Case Studies in Interlanguage Pragmatics: A Search for Positive Transfer

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Introduction

No longer the cultural property of native speakers, the English language has exploded to global proportions wherein each user of the language exercises their personal ownership of it. This unprecedented growth brings with it a myriad of novel issues from the standardization of English grammar to debates on linguistic imperialism; but with the very astounding fact that recently the number of non-native users of the English language has outnumbered the native users (Crystal 1997, as cited in Jenkins 2002), new research has been directed towards just how one should teach the language. Native speaker models are strongly supported by the grammar mavens and indeed, this variety holds the most prestige internationally, giving it high demand in schools. However, as the definition of "native speaker" becomes less and less clear, a more liberal form of approaching the teaching of the language became necessary. The current paradigm of teaching methodology known as communicative language teaching (CLT), focuses on acquiring communicative competence through preaching fluency over accuracy, and by demonstrating grammatical knowledge not by stating a rule but by "using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning" (Savignon 2001, p. 17). This approach, prevalent for decades, doesn't concern itself with the *integrity* of the language, at least in comparison to the focus on integrity of other popular languages such as French and Arabic. Unlike these, and many other languages, English lacks an official governing body that could, theoretically, create policy which would homogenize the language of its many dialects, and potentially deprive its non-native speakers of their tenure and status as legitimate users of the language. Given the diversity of Englishes, and the reality that English is taught through methodologies that perpetuate and increase this diversity in a medium that is free of a governing policy, much needed attention has been brought to the concept of mutual intelligibility across cultures.

English is taught in a variety of contexts, most of which can be grouped into two classifications: English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Learners within these two contexts often have very different purposes for learning English but given the status of English as a global language, there is a good chance they will be using it interculturally, in the international arena. In the EFL context, learners tend to develop their English with classmates of the same culture and L1 as themselves. From this background their interactions in English are guided by their source culture. Conversely, ESL learners are immersed in a culture that is not their own and are therefore learning to interact in English either with classmates from a variety of different countries or with native speakers from the culture of the target language.[*] In both of these scenarios, the cultural background of the learner has an impact on the way they socialize and interact in English and is therefore a significant component in their acquisition of communicative competence. The study of non-native speakers' sociolinguistic interactions in another language is known as interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993). Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), although not a precursor for intelligibility, does play an essential role in accurate communication. For instance, the indirectness that is common among the Chinese and Japanese as exemplified by such conversational patterns as ritual refusal of an invitation that one wishes to take, can be received infelicitously by more direct westerners. This example reveals one way our cultural background can lead to

[*] I will often use the term English language learner (ELL) to refer to both ESL and EFL learners.

miscommunication, not on the grammatical level, but the social level, where one's lack of L2 pragmatic ability can damage comity and social status.

In the interest of minimizing these miscommunications in English and increasing teacher's proficiency in meeting their student's needs of communicative competence, more efficient instruction in pragmatics needs to be established. This can be achieved by investigating the pre-existing pragmatic proficiencies of ELLs, identifying pragmatic constructs ELLs have the most difficulty with, and finally synthesizing this information into a framework for pragmatic instruction. This paper moves to explicate the first of these three steps by analyzing the conversations of ELLs and NS.

Background

Pragmatics is an essential element in effective communication which is why researchers have been giving it increasingly more attention (e.g. Kasper 2001, Bardovi-Harlig 1999, Kasper & Schmidt 1996, Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993). With the broadening of Canale and Swain's (1980) *sociolinguistic competence* component of communicative competence to include pragmatic competence, pragmatics has been a familiar presence in the CLT classroom. Pragmatics has been defined as the "ability to produce meaning in a socially appropriate manner and to interpret meaning, whether explicit or implicit, according to context" (Taguchi 2007, p.314). The contextual factors can take almost limitless forms through varying degrees of social distance between interlocutors, their power relationship, or the level of imposition the speech act creates.

