

# Action Research on Pragmatic Use of English

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## **INTRODUCTION**

To become efficient communicators, the learners are expected to develop productive skills as the speakers to produce response to the aural input as well as receptive skills as the hearer to understand the message of the speakers properly. Communication is considered as collaboration between the speaker and the hearer, where the speaker provides clues, linguistic and/or physical to get the meaning across to the hearer, and, at the same time, the hearer tries to get all the information available in the context to get the meaning correctly and interpret it appropriately. The study of this process to construct shared meaning between the speaker and the hearer is defined as pragmatics (LoCastro, 2003). LoCastro claims, "Pragmatics explain how human beings create and understand meaning that can be derived only by going beyond the literal interpretation of signals" (2003, p. 4). Therefore, developing pragmatic competence is essential for the students. However, most of the students in the course I teach are not aware of the role of pragmatics in communication and tend to focus only on the accuracy of language form and propositional meaning of the utterance, but not on the appropriateness of language use and the speaker's intention underlying the utterance. To cultivate pragmatic competence, Thomas (1983) emphasizes the need for learners to develop metapragmatic ability and recommends consciousness-raising for that purpose. Similarly, Eslami-Rasekh (2005) elaborates on the activities which is designed to raise learners' pragmatic awareness which "expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2) and provide them with the analytical tools" (p. 200). Even though the course is designed to develop listening skills, listening ability is taken as a necessary condition to communicate successfully in this course as explained above. In the first class meeting of the course, the students were exposed to authentic language use by native speakers of English and instructed to analyze the speakers' utterances based on pragmatic factors, such as speaker-hearer

relationships and conversational situations in particular, through a consciousness-raising task so that they could realize how pragmatic factors in language use work in communication.

Two research questions were posed:

1. Does the consciousness-raising task with the use of scenes from a movie affect the students' awareness of pragmatic factors in language use?
2. To what extent does this consciousness-raising task affect the students' pragmatic awareness?

## **METHOD**

### Participants

The course was designed to develop English listening ability and comprised of 37 Japanese female students of a women's university in Tokyo. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. The average level of their English proficiency is low-intermediate. As the course was an elected course offered to all departments, the students major different subjects, but more or less motivated to improve their English listening ability in general.

### Material

Student worksheets, Self-assessment sheets, DVD (*Roman Holiday*), transcript.

### Treatment

The students were instructed to do the consciousness-raising task by watching a movie.

### Description of the consciousness-raising task

The use of films for pragmatic consciousness-raising is advocated as they provide authentic language use and are easily applicable to repeated observations of a scene (Fujioka, 2003; Rose, 1997). Fujioka (2003) demonstrates a film analysis to raise learners' consciousness to pragmatic function in language use. In this course, two scenes from the movie, *Roman Holiday*, were excerpted as the material for the consciousness-raising task to show how social variables, such as, social and psychological distance between the speakers, affect the language use in the conversation. Several commercial textbooks for listening skill development designed

based on the movie are now available in the market and can be used in the classroom. As the movie is very popular and the story is rather simple and easy to follow, it may not be difficult for the students to understand what is happening in a scene even though they could not catch the speakers' words accurately. Also, as the students are at about the same age of the heroine, they could have easily inferred how her feeling changed as the story developed, which is important for an appreciation of the story.

The first scene (Scene 1) was from the beginning part of the movie. The heroine (Ann, the Princess) wakes up in the morning in the bed of the hero (Joe, an American journalist) in his apartment. They greet and introduce each other. At this point, they don't know each other well. The second scene (Scene 2) was from the ending part of the movie. Ann and Joe are in the car in front of the gate of the palace. Ann leaves Joe and goes back to the palace through the gate. Joe is left alone in the car for a minute, and then starts the car. They love each other but have to part. These scenes were presented three times respectively. The students saw the same scene with different purposes (i.e., for the gist, and for details). While watching, the students filled in the blanks in the transcriptions so that they listened for the exact language the speakers used in the scenes. After watching the scenes, the students compared and analyze the transcriptions of the two scenes (See Appendix 1 & 2) in respects of the relationship of the speakers and their language use.

