SIMPLE WAYS TO INCORPORATE PRAGMATICS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM
AE TEACHER'S CORNER
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What is pragmatics?

f we use our general knowledge of the word "pragmatic," we would expect that *pragmatics* has to do with things

that are practical, but in linguistics, *pragmatics* has a specialized meaning. Imagine this scenario:

After living in a new country for a few weeks, a young teacher goes to the bank to make a transfer. This teacher is not yet familiar with the language and culture of her host country. While processing the transaction, the bank teller asks, "Did you eat?" The teacher does not understand why the bank teller is asking this question. Although the teacher understood the grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation the bank teller used, she did not know how to respond. She is confused because, for her, it is odd to be asked this kind of question during a business transaction. In her culture, the question "Did you eat?" is used to invite someone to eat with you or to offer them something to eat. After a long pause, the teacher answers "Yes," but still wonders why the teller had asked this question. Later, the young teacher learns from her colleagues that in her host country, "Did you eat?" is simply a greeting like "How are you?" It is only meant to be a greeting, not any kind of invitation.

This is an example of pragmatics. Pragmatics tells us that communication is not only about the words we use.
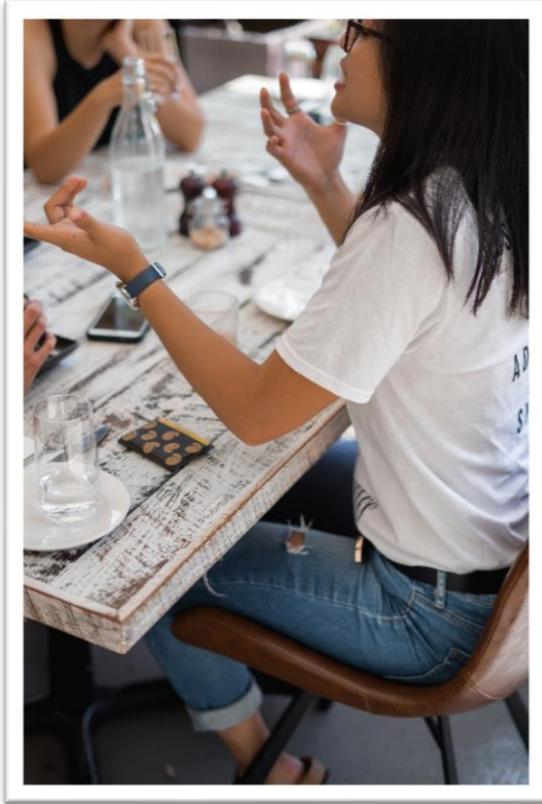
Understanding Pragmatics

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In the example above, the listener and speaker had different understandings about the meaning of the very same words. Communication is influenced by **cultural backgrounds** and the **social contexts** in which people use language. The study of pragmatics is about the ability to use language in socially appropriate ways. **Pragmatic ability** refers to knowledge about pragmatics and the ability to apply that knowledge. Understanding **pragmatic meaning** can be challenging since speakers do not always directly say what they mean, and listeners may not always correctly interpret the intended meaning of a message.

So, why don't speakers directly communicate their intended messages? In some instances, communicating directly is considered too abrupt. For instance, Americans often find questions about age too direct. However, in some cultures, "How old are you?" is a common question because it helps speakers understand how to address one another. In some cultures, certain messages might commonly be communicated through hints rather than direct communication. For example, someone might say "It's cold in here" rather than directly asking another person to close the door. Even within the same culture and language group, people use language in different ways depending on the context. For instance, in an *English Teaching Forum* article called "[Pragmatic Activities for the Speaking Classroom](#)," Joseph Siegal gave the examples of how apologizing to a potential employer for being late to a meeting would require different strategies and language than apologizing to a friend for being late. Likewise, complaining about working conditions to a colleague would differ from complaining to a manager. In order to be very proficient communicators, we need to know how to communicate appropriately given the situation.

Following the experience at the bank in the story above, the young teacher encountered many more instances in the host country in which people often asked questions that were surprising. They asked about age, salary, and even shoe size. Not only was the teacher sometimes confused about the way people in the host culture communicated, she also found that sometimes the messages the teacher communicated were misunderstood. One day at the supermarket, the teacher told the cashier that a bag would not be necessary. The cashier looked a bit shocked, but the teacher did not understand why. Later, the teacher learned that it was more polite to say "That's okay" when refusing something that had been offered. When the teacher learned about the concept of pragmatics, the differences in communication between the home culture and host culture started to make sense, and she started to think of ways to incorporate pragmatics into lesson plans in English language classes so that both she and her students became more skilled communicators across languages and cultures.

Teaching Pragmatics

Understanding the pragmatics of a language helps learners use language appropriately in different situations, but what does pragmatics mean for the English language teacher? It is important to realize that there is no one best way to teach pragmatics. Teachers can build information on pragmatics into existing lesson plans, or they might add information or lessons on pragmatics as the need becomes evident. For

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example, after being asked many questions that were taboo, the young teacher created a lesson on taboo questions when meeting someone for the first time in order to talk with students about taboo questions across cultures. Lessons on pragmatics often relate to different language functions, such as greetings, requests, complaints, invitations, and apologies and often include the home culture and the target culture, but they might also include other cultures as well.

