Strategies for learning and performing L2 speech acts

ANDREW D. COHEN

Abstract

This article presents a taxonomy of language learner strategies which are offered in support of learners in their efforts to obtain knowledge about speech acts and to perform them more effectively. Relevant language learner strategy literature and speech act literature are reviewed. After defining language learning and use strategies, the article makes the case for enhancing learner strategies in developing speech act ability. Next, as a lead up to the presentation of the taxonomy of strategies, the issue of where learners are to find empirical sources for speech act material is addressed, with attention given to the current concerns for naturally-occurring data. This is followed by a review of literature on efforts to teach pragmatics. The article concludes with a discussion of suggested avenues for validating the strategy taxonomy.

1. Introduction

The goal of this article is to provide a taxonomy for learner strategies in developing speech ability in a second language (L2). In an effort to provide a foundation for this taxonomy, the paper reviews both relevant language learner strategy literature and speech act literature. The article starts by distinguishing language learning strategies from language use strategies in general, and then offers a rationale for applying this strategy distinction to L2 learners' efforts to learn about and perform complex speech behavior, in the form of speech acts. As a preface to the presentation of the taxonomy of strategies, attention is given to empirical sources for data on speech acts which learners can draw on in order to develop pragmatic ability, followed by a look at inroads into speech act instruction. After the taxonomy is presented, suggestions for research to validate
these strategies are offered, as the entries in the taxonomy are viewed very much as researchable hypotheses.

2. Language learner strategies and pragmatics

In order to consider strategies that learners might benefit from utilizing in their learning and use of speech acts, it is necessary to situate this endeavor within the larger context of language learner strategies and then make the connection to pragmatics. Until the 1970’s and the seminal work by Rubin (1975), the focus of language instruction was primarily on the teacher because it was assumed that if teachers did a competent job of teaching, learners would learn what they needed to. Rubin’s work marked the advent of a strategy approach to language learning and language use. Although definitions of language learner strategies have varied over the years, there is some consensus among experts that language learner strategies are conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors deployed by learners, often with the intention of enhancing their knowledge and understanding of an L2 (Cohen 2005).

Language learning strategies include cognitive strategies for identifying, distinguishing, grouping, practicing, and committing material to memory. So, for example, in the case of the speech act of requesting, learners need to identify those language structures that make requests more polite and perhaps group them accordingly in terms of the use of modal auxiliaries, the use of the past progressive (e.g., “I was wondering if…”), and the like. Likewise, language learning strategies include the metacognitive strategies for planning what to do, checking how it is going, and then evaluating how it went; the affective strategies for regulating attitudes, motivation, and emotional reactions to L2 learning, such as through self-encouragement and reduction of anxiety; and the social strategies for enhancing learning, such as cooperating with other learners and seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers. Advocates of strategy instruction for learners would posit that if learners have a well-functioning strategy repertoire, these strategies will enhance the learning of an L2, whether in teacher-led instructional settings, or in one of the alternative options, such as self-access, web-based instructional settings, and other forms of independent language learning.

In contrast to language learning strategies, language use strategies come into play once the language material is already accessible, even in some preliminary form. Whereas language learning strategies would be used with an explicit goal of improving learners’ knowledge of a given language, language use strategies focus primarily on helping students utilize the language that they already have learned (see Cohen 1998). They also include strategies with a cognitive, metacognitive, social, or affective function, but this time the purpose is to use the material that has now been learned to some extent. What is now added to the strategy repertoire are the following types of strategies:

- **Retrieval strategies**—for calling up information about the language already stored in memory (Glahn 1980) (e.g., retrieving the correct verb in its appropriate conditional tense for making a polite request or retrieving the meaning of a particular adjective when it is heard or read, for example, in a letter, in what appears to be a complimentary tone).
- **Rehearsal strategies**—for practicing L2 structures that have already been learned to some extent (Weinstein & Mayer 1986) (e.g., rehearsing the subjunctive form for several Spanish verbs in preparation for using them in a request in Spanish to a teacher or boss to be excused for the day).
- **Communication strategies**—for steering the conversation away from problematic areas, for expressing meaning in creative ways (e.g., by paraphrasing a word or concept, coining words, using facial expressions or gestures), for creating more time for them to think, and for negotiating the difficult parts of the communication. In addition, communication strategies include compensating for gaps by literal translation from the first language (L1) or switching to another language. Finally, communication strategies include conversational interaction strategies (e.g., asking for help, clarification, or confirmation) and strategies for maintaining the floor, which are both for learners who are experiencing gaps in their knowledge and for those who are not (e.g., using fillers and other hesitation devices) (see Dörnyei & Scott 1997; Dörnyei & Kormos 1998).
- **Cover strategies**—for not looking foolish (e.g., using a memorized and partially understood phrase in an utterance in order to keep the action going or laughing at a joke that was not understood at all).

We note that there is inevitably overlap between language learning and language use strategies. What starts as a language learning strategy at, say, the initial exposure to a speech act, such as refusal, may quickly become a language use strategy since the initial learning phase may be brief. Furthermore, new learning is likely to take place as learners make use of what they have learned, however partially.