Pragmatics has since been expanded into several subcategories such as pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics, cross-cultural pragmatics and ILP (Kasper 2010). The former two deal in the social perceptions of language being used and the linguistic forms and grammar implemented towards those usages. The latter two, cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, take into account the range of pragmatic formulas across different cultures and how these come into play in communication. ILP specifically, has received much attention due to the rising number of interactions involving ELLs due to the globalization of English. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) specify the use of linguistic action patterns used by NNSs in an L2 as a key component of ILP. Linguistic actions in pragmatics usually take the form of politeness features of actions such as requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, suggestions, complaints etc. (Kasper 2010); but ILP also deals with the illocutionary force in linguistic actions and agreement with Grice's (1975) maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner as well.

Within ILP, one of the most frequently addressed issues is pragmatic transfer (Bou Franch 1998). Pragmatic transfer occurs when LLs deliver or interpret linguistic action through the lens of their native culture when communicating in their L2. For example, Wannaruk's (2008) analysis of Thai ELLs use of refusal strategies revealed negative transfer in the form of infrequently used gratitude markers when refusing an invitation. This would cause a communication breakdown in that NS listeners might interpret the speakers' lack of gratitude markers as being rude. Pragmatic transfer can be both negative and positive, but most studies focus on negative pragmatic transfer, most likely because positive pragmatic transfer doesn't cause communication breakdown. However, positive pragmatic transfer warrants focused research because it is these linguistic actions that shed light on the pre-existing communicative effectiveness of ELLs, which can then lead to syllabi that better meet the needs of students who use the language with speakers from other cultural backgrounds.

Development of pragmatic competence is complex and the best way to do it has been the subject of much speculation. It has been shown that the level of proficiency in the L2 does not correlate with the level of pragmatic proficiency (Taguchi 2007) and that the amount of L2 social contact also doesn't lend to improved pragmatic proficiency (Taguchi 2008). Likewise, Bardovi-Harlig (1999) made it clear that grammatical competence in the L2 is not a sufficient condition for pragmatic development, although it may be a necessary one. These findings suggest that development of pragmatic competence is not a by-product of second language learning or exposure, but would require explicit classroom attention. Of more concern than how pragmatics can be taught is *should* it be taught? Huth and Taleghan-Nikazm (2006) make an interesting point about teachers teaching of pragmatics:

> They provided their learners with models of L2 sociocultural norms which are usually exclusively based on native speaker intuition. Native speaker intuition, however, affords somewhat idealized versions of social interaction. (p. 54)

The use of "native speaker norms" to teach pragmatics seems as silly as using such a model to teach pronunciation. However, where native-like pronunciation has long been seen as a false goal, attaining native-like socio-cultural language use is still widely accepted as achievable. Many studies in ILP have compared the speech of NNSs of English to NSs, using the culture of the target language as the model for pragmatic competence. However, due to the rise in NNS-NNS interactions, where speakers come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this model is no longer valid.

Before we can decide if native-like pragmatic language use should be taught we have to ask if our learners *want* to achieve it. Dividing our ELLs back into their ESL/EFL categories, Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) performed a study which asked these groups of learners to rank the severity of two error types: grammatical and pragmatic. The results showed that EFL learners ranked grammatical errors as more serious whereas ESL learners said pragmatic errors were worse. Obviously, ESL learners interact more with NSs and therefore encounter more pragmatic miscommunications in their language use than do EFL learners who mostly interact with other NNSs. Given that the trend of English language use towards an exponential growth of NNS-NNS interactions, the importance of pragmatic errors would predictably become less central.

Even now, studies show that many ELLs favor retaining their own identities while interacting in English. LoCastro (2001) points out that learner motivation, self identity and L2 cultural attitudes influence and constrain the willingness to adopt NS standards of linguistic action (p. 69). To obtain more efficient instruction in pragmatics so as to increase the communicative competence of ELLs, English language teachers will have to be aware of their learner goals and also be aware of who their learners will be using the language with. In Wannaruk's (2008) example mentioned above, it might be pertinent to teach Thai learners to use gratitude markers more frequently if they planned on living in an inner-circle country and interacting mostly with NSs; however, her study used Thai *EFL* learners who probably won't be interacting with too many NSs; or if they do, it will be in a context where the NS won't expect their native pragmatic model to be mirrored. In this scenario it would be a disservice to the learners to include explicit pragmatic instruction on the NS norm of frequent gratitude marker use in refusals.

