

Pronunciationforteacher.com/ Key Concepts

The Intersection of Pragmatics and Pronunciation

Pragmatics is defined as “how-to-say-what-to-whom-when” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, p. 68). It is broken down into two distinct types of knowledge, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic. The different strategies and forms a speaker uses to convey communicative intent constitutes pragmalinguistics. Sociopragmatics is the study of different situations in which those language forms and strategies are used. In other words, pragmalinguistic knowledge refers to the *how-to-say-what* and sociopragmatic knowledge the *to-whom-when*. One could even add on *where-and-why* to tackle more of the contextual factors at play when we communicate with each other as well as the reasons we do so, something Yates (2004) refers to as “the secret rules of language” (p. 1).

Much like the teaching of pronunciation (see Derwing, Munro & Thompson 2008), pragmatics is not easily acquired without instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003) and it can take many years in a naturalistic context for second or additional language speakers to gain proficiency in this area (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). There is significant evidence that focusing on aspects of pragmatics for the purpose of workplace integration can be of real value to language learners (see Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Riddiford, 2007); however, pragmatics can be a complex topic to discuss in second language classrooms for reasons of identity. As Ishihara (2010) outlines, it can be useful to incorporate activities whereby learners reflect on the ‘native-like’ or ‘target culture’ language formulae choices they make and when they make them. In pronunciation, accent and identity are interconnected. Teachers do not teach pronunciation to eliminate accent, but rather to improve comprehensibility and intelligibility (see Derwing’s article in Key Concepts for definitions). In pragmatics instruction, although focusing on certain formulaic language elements commonly used by the broader language majority can be helpful for learners, it is also important for instructors to explain *why* these structures are used by connecting them wherever possible to the sociocultural values that inform their use. Pragmatics errors, after all, are often more critically evaluated in comparison to grammatical errors, making pragmatics a useful topic to cover in class (Campbell & Roberts, 2007).

The intersection between pragmatics and pronunciation in research still remains less explored; however, in a recent study with intermediate English language learners, Derwing et al. (forthcoming) examined how instruction in pragmatics might also affect comprehensibility and fluency. Two classes (a control group and an experimental group) were given pre and post discourse completion tasks (DCTs) focusing on the speech acts of requests, refusals, compliments and apologies. One class was given pragmatics instruction for five hours a week over five weeks. The teacher focused on these four speech acts in a variety of contexts related to customer service in the retail sector, where many immigrant students in Canada work while they go to language classes during the day. Although the control group’s pragmatics were rated as considerably better at the outset of the study, the experimental group had significantly

outperformed them in sociopragmatic accuracy after the course was completed in all four assessed scenarios. The group that received instruction also demonstrated a significant improvement in comprehensibility in three of the four DCTs. When it came to fluency, the experimental class showed a significant improvement in one of the scenarios and a significant loss of fluency in the most challenging of the four scenarios—asking for an increase in pay from a manager. Possibly an increased knowledge of the ‘how-to-say-what-to-whom’ made this request considerably more difficult, causing the students to spend most of their attention on the social appropriateness of their request.

Teaching strategies used in the study

The instructor used the following strategies for teaching pragmatics and pronunciation in the course:

- Real-world scenarios (DCTs) to role play (Tatsouki & Houck, 2010).
- Peer and self-evaluation. After watching videos of their own role plays, students evaluated themselves and their peers with feedback on use of softeners, formulas, tone, volume and fluency.
- Explicit instruction on word and sentence stress (Gilbert, 2012)
- Comparisons of first and second language (L1/L2) and first and second culture (C1/C2) approaches to performing speech acts, including tone, emotional attachment to a message, and other elements of body language were either similar or different (Yates & Springall, 2010).
- Community journals: daily reflections on what students noticed about how speech acts were performed outside of class.

Dahm and Yates (2014) examined the sociopragmatic strategies used by native English-speaking (NES) doctors and their non-native speaker (NNS) counterparts in medical role plays. The authors observed that the two groups approached patient care with different sociopragmatic language choices (e.g., softeners, informal language, empathy statements). They argued that although the NNS may have knowledge of the pragmalinguistic formulae deemed ‘appropriate’ in the role play, they do not always use them and advised instructors to discuss the sociopragmatic reasons why certain language choices may be more effective. Yates (2017) has outlined how pronunciation and pragmatics can be taught together using what she calls the PREFER approach:

- Practice-relevant models
- Raising awareness of pragmatic and pronunciation issues and their interaction
- Experimentation with new pragmatic resources and pronunciation
- Feedback
- Exploring the world outside

- Reflection on what to do and how to do it (p. 240).

Methodologies and materials

Similarly, Martínez-Flor and Uso-Juan (2006) proposed six stages for the development of pragmatic skills: researching, reflecting, receiving, reasoning, rehearsing, and revising. Instructors might find it useful to use such a framework and to address pronunciation and pragmatics together at each step.

In a 2012 volume on prosody and pragmatics in English language teaching, Romero-Trillo suggests that instructors may find it useful to develop an understanding of how tone is used as a lexical feature (in Mandarin, for example) or as a pragmatic feature (as in French) which can help to explain the notion of intended meaning.

Finally, although commercial language textbooks do not have much in the way of a specific focus on pragmatics, there are several very useful resources, many of which include lesson plans, sample tasks, and assessment strategies (see Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010; Yates, 2008). In some cases, however, until new materials are developed, it may be necessary to integrate pronunciation teaching points into the ‘how-to-say-what-to-whom’ where and why.

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