DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO PERFORM SPEECH ACTS

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This paper calls attention to an increasingly prominent field of interest within second language acquisition research and pedagogy, namely, that of pragmatic ability. It focuses on an area within pragmatics, that of speech acts, considers the processes underlying the performance of such speech acts, and looks at the effects of explicit instruction in this area. The paper starts by asking what speech act ability entails. Several basic distinctions are made in the description of speech acts, such as that between *sociocultural* and *sociolinguistic* ability. Second, directions of previous research describing speech acts are indicated and directions yet to be taken are pointed out. Difficulties in researching oral speech act performance are noted, and verbal report is recognized as one of a limited number of research tools available for investigating cognitive processes involved in speech act production. The paper then reviews four studies that utilize verbal report to gain at least some access to the underlying processes. Finally, the paper looks at previous research on the tutored and untutored acquisition of speech acts and provides suggestions for future research.

PRAGMATIC ABILITY: THE CASE OF SPEECH ACTS

Foreign language students may gain comfortable control of the vocabulary and grammar of the language without achieving a comparable control over the pragmatic or functional uses of the language, such as those expressed by *speech acts* (i.e., functional units in communication). In other words, they may learn various forms for offering their thanks or for apologizing but may not be sure when it is appropriate to use one form or another. For example, the learner has just finished a large meal at the home of Japanese hosts in Tokyo. What does the guest say in Japanese upon

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getting up from the table? Does the event call for a hearty thank you, an apology, or some combination of the two? Ferrara (1994) reports on the results of both naturalistic and elicited data collection that found Americans tending to use thanks in situations where for native Japanese speakers a quasi-apology form was the preferred token, such as after a meal in a private home. In a situation where a professor was given a small gift, Americans chose to give thanks whereas the Japanese apologized for being unworthy.

Whereas theorists had noted that nonnatives were likely to experience negative transfer from native language in the production of speech acts (Loveday, 1982; Riley, 1981; Schmidt & Richards, 1981), empirical investigations were slow to investigate this form of transfer until well into the 1980s. Until that time, studies continued to focus more on language forms and the meanings of these forms (e.g., in the areas of phonology, morphology, and syntax) than on their pragmatic function in a given utterance. Early empirical research on speech act sets (e.g., Cohen & Olshaint, 1981) was in part prompted by a realization that, although transfer occurs at the sociocultural level, few if any contrastive studies were systematically undertaken in order to characterize such phenomena. In recent years, researchers have begun to investigate empirically the effects of transfer from native language on the sociocultural choices made and sociolinguistic forms used in performing speech acts in a second language.

Sociocultural choices refer to the speaker’s ability to determine whether it is acceptable to perform the speech act at all in the given situation and, if so, to select one or more semantic formulas that would be appropriate in the realization of the given speech act. A semantic formula, in turn, is a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion, any one or more of which can be used to perform the act in question (see Olshaint & Cohen, 1983). Thus, the semantic formula of expression of apology may serve as an apology, or it may be coupled with an acknowledgment of responsibility and an offer of repair: for example, I’m really sorry [expression of apology], I wasn’t looking where I was going [acknowledgment of responsibility], or Here, let me pick them up for you [offer of repair]. Depending on the language situation involved, the speaker may need to take into consideration (a) the culture involved, (b) the age and sex of the speakers, (c) their social class and occupations, and (d) their roles and status in the interaction.

Thus, whereas certain acts in a culture may not require an apology (e.g., one’s role in an auto accident), there are other perceived infractions that do. It still takes some sociocultural savvy to know which semantic formulas to use in the apology. For instance, it may be appropriate for speakers who have missed a meeting with their boss through their own negligence to use the semantic formula of repair by suggesting to the boss when to reschedule the meeting. In other cultures (e.g., Israel), however, an attempt at repair might be considered out of place in that it would most likely be the boss who determines what happens next. Thus, sociocultural knowledge is called for in determining whether a speech act set is appropriate to use and, if so, which member(s) of the set of possible semantic formulas are selected for use.

