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This article focuses on facilitating the development of second language (L2) pragmatics, especially with regard to one aspect of pragmatics, namely, speech acts. Speech acts constitute an engaging aspect of pragmatics because of the possible misfit between what is said or written in a language in the given speech act and what is meant by it. The concern is with helping L2 learners avoid pragmatic failure in high-stakes situations where they must interact with native speakers of the L2 and where approximating the sociocultural norms for the given context norms is a priority. All too frequently, nonnatives learn forms inaccurately or incompletely, and then attempt to use them in ways that are not appropriate for the given context. Hence, there appears to be an important role for the explicit teaching of L2 pragmatics. The article discusses issues relevant to L2 pragmatics instruction, such as selection of material for instruction, teacher preparation, the role of teachers in facilitating the learning of pragmatics, the assessment of pragmatics, and the role of technology in making L2 pragmatics accessible to learners.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, L2 pragmatics instruction, assessment of pragmatics

Introduction

I first learned about pragmatics from my colleague at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Shoshana Blum-Kulka, and then from the late 1970s pursued a research agenda with my colleague Elite Olshatian, focusing primarily on the speech act of apologizing. So my personal and professional interest in pragmatics has spanned perhaps thirty years. I became fascinated with the challenges associated with collecting data on both the comprehension and production of pragmatically complex L2 messages, since the intentions, assumptions, and actions performed by such messages may well be in need of interpretation (Yule, 1996: 3-4). The reason is that sociocultural norms for a given speech community predictably put constraints on how messages are communicated. For example, a given speech community may prefer that certain messages be delivered indirectly (e.g. “Good afternoon. I was wondering if you might have the time.”), while another speech community would prefer more direct communication (e.g. “Hey, what time is it?”). Members
of the speech community tend to adapt to these patterns (for survival sake) but the average learner of the language, especially those who are learning the language as a foreign rather than a second language, may find it a challenge to accommodate.

I have formally and informally studied eleven languages beyond my native English over the course of my life, and while I have achieved relative pragmatic control in, say, four of these, I can easily produce pragmatic failure in other languages such as Japanese (see Cohen, 1997, 2001). It is probably more my pragmatic failures than my successes which have made me acutely aware that pragmatic performance benefits from explicit instruction—that learners do not necessarily just get it through osmosis.

My concern as an applied linguist is to provide for learners of a second language (L2) a means for developing pragmatic ability more readily in that language, especially with regard to one aspect of pragmatics, namely, speech acts. Speech acts are often, but not always, the patterned, routinized language that natives and pragmatically competent nonnative speakers and writers in a given speech community (with its dialect variations) use to perform functions such as thanking, complimenting, requesting, refusing, apologizing, and complaining (see Olshtain and Cohen, 1983: 19-21; Cohen, 1996: 384-385). For the purposes of this paper, L2 will serve as a generic label, including both the context where the language is spoken widely and the context where it is not. In principle, pragmatic development in an L2 will be faster in the former context than in the latter, but it depends largely on how the learner makes use of the available resources. So, the focus is both on speech acts as performed by members of the dominant language group (e.g. Persian speakers performing speech acts in Persian in Iran) and by members of minority language groups as well (e.g. the pragmatics in Arabic of Arabic-speaking immigrants to Iran, where the speakers may be increasingly drawing on the pragmatic norms for speakers of Persian in Iranian culture).

Speech acts constitute an engaging aspect of pragmatics because of the possible misfit between what you do or do not say or write in a language in the given speech act and what is meant by it. Speech act theory, in fact, provides a reliable and valid basis for examining
pragmatic patterns that are primarily focused on selected utterances from the discourse (Mey, 1993). Nonetheless, there is increasing interest in moving beyond a traditional approach to focusing on speech act theory and on speech acts in isolation from situated interaction. The approach is referred to by Kasper (2006) as discourse pragmatics, which entails applying conversation analysis to speech act research. According to Kasper and others, this approach does not just advocate the study of speech acts in discourse or in interaction, but through discourse, employing the approach of conversational analysis (CA) to action, meaning, and context in studying speech acts.

