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Teaching Pragmatics Through Theater
by Alice Savage

When people have a conversation, they do not just exchange information. Rather, they negotiate a relationship, and the social skills involved are called pragmatics. To be good at pragmatics is to be good at the art of sending and receiving implicit messages and intentions. This can be done through gesture, intonation, the choice of specific phrases, or even silences.

For example, if I say, "I don't want you to take this wrong way, but…" you are immediately alerted to the fact that I'm about to make an observation that is not flattering. I may also underscore my sincere good will through the pitch of my voice, my eyes, and my body language. Likewise, when my college-aged son tells his friend, "Yeah, I got you," he usually nods in a gesture of empathy and understanding. "Yeah, I got you," is a short, frequently used phrase that young adults in his subculture use to bond with each other and signal their willingness to continue listening.

These expressions and gestures are loaded with meanings beyond the literal, and they help speakers make moves in a conversation. Conklin & Schmitt's (2012) research suggests that English learners can increase their fluency by storing these frequently occurring formulaic sequences. They can also benefit from watching and mimicking the body language of different types of conversations.

Recently, there has been a call for instruction in the "hidden" language of pragmatics, but the field is only just beginning to figure out how to create appropriate classroom materials. Most course book dialogs do not include the patterns of real conversations with their backchannelling and culturally embedded messages. Yet according to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), without direct instruction, it can take up to 10 years in a second language context for a learner to acquire these pragmatics skills.

Playwrights and Pragmatics

Fortunately, there is a group of people whose career depends on their awareness of pragmatics, and that is playwrights. They may not know the term *pragmatics*, but their job is to write conversations that resonate authentically with their audience. A play explores what happens when people use their pragmatics skills, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

“I put words in their mouths,” writes Australian playwright Bovell (2017).

> It is this, more than anything else that distinguishes what I do as a playwright and screenwriter from the work of the novelist, or the poet, or the short story writer. They write their words primarily to be read. I write mine primarily, to be said and heard. (p. 11

In addressing this distinction, Bovell (2017) is very aware of the pragmatics of the situations in which he puts his characters. Their impulses and reactions inform his decisions about the dialog. He knows that a character wants something and must use social skills to achieve it. For example, if Nora wants approval from Torvald, she has to create the conditions in which he is likely to give it. If she speaks recklessly, she may hurt her chances of success. This movement toward an outcome is what theater artists call rising tension. The situation is constructed, but it resonates with people because it reflects the patterns and dynamics of real life.

Teachers and students can make great use of these conversations in the classroom. A theater script can showcase the unfolding of a relationship through the language moves that characters make. Here’s an example from *Only the Best Intentions* (2018) by Alice Savage, a one-act family drama written for English learners. In the opening scene, a mother and father are talking about their son, who has missed the bus. There is a short exchange in which both are frustrated. We only hear the mother (Fiona), but her language choices reveal a movement from venting her frustration to collaborating on a solution. Here is Fiona, talking on the phone:

> Jaime missed the bus again
> I thought you were taking care of it.
> [Pause]
> I was, but the repair guy is coming.
> [Pause]
> For the dishwasher. I told you.
> [Pause]
> I know, but I can’t leave. He’ll be here any minute.
> [Pause]
> I know you can’t. So…what do you want to do?

When Fiona shifts to, “So…what do you want to do?”, she pauses to signal a transition. Then she invites her husband to offer a solution. In this way, she’s signaling her willingness to collaborate. This interaction can be highlighted and discussed. Students can read the scene aloud and feel “the words in their mouths” and process the experience, perhaps coming away with a strategy they can use in group projects or with coworkers.

Or not. With pragmatics, it is important that learners have agency. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) make a distinction between raising awareness of pragmatics patterns and imposing them:

> It is up to the learners themselves as to whether they will choose to be pragmatically appropriate. Even if they gain an understanding of the social and cultural norms, they could still resist accommodating to L2 norms in their own pragmatic performance. (p. 14)

In other words, pragmatics through theater is about helping students investigate the language choices of characters. Then they can make informed choices about how they want to function in the new language identity.

Building a Pragmatics Lesson

In designing lesson plans that involve pragmatics through theater, there are several approaches you can take. The following example sequence is just one option among many, and not all the elements would need to be included.