It seems necessary to provide learners with explicit pragmatic instruction. Yet, what form this instruction should take and from what basis should it be building off of still needs to be determined. This background has provided a definition of pragmatics and has given an overview of the scope of pragmatic research. Most studies fail to take into account the interactional skills ELLs already have when using pragmatics, therefore a close look at these skills is necessary to better inform future research.

Rationale for the present study

The purpose of this study is to strengthen current pragmatic instruction by identifying the pre-existing pragmatic proficiencies of ELLs. In identifying the interactional pragmatic skills of ELLs, English teaching professionals can design communicative lessons from a more informed position and therefore better meet the needs of their students. This study functions on the premise that there is no preferred pragmatic model for ELLs to follow. Such a model would represent a single culture and could not possibly do justice to a speaker of English using the language globally. I will be able to identify the occurrences of pragmatic linguistic actions made by ELLs by examining the interlanguage created when they interact with NSs. In analyzing ELL-NS conversation it will be easier to see the instances of pragmatic transfer than if analyzing the conversations of two learners. This is because when two learners interact they may employ communication strategies for production and comprehension that wouldn't be necessary if they were speaking with a native speaker. These communication strategies might interfere with otherwise naturally occurring pragmatic utterances. Also, I chose to record the conversations of low-proficiency learners (as ascribed by the school they are enrolled) because these learners will have had the least amount of explicit pragmatic instruction in the classroom and the least amount of practice using learned forms. Therefore, their output will be the least influenced by factors other than the pragmatic repertoire of their native culture.

The many forms that pragmatics can take, from politeness features to sarcasm, are relevant to any user of the English language. However, they are not solely bound to the English language specifically. Speakers of different L1s have similar cultural schemata that create linguistic forms such as these in their mother tongues (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998). This would create positive pragmatic transfer between the speakers L1 and English. Unfortunately, the most popular approach to language teaching, CLT, does not recognize the resources students bring into the classroom from their mother tongues (Swan 1985). Pragmatics are taught from scratch through CLT with curricula that respond directly to what learners “need” to know, often without taking into account what they already know.

As demonstrated by other studies (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm 2006, Hellerman 2009) the use of conversation analysis (CA) can be an effective tool in examining pragmatics in talk in interaction and will be employed in the present study. CA, instead of examining the outcome action of talk, starts by observing how a bit of talk was done and inquires as to what someone could be doing talking in that way and what that bit of talk seems designed to do (Schegloff 2007). This process-oriented examination treats ELLs (or “NNSs,” deficient by definition) as true participants in talk in interaction. By validating them in this way, we can make conclusions about their use of the English language that are not possible with research methods that consider them learners who are subject, and even prone, to error. CA is also very effective in examining pragmatics, as conversation participants are heavily influenced by their social and cultural schemata. Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) elucidate that “co-participants mutually project ‘what ought to come next’, based on inference as they orient towards socio-pragmatic rules of language use” (p. 58).

The data used for this study are the recordings of naturally occurring conversation between adult ELLs and NSs. I recorded two conversations ending up with 70 minutes of data, the first conversation was 33 minutes and the second was 37 minutes. Due to the limited quantity of data, I will interpret my findings on a case-study basis and will discuss my analysis of the conversation with this in mind. The data, although minimal in quantity, was rich in quality. There were many instances of the communicative effectiveness of low-proficiency ELLs interacting with NSs. The few data extracts I chose for my analysis exemplify the range of pragmatic proficiencies evident in the recordings.

