

*From Linguistic Expressions to Intercultural Communication:
The Significance of Pragmatics in EFL Teaching and Learning*

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Abstract

The variety of norms across languages and cultures poses a challenge to second language (L2) speakers in engaging in meaningful intercultural communication. This study discusses the incorporation of pragmatics in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Freshman course at the tertiary level, and in particular, through teacher reflections and teaching assistants' observations. When immersion in the target language and culture is limited, explicit teaching and conscious learning may facilitate acquisition of linguistic and pragmatic features so as to promote successful communication across languages and cultures. However, L2 textbooks often lack coverage of pragmatics. The instructor's mindful incorporation of authentic pragmatics materials when opportunities arise can help students engage in meaningful conversations. Differences in cultural norms can cause unintentional communication misunderstandings during intercultural interactions. Some nuances (e.g., backchannel) in naturally occurring conversations might be challenging for L2 learners to decode. When necessary, explicit instruction can be more effective in raising students' awareness. The instructor's reflections and incorporation of pragmatics in language teaching help to raise students' awareness. To encourage analytical skills and promote implicit learning in language classrooms and beyond, we propose 1) teaching and learning of both linguistic and non-linguistic features, 2) enhancing communicative skills with topics relevant to the students, 3) use of authentic materials for illustrating the pragmatics aspect. Acquisition of pragmatics in an EFL course can have a significant impact on students' intercultural communication in various contexts, such as academic/professional settings, home country and abroad, given the increasing mobility of individuals in our globalized world.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Linguistic Features, Intercultural Communication, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teacher Reflections

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Introduction

Following from the National Development Council's (NDC) blueprint, the Bilingual 2030 Policy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Taiwan has initiated numerous policies directed at promoting English as not only a foreign language, but also a lingua franca, in the education system and the wider environment in Taiwan (NDC, 2018). Nevertheless, underlying the bilingual policy, it is also solely "presented as the extension of English across levels of schooling for Taiwan's domestic student body, specifically as part of a greater plan to integrate Taiwan into the world through internationalization" (Ferrer & Lin, 2021, p. 7). In other words, the aim is to promote language competency by increasing the knowledge and skills of the next generation of students in Taiwan to advance the nation's global competitiveness on the world stage.

However, a major goal of language learning should be to prepare learners to use the target language for meaningful communication, for them to cultivate "a communicative desire to use language for a real purpose" (Tin, 2013, p. 385). Whether in the first, second, or foreign language, it is a highly complex process (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). In general, language learning involves two basic processes: lower-level comprehension processes that involve translating the written code into meaningful language units, and higher-level processes that involve combining these units into a meaningful and coherent mental representation (Kendeou et al., 2014). Moreover, researchers have also highlighted how texts cannot be understood without contributions from the learners as it requires them to scaffold their prior knowledge and experience to build new understandings (Velasco & García, 2014). Language learning is not a passive activity as it demands that learners engage in an active search for meaning (Thomas, 2019). This study, drawing on reflective practice with sociocultural theory as its underpinning framework, thus attempts to investigate how the teaching of pragmatics can be better incorporated in one English course for first-year university students to fully make sense of, comprehend, adapt and utilize different languages to convey their communicative intent, to become competent global citizens.

Pragmatics and Its Role in Intercultural Communication

Pragmatics concerns the interactional use of language in social contexts (Fernández & Staples, 2020) and the intended message the speaker tries to communicate (Parajull 2022). As pragmatic rules are subconsciously used, even native speakers of the target language may not be aware of them until rules are not followed as expected, leading to feelings of hurt or offense (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Acquisition of pragmatics is even more challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in an environment where input of authentic discourse is limited. A common goal for language learners is to appropriately understand and communicate intents in various contexts, making pragmatics highly relevant in language teaching and learning. Cultivating awareness can help mitigate pragmatic breakdowns in intercultural communication contexts involving both native and non-native speakers. Sabirjanovna (2022) provides a brief definition of intercultural communication (IC) as "the interaction of representatives of different cultures" and argues for "culture" being the primary element of IC. Arasaratnam & Doerfel (2005) point out the difficulty of defining intercultural communication competence (ICC) as "competence" itself is subjective, and ICC is usually influenced by each person's culture. Similarly, "communication" cannot be easily defined since it involves different contexts, such as mass communication in sociology and personal communication in psychology (Sabirjanovna, 2022). Although a precise definition

of these terms is elusive, there is a widespread consensus that pragmatics plays a crucial role in achieving effective intercultural communication.

