridani 1993; Kumagai 1993; Kondo 1997) support this view suggesting that the Japanese preference for the expression “I’m sorry” is to keep harmony with an interlocutor by humbling themselves. Japanese prefer to take this humble approach rather than to take a rational explanatory approach to restore relationship with an interlocutor. [S1] questions this analysis by saying “Are they obedient?”, but unfortunately the discussion on this point ends here and the students do not expand it further.

After group discussions, the leader of each group was asked to present the summary of the discussion in their group. One of the points brought up in this section was semantic **Content** of speech act strategies. The following is an example.

[6]

In Japanese we often say, *Gomen ne, kyowa yoji ga arunnda*

*keredo...* (“Sorry, I have something to do today, so...”) We often do not complete a sentence and avoid expressions of [Direct Refusal]. We tend not to give concrete reasons for refusal.  
Content

First of all, this group expressed their awareness that Japanese refusal is different in that they use a strategy of not completing a sentence, thus avoiding direct refusal expressions. Besides, they point out that the reasons Japanese give are not concrete. This analysis is consistent with the findings of previous studies on refusals of Japanese learners. Both Beebe et al. (1990) and Kondo (2000) point out that Japanese give formulaic non-specific reasons in refusals and that is transferred when they are speaking English.

The following comments by another student provide a different perspective.

[7]

Sometimes Japanese use vague expressions in consideration of the hearer’s feelings. Japanese learners of English (JE) cannot give concrete explanations of the reasons for their refusals, because their English ability is limited.  
Content  
Limitation of Linguistic Ability

The group leader mentions that the Japanese use vague expressions as a politeness strategy, which suggests that probably a transfer from Japanese language is at play. In addition to this analysis, she

provides another reason for their non-specific explanations or excuses in refusal, saying that they might be caused by the **Limitation of their Linguistic Ability**. The limitation of ability in formal aspects of language, such as vocabulary and grammar, obviously prevent learners from performing various speech act strategies.

Another group leader talks about the **Illocutionary Force** of certain expressions. An **Illocutionary Force** is a ‘conventional communicative force’ achieved in saying something (Austin 1962)<sup>7</sup>.

[8]

I think both Americans and Japanese want to express their thanks to the invitations, but they have different ways of Illocutionary Force expressing it. Americans say “thank you” or “I’d love to.” On the other hand, Japanese say “I’m sorry”. Basically their feelings are the same.

The group leader explains that the **Illocutionary Force** that Japanese learners are trying to convey by “I’m sorry” is probably the same as what Americans are trying to do so by “thank you” and “I’d love to.” The point is that the underlying speakers’ intent is the same, whereas they have different conventional realizations. This is an interesting analysis because there have been relatively rich studies focusing on multi-functionality of the Japanese expression *sumimasen* (Coulmas 1981; Kimura 1994; Tateyama 2001). *Sumimasen* is usually translated as “I’m sorry” in English. However, the expression has functions of both apologizing and thanking. Such compli-



cations between certain expressions and illocutionary force they have make communication difficult when we speak in a second language.

### **3. Conclusion**

The present study has attempted to analyze what kinds of pragmatic awareness can be raised in the EFL context using an instructional method that was specifically developed for raising pragmatic awareness.

In order to raise pragmatic awareness, the learners were presented with a hypothetical refusal situation and speech act strategies that can be used in the situation. Then they were asked to analyze their own speech act performance and data taken from different cultural groups and learners (Americans speaking English, Japanese speaking English, and Japanese speaking Japanese). The content of the class discussions that followed revealed that the present instructional procedure raised students' pragmatic awareness on the following points:

1. Pragmatic awareness was raised concerning the use of different refusal strategies among Japanese speaking Japanese, Japanese learners of English speaking English, and Americans speaking English.
2. Awareness was raised that both Japanese and Americans attend to the 'face' of an interlocutor and use 'politeness' strategies in refusals.
3. The lack of pragmatic knowledge about American English

refusals by Japanese learners of English can be reflected in their choice of strategies when they speak in English.

4. There can be pragmatic transfer from native languages in the choice of strategies (semantic formula) and in the semantic content of speech act strategies.
5. There can be strategies that are inappropriate and might cause misunderstandings in refusal situations.
6. The limitation of the linguistic ability of Japanese learners may have contributed to the difference in strategy choices and to the non-specific content of refusal reasons.
7. Pragmatic awareness was raised concerning the use of different expressions for the same feelings and the difficulty of understanding illocutionary force of utterances in second languages.

The findings of the present study show that learners can become linguists and discoverers themselves. They were actively involved in analyzing, thinking, and reflecting on their own speech performance. As a result, they became aware of varieties of pragmatic aspects.

Teaching pragmatics is a complex undertaking indeed. Appropriate use of language is intricately connected with cultural values, situations, interlocutors, and other variables. Just teaching formulaic phrases or forcing learners into “the target norm” is not likely to enhance pragmatic ability. On the other hand, it seems that an

awareness-raising approach can sensitize learners to cultural differences and different variables involved in language use. Hopefully, learners will be able to apply the pragmatic awareness acquired in class in whatever setting they may encounter in the future.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Bachman's model (1990) of 'language competence' is subdivided into 'organizational competence' and 'pragmatic competence'. Organizational competence comprises 'grammatical competence' and 'textual competence.' Pragmatic competence subdivides into 'illocutionary competence' and 'sociolinguistic competence.' The phrase 'pragmatic aspects' in the present paper refers to concepts related to 'pragmatic competence.'

<sup>2</sup> EFL (English as a foreign language) learners are those who learn English mainly in school and have little contact with English outside of the classroom. Japanese students learning English in Japan are examples of EFL learners. On the other hand, ESL (English as a second language) learners are those who study English where English is used in daily lives.

<sup>3</sup> The basic notion of 'speech act' has been introduced by two philosophers, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), based on the belief that language is used to perform actions. In the field of 'Interlanguage Pragmatics,' various speech acts, such as apology, requests, refusals, and compliments, have been studied.

<sup>4</sup> Beebe et al. (1990) break down refusal responses into semantic formulas (those expressions which can be used to perform a refusal) and adjuncts (expressions which accompany a refusal).

<sup>5</sup> Grice (1975) lists "Be brief (avoid prolixity)" as one of the submaxims of manner.

<sup>6</sup> Brown and Levinson (1987) define 'face' as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, and they are called face-threatening acts (FTAs). Refusal is a FTA which threatens especially the hearer's face, and politeness strategies need to be used to minimize FTAs.

<sup>7</sup> Austin (1962) subcategorizes speech acts into the following three component acts:

- i. locutionary act ----- the production of sounds and words with meanings
- ii. illocutionary act ----- the issuing of an utterance with conventional communicative force achieved "in saying something"
- iii. perlocutionary act ---- the actual effect achieved "by saying something"

The intention of the speaker behind the utterance is called 'illocu-

tionary force.' For example, when X says to Y "are you hungry?", X may intend the question as a request for Y to make X a sandwich.

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