The sociolinguistic forms refer to the actual language forms used to realize the speech act (e.g., sorry vs. excuse me, really sorry vs. very sorry). The speakers’ sociolinguistic ability would consist of their control over the selection of these forms, which includes their control over the register of these forms, from most intimate to most formal. The language forms are the actual words or phrases selected in order to realize the speech act in the given sociocultural situation: for example, the expression of regret in an apology for knocking someone down, registration of a grievance in a complaint against a landlord, specification of the objective of a request for assistance from a classmate, or the refusal of an invitation to go out for dinner and a show. For instance, when students are asked to dinner by their professor and they cannot make it, turning down an invitation may well be socioculturally appropriate, but the reply “No way!” would probably constitute a sociolinguistically inappropriate choice of forms for realizing the speech act set of refusal. The problem is that, socioculturally, this phrase would be interpreted as rude and insulting, unless the students had an especially close relationship with their professor and the utterance was made in jest. A more appropriate response might be the following: “I would love to but I have a prior engagement I can’t get out of.”

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE PERFORMING OF SPEECH ACTS

Research has increasingly helped to provide empirical descriptions of speech act performance by nonnative speakers. Whereas early speech act literature focused for the most part on the performance of such acts by native speakers and was often anecdotal in nature, empirical studies have steadily accumulated over recent years focusing on the performing of speech acts such as requests, compliments, apologies, complaints, refusals, and expressions of gratitude in a second or foreign language (see Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Cohen, 1996; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Wolston, 1989; Wolfson & Judd, 1983). Thus, there is a growing source of data describing speech acts in terms of the possible semantic formulas that comprise them and the linguistic forms most frequently used to realize these semantic formulas.

The apology speech act set, for example, has at least five separate semantic formulas, which may stand alone or be used in combination: expressing apology (I’m sorry), acknowledging responsibility (That was dumb of me), offering repair (Well, maybe we can celebrate your birthday a day later), giving an explanation or excuse (I’ve had a lot on my mind at the office recently), and promising non-recurrence (It will never happen again). In addition, there are various possible modifications both for intensifying the sincerity (I’m really sorry) and for mitigating the apology (Yeah, but you were in my way) (Cohen, Olshaint, & Rosenztein, 1986). What adds to the complexity of selecting appropriate strategies is that this and other speech acts are conditioned by a host of social, cultural, situational, and personal factors.

Whereas numerous studies of speech act ability on the part of adult learners have now been conducted, such studies have not, for the most part, dealt with the development of this ability, as is pointed out in Kasper and Schmidt (1996) elsewhere in this volume. Studies of the development of language knowledge have tended to focus more on the acquisition of basic morphological, syntactic, and phonological
forms than on the development of the ability to perform speech acts. Along with study of the development of speech act ability, there is a need to investigate the processes underlying the planning and execution of speech act utterances. The empirical investigation of such processes has focused primarily on compensatory strategies in lexical retrieval, that is, strategies used to compensate for or remediate a lack in some language area (Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Kellerman, 1991; Paribakht, 1985; Pouisse, 1990; Tarone, 1983).

Building on the work of Faerch and Kasper (1983) and others, Bachman broadened strategic competence beyond compensatory strategies to include three components: an assessment component, whereby the speaker sets communicative goals; a planning component, whereby the speaker retrieves the relevant items from his or her store of language knowledge (or competence) and plans their use; and an execution component, whereby the speaker implements the plan (Bachman, 1990, p. 100). Research has shown, for example, that there are learners who prefer to plan their foreign language utterances carefully in terms of vocabulary and structures before producing them. Seliger (1980) classified nonnatives as pertaining to one of two general patterns, the planners and the correctors, with the former planning out their utterance before delivering it whereas the latter start talking and make midcourse corrections. Crookes (1989) found that when intermediate and advanced ESL students were specifically instructed to plan for 10 minutes before performing descriptive tasks, they showed more variety of lexis (e.g., more explicit adjectives) and more complexity of language (e.g., more subordinate clauses) than a control group not given time to plan. In applying this finding to speech act processes, we might expect that those learners who only do a minimal assessment of a situation before starting to speak might be more prone to violate certain sociocultural and sociolinguistic conventions than those of similar ability who do more careful preplanning.