While there is real value in investigating the full discourse context of pragmatic behavior, I would contend that for the sake of foreign language pedagogy there are genuine benefits in continuing to focus on the more traditional speech act research avenues as well. Even if the findings from more traditional speech act work do not precisely reflect actual discourse patterns (with its weavings, starts and stops, discontinuous elements, etc.), this material still provides both teachers and learners acceptable, if perhaps simplified, models for how speech acts can be performed. This may be precisely what a learner is looking for, rather than the more elaborate, reality-based model. So for the purposes of this paper, reference to pragmatics here will be to that domain of pragmatics which is represented by the more traditional speech act literature with its emphasis on isolated speech acts, ideally informed as much as possible by situated interaction.

What has prompted numerous studies is the seeming disconnection between the apparent meaning of a speech act such as a request, referred to as the propositional meaning (e.g. “Is that your cell phone?” = inquiry as to whether the other person is the possessor of a particular cell phone), and the intended illocutionary meaning or effect as conceived by the speaker (e.g. a request that the other person turns it off). An interesting component of a speech act set is the perlocutionary effect or actual illocutionary force of the speech act—namely, what the other person will do or say, which in the “cell phone” example is likely to be that the addressee will say something like, “Whoops!” or “Oh, sorry,” and turn the cell phone off. When the addressee’s response is not within the expected parameters of the situation for native speakers, it may be
a source of mirth or possibly annoyance, such as if “Is that your cell phone?” is met with “Yes, it is” or “Yes, it’s a Nokia.”

We note that there is some current interest in approaching language performance in terms of multicompetence (see Cook, 1992). This approach would claim that it is inappropriate to evaluate language performance as in realm of pragmatics in terms of an ideal native-speaker (NS) model, as has usually been the case. In addition, multilinguals would be held in esteem for what they can do, and not chastised for what they cannot do. Hall et al. (2006) would argue that it is important in multicompetence research to avoid using the native speaker as the model. They would argue that language knowledge is provisional, grounded in and emergent from language use in concrete social activity for specific purposes that are tied to specific communities of practice. Thus, it would not necessarily be appropriate to use English native speaker norms to evaluate, say, an English-medium apology made by a native German-speaking salesperson to a native Japanese-speaking client.

There is another approach to pragmatics that expects and perhaps even encourages learners to express their own subjectivity in language learning by not adhering to L2 norms (see LoCastro, 2003: 291–308; Ishihara, 2006). So in this case, therefore, deviation from the NS norms would be out of choice, rather than due to lack of pragmatic ability. Ishihara (2006) gives an example from her research of a learner of Japanese who chose to use the higher level of keigo (exalted and humble forms of honorifics) in casually conversing with a much younger employee, when he was not expected to use it at all. His rationale was that he believed in equality among all human beings and that he did not want to be disrespectful of anyone by using an informal speech style.

While there can be an advantage to applying both a multicompetence and a subjectivity approach to dealing with speech acts, I am not convinced that it pays to abandon the approach of encouraging learners to model their performance after NS norms in the given community of practice within the given speech community. My particular concern is with helping L2 learners avoid pragmatic failure in high-stakes situations where they must interact with NSs of the L2 and where
approximating the sociocultural norms for the given context norms is a priority. For this purpose, it would appear that there is an important role for the explicit teaching of L2 pragmatics.

The Case for Explicit Instruction in Pragmatics

It was constituted some years ago with regard to positive politeness strategies in Hebrew that it can take over 10 years or more for L2 learners on their own to acquire the ability to perform pragmatics in a way indistinguishable from natives (Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985). Consequently, it would appear valuable for teachers to intercede (for support of this view, see Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Rose, 2005). While the writings of Krashen (e.g. 1997) might suggest that learners will simply acquire an ability to perform in a language, pragmatics seems to be one of those areas resistant to acquisition, especially in more select areas, such as what to say at a funeral, or how best to make tactful requests such as in asking your boss for a raise or permission to take a lengthy vacation. If learners indeed develop pragmatic ability slowly when left to their own devices, the question arises as to what can be done to enhance their pragmatic acquisition. It is probably safe to say that typical course work provides only incomplete and often ambiguous treatment of L2 pragmatics. For this reason, the door is open for the development of materials aimed at complementing what learners already know about L2 pragmatics. But what would learners actually do with this fine-tuned pragmatic information?

