Evaluating pragmatics-focused materials

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Learners often find the area of pragmatics (that is, using speech acts such as requesting, inviting, and complimenting) problematic. Teachers are urged to teach pragmatic aspects of language, and make use of authentic samples of spoken discourse to do so. However, information about the effectiveness of pragmatics-focused instruction of this nature has been lacking. This paper describes how we evaluated a set of instructional materials targeting the speech act of requests. The materials aimed to raise learners' awareness of native-speaker norms of requesting in an academic environment. They employed a ‘guided discovery’ approach in which the learners analysed samples of authentic spoken language. The findings of our evaluation showed that the learners found this experience positive. After instruction, their perceptions of the appropriateness of requests matched those of native speakers more closely than they did prior to instruction. These findings have implications for the development of pragmatics-focused materials.

Introduction

Studies have shown that second language learners often struggle to communicate appropriately, even when they have a high level of general language proficiency (see, for example, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990). When learners make errors of appropriacy (pragmatic errors), the consequences are potentially more serious than if they make grammatical errors. While native speakers are usually able to identify a grammatical error produced by a non-native speaker as a language problem, they are less likely to identify a pragmatic error as such. Instead, the non-native speaker may be seen as rude (ibid.). Possible reasons for these difficulties include the transfer of inappropriate norms or language from the learner’s first language, and misconceptions about the target language.

At universities, interacting with academic staff is an important communicative task for students (Gravatt et al. 1997). For example, a student may need to ask a tutor or lecturer for help with an assignment. The conventional approach seen in many currently available English for Academic Purposes (EAP) speaking textbooks (for example, Lynch and Anderson 1992; Madden and Rohlck 1997; Rignall and Furneaux 1997) to improving learners’ pragmatic competence is to present learners with lists of ‘useful expressions’ for various speech acts. This is problematic, however. Typically the lists present explicit realizations of speech acts.
rather than subtle and indirect ones (Basturkmen 2001). Another problem is that this approach usually neglects to show when and for what purposes it is appropriate to make a speech act, and which expressions would be appropriate in a particular situation. Yet research shows that cultures vary in regard to what speech acts can be performed due to different perceptions of factors such as relationships, rights, and obligations (Blum-Kulka and House 1989). For example, it may be appropriate to ask about someone’s salary in one culture, but not in another. When language learners simply transfer the norms from their first culture to a second language, they may fail to achieve their communicative goals (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990; Tanaka 1997).

A number of suggestions have been made for overcoming the problems in conventional language teaching materials. In particular, some argue that learners should be encouraged to analyse samples of authentic conversation to see how language is used to realize speech acts appropriate to specific settings (Riggenbach 1990; Tanaka 1997; Clennell 1999). But how practical is this suggestion, and how effective is it for learning pragmatics? For example, would ESOL students be able and willing to analyse transcripts of authentic speaking? Until now, there has been little evaluation of this approach. This led us to carry out our own investigation, in which we set out to evaluate the effectiveness of a set of pragmatics-focused materials.

Materials

The first step in the study was to develop the materials. These were based on authentic data we collected at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The data comprised 17 audio recordings of naturally-occurring conversations in which native-speaker and ESOL students made requests to academic staff. The materials aimed to raise learners’ awareness of what kind of requests native-speaker students made to staff, and how they made them. This was achieved through guided analysis of recordings and transcripts of authentic spoken language, with brainstorming of factors that can affect how requests are made, and discussion comparing pragmatic norms of the target culture with those of the learners’ own cultures. It was hoped that transferable skills and independence would be fostered by asking students to analyse discourse by themselves. Appendix 1 shows a sample of the teaching materials developed.

Because pragmatic behaviour is closely tied to cultural and individual identity (Benesch 1993), no attempt was made to get the students to copy the native-speakers’ requests. The aim was simply to provide learners with a deeper understanding of typical native-speaker language use. The students are left with the decision as to whether or not they should conform to these norms in their own speech.

Evaluation

The object of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the materials. There were three areas we wished to investigate:

1. Were the students able to carry out the tasks involved in the materials?
2. How useful, interesting, and enjoyable did the students perceive the materials to be?
3. Did the materials raise the students' awareness of requests in a university context?

Simply put, these questions can be summarized as ‘Could they do it?’; ‘Did they like it?’; and ‘Did they learn anything?’

Four classes (three university-based EAP classes, and one EAP class in a private language school) were taught using the instructional materials for a period of five or six hours. Most of the students were 21 to 25 years old, and had been studying English for an average of seven and a half years. Their native languages were Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Korean, Tamil, and Tongan. In all, 18 students from the four classes completed an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the classes.