Although researchers are now able to produce relatively accurate descriptions of speech acts based on empirical data rather than on intuition and anecdotes, there is still a need to better understand the rationale for the sociocultural choices that are made and for the sociolinguistic forms that are selected in order to realize the given speech act (e.g., Cohen & Olshamit, 1993). We are still lacking detailed descriptions of the processes involved in the production of these speech act utterances by nonnatives. The very complexity of speech act sets like those of apologies and complaints has made it an area of interest in language learning, as this complexity makes special demands on the speaker.

Findings from the limited number of research studies available suggest that language learners may perform multilingual mental translations in order to generate speech acts. For example, multilinguals who may function largely through a language other than their native language while learning and using a target language may revert to their native language at some point in their language processing prior to the production of the speech act. This is what a native French-speaking respondent from the Cohen and Olshamit (1993) study reported after role-playing in English a situation of asking his teacher for a ride home. He indicated that he thought the utterance through in French (the native language) first because he was aware that it called for the speaker to give deference to the status of the addressee, a teacher. He then translated the utterance into Hebrew (his language of daily communication) and finally produced what he felt would be an appropriate English (target language) equivalent of that utterance (Cohen, 1995).

Furthermore, learners and users of a target language may perform other kinds of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural cognitive and affective manipulations totally unbeknownst to the interlocutor before producing what sometimes comes across as a curious response. Often the response itself is only an abbreviated manifestation of what actually transpires in the nonnative speaker’s mind. The following is a sampling of verbal report data from learners as to what went on in their minds before and during efforts to role-play a situation in which they were to ask their teacher for a ride home after class (Cohen & Olshamit, 1993). One student debated among drive, come, and go and ended up with, Can I come with you? Another student wanted to make a polite request and was uncertain as to whether she could ask, Do you have any room in the car? As she put it,

> It has a lot of meanings and I wasn’t sure that it was correct, so I changed my tactic, and decided she would understand better if I said, I want to drive with you. I thought of lift, but didn’t know how to use it in a sentence so I left it out.

Finally, a third student described how he arrived at asking Debbie, Can I come by your car?

> First I thought with your car, with you and that I would not mention the car because I didn’t know how to indicate hamzonet shelax ["your car"]. I worried that she would think I wanted to go for a ride with her. To get a ride with you would be an expression I wouldn’t know how to use. Can I come are words that I know how to use. After I heard the [interlocutor] read by car, I said by your car.

**INVESTIGATING THE PROCESSES UNDERLYING SPEECH ACT PERFORMANCE**

Attempting to describe the processes underlying any of the four skills in using a foreign language is challenging because it calls for some intrusive means for tapping what is essentially fleeting behavior. Not surprisingly, researchers have done more work on describing reading, writing, and even listening processes than on speaking. One major problem has been that of finding a research methodology that provides a rich source of data without interfering with the natural speaking processes. While dyadic discussion (Vygotsky, 1978) is one potential means (i.e., respondents discuss strategies that they use in responding to a discourse completion task), it remains for researchers to work out an effective means for utilizing this approach. To date, the common research method being utilized in the investigation of thought processes during oral elicitation situations has been that of verbal report. Whereas verbal reports have their limitations (Cohen, 1987, 1991, in press), their careful use can provide one more source of data, often a source of data unobtainable by observation or other means (Ericsson & Simon, 1993).

With regard to the reliability of verbal reports, respondents have been found to
provide reliable retrospective reports on their cognitive processes while writing, especially if the reporting takes place shortly after the mental events themselves (Greene & Higgins, 1994; Swanson-Owens & Newell, 1994). A recent book by Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) devoted to verbal reports in reading points out that it is "a matur ing methodology with much interesting work already accomplished and considerable work to be done" (p. 1). The authors then proceed to detail the numerous studies that are needed in order to fully validate the methodology.