Research on L2 strategy use has demonstrated that learners differ in how they use strategies. A study by Vandergrift (2003), for example, reported on the strategies of two French L2 learners, Rose and Nina, when confronted with the task of listening to an announcement about how to win a ski weekend in a drawing. Although both listeners engaged
in translation from their L1 to some degree, Rose appeared to use an ineffective strategy for the task, namely, bottom-up processing exclusively. In contrast, Nina used a more effective strategy, which was to engage in top-down processing by using her world knowledge and text knowledge to interpret what she heard. Her strategy was to develop a frame of reference from which she could interpret new input. Numerous other studies have appeared which describe learners like Nina, who most likely have the requisite ability to do better at L2 learning than their performance would suggest. It is studies like these that have prompted learner strategy experts to devise interventions for enhancing strategy use by L2 learners. There have, for example, been studies involving explicit strategy instruction for learners in listening (Rubin 1990), speaking (Dörnyei 1995; Cohen et al. 1998; Nakatani 2005), and the literacy skills of reading and writing (Macaro 2001). These studies and others have demonstrated that learners who consciously make use of language strategies produce better results in their language performance than students who are less strategic.

If we take a closer look at the actual language tasks employed in the studies which have determined that explicit strategy instruction can have an impact, we notice that they have tended to be relatively straightforward tasks, rather than those which involve complex speech acts. For example, in the Cohen et al. (1998) study, respondents had to describe themselves to someone who was going to meet them in an airport, retell a simple fable, and describe their favorite city. It is posited for the purposes of this article that if the language tasks involve complex speech acts, then successful completion of them might call for more specialized speech act performance strategies. While speech acts may be delivered in a direct way, they may also be negotiated in an indirect manner, involving a host of complex variables, as the interactive discourse unfolds.

So, for example, a daughter might use the strategy of a relatively direct request to borrow a car from her parents over the weekend (“Hey, dad, can I take your old car this weekend?”), or she could choose a more indirect request strategy (“Hey, dad. How was your business trip to Chicago? I was wondering if you’re going to be using your old car this weekend. Something important has come up and . . .”). Depending on the language and culture, it may be strategic for the speaker to adjust the delivery of the speech act according to the age, relative status, or gender of the addressee. The speaker would also need to know what it means to borrow a car in that particular context—that is, how big an imposition it is likely to be in that culture (e.g., whether a car is a daily necessity or a luxury) and in that specific context (e.g., borrowing a new and relatively valuable car vs. an older “spare” car). In some cases, it may be crucial to avoid suggesting the borrowing of the car altogether, but rather just to indicate the need for transportation and to leave it to the addressee to determine whether to offer a car or not. In the above example, there is undoubtedly some family history involved, such as whether the father trusts his daughter to drive even the older car safely. Issues of family personalities and relationships are also likely to play a part in the phrasing of the daughter’s request and in the father’s response to this request. And it could take a number of turns to resolve itself, whether the interaction ends amicably or in conflict.

Research has demonstrated that effective speech act performance entails not only strategically selecting and making use of the pragmatic forms that are appropriate for the given speech act, such as in making a request (“Can I take . . .?” vs. “I was wondering if . . .”), but also performing the speech act (in this case, a request for a car) in the right place at the right time, given the sociopragmatics for that speech community and for that family unit in that situation. So, whereas native speakers of English, and in this case, a daughter, would most likely soften the request through syntactic mitigation (e.g., “I was wondering if . . .”), nonnative speakers may well have learned this syntactic structure but would not necessarily have sufficient pragmatic control over its use in their requests to know whether or when to use it (Bardovi-Harlig 2003).

So the challenge is to support learners in being more systematic in their strategies for learning and using complex speech acts. A recent concern for greater rigor in defining and doing research on language learner strategies would suggest not viewing the strategies that learners use for speech act performance as separate thoughts and behaviors, but rather as strategy chains or clusters (Macaro 2004). In the case of strategy chains, the learner is selecting and deploying the strategies in sequence. Let us say that a male learner wishes to ask his female boss for a raise. A strategy chain would involve a series of social strategies in sequence. First, he might use a supportive comment, such as “You know, I’ve been working 12-hour days these last few weeks.” Second, he might use a supportive move, such as “Could I have a minute of your time?” and then follow through the request by way of justification for making it (“You know, I’ve been working 12-hour days these last few weeks . . .”). Third, in the sequence would be the head act in the form of a query serving as an indirect request (“Would it be possible to consider giving me a slight raise?”). In the case of strategy clusters, the learner deploys the strategies simultaneously, in an overlapping manner. So, a strategy cluster deployed in requesting a raise could include at least the following learner strategies: retrieving from memory some possible language structures for making that request, choosing from that material forms that are at the level of politeness due to a boss, making sure that the request is sensitive to the norms for male-to-female talk in that speech community and situation, and using a monitoring strategy to see how well these two strategies are working.
From initial research exploring the strategies that L2 learners of Japanese use in performing speech acts, it would appear that learners do make efforts to use various combinations of strategies—perhaps some learners more than others (Robinson 1992; Cohen & Olshain 1993; Widjaja 1997; Cohen & Ishihara 2005). However, given gaps in their knowledge about sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms for the given speech community, even if they apply a host of strategy chains and clusters to the performance of L2 speech acts, the results are still likely to partially reflect negative transfer from the norms that they use for speech act behavior in their local L1 or other language community. Again, given the limits on their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge, they may generalize L2 speech act patterns from a situation for which they are appropriate to a situation for which they are not, producing a deviant result. And according to the research evidence, it can take many years for L2 speakers to have their performance reflect the norms of speech act behavior for a given speech community (see Olshain & Blum-Kulka 1985; Barron 2003).

This daunting challenge, then, would appear to provide justification for making an effort to at least enhance learners’ strategies for acquiring the necessary knowledge base in the pragmatics of the L2 and for performing speech acts appropriately in the given speech community. These strategies have a potentially beneficial role to play in helping L2 learners to reduce the likelihood of pragmatic failure in their performance of speech acts. The issue of where the learners obtain their knowledge of how to perform speech acts will be taken up in the next section.