Ellis (1997) proposes that the empirical retrospective evaluation of tasks should involve collection of three types of information: response-based (what the students do), student-based (what the students think), and learning-based (what the students learn). Our evaluation of the materials was based on this three-way model.

Response-based information

Could the students do it?

In order to collect response-based data, all the classes were recorded on videotape, and transcripts made of the interactions to identify whether or not the students could carry out the tasks and activities in the materials.

The recordings showed that the students did not find the classes overly difficult, and that they were able to achieve the tasks. During the classes, the teacher constantly threw questions over to the students, and most of the time the students were able to provide convincing answers or interesting ideas.

It was also noticeable that some of the students made links between what was being taught in class, what the norms were in their culture, and their experiences in New Zealand. This is precisely the sort of ‘awareness’ that it was hoped the materials would foster. The following is an excerpt of a discussion between the teacher and a Korean student. It occurred after a transcript had been studied in which a non-native speaker student from China failed to ‘get to the point’, leading to long silences and the tutor asking ‘Well, what is the problem?’ The Korean student was relating the transcript to communication difficulties he had experienced in New Zealand.

S: I think it’s because of cultural difference because in Asian country we start with this sentence.

T: Right … so it would be rude to be very direct at the beginning?

S: Yeah it’s very rude … sometime when I ask a request at a shop or some office I just I explain my situation first … I don’t direct … but sometimes they say ‘What’s the problem?’ and I really embarrassed …

Student-based information

Did the students like it?

Did they think they had learnt anything?

A questionnaire was designed to investigate students' opinions on whether they liked the materials, and whether they felt they had learnt...
from them. It was administered at the end of instruction, and some of the results are given in Appendix 2. They showed that the students found the classes to be useful, interesting, and enjoyable. None of the questions attracted a response that indicated disagreement (a response lower than 4). Indeed, the most common response for the items about usefulness and enjoyment was 7—the strongest agreement response possible. This finding was supported by the students’ comments on the open-ended questions, as shown in the remarks of one of the students:

It was very interesting and useful class. I sometimes try to listen to other students making requests in some situations, but I can not catch perfectly of course, so that I was very happy to have the chances to listen to the other students speaking recorded.

The students’ responses on the self-report questionnaire also indicated that they felt they had learnt something. Almost all responded affirmatively to the question ‘Have you learnt anything new about making requests in English?’ Most then provided details of what they had learnt. Here is an example:

Yes. How to ask the tutor in polite, proper way. Big help ‘cause I used to make many problem not because I was rude but simply because I haven’t learnt.

The students reported that they had learnt about the factors that affect politeness, such as the size of the request and the relationship between the speakers, and ‘how to be polite’. These responses seem to suggest that the students’ awareness of requests had been raised. Indeed, some students made comments to this end, such as the one given below:

I think that the three classes was very useful and it opened my eyes on things that I wasn’t paying attintion (sic) to.

These comments are supported by the students’ responses to section B, Appendix 2, of the questionnaire. As Appendix 2 shows, 15 out of 18 students agreed that they had paid special attention to their own production of requests outside of class. The majority (10 out of 18) had also paid special attention to other people making requests. Only one student responded that he had not thought about the work carried out in class. These results suggest that many of the students transferred the heightened awareness gained inside the classroom to the world outside the classroom.

Did the students learn anything?
While the responses to the questionnaire indicated that most of the students believed that they had ‘learnt something’, we also needed to find out if the ESOL students had really developed a better understanding of requests after using the materials. To confirm this, we devised a ‘perceptions of appropriacy’ questionnaire, following Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998). It aimed to measure whether any learning had taken place which was directly attributable to the instructional materials. The questionnaire contained ten requests, five of which were intended to be ‘appropriate’, and five ‘inappropriate’. Each item comprised a brief description of the context, followed by a short conversation in which the
student made a request. However, while the ‘appropriate’ requests were
taken from the authentic data we had collected in the University, none of
the transcripts used in the classes were included again in the
questionnaire in the same form. The five items that were intended to be
‘inappropriate’ were based on expressions we had observed ESOL
students using in role-plays, but which were absent in the naturally-
occurring data. Here are the ten items from the questionnaire:

Note: Item 1 is shown in the format that was used for all the items in the
questionnaire.

1 Lucy has gone to see the Dean during her office hour.
   Dean: Hi.
   Lucy: Hi. I’m just wanting to withdraw from one of my Art History papers.

How appropriate do you think the underlined sentence is?

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<tr>
<td>very appropriate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>not at all appropriate</td>
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</table>

2 Alison wants to change her tutorial time, so she has gone to see the course
   coordinator during his office hour.
   CC.: How’s it going?
   Alison: Good. Ah could you do me a favour?