As verbal report techniques are intrusive, it would be unreasonable to ask speakers to provide such data while they are engaged in oral interaction. Yet if the interaction has been over for more than a short while, subjects may not be able to retrospect fully about the strategy selection that they carried out a few minutes prior to the intervention. Hence, researchers are doubly challenged to devise verbal report methods that are not overly intrusive but still capture the speaker's retrospections reliably. In any case, respondents need to be aware of the strategies that they are using (without necessarily attending to them) or they will not be able to report about them. Hence, whatever procedures are used, they must promote this level of awareness.

Whereas there is as yet little verbal report research on the underlying processes involved in the perception of speech acts by nonnatives, a few studies have investigated the production of speech acts. Let us look at four of them here.

Perhaps the earliest study was that by Motti (1987), which involved 10 intermediate EFL university students in Brazil. After filling out a discourse completion task calling for a single-utterance apology in English in response to a prompt, the respondents were asked to provide a retrospective verbal report in Portuguese with regard to a series of variables, including their depth of analysis of the situation before response and the extent to which they thought through their response in the foreign language (English) or in Portuguese (their native language) while preparing and writing their responses. Motti found that respondents thought slightly more in English than in Portuguese in the planning and execution of their utterances and were preoccupied with correctness. They also reported paying more attention to the interlocutor's status than to his or her age.

In a second study, Robinson (1991) had 12 native Japanese-speaking females respond to six written discourse completion items calling for refusals of requests and invitations in English. The respondents were asked to think aloud as they filled out the items, and their verbal reports were tape-recorded. Although given the option of responding in Japanese, all respondents reported in English, which the investigator attributed to her own inability to speak Japanese. Immediately after completing the task, the researcher interviewed the subjects individually for 20-30 minutes regarding the content of their utterances from the think-aloud session, playing back the tape-recording to remind the respondents of specific thoughts. The use of verbal report in this case helped to reveal a sociocultural problem that respondents had with the refusal task. One of Robinson's subjects reported that because part of her Japanese upbringing in the family was that a girl should say "yes," or at least not say "no" in order to preserve social harmony, the task of refusing was difficult for her to perform. As she put it, "I haven't learned saying no—anytime yes, yes, yes. Oh, this is our custom, is our custom, Japanese custom—my family taught me—smile and modest is . . . very good part for Japanese women—sometimes . . . " (Robinson, 1991, pp. 56-57).

A third study that called for role-play and then verbal report after all the tasks had been completed was that of Frescura (1993). Role-play data on apologies were tape-recorded from native Italian speakers in Italy, native English speakers in Canada, Italians residing in Canada, and English-Canadian learners of Italian. After being tape-recorded in six role-play interactions, the 83 respondents were asked to listen to all six recordings and to provide retrospective verbal report on (a) how close to real life they felt their performance to be, (b) how dominant they felt their interlocutor was, (c) how sensitive they were to the severity of the offense and to the tone of the complaint, and (d) what their linguistic difficulties were (for Italians in Canada and learners of Italian).

Data from Frescura's role-plays were coded according to a taxonomy comprising seven semantic formulas in two categories: hearer-supportive formulas and self-supportive formulas. The hearer-supportive formulas were those used when complainers chose to support the face of the complainer by admitting their own guilt, by recognizing the complainer's rights, or by offering compensation. The self-supportive formulas were those used when complainers chose to support their own face by denying guilt, by appealing to the complainer's leniency, or by providing an explanation for the offense. Performance was measured according to the total output of formulas, the types of formulas used, and the intensity of the formulas produced. Frescura found native speakers of Italian in Italy to prefer the self-supportive formulas overall, whereas native speakers of English preferred the hearer-supportive ones. Learners of Italian did not indicate any preference, whereas native Italian speakers in Canada reported preferring to maintain some of the self-supportive formulas used by the native Italians in Italy.

The fourth study, by Cohen and Olshtain (1993), sought to describe ways in which nonnative speakers plan and execute speech act utterances. The study set out to investigate how fully the processes whereby nonnative speakers produce speech acts in an elicited role-play situation. The study was designed to arrive at a description of the ways in which nonnative speakers assess, plan, and execute such utterances. The decision to investigate thought processes during complex speech acts was based on the aforementioned assumption that such tasks are potentially demanding socioculturally and sociolinguistically and, thus, a rich source of data.