3. Sources for information about speech acts

It is a given that native speakers of a language within a given speech community share knowledge about the norms for the performance of speech acts. As Kasper and Rose put it, “speakers’ choices ... are governed by social conventions which can be flexible to different, contextually varying degrees but only entirely set aside at the peril of losing claims to face, insider status, or sanity. These constraints are partly universal, partly activity- and genre-specific, and have to be worked out by language learners and other novices” (Kasper & Rose 2002: 2–3). So the first question, which will be taken up in this section, is how we obtain information about speech acts that can be passed on to learners. The follow-up question then is how to expose L2 learners to this information so that they can “work it out” (in Kasper and Rose’s terms), which is an issue that will be considered in the next section of the paper.

There is a growing consensus that instructional material on pragmatics should be research-based, rather than dependent on the instructor’s or curriculum writer’s intuition. Native speakers’ intuitions about their own pragmatic use of language may not always be accurate since they often perform speech acts without paying much attention to how they do it (Boxer & Pickering 1995; Rose & Kasper 2001; Schmidt 1993). Therefore, it is all the more important to make use of findings from empirical studies in order to better inform the speech act material that is used in L2 instruction. As was first demonstrated by Wolfson (1981) with the collection of data on complimenting, there are obvious advantages to obtaining instructional material through natural data (from corpora, if possible) rather than through, say, measures involving production questionnaires, especially of the discourse completion task (DCT) variety, since such questionnaires may reflect what natives think they do rather than what they do in real interactions. One of the recent studies that support this view is that of Golato (2003), who compared compliment response data from naturally-occurring settings (analyzed through conversation analysis) with data collected by means of a DCT. Her source for conversation analysis was responses to compliments in German L1 among friends and family from a corpus consisting of 6 hours of telephone and 25 hours of face-to-face conversations. The DCT consisted of a one-line context description (with the situations similar to those in her corpus) followed by a compliment and four lines on which to write one or more responses. She administered her DCT to 30 respondents, some of whom were subjects in her conversation analysis study. While the most frequent types of responses in the DCTs involved the response strategies of “questioning the compliment assertion,” “commenting on the object,” or “providing an account,” Golato did not find these to be the most frequent response strategies in the naturalistic data. Furthermore, in naturalistic data, ja was used alone, whereas in the DCT some background or a shift of referent was provided, and more combinations of strategies were used. Golato felt that the DCT respondents were attempting to compensate for the absence of an interlocutor by expanding their responses. Her conclusion was that the DCT that she constructed for her study did not provide reliable examples of what speakers were actually doing when interacting with co-participants.

Over the last decade researchers have begun to amass corpora of pragmatic data that can be drawn on to better understand how native speakers of a language actually realize speech acts in numerous contexts. So, for example, as part of a Language in the Workplace project at Victoria University of Wellington, Holmes and her colleagues have collected over 2,000 interactions in English (mostly L1) in the workplace in New Zealand.
Zealand (Holmes 2003a, 2003b). Extensive analysis of their corpus has yielded insights into what is necessary for fitting in and becoming an integrated member of the workplace, with the focus being specifically on small talk, humor, whinges, complaints, and refusals. The findings are that speech acts may be highly indirect and dependent on both personal characteristics of the interlocutors and on their actual relationship with others in the workplace, sometimes established over long periods of time.

There have been various other efforts to describe pragmatic behavior by means of corpus data as well. For example, Koester (2002) reports on a corpus of speech acts in English, consisting of 66 conversations between colleagues at work, recorded in eight different offices in a variety of locations in the US and Britain, with participants giving instructions, making arrangements, briefing others, or engaged in joint problem solving. She found that speech acts such as giving advice and giving directives were not usually performed directly and that it was necessary to look beyond the individual utterance to see how particular communicative acts unfolded within a conversational sequence. As with Holmes, Koester viewed corpora as valuable sources of material for the teaching of functional language. Another study involved analysis of two complaints taken from Japanese corpus data that the investigator had collected (Kumagai 2004), with the focus on how the repetition of utterances within such conversations functioned for the complainer as a conversational strategy to express emotions, intensify the reproach, hold the floor and control the topic, and manipulate the development of the conversation. The recipient of the complaint was found to use repetition for other purposes, namely, for repeating an apology, stalling or diverting the complaint, reorienting the conversation to a solution, and closing the conversation.

In addition, there have been studies which have compared L1 corpus data with data elicited in more structured contexts. For example, Kobayashi and Rimmert (2003) compared samples of role-play performance by high- and low-proficiency Japanese EFL students with naturally-occurring L1 request data in Japanese and English. They also looked at how level of EFL proficiency affects students’ choice of strategies for coping with high imposition request situations. They looked at the length of request sequences, the presence of pre-request negotiation, supportive moves, the position of grounders, build-ups to requests, head act shift (e.g., from direct strategies in low imposition requests to conventionally indirect strategies for high imposition requests), pervasive want-statements as head acts (in NNS data, not in L1 data), and strategies for acknowledgement (by the requester once the request has been accepted). Their main finding was that negative transfer does not necessarily take place. They found that some aspects were more easily transferred than others. They provided some differences between Japanese and English requesting behavior that they felt would probably need to be taught.