Analysis

In our first data segment (1.0), I analyze the talk in interaction of two speakers participating in a multi-speaker conversation. The conversation is taking place in an otherwise empty classroom on the campus of a university between the hours of 11:00 and noon. Speaker D is an ELL who is enrolled in an intensive English program, he is an intermediate-beginner who has had only limited instruction in English in his home country of China and has only spent a little over two months in the United States. The extent of classroom instruction on pragmatics that he has received has been minimal; he has learned things like safe topics to ask about, phrases for opening and closing conversations, and how to keep a conversation going. Speaker A is a NS of English enrolled in a masters program to teach English as a second language.

These speakers are participants in an activity ran by the intensive English program that joins their students with NSs for casual (non-academic) conversations as a less stressful method of practicing their English in social contexts. The conversation had been going for about five minutes when speaker D enters the classroom to join the group and was greeted by speaker A:

Extract (1.0) **[Conversation group #1~ 05:38-05:48]**

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Fpp    1    A:   how are you?
Spp    2    D:   (hh fine)°
Fpst→  3    A:   you sick?
Spst→  4    D:   Noh (.2) on:ly a bit mor tired
       5    A:   ye:ah I'm tired also.
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Speaker D demonstrates his understanding of speaker A's turn in line 1 by orienting towards that turn with an aligning response in line 2. This transaction is a formulaic greeting and conversation starting sequence in English and speaker D has probably been given explicit classroom instruction in this. What's interesting, though, is his use of the "no" token in line 4. As Hellerman (2009) points out "…using the token *no*, is a highly sensitive action done in talk-in-interaction in English and one that may have interactional and interpersonal consequences for learners of the language" (p. 100). The lack of any hesitation markers (such as pauses of silence or a non-lexical "um") which are usually found when the word "no" is used to mitigate the negation of a previous turn, shows that speaker D is effectively cooperating toward a shared understanding of the talk. Even though he had just entered into the conversation he immediately assessed the action that speaker A's post-expansion was doing and was able to give his relevant second.

Also of note in this extract is how the “no” token functions as a repair. When speaker A greets speaker D in line 1, speaker D’s response is very soft and heard as potentially problematic by speaker A. Speaker A then initiates a repair sequence by asking if speaker D is sick. Speaker D senses the possibility of a misunderstanding of his initial response from line 2 and repairs by saying “no”. However, if D ended his turn with the “no” only, it could have been interpreted as additionally problematic in the sense that using a “no” marker without an explanation or an account of some sort is heard as being short, or even rude in the English language. Speaker D obviously understands this and continues with an account of being tired which is heard as an acceptable response by A.

Our next extract (1.1) has three speakers participating in a multi-speaker conversation. The context of the conversation is the same as in extract 1.0. Speaker A was described above; speaker C is also a NS and enrolled in the same masters program as A. Speaker B is a NNS enrolled in the same intensive English program as speaker D from extract 1.0.

The extract begins with a possible sequence closure of the previous topic in line 1, which is evidenced by the turn being followed by a pause, leaving the option of new topic selection (or possibly reviving the old topic) open to any participant. Speaker B hears the pause as such and selects himself to start a new topic on a Halloween party he had attended, in line 2:

Extract (1.1) **[Conversation group #1~ 07:50-08:44]**

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      1    C:   Oka:y (.2) so the midterm is only one part hh hhh (2.0)
PreT  2    B:   I take part i:n za Halloween party
goahd 3    C:   okay whenza Halloween party,
tllng 4    B:   Sundays night an I back home sree oh clock hhh°
      5    C:   o:h it was la- two days- a couple days ago? (.2) that you
      6         went to the halloween [party?]
      7    A:                         [last w]eekend? last weekend?
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        B:    yea las weekend
        C:    ohkay and it was over at three?(.2)
        B:    yea=
        C:    =in the morn- you said you: returned home at three?
        B:    (.2)yeas sree oh clock=
        C:    [oh my go:sh.]
        A:    [oh my god   ]
        B:    yah
-whq→   C:    What time did you have to wake u:P?
        B:    (.)mmmmm(.2)maybe(.)I(.) >didn't a come to< class[uh
              Monday=
        C:                                                     [hh hh]
        B:    =I got to get up ima crazy because eh(.) before ze
              Halloween party I no sweeping [(.) sept]=
        C:                                  [ooh gosh]
        B:    =lasteh last night(.) because we needed do deh video so
              (.2)I no sweep and uh >las day I way tickets the
              halloween party I uh so tired< I can can no get uh-
              wake up
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Speaker B, when proffering his topic, does so using a formulaic sequence of topic-proffering by initiating a topic in a fashion that makes it available for recipients to embrace or reject it (see Schegloff 2007, p. 169-170). Speaker B could have actively launched into his topic being the only speaker with access to the information regarding the Halloween party, but doesn't do this, as it can be heard as rude or as dominating the conversation. In proffering his topic, speaker B demonstrates his sensitivity to this convention of conversation.