Selecting Material on L2 Pragmatics

What material on L2 pragmatics do teachers teach or make explicitly available to learners? Where might a teacher look for examples of teachable pragmatics? Thirty sample pragmatics lessons were collected and posted on the Internet by Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003). They were all intended to help English learners use socially appropriate language in a variety of informal and formal situations. They cover awareness, conversational management, openings and closings, requests, refusals, compliments, and complaints. Where else might teachers find pragmatic material? Films and TV shows usually provide
larger-than-life language. They are heavily scripted and rehearsed. It has been found, for example, that in Larry King Live data, males give and receive as many compliments as females, whereas in naturally-occurring data females give and receive them more than males. And in films, it is males who are seen to give and receive more compliments than females (Tatsuki and Nishizawa, 2005). So, contrived media samples of pragmatics may not be true to life.

Recent research on the impact of L2 pragmatics instruction in the classroom included a target group of 94 second-semester learners of Spanish who watched scenes from the pedagogical video series Destinos (VanPatten, 1992). The students were asked to identify four speech acts in the video material (thanks, apologies, commands, and polite requests) and then to practice the speech acts in role-plays (Pearson, 2006). They tended to find the videos inauthentic, out-of-date, and somewhat boring—a reminder that it is not enough just to teach pragmatics; rather, both the nature of the context and the content of the materials are crucial factors.

To what extent are corpora teacher-friendly if the purpose is to glean insights about pragmatics? The problem is that it may not be easy to extract examples of speech acts from corpus data since the focus in such data sets is on forms, not functions, and speech acts occur across numerous turns. With complex speech acts (e.g. apologies, complaints, and the like) tagging pragmatic behavior for analysis can be a challenge. Félix-Brasdefer (2006) has provided a model for analyzing speech acts occurring in unscripted role-play interaction (in this case, a refusal to an invitation). The data are approached with conversation-analytic tools, considering the various sequences and multiple turns, and suggestions are provided for how this analysis could be applied to classroom instruction. Given the time-consuming nature of this kind of rigorous analysis, it could be viewed as an area for future materials development consistent with available time and resources.

Teacher Preparation in L2 Pragmatics

How much knowledge about the pragmatics curricula do teachers have and how important is this knowledge in the teaching/learning process? How much instruction in pragmatics have they received in
their teacher development programs, and how comfortable are they with teaching this material to their students? Would these teachers feel confident about giving fine-tuned feedback to their learners regarding the subtle innuendos associated with, say, a high-stakes request (e.g. requesting a raise)?

Va´quez and Sharpless (2007) conducted a telephone survey primarily with the directors of some 100 Master’s level TESL degree programs across the United States. Almost all of them reported including pragmatics in their curriculum, although there was considerable variability in (a) the extent to which pragmatics was reportedly dealt with, (b) exactly where in the curriculum it was addressed, and (c) how well-conceptualized pragmatics was at the programmatic level. In several programs, pragmatics was reportedly dealt with for one week in an “Introduction to Linguistics”-type course. In other programs, pragmatics topics were said to be addressed for 2-3 weeks in a sociolinguistics or a discourse analysis course (where the emphasis was on politeness and speech acts but where there might be little or no discussion about pragmatics in terms of L2 development, teaching applications, and assessment). Only about 11% of the programs reported having a “dedicated course” dealing with pragmatics as applied to language teaching. Finally, there was a subset of other programs in which pragmatics topics were reportedly sprinkled throughout or touched on in a number of courses.

In the summer 2006, Ishihara (2007a) conducted a study on the impact of an intensive 5-day summer institute on teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about pragmatics. This CARLA institute (which I team-taught with Ishihara) provided an opportunity to conduct an ethnographic case study of the development of teacher knowledge and beliefs about pragmatics among 16 practicing L2 teachers. The institute was found to enhance the teachers’ knowledge about L2 pragmatics and contributed to their ability to design pragmatic instruction and to assess it. Among other things, the participating teachers came to realize during the instruction that at times approximating the NS model was not always the learners’ goal. Ishihara concluded that for teachers to incorporate the learners’ actual goals into pragmatics instruction and assessment, the teachers would most likely need explicit modeling of how that would
be done in the classroom (Ishihara and Cohen, forthcoming). Ishihara has conducted follow-up research with participants in a similar institute in summer 2007 and her report on that study will be forthcoming.