There have also been recent studies focusing not on production of speech acts but on the ability to perceive which of a series of utterances would be the most appropriate in the given speech act situation. A study of this kind involving requests was conducted with Korean foreign-language learners (Byon 2004). The thirty subjects listened to a sequence of three audio-taped request speech act situations, each followed by four taped choices of alternative request interactions with two-to-four turns each (played three times each). They were asked to judge the most appropriate request according to: 1) the referential content of the message, 2) the social meaning (e.g., politeness through the appropriateness of honorific elements), and 3) pragmatic meaning (e.g., directness). They were also asked to provide the reason for their choice. Among the findings with regard to learner perceptions were a series of reasons for incorrect responses, which included difficulty in perceiving the speech level and the use or nonuse of honorifics. The researcher attributed much of the difficulty to L1 sociopragmatic transfer, given the American egalitarian value system and directness in American English.

Although there might be great value in gathering language in its natural setting, as the Golato (2003) study would suggest, it is unrealistic to assume that there will be sufficient learner-friendly corpora of natural data available to provide learners with the speech act information they might need for the host of L2 situations that they might encounter, especially with regard to numerous speech acts, such as apologies and complaints, that are not found in naturally occurring data so frequently. Hence, creatively-fashioned and administered role-play situations and written DCTs constructed so as to simulate actual discourse situations (e.g., through multiple-rejoiner situations) still have an important contribution to make. Of course, the caveat is that they may not reflect exactly what people say in extended discourse and fully contextualized discourse, but rather represent somewhat idealized, but hopefully still appropriate, behavior for that situation. This is not surprising if the instructions are to think through what it would be appropriate to say in such a situation. The respondent may purposely search for an archetypal response. Since there is a range of what native speakers might do in a given situation anyway, as long as the elicitation yields data that could reflect appropriate native-speaker performance, such data can make a contribution, often more so than the intuitively-derived pragmatic material found in textbooks (to be discussed in the next section below).

If time and resources permit in the data collection phase, efforts can be made to enhance the quality of production questionnaire data by
employing various types of formats for collecting oral data (see Kasper 2000). One such format calls for the interviewer reading each situation aloud to the respondents, who are to respond verbally on audiotape, as was the case in a study of Egyptian Arabic and American English refusals (see Nelson et al. 2002) and in the case of the much earlier study of apologies for which Hebrew L1, English L1, and English L2 data were collected (Cohen & Olshain 1981). In addition, the notion of a multiple-rejoinder DCT has been promoted, in an effort to ensure that there will be three-to-four turns, so as to approximate a discourse more than when there is simply one turn as in the Gelato (2003) study (see Cohen & Shively 2002/3; Paige et al. 2004).

The next section will look at the issue of how best to expose L2 learners to information about speech acts so that they can apply strategies to enhance their control of it.

4. Efforts to teach pragmatic behavior

The research literature would suggest that efforts to explicitly teach pragmatics are coming more into vogue (e.g., Rose & Kasper 2001). There are, in fact, edited volumes reflecting practical efforts to teach pragmatics, replete with lesson plans (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor 2003; Tatsuki 2005). In addition, websites that provide self-access speech act materials for L2 learners have appeared, such as one developed at the University of Minnesota for the learning of five speech acts in Japanese (http://www.iles.umn.edu/IntrotoSpeechActs/).

Given the disparity between what native and nonnative speakers do pragmatically, the question has arisen as to the kinds of instruction about pragmatics that would serve to close the gap. One way for learners to acquire more appropriate pragmatic language behavior would be through regular classroom instruction (assuming the learners are currently taking classes). There is, in fact, some evidence that instruction alone—without an intervention explicitly focused on speech acts—can have an impact. For instance, a study of 160 EFL learners (Safont Jorda 2003) found that EFL learners improved over the course of a semester in their ability to modify their requests, even though they were not explicitly taught how to do so. The researcher found that, while in pretesting the learners used few modification devices in a DCT, at posttesting the learners began to use strategies like attention getters, grounding for their requests, and “please.”

Nonetheless, it would appear that explicit instruction in pragmatic behavior has generally made more sizeable inroads into this area of learner performance than has just participation in regular instruction. For one thing, the students’ L2 textbooks have not necessarily provided much focus on these areas (see Vellessa 2004), and even if they have provided some coverage, the information provided may not reflect natural data (see Kakiuchi 2003). Secondly, teachers may find it useful to have access to curricular materials which have L2 pragmatics as an explicit focus, since this area has traditionally been underrepresented in teacher development programs. Thirdly, an explicit approach to pragmatics instruction seems to have an edge over a more implicit approach. For example, Trosberg (2003) reports on several studies involving both implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatics for students of business language (e.g., handling of customers’ complaints). The results of her study were that those learners explicitly taught pragmatic routines (e.g., a “recipe” for how a salesperson could respond to a customer’s complaint) had a slight advantage over those taught inductively. What she found particularly striking was how easy it was to teach pragmatic routines and how dramatic the changes were in the way the complaints were handled after very little teaching over a short time.

A second study involving both explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines to beginning learners of Japanese L2 also seemed to slightly favor the explicit treatment (Tateyama 2001). One group received explicit metapragmatic information while the second group did not. The participants engaged in role-play and multiple-choice tasks and provided retrospective verbal report. While there were no differences between the two groups in the multiple-choice and role-play tasks, close examination of the errors in the multiple-choice tasks indicated that the participants in the explicit group were more successful in choosing the correct answers in items which required higher formality of the linguistic expressions. The participants were found to benefit from explicit teaching about how factors such as the degree of indebtedness in thanking expressions, the severity of the offense in the different apology situations, age and social status, and the in-group/out-group distinction may influence the choice of routine formulas.