Pragmatics varies across languages and cultures. Different cultures have diverse pragmatic norms, such as politeness conventions, preferences for being (in)direct, and conversational implicatures. The failure to express a communicative intent or being unaware of the differences underpinning pragmatic norms may result in misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or miscommunication, leading to the interference of making good and engaging conversation. Moreover, as O’Keeffe et al. (2019) remind us, second or foreign English language learners may also show significant differences in the way they convey and comprehend certain speech acts, such as greetings and leave takings, or when making short responses.

Communication involves linguistic and non-linguistic features. Linguistic features (e.g., words and expressions, intonation) may be more obvious than non-linguistic features which can be more subtle (e.g., gestures, turn-taking, back channeling, personal space). Language involves form and meaning, and meaning depends on contexts. It is thus crucial to learn not just the form, but also the use of it in appropriate contexts. The use and interpretation of language is largely influenced by the context and its intended message may go beyond literal interpretation. The teaching of pragmatics thus aims to cultivate English language learners' ability to adaptively and appropriately respond to diverse social contexts and scenarios. To effectively help language learners, authentic materials and communicative activities can be used for developing pragmatic skills (Soler & Flor, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012). Parajull (2022) thus highlights how more input of pragmatic features through explicit teaching, as well as the provision of opportunities for peer-interaction and group work, can help to raise learners’ awareness and acquisition of linguistic expressions and their functions.

Furthermore, prosody and formulaic language (including conventional expressions in interactions) play a crucial role in communication, and prosodic patterns produced deviate from anticipated norms can potentially lead to a negative impression for the listener (Fernández & Staples, 2020). Prosody, however, frequently remains underemphasized within EFL instructional materials, despite its capacity to significantly alter the intended meaning of a message through variations in intonation, including rising and falling patterns, the infusion of sarcasm, and the selective emphasis on specific words within utterances. For instance, the utterance “This is great!” conveys entirely different meanings when spoken with genuine sincerity as opposed to articulated sarcastically. However, this distinction remains imperceptible in written form, and even when audio recordings are available, the nuanced difference may not always be obvious and readily perceived by the learners.

In an increasingly interconnected global landscape, using English as a Lingua Franca in intercultural communication has become more common than ever. While the adoption of native speaker norms is typically regarded as socially appropriate, Taguchi (2011) cautions that diverse native speakers may diverge in their judgements of appropriateness; moreover, some learners may opt not to conform rigidly to these native speaker conventions. As O’Keeffe et al. (2019) further remind us, the goal of teaching pragmatics is not about conforming to native or any particular language norms, but it is to guide English language learners to become familiar with some of the norms and practices of the target language as pragmatic errors may cause them to appear rude or abrupt of which the learners themselves may not even realize. Instructors’ mindful incorporation of authentic pragmatics materials

when opportunities arise facilitates students' engagement in spontaneous communication in real-life situations.

In the case of Taiwan, learners have limited exposure to interactions in English and have little chance to acquire pragmatics implicitly and informally. Furthermore, the lack of coverage of pragmatics in EFL textbooks is not uncommon. Researchers thus suggest the importance of incorporating pragmatics into EFL curricula through explicit instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor 2003, Parajuli 2022). Meanwhile, it is important to allow time for students to develop their pragmatic skills and show sensitivity to students' choices. For instance, a learner from a culture where indirect requests and responses are considered appropriate may find it difficult to make a direct request, despite having the knowledge of it. In a setting where interlocutors have fairly different norms and neither are aware of the fact, misinterpretation can easily occur. Cultivating pragmatic awareness helps students to learn the language and interpret messages through a broader lens when communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds.