#### Data collection

Three types of qualitative data were collected: the teacher's general observation of the class performance in the warm-up phase of the lesson procedure, the students' written assignment (See Appendix 3), and the students' written reflections upon their performance on their assignment.

##### *Teacher's general observation of the class performance*

The teacher paired up the students and made them greet and introduce each other as if they met for the first time. The teacher asked the class to come up with and share the expressions they used in the conversation, and listed on the board some of those popularly used by the students.

##### *Students' written assignment*

As the assignment, the students rewrote the conversation between Ann and Joe which they listened to and analyzed in the consciousness-raising task. They were supposed to modify the language in the conversation according to the two pair of

speakers they chose themselves (such as, the new employee and the boss in the office or two classmates of their age at college, etc.). The assignment was collected one week later from the instruction.

#### *Students' written reflections*

In addition to the assignment above, the students were told to write a reflection upon how they modified the conversation to make it sound natural for the designated pair of speakers. This was also collected one week later from the instruction with the assignment.

#### Data analysis procedure

The teacher's general observation of the students' performance at the initial stage was used as the baseline against which the overall change in the students' awareness to pragmatics after the consciousness-raising task was measured. The students' written assignment was examined according to the types of modification the students did on the original conversation qualitatively. The students' reflections were coded on the basis of similar comments and key phrase notes were taken.

## **FINDINGS**

#### *Teacher's observation*

The typical expressions the students came up with and listed on the board were such as, "Hello, how are you?" "Fine, thank you" for greeting between friends, and "How do you do?" "How do you do?" or "Nice to meet you" "Nice to meet you, too" for greeting between a teacher and a student.

#### *The written assignment*

The written assignment showed the typical pattern of the students' modification of the conversation. 24 out of 37 students chose two friends as the speakers of their modified conversations. Other pairs of speakers were: mother and son/daughter chosen by 4 students, boy and girl by 4 students, teacher and student by 2 students, Tom and Jelly, cartoon characters, by 2 students, and shopkeeper and customer by 1 student. Most of the students modified the conversation to make it sound more casual than the original one between Ann and Joe, which was relatively formal as they do not know each other well.

In general, the students reduced formality of speech in the following ways. First, they changed the utterances with *would* or *may*, such as, in "Would you like a cup of

coffee?” or “You may sit down.” of the original version to “Do you want coffee?” or “Sit down, please”. Second, formulaic expressions were used by many students. “Oh, really?”, “OK.”, “Good idea!”, “Let’s go!”, and “See you later.” are some of them. “How are you? I’m fine. And, you?”, which is a minimal pair typical to the very beginners, was also often used by the students. Thirdly, related to the second observation, many of utterances in the conversation were made shorter. This modification appeared to have been naturally done as a result of the use of formulaic phrases, but not intentionally. A few students wrote in the reflection that they realized that the casual conversation like the one between friends tend to be made mostly by shorter utterances. Among others, the expressions for invitation, suggestions or negotiation, such as, “Let’s go.”, “How about~ing?” were often observed. This kind of modification appeared to be done in accordance with change of the topic of the conversation. The original conversation was the one in which the speakers introduced each other. Some students extended the conversation between friends adding the new topics, such as, going shopping, watching movies, and applied formulaic expressions for negotiations or giving suggestions.

#### *The written reflections*

The students reflected about the modifications they did on the original conversation. These reflections were categorized based on the type of modification, and the result was summarized in Table 1. These categorized modification types