With the proffering of the topic in the form of a pre-telling in line 2, speaker C gives the go-ahead which both functions as an acceptance of the topic and a turn which makes relevant for speaker B to perform the telling. Speaker B successfully interprets his topic as being accepted and proceeds with the telling.

Also of interest in this extract is the –wh type question in line 16. In his telling, speaker B established that the Halloween party occurred on the previous Sunday night (this conversation took place on a Wednesday) and that he didn't get home until 3:00am. Speaker C then uses a

–wh question asking what time he had to wake up. All three participants in this conversation are students and as mentioned above, the conversation is taking place in a classroom during a break. The institutional setting and the roles of the participants as students, influences their speech as they orient to their institutional relevant identities (Heritage 2005), as can be seen by the action of the –wh question of line 16. The –wh question made by speaker C was relevant because she knew that speaker B was a student and had to be at class on Monday morning following the party. The action of the question is not literal in that it isn't requesting the information of what time speaker B woke up. If speaker B interpreted this question in that way and responded by saying "I had to wake up at 7:00am" it would have failed to address the action of the question and would have been dis-preferred in the sequence because it would have required multiple other turns to find out if he made it to class or not, how tired he may have been, etc. However, speaker B realizes the action of the question as addressing the success or failure or his making it to class the next day and responds appropriately with an account of not making it to class.

This final extract (2.0) is of a different context than the previous two and has entirely new speakers as well. The participants (only one speaks in this extracts) are two NNSs who, similarly to the previous participants, are enrolled in an intensive English language program in San Francisco, are considered to be at the intermediate-beginner proficiency level, have had about two months exposure in the target language culture and have had relatively little instruction in English in their home country. The NNS participants are from Korea and Saudi Arabia. The NS participant is an administrator at the language institute where the two NNSs are enrolled and is an experienced English language educator. Their conversation took place on campus in an outside sitting area near a restaurant where they had just purchased lunch.

Extract (2.0) [Conversation group #2~ 11:45-12:14]

	1	A:	but you live uuuh(.2) you(.)live(.)next door
	2	B:	yeah
	3	A:	you live very close
	4	B:	yeah (.7)
	5	A:	this is a bad place to sit isn’t it?
	6	B:	hh hhh
	7	A:	hh (.4) you guys keep shading your eyes hh
→	8		(7.0)
	9	A:	do you guys wanna move? (.4)
	10	B:	no(.) its okay
	11	A:	its okay? (.2) this should feel normal to you yeah?
	12	B:	[hh hh
	13	A:	[hhhh h

In this extract, speaker A (the NS) makes an assessment in line 5 which can be categorized as a pre-suggestion because she is premising a proposal to move, that occurs in line 9. To supply some further context, the participants are seated in the sun which is shining in their eyes. Her assessment is met by a laugh token in line 6 by speaker B. Laugh tokens can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and it’s never safe to claim one as being heard to perform a specific function. In this scenario it could mean a couple of things. One way is that speaker B didn’t understand speaker A’s utterance in line 5 and the laugh token was a strategy of responding ambiguously as opposed to specifically where he could risk loosing face had he interpreted her utterance incorrectly. Another way to hear it is that he *did* understand but disagreed with her assessment about this being a bad place to sit but didn’t want to voice that disagreement explicitly; as such conflicts can be difficult to voice politely by ELLs.

