Pragmatics: When the Unwritten Rules of Language Break Down
by Kerry Louw and Yuji Abe

Think about a time when an ESL student gave you feedback—a suggestion on how to make your language class better; for example, "You should add more grammar and you should supply all the right answers."

How did you feel? Did you feel the student was rude? Did you think the request was inappropriate? If so, did you inform the student that the request was not acceptable, or did you just keep quiet?

We call this an opportunity. There are ways to turn moments like these into pragmatic lessons: ways to explain the unwritten rules so students become successful intercultural communicators. In this article, we will share an example of giving feedback and a framework to make sense of differences in feedback styles.

We will also describe an approach (Kondo, 2010) to teaching pragmatics and include links to our free online resources including pragmatic patterns, lesson plans, learner handouts, and audio files to teach three speech acts (apologies, feedback, and complaints).

The Idea of Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is a term that is used in relation to communicative competence and is the ability to factor in the context such as the interlocutor's age, gender, role, and status, and adjust word choices, tone, and register accordingly (Garcia, 2004).

To be good communicators requires language users to have reasonable mastery of language content, plus the ability to use language effectively and appropriately within a context. Unlike grammatical errors, "pragmatic errors can easily lead to misconstruals of speaker intentions, which can in turn lead to negative judgements about a speaker's personality or moral character" (Vásquez & Sharpless, 2009, p. 6) and may lead listeners to negatively judge the speaker's overall competence.

For many internationally educated professionals with documented credentials and experience in their countries of origin, one of the barriers to retention and promotion is their soft skills (professional communication skills, ability to work effectively with others, and ability to learn continuously). Without understanding the unwritten rules of pragmatic communication patterns, newcomers may not be able to identify how and why their actions in a team are unsuccessful. They are also less likely to be asked to lead teams and gain the experience that supports upward mobility within a company.

The Critical Incident Video: The Power of Suggestion

Here is an applied example of these unwritten rules of language.

In this video clip, Roger, a manager, reviewed Mariana's report and used Microsoft Word's Track Changes feature to highlight his comments and suggestions. He then said, "I'd say it could use a bit more work. Take a look (at my comments and suggestions) and let me know if you have any questions or if anything's unclear. Let's make it spotless."

However, Mariana went ahead and sent her report without changing anything. When Roger asked what had happened, Mariana said, "I didn't see anything in your review telling me that I had to change things."

Why? Because Roger's feedback included the softeners *could* and *a bit***,** Mariana interpreted that the changes were only suggestions and therefore not definitely necessary. Mariana later defends her action when Roger confronts her for not making changes by saying, "I didn't see anything in your review telling me that I had to change things. I didn't realize your suggestions were not really suggestions." Mariana needs to hear a more negative statement to understand a change is required. However, this type of statement would be perceived by Roger as inappropriately rude.

In summary, cross-cultural feedback (Laroche & Yang, 2014) explains how a statement can be sent with the intention of requesting a change but received as a statement that no change is necessary. Without understanding the unwritten rules of Roger's pragmatic communication, Mariana could not act successfully.

International students also require pragmatic competency to successfully navigate both the formal and informal aspects of the school and workplace. They are expected to fit in, and may be judged negatively when they do not. However, ESL speakers cannot develop pragmatic competencies without understanding the cultural context in which everyday language use occurs (NorQuest College, 2011). It is essential for ESL instructors to provide these pragmatic lessons to their students.

Model for Teaching Pragmatics With Online Resources

One practical model for introducing pragmatics into classroom instruction using speech acts is Kondo's approach (Kondo, 2010). She proposes:

1. using a warm-up activity to raise awareness,
2. teaching the speech act explicitly,
3. raising cross-cultural pragmatic awareness,
4. providing authentic input, and
5. practicing output in interaction.

Using this evidence-based instructional method, we've created easy-to-use lesson plans to introduce three speech acts: apologies, feedback, and complaints. We've also included pragmatic patterns and sample audio recordings of Canadian workplace-appropriate language for compliments and requests. You can find these lesson plans, patterns, and sample audio recordings here.

Tip

Once students gain some language and understanding of pragmatics, it can be effective to expose learners to pragmatic aspects of language and provide them with analytical tools to arrive at their own generalizations about contextually appropriate language rather than teaching every speech act specifically (Schmidt, 1993).

Key Points

ESL speakers cannot develop pragmatic competencies without understanding the cultural context in which the language is used. ESL instructors can use our lesson plans to teach three speech acts—apologies, feedback, and complaints—in context, and can also use our pragmatic patterns as analytical tools so that ESL learners can arrive at their own generalizations of culturally appropriate language use.

References

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