Lessons on pragmatics are sometimes (but not always) carried out through **speech act sets.** A speech act set is a set of possible strategies for use in a particular language function. For instance, for an apology, **a speech act** in English could include the following strategies: *expression of apology* (I'm sorry for being late), *acknowledgment of responsibility*

(It is my fault), *explanation or account* (The reason this happened is that I forgot to set my alarm.), *offer of repair* (I will buy you lunch.), and *promise of non-recurrence* (It will never happen again.). When giving an apology, speakers would use a minimum of at least one strategy, but could make use of numerous strategies.

Instruction in pragmatics can start at early levels of language proficiency. For instance, in our example, there was a great deal of pragmatic meaning in the greeting, and greetings are often one of the first language functions learners are introduced to. As English language teachers, our main goal for teaching pragmatics is to raise learners' awareness about the choices they can make when interacting in the target language. Textbooks for language learning don't always include information about pragmatic ability, and pragmatics does not always receive much attention in teacher training programs. Fortunately, there are many excellent resources on *American English* (americanenglish.state.gov) with ideas for teaching pragmatics in the English language classroom. The following section will provide information on the resources for teaching pragmatics and highlight some of the activities available on American English.

Some Ideas for Teaching Pragmatics

Introducing Pragmatic Awareness

In "[Introducing Pragmatic Awareness at Low Levels,](Introducing Pragmatic Awareness at Low Levels)" Edit H. Kontra describes an activity about how we speak tells a lot about our intended message. For instance, when asked how we are doing, we might say "I'm fine" with a very sad voice, which shows that we are, in fact, not fine. For the main part of the lesson, in pairs, students read dialogues from their course book using different moods, and other students attempt to identify the moods of the speakers. Following the reading of each dialogue, students talk about how language was used to convey certain moods. Observations often relate to features of language such as rhythm, intonation, or tone.

Greetings

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In "Luck of the Draw (Pragmatics)," Amy Hanna explains an activity for using appropriate greetings with different people and different contexts. Students practice using different greetings through role-plays where the speakers and locations are randomly selected. This activity can also be used for practicing pragmatics with a variety of other functions such as apologizing, giving advice, making a request, making an excuse for being late, or closing a conversation. As an extension activity, students can evaluate the appropriateness of peers' use of pragmatics in different situations.

Request Scenarios

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In the *Forum* article "Pragmatic Activities for the Speaking Classroom," Joseph Siegel provides useful information for teaching pragmatics in a speaking class through activities for request scenarios. The teacher comes up with a number of scenarios in which a request would be made. Each scenario has certain specific features, such as age of speakers, context, past relationship of speakers, and so on. The teacher gives the scenario, and students decide how they would make a request. The teacher and students go over the responses and talk about why a certain response is appropriate for the situation and why others are not appropriate. The teacher can then extend that activity with "a range of interlocutors." For the range of interlocutors, the teacher writes down a list of different people on the board with numbers next to each person. For example, 1 = elderly man, 2 = woman in a business suit, and 3 = a boy younger than you. The teacher then provides a scenario. For example: *You have your hands full*. *You drop a bag and can't pick it up*. (Examples are taken from the article.) Students then decide which person they are talking to and provide an appropriate request.

Complaints

Image by mohamed Hassan from Pixabay

In the *Forum* article "Twelve Activities for Teaching the Pragmatics of Complaining to L2 Learners," Amanda Hilliard provides activities for teaching complaints. These activities help learners understand how to complain appropriately in different situations. In one activity from this article, students are given different situations. For example: *Your classmate always comes late to group meetings and is not helping at all with your group's presentation. Complain to that classmate.* (Example is taken from the article.) Students first write down their answers in their native language, and then they translate that response into English. Students and teacher then talk about what students have written in the chart and discuss their appropriateness.

From the above activities, we can get some ideas about how we might approach teaching pragmatics. Fortunately, there are many other resources available on American English on the page "Teaching Pragmatics." The following resources are sorted by language function so that you can find them easily.

Apologies: "Pragmatic Activities for the Speaking Classroom"

Closings: "How do you say good-bye?"

Complaints: "Twelve Activities for Teaching the Pragmatics of Complaining to L2 Learners"

Compliments: "Giving and Responding to Compliments"

Greetings: "Luck of the Draw (Pragmatics)," "Greetings with a Difference"

Greetings, small talk, and leave-taking: "Hello, I Must Be Going!"

Openings and closings: "How are you, Auntie Elizabeth?"

Politeness: "Politeness is More Than 'Please,'" "Softening Short Requests"

Refusals: "Teaching Refusals in an EFL Setting"

Requests: "Pragmatic Activities for the Speaking Classroom," "E-mail Requests," "What Do You Think? Requesting Responses from Professors"

Conclusion

The classroom is a safe place for learners to experiment with using language in different ways, so it is a good place for them to acquire pragmatic competence. Pragmatic instruction often focuses on asking learners to determine the best way to communicate in a certain situation given the context and the culture, and is generally linked to language functions. A lesson in pragmatics might be related to content in the textbook. For instance, when going over a textbook unit on apologies, the instructor can add information concerning how people apologize in the home language and the target language. Alternatively, teachers might add in lessons in pragmatics because of student need. If, for example, the instructor notices that students come across as too direct in the target language, the teacher can prepare a lesson on politeness. Although instruction in pragmatics is not always present in the curriculum or in textbooks, there are numerous resources for teaching pragmatics—many of which can be found on the American English website. As teachers, we can learn about the pragmatics of a language and different ways to teach it by researching the language functions we are teaching. Pragmatics is an important part of learning language because it helps learners to avoid miscommunication and to communicate as they wish across cultures and languages.

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