3 Janine has also gone to see the course coordinator to change her tutorial
time.
   C.C.: Come in. What can I do for you today?
   Janine: Hi, um when I was driving into work today there was this really big
traffic jam, so I was late, and I’m in the 8 o’clock tutorial, and um
you know when if you’re always late for a tutorial you miss too much
so I was wondering if I can change my tutorial?

4 Arthur has gone to see his lecturer during her office hour.
   Lect.: Come in.
   Arthur: Hi, I just want to get an extension for my assignment.

In numbers 5 to 10 all the students have gone to see their tutors during the
tutors’ office hours. They all want some help with an assignment.

5 Tutor: Hi. Have a seat. What can I do for you today?
   Jason: Um, I’ve come about my assignment. Can you please help me … it’s
      very difficult.

6 Tutor: Please take a seat.
   Rob: Um I’ve written the literature review for my assignment, and I just
      want to check I’m on the right track.

7 Tutor: Hello, have a seat.
   Jill: Thanks, I’ve come about the assignment. I don’t have much
      experience in this area … could you please suggest a topic for me?

8 Tutor: Come on in.
   James: Thanks. Um, for my assignment I was going to look at Maori fishing
      rights. I’ve got lots of articles on the Maori fishing issue and non-
      theoretical stuff but I don’t know the theory … could you recommend
      a reading on indigenous rights?
The questionnaire was administered twice (before and after the course of instruction, using the pragmatics-focused materials). The questionnaire was also administered to ten students at the same university who were native speakers of English. Their responses were used as a baseline against which the ESOL students’ responses were compared.

The results of this questionnaire confirmed that the ESOL students’ perceptions of the appropriacy of various requests after instruction came closer to those of the native speakers than they did prior to instruction. Before instruction there was little correlation between the native-speakers’ responses and those of our ESOL students. However, after instruction, the responses of the ESOL students were much more in line with those of the native speakers. Table 1 below shows the ranking given to each item by the native speakers and the ESOL students (before and after instruction). It also shows the difference between the native speakers’ and the ESOL students’ ranking of each item. For example, the native speakers considered Item 1 (see Figure 1 above) as generally quite appropriate, as was intended. This item reflected a pattern of language use commonly found in our authentic data: a ‘want statement’ softened by the word ‘just’ was used for a ‘small’ request. At the university where the data were collected, obtaining the Dean’s signature is the last step in the process of withdrawing from a course. From the conversations recorded in the Dean’s office, this step seems to simply be a formality. When we calculated the scores, Item 1 ranked as the fourth most appropriate item as perceived by the native speakers. Before instruction, the ESOL students considered this item to be inappropriate. When we calculated their scores, this item ranked tenth—a difference of six places. However, after instruction, the ESOL students’ perception of this request was similar to the native speakers’ perception. Their responses gave a ranking of 4.5, i.e. a difference of just half a place.
In summary, the results of the video recordings of the classes, the student-based questionnaire, and the ‘perceptions of appropriacy’ questionnaire, suggested that use of the pragmatics-focused instructional materials led to positive outcomes. It appeared that the students ‘could do it’, that they ‘liked it’, and that they ‘learnt something’.

**Conclusion**

In this article we argued that, by and large, the conventional approach to teaching speech acts in most currently available EAP speaking textbooks is inadequate. The language input in the textbooks tends to consist of lists of ‘useful expressions’. The textbooks seem to wrongly assume that learners know when and how it is appropriate to make speech acts, and that all they need is to be given the phrases to do so. To offer a ‘better way’ to teach speech acts, we devised a set of materials which encouraged learners to analyse transcripts of authentic speech themselves, and to focus their attention on social considerations affecting speech act use.

Although the idea of encouraging learners to become ‘discourse analysts’ themselves had been proposed a number of times in the literature as a means of developing learners’ pragmatic competence (see, for example, Riggenbach 1990), there had been a lack of empirical evidence to show whether this idea is practical or effective. Our evaluation of the pragmatics-focused materials we developed in-house indicated that learners not only enjoyed this type of instruction, but were also able to learn from it. These results suggest that a case can be made for changing the way speech acts are presented in EAP (and general functionally-based) speaking instructional materials.

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References


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Requests

1 Role-play
Give out role-cards, and check vocabulary with the class.
Students carry out and record the role-play.

2 Discussion of social factors in requests
In groups, students discuss what a request is, and what influences the way people make requests.
Give students the chart 'Factors which affect politeness in requests', and add any other factors the students suggest.

3 Analysis of recordings of role-play
Students listen to their recordings and transcribe how they made the request.
Feedback to teacher, who writes up the requests on one side of the board.