The Role of Teachers in Facilitating the Learning of L2 Pragmatics

If we assume that learners need explicit instruction in L2 pragmatics, then the question is how to do it. Is it the teachers’ responsibility to teach it and if so, what can actually be learned about speech acts in the classroom and how much time should be allotted to this effort? How high should teachers set the bar in terms of what is expected of learners in their learning and performance? How many speech acts would be selected altogether? Would teachers focus on just one at a time? How would it be determined whether to spend time on one speech act more than another? Would the materials we might present in class or on the web cover a robust range of information about, for example, the speech act of requesting (e.g. requesting hot tea from a busy stewardess vs. requesting a second opinion in a hospital ward)? If not, what would be left out and with what consequences? Is actual or idealized pragmatic behavior taught? Should an attempt be made to teach tone (e.g. an apology expressed sarcastically) (Beebe and Waring, 2002)? And should the focus be both on speech acts delivered orally and in writing? And what about the oral/written hybrid language of email requests, since it is through email that pragmatic failure is often found (see Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006)?

What about the option of having the learners gather information from native speakers? The learners would need to be sufficiently aware of what to ask a native speaker in order to complement the knowledge that they already have (e.g. fine-tuning a date refusal, see Widjaja, 1997). Of course, there is always the question of whether native speakers actually deliver speech acts (e.g. requests) in that fashion—namely, the way that a teacher might teach them to. In principle, a well-crafted corpus would provide instructors an effective means to verify the authenticity of textbook language. It would appear that at present corpora do not yet have a major role in L2 pragmatics instruction.
Learners’ Performance of L2 Pragmatics
Ways to Learn and Perform L2 Pragmatics

If it is our intention that learners be exposed to explicit information about how to perform L2 pragmatics, how is this best done? Learning speech acts in the classroom may be a challenge depending on the extent to which cultural and contextual meanings can be made clear and accessible, such as through effective use of the Internet (see Belz and Thorne, 2006). Submersion in the L2 language and culture as through travel and study abroad can have an impact, but the process may be slow. With regard to acquiring speech acts through submersion in the language community, what if the speech act situation is not one you are exposed to every day, such as how to request a second opinion when a doctor’s diagnosis seems suspect? Even the best corpus may not have useful data for teachers and learners to draw on with regard to domains such as this one of “challenging requests.”

What if despite the fact that the speech act is a relatively common one, approximating NS behavior in the L2 is nonetheless elusive? For example, let us assume that learners have been exposed to various complaints in the L2, and that they want to complain to a professor about a grade. Will they have acquired from those various exposures what they would need in order to perform the complaint appropriately? A complaint of this kind would call for tactful mitigation (e.g. “I think uh it’s just in my opinion maybe the grade was a little low.”) and then effective delivery of the complaint statement (e.g. “I was kind of upset with my grade. I know that a lot of the problems are mine but there are certain areas that I wasn’t totally in agreement with what you said.”).

If learners rely on textbooks and on classroom interaction, what if the textbook writers have used as the source for their material their own somewhat inaccurate intuition about what native speakers might say or write? The textbook may, for example, list a series of intensifiers for an apology, such as “so,” “awfully,” and “terribly,” without indicating which are the most frequently used, or more importantly, the most appropriate for the given instance (since frequency is not necessarily the best criterion). Textbooks based on corpora may also indicate the frequency of collocations, but not necessarily the appropriateness for
a given situation. Turning to a self-access pragmatics website may be an option, as will be discussed below. Finally, what factors on the learners’ side may support or hinder their ability to both learn and then perform speech acts in ways that are appropriate for the given situations in which they find themselves (e.g. their language proficiency, learning style preferences, and personality)?