Reflective Practice and Sociocultural Theory

As teaching and learning becomes more student-centered, reflective practice has gained wide recognition as a concept whereby teachers do not only prompt themselves to reflexively adapt their teaching practices to better facilitate students' diverse learning styles and preferences in the here and now, but also reflectively think about how to foster and enhance their students' learning motivations and outcomes with self-determination as a way forward. According to Farrell (2015), reflective practice promotes self-awareness and improves teaching skills. Teacher reflections impact students' performance in the classroom and beyond (Torres-Goens & Farley, 2017). As previously mentioned, pragmatics involves moving beyond literal meaning of words and expressions. When instructors notice nuanced use of language in preparation for class or in reflection of classroom teaching, making time to address the point may seem insignificant, yet such effort can gradually help student to develop their awareness and acquisition of pragmatic competence. As Golombek and Johnson (2021) remind us, "what is learned is fundamentally shaped by how it is learned" (p. 102605). Reflecting on how students can better learn from what is taught and how to teach it, is just as important as thinking about what to teach. Echoing Vygotsky's sociocultural theorization, Golombek and Johnson (2021) also highlight that "method is something to be practiced, not applied" (p. 102608). Thus, teacher reflections should be regarded as a tool that allows teachers to learn from as well as to enhance and improvise on future actions from what is practiced.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory views knowledge as products of socially constructed realities shaped by an individual's cultural backgrounds and worldviews (McKinley, 2015). In other words, how students make sense of and generate the knowledge they acquire in the learning process is largely underpinned by their cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge. Kress (2011) also reminds us that for learning to be meaningful, it is important for teachers to situate teaching and learning in the context of the students' sociocultural environment, rather than unidirectionally through textbooks or teaching materials that are foreign to their everyday beliefs and practices. Ybema et al. (2010) thus highlight how a constructivist perspective, in the way it recognizes that "social realities as collectively or intersubjectively constructed in an ongoing interplay between individual agency and social structure, in and through which individuals and structures mutually constitute each other" (p. 7), and of which this study draws on, is an appropriate approach that seeks to investigate how pragmatics can be better incorporated in an EFL course as

students learn to communicate and interact in a foreign language (English) that aligns with, rather than contradicts, the prior knowledge and sociocultural environment of their everyday lives.

Background of the Study

This pilot study, conducted within a freshman English class of 35 students, primarily focuses on the incorporation of pragmatics and students' communicative competence. Specifically, it was achieved through the instructor's reflective practice and TAs' observations. The duration of the study spanned 10 months. The team comprises an instructor, and three TAs (two international TAs and one Taiwanese TA) in the first semester and four TAs (one international TA and three Taiwanese TAs) in the second semester.

Given the constraints of a curriculum bound by time, it is easy to overlook opportunities when a brief explanation, or even more effectively, a more extensive discussion on the topic could be provided. Incorporating pragmatics necessitates instructors to recognize the significance of pragmatics as well as a heightened sensitivity to cultural differences and language use in various contexts. It is worth noting that incidental exposure of pragmatics (e.g., requests in various situations) in the classroom can be acquired by the learners. Taguchi (2011) suggests incidental learning of pragmatic features through classroom discourse such as interactions with the instructor and peers. For pragmatic instruction, Parajull (2022) lists practical tasks focusing on linguistic and socio-linguistic dimensions. Linguistic tasks that familiarize learners with the forms include analysis of vocabulary in context, notice and practice intonation, discourse fillers, etc. Social-linguistic tasks include analysis of speakers' goals, practice of politeness/directness, speech acts, and identifying L2 norms and language use. Whenever possible, we took advantage of these practical tasks and further engaged students in a brief or extended discussion, which at times were spontaneous and incidental. In addition to explicit instruction, we also believe in the importance of allowing students to discover and discuss what may be "hidden" rules/messages. This aligns with what Parajull (2022) argues for, a combination of inductive methods (bottom-up approach; examining samples to form rules) and deductive methods (top-down approach; apply rules in examples), and stresses that students' higher order thinking can be developed through analysis of pragmatic samples.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we mainly focus on the three major elements of this pilot study in the EFL setting – oral skills, incorporation of pragmatics, and intercultural communication – through teacher reflections and TAs' observations. Students' questions, thoughts, and suggestions voluntarily shared with us are reflected on and taken into actions. For instance, a discussion on cultural differences in a textbook article was expanded to a special session so we could delve deeper than the confines of the textbook, allowing for extensive exploration of authentic materials (videos, pictures, etc.) and discussion on relevant issues.