A third intervention to enhance pragmatic performance involved the development of English request strategies by Japanese EFL learners (Takahashi 2001). The study used four input conditions: 1) explicit teaching of requests, 2) having learners compare their utterances to those of native speakers, 3) having learners compare the utterances of other EFL learners to those of natives, and 4) having learners read transcripts of interactions and answer comprehension questions about the content. An open-ended DCT and a measure of confidence in selecting request forms were administered on a pre-post basis. The learners were also asked to provide immediate retrospective verbal report data about their conscious decisions...
during their request performance. The degree of input enhancement was found to influence the acquisition of request forms, with the first condition, "explicit teaching," having the strongest impact, and then the second, third, and fourth conditions in that order. Explicit instruction helped develop both proficiency and confidence to a greater extent than the other three conditions. The third and fourth conditions both failed to draw the learners' attention to the target forms in the input.

A fourth study, which entailed providing intermediate ESL learners with explicit pragmatics instruction in complimenting and responding to compliments, had several features not so prevalent in other studies—namely, an interim measure and a delayed posttest, one year after the instruction (Ishihara 2004). As the instruction progressed, learners produced longer written DCT complimenting dialogues on appropriate topics, approximated native speakers in their use of the syntactic structures associated with compliments, and utilized newly learned response strategies. One year after instruction, although a few response strategies were marginally employed, a subset of the learners still demonstrated their retention of central skills. The researcher reported that the instruction contributed to the learners' understanding of the culturally-specific nature of complimenting and awareness of gender, relative status, and appropriate topics. In addition, after the instruction, the learners reported a higher level of confidence in complimenting interactions and enhanced motivation for learning other speech acts.

Aside from looking at the production of speech acts, studies have also focused on enhancing the perception and interpretation of speech acts. For example, one study involving Persian advanced EFL students consisted of two 30-minute intervention sessions comprised of explicit meta-pragmatic instruction on the speech acts of requesting, apologizing, and complaining (Eslami-Rasekh et al. 2004). Teacher-fronted discussions, cooperative grouping, role plays, and other pragmatically oriented tasks were used to promote the learning of the intended speech acts. A multiple-choice pragmatic comprehension test was used both as a pretest and posttest to measure the effect of instruction on the pragmatic comprehension of the students. The results of the data analysis revealed that the EFL students' perception of speech acts improved significantly, despite the limited intervention. The study was reminiscent of the Osbahrain and Cohen (1990) study in terms of the duration of the intervention, since that study had only three sessions of 20 minutes each focused on EFL apologies. The difference in the latter study was that it entailed speech act production.

In addition to those studies which have produced results which are generally in support of explicit instruction in speech act performance, there have been those with less favorable results over time. For example, a study was conducted to enhance the politeness and indirectness of non-native English-speaking law students' requests (Salazar Campillo 2003). The researcher administered a pretest of requesting with a DCT, provided a session where she first taught request strategies (from the most indirect to the most direct) and then focused on lexical downgraders, and then gave a posttest. Three weeks later she gave another, delayed posttest. Although she found a qualitative increase in the use of requests on a DCT immediately after instruction (e.g., the use of some mitigation), this effect was not maintained in delayed tasks. Her conclusion was that the effects of instruction were only for the short term.

Despite the studies with mixed results, it would still appear that learners stand to benefit from explicit focus on pragmatics, rather than simply being exposed to appropriate speech act performance in class. Nonetheless, it would seem that such explicit focus is not sufficient if the learners do not have strategies for both learning this material and for performing speech acts based on this knowledge. One means of enhancing learners' use of strategies in dealing with speech acts is through style- and strategies-based instruction (see Cohen & Weaver 1998, 2005; Macaro 2001). In this approach, the instructor and the instructional materials are not just focused on teaching learners pragmatics but also on developing within the learners a keener sense of how to be more strategic in dealing with this area of L2 language behavior. Orientation to speech act strategies could either be through classroom-based instruction or through self-access at a website—either as part of a distance learning course, an out-of-class component of a traditional course, or as part of autonomous learning to some degree or other.

The next section will provide a taxonomy of speech act strategies that could be offered as part of this style- and strategies-based instruction. The section presents strategies that L2 learners may wish to utilize in their learning of speech act material and in their performance of these speech acts and also presents metapragmatic considerations learners are likely to face in their efforts to have pragmatically successful L2 interactions.

5. Taxonomy of learner strategies for acquiring speech acts

The following is an effort to provide a taxonomy which identifies key learner strategies in the acquisition of speech acts. The taxonomy includes: 1) strategies for the initial learning of speech acts, 2) strategies for using the speech act material that has already been learned to some extent, and 3) learner's metapragmatic considerations regarding the deployment of these strategies. Sources for strategies in this taxonomy
include the general learner strategy literature, the speech act literature, and insights from recent strategy research conducted to enhance college students' learning of Japanese L2 speech acts through a strategies-based online curriculum (Cohen & Ishihara 2005) and from a language and culture study abroad project (Paige et al. 2004; Cohen et al. 2005). While explicit strategy instruction has been found to benefit language development in general (see, for example, Dörnyei 1995; Cohen et al. 1998; Nakatani 2005), its application to the learning and use of speech acts is, at present, still limited. One recent application was in an investigation of speech act strategy intervention in study abroad which included the administration of a strategy inventory on a pre-post basis with 86 experimental and control students. A reported increase in the use of the strategy “figuring out and modeling native-speaker language patterns when apologizing, requesting, or complaining” among the experimental group students was found to correlate positively with higher scores of rated performance on a series of multiple-rejoinder DCT vignettes (Cohen et al. 2005).