Speaker A seems to hear the laugh token as being ambiguous and elaborates on her assessment in line 7 by giving a reason that this was a bad place to sit. This turn is met with a seven second pause, which is unusually long in between related turns at talk such as those of lines 7 and 9. This long pause might be explained by the fact that participants were eating and may have been chewing and unable to respond right away, however, this is speculation. Although chewing may have contributed to the pause, it *is* heard as a lack of talking and the participants orient to it in that capacity. Pomerantz (1984) points out that pauses after initial assessments are frequently heard as disagreements of the assessment. At this point in the turn sequence it isn't clear if the NNS participants intended to disagree with speaker A's assessment but given their proficiency level, a silence would be an effective way to demonstrate hesitancy or resistance to the assessment. If they were advanced learners, then they might have had the vocabulary and pragmatic proficiency to disagree verbally and in a manner appropriate to the context. This is especially significant in this particular interaction as the power relationship between the speakers is very stratified, with speaker B as a student enrolled in a program administrated by speaker A. Using the silence to show resistance was a pragmatically appropriate way for speaker B to oppose the assessment, however, speaker A doesn't hear the silence as an outright disagreement with her assessment and goes ahead with her suggestion to move in line 9. The response by speaker B in line 10 is a voiced disagreement with the suggestion, which affirms that the silence in line 8 was meant to be heard as a disagreement and, although not entirely misinterpreted by the native speaker, did require several turns of clarification.

This difficulty in interpreting the silence as a disagreement is a minor miscommunication but it does bring forth an interesting point about pragmatic transfer. Namely, why is it the NNS provided a pragmatically appropriate linguistic action which was not heard as such by the native speaker? Perhaps the native speaker, in her assessment of her interlocutor as being a learner of

English, was unprepared to interpret the silence as a disagreement. This could have instilled an element of doubt about mutual intelligibility and, for the benefit of this doubt, caused her to decide on explicitly voicing her suggestion, counter to the disagreement.

Discussion

These extracts, although a small sample from the data, do show the range of sophistication in the learner's interactional skills. The pragmatic awareness that these learners exhibited and the aptitude they demonstrated was much more proficient than would be expected considering only what they've been taught in class and their exposure to the language. Other factors must be considered such as the linguistic and socio-pragmatic skills these learners bring over from their L1, when speaking English. Pragmatic and interactional skills do positively transfer in these adult ELLs, and although some adjusting may be needed, identifying this is an important first step towards achieving more efficient instruction in pragmatics.

The extracts itemized some basic elements of interaction in English and the learners were able to navigate themselves through these conversations without an instance of miscommunication. One reason for this could be the nature of the conversations. There were no requests, invitations, difficult implicatures, or other more advanced pragmatic constructs. Most of the conversation was oriented to question-answer scenarios or the reporting of information. However, proficiency in the basics of conversation is a key element in the path to communicative competence. For instance, extract (1.0) demonstrates a very successful interaction for a student with the level of training that speaker D has had. His very effective use of the "no" token, which can often times cause problems even for native speakers, marks him as an efficient communicator, utilizing communicative skills that probably weren't explicitly taught to him in the English language classroom. Likewise, speaker B in extract (1.1) was able to bring a new topic of conversation to the table in a pragmatically appropriate way. In extract (2.0) also, the learner was able to sense the pragmatically sensitive nature of the interaction and responded appropriately. Each of the interactions in these extracts could have ended in miscommunication had the NNSs spoken differently. The fact that they didn't end in miscommunication is an important fact to pay attention to.

The pedagogical implications of recognizing the positive transfer of pragmatic skills are three-fold. The first is that we can stop wasting so much valuable classroom time teaching students such things as the correct way to be polite when using a "no" token, or how to start a new topic in conversations. Secondly, we can gain better understanding and increased awareness of cross-cultural similarities in communication which will make the growth of English as an international language less painful. And lastly, we can better meet our student's needs by eliminating impractical native-like models for interacting pragmatically. This final implication especially, will create greater access to the English language and further validate those who currently use it.

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