A second interest was in exploring the sources for positive and negative transfer of forms from native to target language by attempting to describe just when the thinking was taking place in one or the other language. Whereas the literature on language transfer pays a good deal of attention to the transfer of structures (e.g., Dechert & Raupach, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 1983; Ringbom, 1987), little attention has been paid to the shift in language of thought between and among languages (in the case of multilinguals) during the process of assessing, planning, or executing a given utterance (Cohen, 1995).

The 15 advanced learners of English as a foreign language who served as subjects in the study were given six speech act situations in which they played a role with a native speaker. In the administration of the role-play interview, the interlocutor
gave the respondents an opportunity to read the descriptions of brief role-play situations (two apologies, two complaints, and two requests in all). Then she read each situation slowly out loud, gave the respondent time to think of a response, gave her opener, and had the respondent role-play with her. The interaction was videotaped and audiotaped as well. After each set of two situations of the same type, the tape was played back and the respondents were asked to comment on the factors that contributed to the production of their response to that situation. They were all asked the same fixed questions (e.g., “Did you think out your entire response before offering it, or did you start responding and think out the rest of your response as you went along?”) as well as open-ended probes according to their individual responses (e.g., “How did you arrive at the request, Can I come with you in your car? Could you give some detail as to possible alternatives you thought of?”). These probing interviews conducted after each set of two speech act situations had the intent of employing retrospective self-observation in order to obtain verbal report data about the cognitive processes that went into the planning and production of speech act realizations. The interviewer’s probes were conducted in what was the native language (Hebrew) for 11 of the respondents and a language of high proficiency for the other 4 respondents.

The respondents were encouraged to be precise and to give examples where possible. The subjects were interviewed at three intervals—after the apology, complaint, and request situations, respectively—instead of waiting until after all six speech act situations, in order to obtain more accurate retrospective reports of behavior. It was feared that the delaying of the verbal report would reduce the reliability of the retrospective data, even using the videotaped behavior as a memory aid. When the respondents were not sure as to what they did and why, the interviewers played just the relevant segment of the videotaped session a second or even a third time in an effort to jog the respondent’s memory.

The study found that, in executing speech acts, half of the time respondents conducted only a general assessment of the utterances called for in the situation, meaning that they did not plan out the specific vocabulary and grammatical forms they would use in their utterances. In fact, the respondents reported planning out the specific vocabulary and grammatical structures for their utterances in only one-third of the situations. Furthermore, respondents often thought in two languages and sometimes in three languages (if trilingual) when planning and executing speech act utterances (as in the earlier example of the French speaker requesting a ride from the teacher). In addition, respondents utilized a variety of strategies in their search for and retrieval of language forms. Strategies included self-debate before selection, the use of formulaic speech, abandoning a word or expression, partial delivery of a thought, lexical avoidance or simplification, and approximation ⁶ (e.g., saying stuff when the intention was to refer to notebook material, or saying reduce the volume instead of turn down the volume). It was also found that respondents did not attend much to grammar nor to pronunciation (see Cohen & Olshtain, 1993).

Finally, this study generated descriptions for three types of language learners based on their speech production styles: (a) metacognizers, learners with a highly developed metacognitive awareness—that is, those who have a voice in the back of their heads that keeps informing them of their general deficiencies, keeps them monitoring their language output to some extent, and continues to remind them of their possible or actual production errors from prior utterances; (b) avoiders, learners who systematically avoid material because they do not know how to pronounce it, because they fear possible sociocultural repercussions, or for other reasons between those two extremes; and (c) pragmatists, learners who use online adjustment tricks such as approximation rather than avoidance.

Clearly, this is just a small sampling of the kinds of data that can be collected with regard to speech act production. Although up to this point the focus has been exclusively on the description of speech act behaviors, the final section of this paper will discuss research on tutored and untutored acquisition of speech acts by adult nonnatives.