With the exception of several instances indicated below, the strategies listed in the following taxonomy are in need of empirical validation as to their actual contribution to enhancing learners' speech act ability. Hence, it is best to consider the listing of strategies in this taxonomy as a series of hypotheses.

5.1. Speech act learning strategies

- **Taking practical steps to gain knowledge of how specific speech acts work by:**
  1) identifying the L2 speech acts to focus on, using criteria such as:
     a) their frequency of use in common situations encountered by the L2 speaker in the given speech community (e.g., “requesting,” “refusing,” and “thanking”),
     b) their potentially high-stakes value in discourse (e.g., “apologizing” and “complaining”),
     c) their special role in the given community of practice within the speech community or the society, such as in creating solidarity (e.g., the use of expletives).
  2) gathering information (through observation, interview, and written material; see below) on how those speech acts are performed by members of one or more communities of practice within a given speech community (for example, at the workplace: making requests of age mates, refusing requests made by people of higher status, and thanking people in service—e.g., cafeteria workers, custodians).

- **Conducting a “lay” cross-cultural analysis by:**
  1) thinking through and even writing out what the appropriate things to say would be for that speech act in the L1 speech community, depending on the situation,
  2) identifying the sociopragmatic norms for performance of these speech acts in the target speech community,
  3) assuming they can be performed in the given situation, identifying:
     a) the semantic formulas that tend to be used with the given speech act in that situation (e.g., whether an offer of repair is expected to be given in that apology situation),
     b) the linguistic structures to use, consistent with the local pragmalinguistic norms (e.g., whether to use the word “apologize” in the expression of apology or just “sorry”;
     whether to repeat “sorry” more than once, and whether to intensify with words like “really,” “awfully,” or “so”),
  4) determining the similarities and differences between the two cultures, and then making a mental note or a notebook entry regarding the difference(s),
  5) obtaining a viable interpretation for the cross-cultural differences (e.g., by asking members of the L2 speech community, which could mean members of a particular community of practice such as a group at the workplace, or social or friendship group).

- **Observing what native speakers do by noting what they say, how they say it (speed of delivery, tone, etc.), and their nonverbal behavior as they say it (facial expressions, body posture, and gestures).**

- **Asking natives (instructors and non-instructors) to model performance of the speech acts as they might be realized under differing conditions, possibly to answer questions about their performance as well. A key goal of the learner would be to see if there is variation in the realization of the speech act(s) according to:**
  1) the magnitude or seriousness of the issue prompting the speech act (e.g., apologizing for missing a meeting vs. spilling hot coffee on a friend),
  2) the relative age of the speaker and the addressee (e.g., making a request to a senior professor vs. making a request to a young child),
  3) the relative status of the speaker and the addressee (e.g., making a request to the senior vice president of a firm vs. one to a custodian),
  4) the relative roles of the speaker and the addressee in the relationship (e.g., making a request to the chair of the board meeting vs. to a waiter in a restaurant),
5) the length of acquaintance of the interlocutors (e.g., making a request to a stranger about switching seats upon boarding an airplane as opposed to making an appeal for assistance to a longtime friend over morning tea).

- Accessing published materials dealing with speech acts:
  1) Websites with instructional materials on speech acts (e.g., websites for self-access learning of key speech acts in a given language) (see Cohen & Ishihara 2005, Ishihara 2005a).
  2) Corpora in the target L2 that provide samples of the given speech acts in numerous contexts.
  3) L2 textbooks which have coverage of the speech acts of interest.
  4) Research articles providing insights on speech acts not available from other sources (e.g., the study by Daly, Holmes, Newton, & Stubble 2004, on the f-word expletive being used in requests and refusals on the factory floor in New Zealand as a signal of solidarity).

5.2. Speech act use strategies

- Devising and then utilizing a memory aid for retrieving the speech act material that has already been learned (e.g., visualizing a listing of the semantic formulas for a given speech act—possibly remembered through an acronym—and then scanning down this list in order to select those members of the speech act set that seem appropriate for the given situation).
- Practicing those aspects of speech act performance that have been learned:
  1) Engaging in imaginary interactions, perhaps focusing on certain pragmalinguistic aspects of the speech act.
  2) Engaging in speech act role play with fellow learners of the L2 or with native speakers playing the other role.
  3) Engaging in “real play,” with native speakers in the speech community, where the native speakers perform their usual roles (e.g., lawyer, doctor, shop clerk, etc.) but with the added knowledge that the learners are simply practicing speech acts and may say things that are contrary to fact (e.g., apologizing for something that in reality they did not do).
  4) Engaging in interactions with native speakers without them being aware that the learner's purpose is actually to practice speech acts.
- Asking native speakers (of the L2 variety of interest) for feedback as to their sense of what was and was not appropriate in the speech act performance.
  - Determining their learning style preferences (whether informally or through some style preference inventory) and then trying out an approach to speech act delivery that is consistent with the results (e.g., if the learners are found to be more reflective, then possibly thinking through the elements in the speech act before performing the speech act; if they are more impulsive, then possibly just “on-lining” it and seeing what the response is).
  - Using communication strategies to get the message across:
    1) Using an alerter as a social (interactive) strategy to signal to the addressee before the delivery of the speech act that it may not come out right (e.g., “I want to say I'm sorry, but I'm not sure how to say it right . . .”).
    2) Upon delivering the speech act, using metapragmatic statements to repair the situation in the case of possible or actual pragmatic failure.
    3) Attempting to approximate what native speakers might do in that speech act situation:
       a) (For the more advanced learners) weighing the assumed force and impact of several different approaches, and then on that basis selecting one.
       b) Going by “feel” as to what native speakers would do based on L2 knowledge that has accrued (as in the case of a learner in Robinson 1992, who knew the form “I would like” but was misguided by her sociopragmatic hypothesis that this was too polite when talking to American friends).
       c) Basing speech act performance on a sense of what seems reasonable to expect native speakers to do in that speech act situation based on the learners' psychotypology or perception as to how similar the L2 is to their language (Kellerman 1983).
    4) Compensating for a gap in knowledge by translating from the L1 or from another language exactly what would be said in that language in order to perform the speech act (i.e., without any preconcept that the words and phrases will be acceptable).
- Having the knowledge to perform the speech act appropriately but, as an expression of self-agency or subjectivity, remaining true to their own inclinations in their speech act delivery, rather than being overly native-like (see Cohen 1997; LoCastro 1998, 2003; Ishihara 2005b).