One of the main goals of the course is to help students improve their oral skills. In order to better understand what may prevent students from sharing their thoughts in English in class, we conducted an informal survey. Factors that may discourage students from actively engaging in speaking include *lack of confidence*, *worries about making mistakes*, and *not knowing a particular word or phrase*, etc. We asked: *If you hesitate to share your thoughts or answer a question in class, what are some of the reasons that cause the hesitation?* Students

could choose all factors that apply, with a category *other* where they could freely add any unlisted reasons that are true for them. Based on the results, a number of causes preventing students from expressing themselves in English were confirmed (See Figure 1).

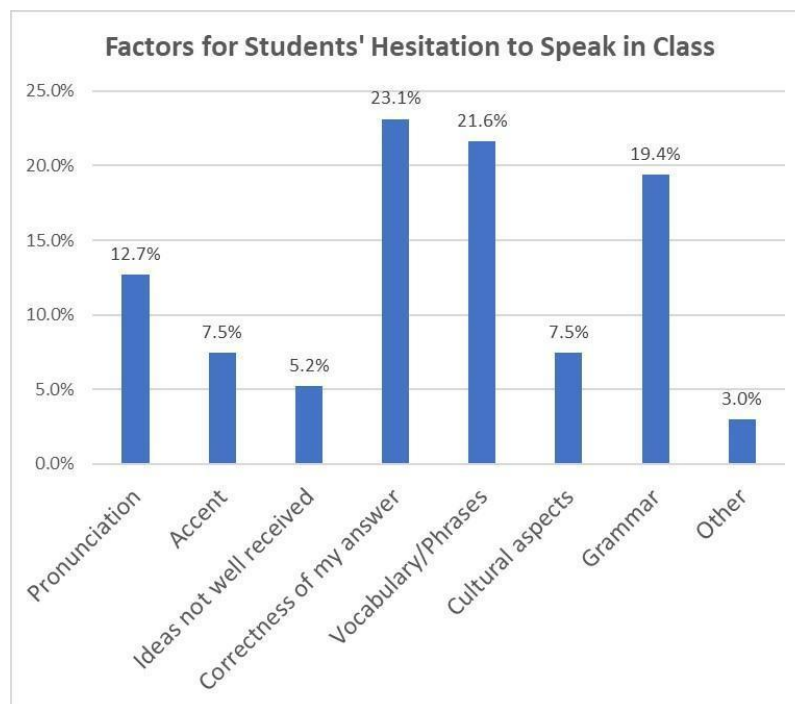


Figure 1: Factors for Students' Hesitation of Speaking English in Class

Results (calculation based on total number of responses) show that *correctness of the answer* (23.1%), *limited vocabulary/phrases* (21.6%), and *grammar* (19.4%) are the top three factors that prevent them from expressing themselves. Simply put, *avoiding making mistakes in front of others, not having the words or phrases to express the thoughts, and building words and phrases into sentences* are students' real struggles. Besides the top three factors, *pronunciation* (12.7%) and *accent* (7.5%) caught our attention, with the former indicating the "correctness of pronunciation" and the latter referring to students' perception of his/her own accent being non-nativelike. If we collapse these two factors, we have a combined category of 20.2% concerning pronunciation. A reflection entry reads:

Students' difficulties, expressed in numbers (in the chart), somehow seem more real. The most difficult one to overcome is "correctness of the answer" that students are worried about. Graduating from high school just a few months ago where correctness of answers is very much emphasized, students may need some time to adapt to changes. Earning their trust and providing a friendly environment where they can express confidently and through critical thinking will be what we need to work on. Remember, though, that a change from test-oriented learning in high school to active participation in discussion which requires critical thinking and oftentimes with no fixed answers will take time. Be patient.