Assessing the Performance of L2 Pragmatics

Assuming that students learn pragmatics in the classroom, how do we go about assessing their pragmatic behavior, and especially what they have learned from instruction? Do we use discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role play, real play (i.e. where learners interact with real-world individuals as part of class activities), or even have students put together their own digital speech act portfolios (e.g. a sampling over time of oral and written speech act performance in a number of situations under different conditions)? If we use the DCT approach, to what extent can we create a viable situational context by means of a single prompt? Varghese and Billmyer (1996), for example, found that adding more detail to a prompt produced longer responses. The alternate prompt that they constructed for each situation had not only information on the requestive goal, social distance, and social dominance, but also the gender of the interlocutor, the role relationship, the length of acquaintance, the frequency of their interaction, whether the relationship was optional, and a description of the setting. If a solution is to use lengthy prompts, then the concern arises that lengthy prompts are difficult to construct and difficult for respondents to read through (Roever, 2004).

Would we use multiple-rejoinder DCTs, whereby the respondent is asked to give an appropriate initial response to the situation and then must supply at least two more responses which are prompted by the rejoinders that are provided for that situation (Cohen and Shively, 2002/2003)? The use of multiple rejoinders represents an effort to make DCTs more reflective of the conversational turn-taking of natural speech, the lack of which has been a criticism of written DCTs (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1993).

When assessed using a multiple-rejoinder format, test-takers are
instructed to read the description of the situation and all the rejoinders before writing in the target language what they would say in each of the response situations for the given vignette. The following is an apology DCT in which the severity of the infraction is major, the social distance is high, and the relative status of the test-taker is low (Cohen and Shively, 2002/2003):

You completely forget a crucial meeting with the distinguished professor with whom you are doing an internship. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you’ve forgotten such a meeting with your professor.

Professor: What happened to you?
You:
Professor: I can imagine that you have a lot on your mind these days, but this is the second time you’ve missed a meeting you agreed to attend.

You:
Professor: Yes, indeed. I hope you won’t forget it next time.
You:
Professor: I’m afraid I can’t reschedule it for today. Let’s try again next week at the same time.

Each rejoinder used in the example above is intended to elicit a strategy for apologizing. The query by the professor would presumably be answered by some explanation or excuse and then by an expression of apology with the appropriate intensity attached (“I’m really sorry about that.”). The professor’s rejoinder might be met by a promise of non-recurrence (“It won’t happen again.”). The next rejoinder calls for an offer of repair (e.g. “Can we reschedule for later today?”). As indicated above, knowing which strategies are minimally required in each case simplifies the raters’ task in judging test-taker responses and reduces scoring differences between individual raters.

Once we establish that L2 pragmatics is to be assessed, what are some suggested areas for assessment? Teachers could perhaps assess for the use of the appropriate semantic formulas for that speech act situation (i.e. the speech-act-specific strategies which alone or in combination with other strategies serve to constitute the speech act—in the above example: explanation/excuse, apology expression, promise
of non-recurrence, offer of repair; for more on the apology speech act, see Olshat in and Cohen, 1983). But this type of learner assessment would depend on whether this set of strategies has been taught in the material and can be measured with relative ease. Teachers could also check for adherence to sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms for appropriateness. In addition, they could check to see if learners are able to make appropriate modifications in the delivery of the speech act (e.g. showing proper intensity given the seriousness or importance of the situation; adjusting the speech act for age, gender, or relative status of the interlocutors).

Finally, how do teachers rate for oral and written speech act production? Do they try to anchor the student responses to baseline data from native speakers for each assessment criterion? Although in principle NS data may well serve as the model for rating learner language, what if the data from native respondents are terse, disjointed, or incomplete? To what extent would teachers use pre-determined criteria for each speech act—namely, those which reflect what they taught in a particular speech act unit? Do teachers determine their own intuitive coding holistically and then give their rationale for it (e.g. for each rejoinder within a given vignette, the teacher takes notes on what is inappropriate and incorrect)? Since pragmatic behavior by its very nature varies, the best approach is to collect data from more than one measure and all the same, to view these measures as an approximation of the respondent’s speech act ability. This approach might suggest the use of a cumulative portfolio of measures, rather than relying on just one or another. While pre-existing measures of speech act performance may be appropriate in a given L2 classroom, designing speech act tasks that really capture the characteristics and interests of the given group of L2 students may be preferable. And finally, how does a teacher go about determining what can be scored and how grades for pragmatic performance are determined based on these scores?

It is apparent from this discussion that there are more questions about assessing pragmatics for instructional purposes than there are answers. Yet while the means for assessing pragmatic ability are still in need of development, this should not deter teachers from including
pragmatics in their instruction as it is an often high-stakes area for language learners where pragmatic failure in the L2 speech community can lead to frustrating situations such as waiting for someone who had no intention of coming and completely misinterpreting what the boss wanted.