5.3. Metapragmatic considerations

- It is up to the learner to determine the speech act(s) they will work on and the aspects of performance that will get attention. For example, to
what extent should the learner’s focus be on comprehension of the speech act, on the production of it, or on both? How much concern will there be for tone, facial expressions, and gestures in speech act delivery? (Whereas an actor usually gets coached in such matters, language learners are invariably left to figure it out by themselves.)

- With regard to metacognitive strategies, the learner needs to determine how much pre-planning of the speech act to do beforehand, as well as the nature of the monitoring that will go on during its delivery and the evaluation that will go on afterwards. In an effort to avoid pragmatic failure, the learner may monitor for:

1) the appropriateness of the chosen level of directness or indirectness in the delivery of the speech act (e.g., finding the right level of directness with an L2-speaking stranger on an airplane),

2) the appropriateness of the selected term of address (e.g., referring in the L2 to Dr. Stephen Blake as “Doc,” “Steve,” or “you”—either tu or vous),

3) the appropriateness of the timing for a speech act in the given situation (for example, whether to make an apology for a work-related incident to a colleague during a social event),

4) the acceptability of how the discourse is organized (e.g., conveying the bottom-line message right at the start of the communication, gradually building up to it, or saving it for the last possible moment),

5) the sociopragmatic appropriateness of the selected semantic formulas and the pragmatic appropriateness of the linguistic material used to represent them (e.g., whether it is appropriate for a college student to give an outright refusal to the department chair’s invitation to dinner and whether the refusal could include—even in jest—an informal phrase like “No way!”).

As indicated above, this is a preliminary effort to provide a taxonomy of strategies that might play a role in the learning of speech acts, as well as in the subsequent comprehension and production of the speech acts afterwards. The next section will take up the issue of validating this taxonomy through various kinds of research.

6. Areas for further research

If we accept the premise that this taxonomy of speech act strategies is potentially beneficial to learners, then as researchers it is imperative to validate its usefulness. This section suggests areas for research and raises issues regarding research methods and especially relating to the design of strategy instruments.

Since an excellent source of insights about strategies is the language learners themselves, it would make sense to refine the above taxonomy by providing it to L2 learners. Various means could be utilized for collecting learner feedback regarding the strategy taxonomy, such as obtaining think-aloud data while the learners are engaged in interactive speech act lessons on a website, retrospective verbal reports just after the learners have performed a speech act task (in class, on a website, or out of class), or interview data of a more general nature, not linked to a specific speech act learning or use task.

Another step would be to incorporate learner strategy instruction into the design of research on the teaching of L2 speech acts. As indicated at the outset of this article, numerous descriptive studies have been conducted on strategies for reading, writing, listening, and speaking an L2, but few, as yet, specifically on strategies that may be beneficial in the learning and use of speech acts. While the strategies appearing in the above taxonomy were purposely phrased in a way that would make them potentially applicable to the learning and use of any speech act in any language, it may be beneficial to construct strategy taxonomies that are of particular relevance in the learning of given speech acts in specific L2 speech communities and in communities of practice within those speech communities. An effort could also be made to empirically determine the extent to which speech act strategies either cluster together or are used in strategy sequences or chains in the performance of given speech acts.

In addition, the experience of constructing a website for the strategies-based learning of Japanese L2 speech acts revealed certain strategies that were not, for the most part, generalizable to other speech acts (Cohen & Ishihara 2005; Ishihara 2005a). While speech act strategy taxonomies will predictably have strategies that are common across speech acts, there would undoubtedly be a need to customize the taxonomy somewhat in accordance with the targeted speech acts and the specific speech community. Not only are there strategies that tend to recur in the performance of certain speech acts within a given speech community, but there are also strategies that are more prevalent in performing speech acts in one language than in another. An example would be the strategy of purposely being hesitant or even disfluent (stammering and leaving utterances incomplete) in the delivery of a refusal in Japanese in order to appear humble in formal settings (Shimura 1995). This strategy would not necessarily generalize to English, for example, where such speech acts would most likely be delivered in an effort to be fluent and coherent, rather than hesitant.
Yet another area of investigation would be to identify those speech act strategies that are most beneficial to learners of a foreign language in contrast to learners of an L2, an issue which has been put aside so far in this article. In cases where the learners are studying the L2 in a country where it is possible to be in regular contact with speakers, presumably the speech act materials contained in the lessons would be reinforced in daily encounters, and strategy choices by learners would reflect this reality. In cases where the learner has little or no contact with speakers of the L2, then strategies for providing this learner with a rich pragmatic environment for learning and then practicing their own use of the L2 can be a challenge. It may be useful to see whether a strategic approach to speech act acquisition in a foreign language situation can help to offset the disadvantages of not having easy access to native speakers of the language.