**RESEARCH ON TUTORED AND UNTUTORED ACQUISITION OF SPEECH ACTS**

**Studies from the Limited Research Literature**

As of yet there appear to be only a few studies of the untutored acquisition of oral speech act behavior among nonnative speakers. One such study (Ellis, 1992) was conducted with elementary-school children, and another study (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993) was conducted with college students. These studies are referred to elsewhere in this volume. Although there is certainly a pressing need to conduct more such longitudinal studies of speech act development among untutored learners of all ages, longitudinal studies of adults in tutored or classroom situations are also sorely needed.

At present, only a few one-shot studies of the effects of brief interventions have appeared. They have involved explicit instruction in the fine points of performing oral speech acts, specifically in the delivery of apologies and compliments. By studying the development and nondevelopment of speech act performance over time, it may be possible to measure more rigorously the contributions and limitations of formal instruction. Various research issues remain to be explored, such as whether or to what extent the attainment of nativelike pragmatic ability in a language calls not only for exposure to the language in a variety of natural contexts but also for some form of instruction or guidance in the performing of speech acts. One wonders whether the speech act patterns of the speaker’s native language may play such an overriding role in both the interpretation and production of such speech acts that without explicit formal instruction or at least some informal coaching speech acts will continue to be misunderstood and incorrectly performed.

Two recent examples stand out from the limited number of studies conducted on the teaching of speech act behavior to adults. One of these, by Billmyer (1990), is discussed elsewhere in this volume. The other study involved the teaching of apologies to 18 advanced EFL learners who were native speakers of Hebrew (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990). The study consisted of (a) an 18-item preteaching questionnaire, with both discourse-completion and appropriacy ⁷ items, aimed at assessing the subjects'
knowledge of apology, request, and complaint speech act behavior in English; (b) a teaching materials packet covering three classroom sessions; and (c) a 9-item postteaching questionnaire on apologies, with five additional questions asking for evaluation of the lessons and materials on apologies. Data were first collected from native speakers in order to establish baseline native norms for the situations utilized in the study. The nonnatives, students in three different advanced English courses, were then given the prequestionnaire and, on the basis of the deviances from native norms that were encountered, materials for three classroom sessions were developed and administered during the regular course of study. Thus, the materials packet was specially designed for the teaching of specific features of apology that had been found to be problematic for the nonnative speakers in the study.

The treatment called for three in-class sessions of 20 minutes each, delivered by a research assistant over a 3-week period. One week after the third and final teaching session, the students received the postquestionnaire. The findings suggested that the fine points of speech act behavior, such as (a) types of intensification and downgrading, (b) subtle differences between speech act strategy realizations, and (c) consideration of situational features, could be taught in the foreign language classroom. Whereas before instruction the nonnative speakers’ apologies differed noticeably from those of the native speakers, after this explicit, empirically based instruction advanced learners were somewhat more likely to select apology strategies similar to those that native speakers used in the given situation. For example, in a situation of “forgetting to buy medicine for a neighbor’s sick child,” the response of one nonnative before training was a weak expression of responsibility (Unfortunately not yet . . . .) and an offer of repair (but I’ll be happy to do it now). After training it was an intensified expression of apology (I’m deeply sorry) and an offer of repair (I can do it right now). Furthermore, after training, nonnative speakers produced shorter utterances, also more in keeping with native behavior.

Prior to instruction, one learner responded verbosely to a situation of forgetting to meet a friend: “Did you wait for me? You must forgive me. I could not come because of problems and I tried to warn you by phone but . . . .” This response was typical of learners at the advanced-intermediate stage of language acquisition who, when uncertain about how to say something, overcompensated by using too many words (Blum-Kulka & Olshaint, 1986). After training, the utterance was shorter: “Oh, I’m so sorry. It dropped out of my mind.” Perhaps the area that met with most success was that of the use of intensifiers. Before training, intensifiers were generally absent in situations like “forgetting to buy medicine for a neighbor’s sick child” (only 20% use). After training, intensifiers (e.g., I’m really sorry I forgot . . . .) were used in almost all cases (90%).