Now that we have looked at pragmatic performance and the assessment of it, let us consider the role that technology can play in dealing with L2 pragmatics, and especially the newer technologies as applied to language learning.

The Role of Technology in Making L2 Pragmatics Accessible to Learners

The use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) allows for the creation of technologically-enhanced instructional materials focusing on pragmatics. CALL research has looked at the benefits of different technologies for pragmatic and cultural instruction: multimedia and authentic materials (Hoven, 1999; Kramsch and Andersen, 1999; LeLoup and Ponterio, 2001), both synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Sykes, 2005), and telecollaboration—whereby language learners engage in projects with students from other cultures through the use of on-line communication tools such as email and message boards (Furstenberg et al., 2001; Belz, 2002, 2003).

While websites are not the only vehicle for disseminating information about L2 pragmatics to learners, they are a convenient way in much of the world, given the challenges associated with obtaining printed media and the propensity for undergraduates to be on the Internet (Belz and Thorne, 2006). So let us take a look at some of the options. There are now user-friendly websites for learners with material to support L2 pragmatic development. The Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR, 2007), for example, offers a series of interactive multimedia modules for language learning, practice, and assessment. The modules are based on video clips that show native speakers and nonnative speakers interacting in natural, unscripted situations. Interactive exercises reinforce language and
cultural topics that come up in the scenarios which take place in Arabic, Chinese, German, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. The video clips include speech acts such as greetings, requests, complaints, and compliments, as well as culture notes and activities based on each clip.

The University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) has three websites dedicated to L2 pragmatics, a general one, one focusing on Japanese (Cohen and Ishihara, 2005), and a third one focusing on Spanish (Cohen and Sykes, 2006). Since Internet environments may lack familiar social cues (Thatcher, 2005), the challenge for website designers is to make sure that the technology is accompanied not only by content, but also by information about how to make use of the content strategically. Strategies deployed by learners for managing their language learning and language use (i.e. strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their efforts, usually referred to as metacognitive strategies) have, for example, been found to provide the impetus for more effective L2 distance learning experiences (White, 1999, 2006). A study of distance learning found that "... language learners at a distance need to be shown more clearly and with more concrete examples why and how developing strategies, in particular metacognitive ones, can help promote more effective learning and by doing so, be time-saving rather than time-consuming in the long run" (Hurd, 2000: 77). In the domain of pragmatics, a learner could use metacognitive strategies to plan out an L2 request, monitor how well the request is actually being made (making mid-course corrections if necessary), and then evaluate how well the request went.

Website for Teachers, Curriculum Writers, and Learners

With funding from the Office of International Education to CARLA, a project was initiated to provide self-access Internet sites for the learning and performance of L2 pragmatics. The first project involved the construction of a pragmatics website for teachers, curriculum writers, and learners with detailed information about the six speech acts for which there were sufficient empirical studies available to facilitate such
descriptions (requests, refusals, apologies, complaints, compliments, and thanks) in as many as 10 different languages: <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/> (accessed 22/7/2007). Suggested strategies for teaching the particular speech acts and sample teaching materials are provided, along with an extensive annotated bibliography which includes information on numerous other speech acts as well.

Website for Learners of Japanese

The self-access website for learners of Japanese was constructed to include instructional units for five speech acts: requests, refusals, compliments, thanks, and apologies (see Cohen and Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007b). The website was intended to be used either on a stand-alone basis or as a supplement to an intermediate course in Japanese: <http://www.iles.umn.edu/IntroToSpeechActs> (accessed 22/7/2007). Language learning strategies deemed supportive for the learning and performance of speech acts, especially for speech acts in Japanese, were identified and built into the curriculum. The website materials included elicited but unscripted, audio-recorded pragmatic performance of native speakers to assist students in becoming more pragmatically adept at both receptive and productive skills, and at self-evaluation. A small group of native speakers then verified that the sample dialogs represented what natives would most likely say in those situations.