A further area for investigation would be the relative usefulness of different sources of input regarding L2 pragmatic behavior, especially with regard to foreign language contexts. For instance, one source of foreign-language input is that of films, especially those rich in conversational exchanges which run the gamut of speech acts. An advantage of viewing a film over live observation of speech behavior is that a learner can replay a section repeatedly to have exposure to a given speech act, and they have an opportunity to check the subtitles as well. However, a film in and of itself may not provide adequate input. For example, a study comparing compliments and compliment responses in films found that film language appears to be most representative of naturally-occurring speech from a pragmalinguistic perspective—particularly with regard to the major syntactic structures found in compliments is concerned—and less so in terms of sociopragmatics (Rose 2001). More recent studies (Tatsuki & Nishizawa 2005; Kite & Tatsuki 2005) have tended to confirm this finding. So, especially if the learners are learning in a foreign-language context, they may be particularly receptive of strategies-based instructional materials that complement the film input with insights of a sociopragmatic nature.

Research on speech act strategy taxonomies would also benefit from continued investigation of learners' subjectivity and avoidance of L2 speech community norms. It cannot, after all, be assumed that learners are striving at all times to assume native-like performance standards when it comes to speech acts. Learner subjectivity may well play an important role in speech act performance (see, for example, Siegal 1996; Cohen 1997; LoCastro 1998, 2003; Ishihara 2005b). In this regard, would L2 learners in a speech community with pragmatic norms conflicting with their often L1-based pragmatic standards be more prone to consciously avoiding or even rejecting sociopragmatic norms for when to use speech acts and for the semantic formulas to include in those speech acts? Would they likewise be more prone to reject the pragmalinguistic norms as to the language structures to select in their speech act performance? This type of strategizing constitutes a category often neglected by researchers since the tendency is usually to assume that learners are striving for mastery or at least some control over the target language. The reality may be that as an expression of their agency, numerous learners are actually consciously shifting back and forth between conformity and avoidance or rejection of the L2 sociopragmatic and also pragmalinguistic norms.

7. Concerns about research methods

There is unquestionably a need to construct better measures of speech act strategy use, since this is still a relatively underdeveloped area. While there exists at least one rather general inventory for gathering speech act strategy information on the web (Cohen & Ishihara 2005), there is a need to construct more finely-tuned measures, especially in keeping with the taxonomy presented in this article. An inherent problem with strategy inventories is that they tend to reflect a learner’s generalized perspective at one moment in time, so there needs to be repeated collection of strategy data in order to get a more accurate measure both of variation in strategy use and of changes in strategy use patterns over time. In addition, the learners’ perspective may be relatively impressionistic unless they have a clear recollection of a series of performances of the given speech act to refer to in responding. For this reason, it would be beneficial to have strategy inventories be task-based so that the responses refer to speech act behavior that was just realized.

An additional problem with the construction of inventories is that they often rely on a scale of strategy deployment. A common one in strategy questionnaires currently is “frequency of use.” The problem with this approach is that of interpreting what “frequent use” on a 5-to-1 scale really means. It does not provide any information as to the quality of this strategy use. What if one learner’s “5” is another learner’s “4” or “3,” and what if the strategy is being used frequently only because it is being used unsuccessfully? Another approach is to ask learners to rate each strategy according to how successful they think its use is for them. Even more precise would be to have them fill out an inventory just after performing a speech act task and rate the extent to which they used each of the strategies and the perceived level of success by using those strategies. It could also be beneficial to ask learners whether they found strategies easy to use, and to supply any tips they might have on how to use them.
Some of the speech act strategies in the above taxonomy, for example, are likely to be easier to use than others.

With regard to the collection of strategy data, it is difficult for learners to perform a meta-analysis of, say, their comprehension strategies at the same time that they are trying to process an L2 speech act and respond to it. This is why there have been speech act production studies which involved the videotaping of learners' speech act performance so that it is possible to show the performance to the learners immediately afterwards in order to assist them in reconstructing the strategies that they used, along with a rationale for why (e.g., Cohen & Olshstain, 1993). Learners may have an easier time focusing on strategies such as, for example, "observing how natives perform speech acts" while engaged in doing activities that do not require them to be so actively engaged in the conversation that there is little or no opportunity for metapragmatic analysis—activities such as listening to model speech performance on a speech acts website or while engaged in the real-world activities of eavesdropping on other people's conversations (in a restaurant, on a bus or train, in a store, etc.) or watching T.V. shows or movies. While research has begun to collect the reactions of learners to strategy information provided at a speech act website through reflective e-journaling (Ishihara 2005a), it would be beneficial to obtain further information on just how helpful various strategies for learning and use of speech acts actually are.

8. Conclusions

This paper has made an effort to underscore the need for more support of learners in their efforts to acquire pragmatic ability by providing them with strategies for enhancing how they learn and use speech acts. The speech act strategy taxonomy provided here is seen as a preliminary step in this direction. Hopefully, just as considerable research has been undertaken to describe speech acts, and, more recently, to teach them to L2 learners, there will be an increase in the number of research studies which focus on enhancing learners' pragmatic performance. The complexity of speech acts and the challenge that they present to learners would seem to amply justify the pursuit of research on interventions to assist learners in being more strategic in their learning and use of L2 pragmatics.

Notes

1. While no distinction is being made between second and foreign language for the bulk of the article, this distinction is taken up in the final section on areas for future research.

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