**Directions for Research on the Teaching of Speech Acts**

Especially because the results of the two preceding studies were based on brief interventions, there is a need to assess the impact of more long-term instructional programs intended to contribute to the development of pragmatic ability in adults. Such research could help us better understand how learners deal with the challenge of using the new language in both socioculturally and sociolinguistically appropriate ways. One question that could be asked is whether adults go through developmental sequences in their acquisition of speech act ability in the same way as they have been found to do in the acquisition of morphemes and syntactic structures such as negation (see Ellis, 1994, chap. 3). Kasper and Schmidt (this volume) address this issue of whether or not there is a natural route of development for speech act ability and question whether or not there are discrete stages.

If there is any sort of a natural order of development, the next logical question is the extent to which this order can be influenced by instruction. It would also be helpful to learn more about the effect that different kinds of explicit pragmatic information has on language learning. In addition, it would be beneficial to gain a clearer picture concerning the role of language transfer in adult second and foreign language learning of speech act ability. Furthermore, we could benefit from descriptions of how selected learners with high pragmatic ability developed that skill. What is it that they have been doing systematically or otherwise that the less successful have not been doing? We need to consider the learners’ motivation, learning style, and learning strategy preferences as they relate to the acquisition of pragmatic ability.

In attempting to interpret sociocultural and sociolinguistic successes and failures, we need to know the sociocultural context in which the given realization of the speech act appeared, why it was performed in that way, what processes contributed to generating the specific sociolinguistic forms that were produced, and how the utterance was comprehended by the listener(s). Likewise, in order to describe the processes that learners go through in producing speech acts such as requests, complaints, or apologies, we should probably consider having respondents review a video- or audiotape of themselves role-playing and have them reconstruct their retrieval and processing of the material going into their utterances and comprehension of utterances, as in the Cohen and Olshaint (1993) study.

The most likely population for such longitudinal, developmental studies is college students and ideally those who are committed to studying at least several quarters or semesters of a given foreign language. Such learners would represent the first 3 years of foreign language study at a given university so that we could get a more complete sense of pragmatic development. As an incentive to participate in the study, the learners could perhaps receive an extra credit hour for an existing course or course credit for a directed study, as they would be studying their own pragmatic development.

It may also be beneficial to train learners to keep electronic journals on their language learning and language use with regard to pragmatics. We could have them tape-record some interactions and also use recollection techniques to remember what they heard and said until they could write it down (Beebe, 1994). We would want students to collect data on their learning and using episodes with regard to pragmatics in and out of class. As the journal entries would be electronic, a teacher or teaching assistant at one designated site could read the entries and respond to them interactively, thus creating an electronic dialog journal. This use of e-mail may help to make the journals more meaningful and interesting for the subjects, especially if the reader were empathetic, encouraging, and supportive.

To collect the maximum amount of data from the most learners, we need to
develop speaking activities calling for semidirect assessment. We could have tasks, for example, where the subjects see videotaped vignettes for which they need to supply contextually appropriate responses at given moments (e.g., the tape is stopped and the respondents record their utterances onto a cassette at their language lab booth). We could also use a written discourse completion task from time to time to check on the development of speech acts.

It would probably be useful to construct three types of accompanying assessment instruments. The first would be a teacher observation schedule to discover how instructors teach pragmatics. Data could be collected through classroom observations and/or through videotaping of classroom sessions that are specifically devoted to instruction and practice activities dealing with pragmatics. The second would be a textbook analysis schedule in order to get at how the students’ current textbooks present pragmatics. The third would be an interview schedule for use both with learners and with their teachers in order to supplement the classroom observation and textbook analysis with information not obtained by other means. For example, we could investigate the fit between what the teachers present, what the textbooks offer, what the learners intake from these two input sources, and what they come to produce as a result of this input, drawn from their peers in classroom interaction, from the outside environment, and from their own acquisition processes at work.