However, it is not uncommon that Asian students are thought of as passive, compared to their counterparts from a western culture. For instance, Lin et al. (2017) point out Taiwanese high school students participated in blog activity passively, while their British counterparts did it voluntarily, and it may be due to a different Taiwanese high school culture where standardized answers are common, and students are not encouraged to think critically. In the

initial stage of our study, only a small number of students regularly shared their thoughts in class voluntarily. One of the teacher reflection entries revealed that students were going through the change:

One of the students mentioned that this English course is very different from all his previous English classes because in high school, there was test after test, and they were not used to open-ended questions. It is encouraging that the student now (in the middle of the semester) feels more comfortable with this learning process constantly requiring group discussion that is quite different from all his previous English classes. It took some time for him. Another student expressed being surprised by how we conducted the course, similar to his foreign teacher guiding them to learn new knowledge through articles, rather than test-oriented English classes in high school. When students are quiet, I will need to remember that their prior English-learning was commonly test-oriented, and their aim was to score high in written tests. Allow them time to develop their critical thinking and formulate their thoughts in speaking.

As students were adapting to an English course early in the first semester, and not all students had the same English learning background, gathering some information in this regard helped the instructor to be aware of the gap. One of the teacher reflection entries shows how students communicated different learning experiences, which lead to a changed thought:

A student shared that in their high school English class, pronunciation of words was not taught. Now she enjoys learning it as well as multiple meanings of a word. Perhaps the focus was to score high on written tests in high school, and they were trained to read and write, with listening and speaking being overlooked. When they are reluctant to speak, besides not having the vocabulary, it is possible that they are unsure about the pronunciation, despite having learned the word and knowing its meaning. It's natural to think that pronunciation is part of the package when learning new vocabulary, but not all students learned it this way. Without adequate vocabulary and learned pronunciation, an idea cannot be fully and clearly expressed. I will need to be sensitive and discern when students need help with pronunciation while attempting to articulate their ideas.

Pragmatic, as previously mentioned, is under-addressed in EFL textbooks; therefore, instructors' efforts in providing learning opportunities, especially with authentic materials and real-life situations, may promote students' pragmatic awareness which is essential for engaging in intercultural communication. In an informal conversation with an Asian student studying in Europe, the instructor recognized a pragmatic failure, unknown to the person who shared the story:

The experience R shared was a good example of a pragmatic failure. At the restaurant, she would like more water. R told me that she said to the waiter politely, "The glass is empty." However, the waiter looked puzzled and had an expression of "And...?" For R, "The glass is empty" is an indirect request of "Could I have more water, please?" For the waiter, however, it was merely a description of the glass on the table, and he needed a direct statement to know what to do next. In the classroom, where a request was presented in a textbook phone conversation, I shared the story with the students and briefly discussed directness and politeness with them. Too bad we did not have enough time to go deeper on the issue today. I'll need to try to set

aside some time for more discussion on pragmatics. I would like to hear about students' experiences of intercultural communication.

To raise students' pragmatic awareness, the instructor and the TAs worked as a team and set aside time to incorporate pragmatics in classroom teaching, with authentic materials and relevant discussion questions. Students were unexpectedly enthusiastic about the topic. The instructor and the TAs agreed that it was a positive learning experience for the students. An entry of the teacher reflections highlights students' interests in learning about it:

Almost every student raised their hands and shared today! This has never happened before! It was good teamwork, with well-prepared materials, including videos along with discussion questions. Students had a lot to share. It was their own personal experiences, and they all seemed to be interested in hearing other people's stories and sharing their thoughts during the group discussion. Student R shared a first-failed-but-then-successful attempt of a request happening at an airport restaurant in Asia. With two non-native speakers of English using English as a Lingua Franca, "take-out food" was not understood by the staff. Having to rush to the gate, the frustrated traveler said, "I want to eat on the plane" which the staff understood immediately. It may not be regarded as pragmatically appropriate, but it worked.

Another story was told by one of the TAs. TA N, being a non-native speaker of Mandarin, was confused when an Uber driver became angry when he asked, "Where are you now?" in Mandarin. An unexpected intonation or missing a word/particle that is perceived as required to be polite by the individual might have caused misinterpretation or misunderstanding of his naive question.