4 Class analysis of authentic data: changing tutorials
Give out cut-ups of possible strategies within changing tutorials.
Students select and order the strategies they used within their role-play.
Students listen to the authentic taped conversation and select/order the strategies accordingly.
Give students the transcript of the conversation.
Students listen to recording again to check strategies.
Instruct students to look at strategies not used and discuss why. Class feedback.
Teacher-led discussion of language points, such as: just + want; (explicit and to the point, 'just' minimizes and is an important softener) and 'is it possible' (impersonal and tentative).
Comparison with what students said in the role-play.
Discussion comparing pragmatic norms of the target culture with those of the learners' own cultures.

Worksheet for requests
Changing Tutorials Role-play
Student
It’s the second week of the semester. You are working on a commerce paper. This course has many students and many different tutorial times. Last week you chose a tutorial by writing your name on a list. Now, however, you want to change to a tutorial at a different time. Go and talk to the Course Co-ordinator during his/her office hour. Knock on the door.

Course Co-ordinator
It’s the second week of the semester. You are the course co-ordinator for a large commerce paper which has many different tutorial times. Last week the students chose their tutorials by writing their names on a list. Some of the lists are now full. It is your office hour. There is a knock on the door. A student has come to see you.
Factors which affect politeness in requests

- social distance
  - e.g. talking to a friend/talking to a stranger
- social status
  - e.g. talking to your little brother/talking to your lecturer
- relationship between S and H

- size of the request
  - e.g. borrowing a pen/borrowing a car
  - e.g. closing a window/editing an assignment
- necessity of request
  - e.g. S has no money at the cashier’s in a cafe/S has no money for a bill due next Monday
- normal or exception?
  - e.g. asking for an extension for an essay is asking for an exception to be made
  - e.g. asking for an extension for an essay is asking for an exception to be made

- how easy is the request?
  - e.g. borrowing $100 from a rich man/borrowing $100 from a poor man

Adapted from Kitao et al. (1987)

**Strategies for changing tutorials (to be cut up)**
- asks lecturer how (s)he is
- apologises for intruding on lecturer
- asks to talk to the lecturer about something
- says (s)he wants to change tutorial
- hints that (s)he wants to change tutorial by explaining a personal problem
- tells lecturer what tutorial (s)he’s presently in
- gives reason why changing tutorial
- apologises for changing tutorials
- gives preference for new tutorial time
- negotiates new tutorial time by:
  - making suggestions
  - giving reasons for rejecting times
- negotiates new tutorial time by:
  - making suggestions
  - rejecting times without giving a reason
Taped authentic conversation

Native speaker (male)
S: Um, just . . .
T: How are you?
S: Good. Um, just wanted a tutorial change.
T: Yep.
S: I’m coming in about the eight o’clock stream.
T: Which time which day?
S: Today.
T: Today. Monday.
S: Is it possible to do a Tuesday nine o’clock one?
T: Tuesday eight o’clock.
S: I mean Tuesday nine o’clock sorry.
T: Yep . . . (looking at papers) ah Thursday hang on sorry Tuesday eight o’clock.
S: Yeah I was, I’m booked in there, but I couldn’t make it this morning. I don’t think I’ll be able to make it next week as well.
T: Too early in the morning.
S: Yeah oh there was a big traffic jam on the motorway this morning.
T: Um Thursday nine is actually full.
S: Mm hm, Tuesday nine?
T: Tuesday nine sorry, Tuesday nine so that’s we have to find another time.
S: Wednesday nine?
T: Tuesday eleven?
S: Um, think I’ve got a lecture then.
T: OK Tuesday twelve, Tuesday one?
S: Tuesday one, ah . . .
T: Which is on now. It’d be good to find a time after this because you really you need to go to a tut(orial) this week. Um Tuesday two?
T: Tuesday three? Tuesday four?
S: Um I’ve got a three-to-six lab on Tuesdays.
T: Oh OK.
S: Wednesday though ah yeah Wednesday I could.
T: Wednesday you can go at nine?
S: Yeah I can do that.
T: That alright?
S: Yeah.
Appendix 2  
Student-based questionnaire

A

1. What did you know about making requests in English before the class?
2. Have you learnt anything new about making requests in English? What have you learnt?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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3. The classes were interesting. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (average score 5.78)
4. The classes were useful. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (average score 6.22)
5. The classes were enjoyable. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (average score 5.83)

B  Outside of the classroom

Outside of the classroom did you:
(circle as many as you want)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>number of students (total = 18)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Pay special attention when you made requests</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Pay special attention to other people making requests</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Re-read the information sheets handed out in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Tell your family or friends about what was done in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Not think about what was done in class</td>
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</table>

C  Comments

I would really appreciate all comments, both positive and negative, and suggestions that you have.