A pedagogical choice was made to consolidate from the empirical research literature those findings regarding Japanese pragmatics that could aid in comprehension, since especially English-speaking learners of Japanese might find it difficult to develop pragmatic comprehension (Kasper and Rose, 2002). However, with regard to the learners’ spoken or written Japanese, the introductory section of the website makes it clear that it is left up to learners to determine how native-like they want to present themselves. On our instructional website, we have a link to communication strategies as a way for learners to get their message across using their own devices, rather than the normative ones. By raising learners’ awareness about what natives do and what the consequences of various performances are, it gives them choices.
If they were previously unaware of NS norms, after being made aware of them, they can decide to what extent they wish to act like native speakers (see Ishihara, 2006).

**Website for Learners of Spanish**

The more recent effort at pedagogical applications of pragmatic information involves the design, construction, and evaluation of the Spanish pragmatics website <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home.html> (accessed 22/7/2007; Cohen and Sykes, 2006), developed over eleven months and launched in August 2006. Unlike the Japanese site, the Spanish one includes video interchanges between natives of various regional varieties of Spanish. Also, scaffolding is used for the purpose of addressing the learners’ varying levels of language/pragmatic ability. Speech acts are dealt with sequentially—first as a core, then in interaction, and then as a naturally occurring sequence.

One of the features of both the Japanese and the Spanish pragmatics websites is the inclusion of a taxonomy of learner strategies to enhance pragmatic development (Cohen, 2005). While the taxonomy available for the Japanese website was a more limited, preliminary one, the one used with the Spanish website was more fully developed, including strategies for (1) the initial learning of speech acts, (2) the use of speech act material that had already been learned to some extent, and (3) supervision of pragmatic strategy choices (referred to as metapragmatic strategies).

In addition, the Spanish website has more modules than the Japanese one:

- Compliments
- Gratitude and Leave-Taking
- Requests
- Apologies
- Invitations
- Service Encounters
- Advice, Suggestions, Disagreements, Complaints, and Reprimands
- Considerations for Pragmatic Performance
Each module contains the following elements:

- Introduction
- Encountering the Speech Act
- Strategies for Pragmatic Performance (in the three areas described above)
- Sociopragmatic and Pragmalinguistic Strategies
- Important Sociocultural Factors
- Language Varieties
- Summary

Although the model dialogs on the website are based on elicited interactions and not natural data, they are nonetheless unscripted and largely spontaneous, thus making them more naturalistic than the scripted dialogs such as those appearing in Destinos (VanPatten, 1992). The website also calls attention to the fact that the patterns will vary (something that would have to be done all the more so when using natural data). Other features of the website include a focus on varieties of Peninsular and Latin American Spanish (for which empirical data were available from the research literature), video clips to provide examples of speech act interactions, coverage of directness/indirectness and relative politeness, guidelines for enhancing strategies for learning and performing speech acts, and extended exercises for learners to work their way through these strategy sections. The reason why so much attention has been given to the actual pedagogical design and execution of the website was so as not to rest on the laurels of technological advances at the expense of content, which has been a limitation of various web-based projects in the past (see Salaberry, 2000).

A small-scale research study conducted in February 2007 with advanced learners of Spanish (to be further described below) had as one of its goals to determine the impact of Dancing with Words on learners’ pragmatic skills. Students indicated they had never before systematically studied pragmatics and that they were likely to continue working with the materials to improve their pragmatic skills (Cohen and Sykes, in press). In a reflective interview one student, Paco (his pseudonym), made the following observation:

...what you are getting at with the program is really, really positive
because I really don’t think there is enough emphasis on real world application….what I am always super, super frustrated with is you always end up with a class full of people who can write A+ papers and perfect grammar, and they can’t speak it to save their lives...the fact that you’re emphasizing a lot more on real world situations than on grammar is something that the Spanish curriculum desperately needs.

As noted by this particular student, many advanced language learners are able to utilize complex linguistic systems, but are unable to express and interpret meaning in order to perform language functions (e.g. apologies, requests) appropriately. Even when pragmatics is addressed in the classroom, the focus tends to remain on linguistic forms, rather than on the essential socio-cultural aspects of their use (Félix-Brasdefer, 2002).