Table 1

Types of modification	Frequency	
● Change formal words to casual words (Deleted “May”, “Would”, etc.)	10	How to speak
● Added “Oh!”, “Wow,” to make the conversation friendly	3	
● Rewrite the first line, “How do you do?” to “Hi”	2	
● Used expressions often heard in school	1	
● Made each turn shorter	2	
● Changed the topic of the conversation (talk about the class at school, invite for movies/drinking, etc.)	5	What to talk
● Specified the situation/speakers’ relationship (meeting a student transferring from another school, meeting a new friend)	2	

appeared to be grouped in two larger types, that is, modification on how to speak and modification on what to talk. As the consciousness-raising task did not refer to topic changes specifically, the latter type of modifications is thought to be applied by the students as intended to make the conversation sound more natural between the speakers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Over all, the students seemed to notice that the language used by speakers of a conversation would change in formality as the speakers' relationship change with respect to their social status and relative distance. Therefore, the answer to the first research question, "Does the consciousness-raising task with the use of scenes from a movie affect the students' awareness of pragmatic factors in language use?", should be affirmative. However, to the second research question, "To what extent does this consciousness-raising task affect the students' pragmatic awareness?", the answer seems mixed. From the fact that most of the students chose friends (i.e., a pair of speakers with similar social status, thus, their psychological distance is small), as the speakers for their modified conversation, most modifications of the conversation were done in a very similar way and similar direction with little variation in formality of speech. Even in the cases that the students chose speakers with different social status, the conversation was between the mother and the daughter, a teacher and a student, or a shopkeeper and a customer. The relative social and psychological distance of these pairs of speakers does not seem so large. On the other hand, as observed in analyses of the written assignment and the students' reflections, some the students spontaneously or purposefully applied the type of modification by changing and extending the topic of the conversation that was not brought up in the lesson. Here, the students showed that what to talk, not only how to speak, the two types of modification categorized in the analysis of the students' reflections, should be adjusted adequately to the pair of speakers of a specific conversation so that the conversation can sound more pragmatically appropriate. Therefore, they seemingly noticed consciously or unconsciously that speakers, topics, and way of speaking work together to compose a sequence of discourse.

## **INTERPRETATION**

Limited variation in the choice of speakers and consequently, in the direction of

modification of the conversation (i.e., reducing the formality) as well as exploration the students made for modification (i.e., topic change) should be noted for interpretation of the students' performance. They give insights about the following points.

Firstly, the result of analyses shows what the students learned from the consciousness-raising task, but at the same time, it also may demonstrate what they have learned in the course of English education since junior high school. From little variation of speakers and low level of formality used by most of the students, it can be inferred what kinds of exchanges they have been often exposed to, and further, what speaking in English means to them, that is, the students' subjective view about speaking in English. This sounds too extreme, but this observation may, to some extent, illustrate the need of English use for the students, in other words, the possible situations where *they think* they might speak in English most. The topic changes some students made in the assignment can be considered to demonstrate further that their expectation of English use is limited to a range of topics. Naturally, their subjective view must have been influenced by the school education as English has been taught as a foreign language.

Secondly, the result of analyses was different from what the teacher had expected. This might be attributed to the gap between the students' subjective view about their speaking in English and that of the teacher's (in this case the teacher was the author of this article) . The teacher had thought that the students should have been more interested in a variety of situations to use English. Speaking in English appears to mean differently to the students and the teacher.

The insights above should be explored to inform future instruction of pragmatics through investigation of the students' needs about English use, and what's more, what speaking English means to the students of the course.

Finally, to understand fundamentally the problems this study indicated and the possible reasons for the students' performances, the insights above mentioned need to be examined theoretically.

Butterfield (2009) conducted an action research on a reading project at a primary school adapting a grounded theory methodology from the perspective of social constructivist. She emphasizes recognition of multiple realities, or multiple subjective meanings of an action by the participants and interpretation of these subjective meanings (2009). Taking this perspective, her definition of action research can be summarized as an inquiry process to identify underlying problems