When one shared a not-so-successful attempt of intercultural communication, it seemed to remind another person of his/her own experience. Somehow it was less intimidating to talk about it after a few stories were told. Numerous personal experiences shared, questions raised, situations discussed today. Students seemed to find the topic and questions easy to relate to. It was time well spent, and extremely encouraging to see students enjoying the session. What a learning process for me and the TAs, too! This course can be a bridge between our local students/TAs and international TAs where learning to use a foreign language in various contexts happens in a truly authentic way. Their genuine interests in each other's cultures, as I observed in class as well as the after-class chat they engaged in, may be just the beginning of further exploration and acquisition of a foreign language, including acquisition of pragmatics.

Reflective practice in this pilot study plays a pivotal role in ongoing enhancement of the course, taking into consideration the challenges faced by students. The instructor constantly and continuously reflects on how to cultivate students' oral proficiencies while at the same time, focuses on incorporating pragmatics in the course, both of which being highly relevant to students' intercultural interactions as a global citizen. The instructor's regular reflections instigate adaptations, additions, or changes in the way we conduct the EFL course thereby fostering heightened awareness of pragmatics among students and facilitating their adeptness in intercultural communication.

Conclusions

This study attempts to investigate how pragmatics can be incorporated in the teaching and learning of one English course for first-year university students in order to foster their confidence in communicating in English, without hesitation or fear of making mistakes. As Parajull (2022) highlights, through explicit teaching, English learners have the opportunity to heighten their awareness and acquisition of linguistic expressions and pragmatic features, which helps to reduce students' fear of making inappropriate responses when engaging in conversation. As pragmatics involves beyond the teaching of literal meaning of words and grammatical know-how, which moves away from the incessant test-taking routines that is predominant in pre-tertiary education in Taiwan, one of the aims of this course was to enhance students' pragmatic competence, in its attempt to mitigate students' hesitation which prevents their attempts at conversing in English.

As noted in the findings, sometimes exchanges in class with students would be a clear example of pragmatics, but the instructor did not have time to elaborate or delve in the topic further with students due to limitations of class time. However, making time to re-address these examples later is not only important as the instructor designs and thinks about what to teach in their subsequent classes, but also helps them to think about how to teach certain pragmatic examples for students to better make-sense of the new learning, in a way that connects with their prior knowledge and real-life experiences. This is when reflective practice comes in as an important tool which helps the instructor to adapt and improvise on future actions from what is practiced (Golombek & Johnson, 2021).

Moreover, as the goal of teaching pragmatics is not about striving for or conforming to any particular language norms that is blindly regarded as superior, or native, but to guide students to become more well-versed in their intercultural understandings and pragmatic competence, the course also aims to decrease students' hesitation or lack of confidence at conversing in English. As noted in the findings, with the mindful incorporation of authentic pragmatics materials during group work, students did not only share their thoughts in class, but also engaged in spontaneous communication without hesitation. This aligns with Thomas' (2019) reasoning that views language learners as active discoverers rather than as passive receivers of knowledge.

As demonstrated, teacher reflections prompted us to tackle identified challenges, and open avenues for course adjustments during the study, all aimed at cultivating the competence necessary for effective intercultural communication among students. For future practice, teacher reflections could strategically focus on the most challenging areas that students encountered. In addition, involving students in self-reflective exercises regarding their personal acquisition journey could yield valuable insights for the instructor to effectively address any potential gaps.

Last but not least, as Ferrer and Lin (2021) argue, the over-representation of Taiwan's bilingual policy in raising its domestic students' language competitiveness in the world arena often overlooks the major purpose of language learning, that is to heighten learners' awareness and desire in using the target language for meaningful communication with as few pragmatic errors as possible. As noted in the findings, whether in English, Mandarin or any languages, the importance of pragmatic awareness, as well as the difference use of intonation and/or word usage, particularly in intercultural communication, does wonders to help to resolve misunderstandings or miscomprehension when making requests or inquiries, either

directly or indirectly. Such an example clearly shows how the promotion of language and pragmatics competencies does not only raise Taiwanese students' marketability on the world stage, but also promotes Taiwan's inclusiveness on the world stage whereby foreigners and locals are able to adaptively and meaningfully converse with each other in total ease.

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