The Potential Pedagogical Impact of Future Research

Findings from studies following some of the suggestions offered in the last section will help language educators develop valuable insights for teachers and curriculum writers in the teaching of pragmatic behavior. Up until the mid-1980s, teaching materials dealing with speech acts were for the most part constructed largely in the absence of empirical studies to draw upon. They relied on the curriculum writer's intuition and could best be characterized as reflecting a high level of simplicity and generality. For example, ESL textbooks treated speech acts such as apologies by emphasizing almost exclusively one semantic formula from the speech act set, namely, that of the expression of an apology: sorry, I'm sorry, or I'm very sorry. Brief references may have been made to other semantic formulas for apologizing without spelling out the underlying principles for when to use what (see Olshaint & Cohen, 1990).

Ideally, the insights gained from the kinds of research studies described in this paper and those insights yet to be gained from the types of studies envisaged in the last section will enhance the use of teaching materials that already contain pragmatic information and, in addition, will contribute to the production of teaching materials that are even better informed pragmatically than previous materials have been. As pointed out by Kasper and Schmidt elsewhere in this volume, the existence of accurate pragmatic information may not be enough if that pragmatic information is subjected to "defective presentation" by teachers. In the past, perhaps the main responsibility for teaching pragmatic information in the classroom has fallen on the teacher. Fortunately, learners are increasingly able to access multimedia software that can help them verify whatever knowledge they have about pragmatics in the target language. Combined word processing, dictionary, and grammar software programs for foreign languages exist and even include a modicum of pragmatic information. In the future, with the assistance of multimedia packages, such programs could provide a host of sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts for given speech acts so that speakers will have greater assurance that they are using those speech acts in an appropriate context, employing acceptable semantic formulas, and exploiting language forms that are sociolinguistically appropriate.

NOTES
1. These are sets of realization patterns typically used by native speakers of the target language, any one of which would be recognized as representing the speech act in question, when uttered in the appropriate context. Note that a speech act set may actually have several speech acts within it (e.g., a complaint that includes not only a complaint statement, but also a request and a threat).
2. Thomas (1983) used different terms to make a similar distinction. Sociopragmatic failure refers to what occurs when language learners do not know what to say and whom to say it to; they use as their guide the way they would do it in the native language and culture. What she termed pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners translate an utterance from their first language into the target language but fail to get their meaning across because the communicative conventions behind the utterances used differ.
3. A semantic formula consists of a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question (see Olshaint & Cohen, 1983).
4. A discourse completion task may consist of a prompt and space for a response:

   You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after xeroxing a chapter. You held onto it for almost two weeks.

   Classmate: I’m really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week’s class.

    You: ________________

Alternatively, it may consist of a prompt, a space for a reply, and then one or more rejoinders that the respondent needs to take into consideration (Blum-Kulka, 1982):

   You arranged to meet a friend in order to study together for an exam. You arrive half an hour late for the meeting.

   Friend (annoyed): I’ve been waiting at least half an hour for you!

   You: ________________

   Friend: Well, I was standing here waiting. I could have been doing something else.

   You: ________________

   Friend: Still, it’s pretty annoying. Try to come on time next time.

Such tasks allow investigators to focus on specific speech act realizations and manipulate the social and situational variables.
5. It is always possible that repeated viewing of a videotaped segment could prompt new thoughts rather than retrospection. Keeping the probes highly focused guards against such occurrences.
6. That is, a word or phrase with a somewhat similar but not synonymous meaning, or with a synonymous meaning but stylistically inappropriate in the given context.
7. Some work has also been done on instructing adult learners in the performance of written speech acts (see, e.g., Cohen & Tarone, 1994), but this is beyond the scope of the present focus on oral production of speech acts.
8. Items where the respondent is to rank order the responses from the most to the least appropriate for that sociocultural context.
9. No delayed test was administered to check for the durability of the learning, but such would be an inherent purpose of any longitudinal research with an instructional component.
10. Although it would also be valuable to study the development of pragmatic competence in adults studying outside the college framework, the logistics required usually make their inclusion in longitudinal studies prohibitive, in terms of both time and cost.
REFERENCES