through the collaborative investigation of self-reflected data between the researcher and the participants for shared subjective meanings of observed actions for the purpose of future changes in the practice that is researched. If adopting her perspective to this action research, understanding what speaking in English means to the students by the teacher, and negotiating of this meaning between the students and the teacher are essential to improve the students' pragmatic learning in the course. Some other researchers also explain the grounded theory applied for qualitative research. Robrecht (1995) states the importance of the perspective the researcher chooses to take as it decides dimensions of a problem under study from which the data are analyzed, thus, the data are to reveal the meanings for the participants specific to that dimension of the problem. Wells (1995) also elaborates the grounded theory based on the presupposition presented by Blumer (1969) on human's actions, which are made to the meaning subjectively interpreted by the actor himself as the meaning negotiated through social interactions with other actors. She cites Glaser and Strauss (1967) to clarify the central characteristic of the grounded theory, which explains "the variability in these interactions, the social structural conditions that support the interactions, the consequences of interactions, and the conditions that support change in interactions over time" (p. 34). The students' performance in this research can be understood according to Wells' explanation of the grounded theory. The meaning they have in common about speaking in English can be considered as the consequence of interactions in the community to which they belong. English lessons at school or English education can be considered as the social structural conditions where these interactions are supported and the shared meaning is supported and maintained as the consequence of interactions. English lessons at school or English education overall can also be considered to be the conditions that support change interactions over time. These theoretical perspectives should be specified by the researcher as a practitioner to expect fundamental changes in the teaching situation over time through action research.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this action research, the consciousness-raising task using a film showed positive effect on the students' awareness to pragmatic use of language. However, the misunderstanding of the teacher about the state of the students' knowledge and



their need of speaking in English should partly be attributed to for the limited variability of the students' performance on the task. To enhance the students' awareness and their actual pragmatic performance, this kind of misunderstanding should be avoided by thorough interpretations of the data collected through a series of action research.

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Appendix 1

Transcription (Scene 1)

JOE: Good morning.

ANN: Where's Dr. Bonnachoven?

JOE: Er, I'm afraid I don't know anybody by that name.

ANN: Wasn't I talking to him just now?

JOE: Afraid not.

ANN: Have... have I had an accident?

JOE: No.

ANN: Quite safe for me to sit up, huh?

JOE: Year, perfect.

ANN: Thank you. Are these yours?

JOE: Er, did... did you lose something?

ANN: No.. no. 1)

JOE: Well, this is what is laughingly known as my apartment.

ANN: Did you bring me here by force?

JOE: No, no, no, quite the contrary.

ANN: Have I been here all night ... alone?

JOE: If you don't count me, yes.

ANN: So, I've spent the night here.. with you.

JOE: Oh, well, now, I-I don't know if I'd use those words exactly, but er, from a certain angle – yes.

ANN: 2) \_\_\_\_\_

JOE: 3) \_\_\_\_\_

ANN: And you are..?

JOE: Bradley, Joe Bradley.

ANN: 4) \_\_\_\_\_

JOE: You don't know how delightful I am to meet you.

ANN: 5) \_\_\_\_\_.

JOE: Well, thank you very much. What's your name?

ANN: Er... 6) \_\_\_\_\_

JOE: Thank you, Anya. Would you like a cup of coffee?

Transcription (Scene 2)

ANN: 7) \_\_\_\_\_

JOE: 8) \_\_\_\_\_

9) \_\_\_\_\_

ANN: Yes. I have to leave you now. I'm going to that corner there, and turn. You must stay in the car and drive away. 10) \_\_\_\_\_. 11) \_\_\_\_\_ as I leave you.

JOE: 12) \_\_\_\_\_

ANN: I don't know how to say goodbye. I can't think of any words.

JOE: 13) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

## Worksheet

Compare the two scenes and fill in the chart.

	Scene 1	Scene 2
What is the relationship of Ann and Joe?		
How well do they know each other?		
How are they feeling?		
Compare the language in the conversation. Put ✕ on the line.		
	+ -	+ -
Formality	←────────→	←────────→
Directness	←────────→	←────────→
Politeness	←────────→	←────────→

### Appendix 3

#### Assignment

Rewrite the short conversation below taken from Scene 1 for a different pair of speakers.

(e.g., the conversation between college students, business persons, or a new employee and the boss, etc.)

A: How do you do?

B: How do you do?

A: And you are..?

B: Bradley, Joe Bradley.

A: Oh, uh delighted...

B: You don't know how delightful I am to meet you.

A: You may sit down.

B: Well, thank you very much. What's your name?

A: Er.. you may call me... Anya...

B: Thank you, Anya. Would you like a cup of coffee?