Start by selecting a specific scene that has examples of functional language such as persuading, apologizing, or airing a grievance. Then follow the steps.

1. Begin With an Experience

Ideally, a pragmatics lesson starts with an experience, so a video or audio recording of a scene can provide a model and initiate discussion. (If a recording is not available, move straight to 2.) When the rhythm of a naturally scripted dialog unfolds, students' innate ability to extract patterns and meaning can be surprisingly keen. They can listen to a scene and identify the context, the relationship between the characters, and what they are talking about through the intonation of the actors and the backchanneling in the script.

2. Read and Discuss

Students do a close read of the script and discuss characters' choices and their outcomes. Does the character achieve a goal, or does she make an error? Here's an example from *Let the Right One In*, a play about teenage vampires by Lindqvist and Thorne (2004). In the play, Oskar is a bullied high school student who meets a strangely pale but athletic girl named Eli. She is a vampire, but Oscar does not know this.

> *Eli*: I can't be friends with you, just so you know.
> *Oscar*: What?
> *Eli*: Sorry, I'm just telling you how it is. Just so you know.
> *Oscar*: What makes you think I'd want to be friends with you? You must be pretty stupid.
> *Eli*: Sorry. But that's how it is.

In this scene, Eli is trying to be honest, and she uses *just so you know* twice. It softens the effect of her statement, though it still hurts Oskar. His defensive response is understandable, but it is not what he is really feeling. This short interaction can be decoded and discussed with students and perhaps lead to discussions of students' experiences, in their L1 or L2. They come away with language they can use when they need to relate information that is difficult to hear.

3. Rehearse the Scene

After reading and discussing the script, students can break into groups and take on roles. In their rehearsal groups they can practice line readings with the goal of getting the stress, intonation,

and gesture of the moment. An interesting side activity is to regroup all the people playing the same role to discuss their character. They can then return to their rehearsal group with new insight. Actors can also experiment with stress, intonation, and gesture to see how it feels to communicate emotions and messages in English contexts.

Students can also go "off-script" and improvise in a new context. For instance, after reading a scene in which a couple discuss their rebellious son, students can improvise a scene in which the son complains to a friend about his parents.

4. Performance and Production of Language

A production can take different forms. Students can memorize and stage a full production. A staged reading is blocked for movement, but actors carry scripts. Finally, in a readers' theater version, the actors focus on fluency and read from a script.

For logistics, there are also different options. You can divide a larger class into two groups and have them develop the same or separate scripts and then perform for each other. Students can add scenes, adapt scenes, or even change the ending. You can also switch genders. For example, the female lead becomes a male with a name change. That can lead to an interesting conversation about how gender affects language choices.

After a performance, you can lead a talkback in which the audience comments and asks questions, and the actors respond. Some questions might include

- How did you prepare for your role?
- Why didn't your character…?
- What was the relationship between X and Y?

These questions can also lead to interesting discussions about human behavior and lead to insight into the pragmatic elements of culture.

Finally, have students write and perform their own role-plays and simulations that reflect their unique realities. Writing a play starts with a conflict. Just have students explore a question, such as what happens when a daughter and her parents do not agree about her career choice. Have students create characters and explore what they might say to achieve their goals.

Plays to Use With English Learners

A professional play such as *Let the Right One In* often has more intense situations than real life, but it still contains the "truth in fiction" dialog that can resonate with readers. Many of the classic 20th-century family dramas include similar opportunities to feel a character and his or her language from the inside. The following plays were recommended by Frances Boyd and Christopher Collins at the annual TESOL convention in Chicago:

- *Lost in Yonkers*, Neil Simon
- *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller

- *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder

A naturalistic play written specifically for language learners is another option. Alphabet Publishing has a series of 20-minute plays for students from high-school age to higher education with pragmatics and pronunciation activities, and Theatrefolk has scripts for the K–12 age range for purchase.

Conclusion

Listening to and performing in a play can be a rewarding experience for teachers and students as it opens up conversations about culture, history, language, and human behavior. It can also give students a chance to move beyond the study of words on the page to the dynamics of real people struggling with real issues.

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