Assessing Spanish Pragmatic Abilities in a Virtual Environment

An innovative component of this small-scale study was the creation of a synthetic immersive environment (SIE) in which learners could practice their Spanish pragmatics and then also have their performance assessed. This new virtual space allows for assessment of both speech act performance as well as students’ use of the resources within the virtual space for successful interaction. It builds on experiences over the last decade with synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) (Healy-Beauvois, 1992; Payne and Whitney, 2002; Belz, 2004; Belz and Vyatkina, 2005; Payne and Ross, 2005; Sykes, 2005). The current work attempts to apply the positive features of SCMC to the design of virtual environments for learning, and in this specific case, for assessing the pragmatics which the students have learned from the Dancing with Words website (see Sykes, 2008, for further discussion of the relationship between SCMC and SIEs as related to learning L2 pragmatics). The idea was to create an environment that is less imposing and more conducive to oral interaction (through avatars—i.e. a graphical image of a user) than a face-to-face one might be.

The SIE used in conjunction with Dancing with Words is an online virtual world named Croquelandia that was designed by doctoral student Julie Sykes and constructed by a team of designers and programmers
as part of a larger project financed by the University of Minnesota. The graphics in the space were created utilizing photos taken by Sykes in the Spanish-speaking world. The photos were then adapted and redesigned into the space by the graphic design and programming team. In the SIE, learners were able to move their avatars throughout the environment, interact with built-in content and non-player characters (computer-generated avatars), and talk with a native speaker playing the role of several avatars.

As indicated above, a small-scale study was conducted to find out what L2 learners actually do when they visit a self-access website dedicated to Spanish pragmatics—that is, the types of website-processing strategies that users of the site employ (Sykes and Cohen, in press). Ten advanced learners of Spanish participated in a one-hour, face-to-face introductory lesson, engaged in various instructional activities using the Spanish pragmatics website, and completed retrospective interviews about their experience. They also completed a pretest, an immediate posttest, and a delayed posttest using the online virtual environment. In this environment, they were required to interact with native speakers and were expected to use strategies they were provided on the website that were specific to the performance of requests and apologies. They needed to request to borrow their host sister’s course notes, engage in a service encounter with a street vendor (buying souvenirs), and apologize to their host-country sister for spilling Coke on the notes in their backpack and ruining them. Learners were able to move their avatar throughout the environment, interact with built-in content and non-player characters, and talk with a native speaker. See Figure 1 for images of the SIE assessment space based on Croquelandia. The creation of this SIEA space provided a low-risk, yet authentic, space for interaction and shows promising possibilities for future pragmatics research and instruction.

In terms of pedagogy and content development, the results of this qualitative study indicated that there was strong motivation on the part of the learners to improve interlanguage pragmatic abilities and that the inclusion of pragmatics materials in curricula and learning materials
Figure 1 Sample virtual settings in SIEA space

was highly beneficial. These results also indicated that online, self-access materials can be an effective and accessible learning source, however linked they are to classroom work.
Discussion and Conclusions

This paper started by giving a rationale for explicit teaching of pragmatics to L2 learners. The importance of having an empirical research basis for choosing pragmatics material was emphasized, and the controversy over acceptable means for obtaining these materials was considered. With regard to the teaching of pragmatics, issues concerning the selection of material, teacher preparation, and the ultimate role of the teacher in facilitating the learning of pragmatics were raised. The position taken in this paper is that of having the teachers give initial guidance and then leaving the actual learning of pragmatics to the students—giving them strategy instruction and directing them to websites where they can learn and practice pragmatics material according to their own interests. While the means for determining a learner’s pragmatic ability are still in need of refinement, the high-stakes nature of pragmatics warrants efforts both by teachers and by learners themselves to assess this ability. Finally, attention was given to the role of technology in making pragmatics more accessible to learners, looking both at websites for teachers and curriculum writers, and at websites expressly designed for learner self-access to L2 pragmatics for specific languages such as Japanese and Spanish. Results of a small-scale study of the effectiveness of the Spanish pragmatics and its accompanying synthetic immersive environment suggested that such innovations can enhance L2 learners’ motivation to improve their pragmatic skills. It was also seen that strategy instruction can be an important component of pragmatics instruction.

Note: Parts of this paper adapted from a plenary presented at the American Association for Applied Linguistics annual conference in Costa Mesa, CA, April 21, 2007.

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