Chapter 7

Speaking Strategies for Independent Learning: A Focus on Pragmatic Performance

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the issue of how to enhance L2 speaking skills in independent learning through the use of strategies to promote pragmatic ability. Pragmatics deals with how meaning is conveyed by speakers—and understood by their hearers—in actual conversational contexts. While independent learning may well be provided offline, new technological advances would suggest that the online study of L2 pragmatics could be beneficial to language learners, especially with the prospect of using virtual environments as a place to practise L2 pragmatic skills.

Pragmatic Ability

Within the realm of pragmatic ability, the ways in which people carry out specific social functions in speaking such as apologising, complaining, making requests, refusing things/invitations, or complimenting have been referred to as speech acts. Speech acts have (1) a basic meaning as conceived by the speaker ("Do you have a watch?" = do you possess a watch?), (2) an intended illocutionary meaning (e.g. "Do you know what time it is?"), and (3) an actual illocutionary force on the hearer, referred to as the uptake (i.e. a request to know the time, and hence, a reply like 'It’s 10:30 a.m. right now.'). In this instance, a young kid or a facetious adult might respond, 'Yes, I do.' If so, the uptake would not work for the speaker, who might then need to ask, 'What is the time, then?' While sometimes speech acts are accomplished by a single word like 'thanks,' at other times they involve complex and indirect speech over a series of conversational turns.

Many of these speech acts tend to follow regular and predictable patterns for members of the given speech community. In the case of 'greetings,'
for example, an associate at work in the United States might say, ‘How’re you doing?’ You are expected to say: ‘Fine, thank you’, rather than delving into a litany of woes, given that you have a bad knee and will be having surgery in a few weeks, and one of your kids just lost his job. To take the latter course would be unexpected. In fact, the person who asked how you were probably kept on walking and had no intention of engaging you in genuine conversation. Members of a given speech community generally know how to perform such greetings and how to interpret them as well.

For L2 learners of that language left to their own devices, however, the speech act of greeting and leave taking may be difficult to interpret and even more so to perform. On the performance end, in fact, L2 learners may simply translate what they would say in their native language in such a situation, rather than thinking how best to say it in a way that conforms with the largely predictable patterns for the target language and culture. So, the student’s version of an apology may not be appropriate: ‘Sorry, I couldn’t make it because things came up …’, for example, might not work in a speech community where the addressee is expecting a more detailed explanation. By the same token, ‘The reason I didn’t come was that my kid got sick and I took him to the doctor and then …’ may be too detailed an explanation for the context.

Whereas early efforts at teaching speech acts, or language functions involved little more than providing learners with lists of those functions, usually in minimal contexts, current L2 instruction may now include curriculum informed by empirical research studies, sometimes involving natural data collected in corpora (see, e.g. Golato, 2003; Holmes, 2003; Koester, 2002; Schauer & Adolphs, 2006). Cross-cultural research on apologies has found that there are a series of strategies that are specific to the performance of apologies in many different languages in a variety of speech communities (see Table 7.1). Preference for using one or more of these strategies in a given apology situation in a given language depends on the language and sociocultural situation. The following is an example of one such situation:

You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologise. The problem is that this is the second time you’ve forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks: ‘What happened to you?’

For Israeli Hebrew speakers, the apology would probably put emphasis on the strategy of explanation (more than an American would): e.g. ‘Well, I had to take a sick kid to the doctor and then there was a problem with the plumbing …’ They would also probably avoid the strategy of repair, because research has shown that in the Israeli culture, the boss

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<tr>
<th>Table 7.1 Strategies for apologising</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(1) Expression of an apology:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A word, expression, or sentence containing a verb such as ‘sorry’, ‘excuse’, ‘forgive’ or ‘apologise’.</td>
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<td>- In American English, ‘I apologise …’ is found more in writing than it is in oral language.</td>
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<td>- An expression of an apology can be intensified – in American English, usually by adding intensifiers such as ‘really’ or ‘very’ – e.g. ‘I’m really sorry’.</td>
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<td><strong>(2) Acknowledgment of responsibility – degree of recognition of fault:</strong></td>
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<td>- Accepts the blame: ‘It’s my fault’.</td>
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<td>- Self-deficiency: ‘I was confused/I didn’t see/You are right’.</td>
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<td>- Lack of intent: ‘I didn’t mean to’.</td>
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<td>- Implicit expression of responsibility: ‘I was sure I had given you the right directions’.</td>
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<td>- Not accepting the blame/denying responsibility: ‘It wasn’t my fault’, or even blaming of the hearer: ‘It’s your own fault’.</td>
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<td><strong>(3) Explanation or account: description of situation which led to the offence, serving as indirect way of apologising.</strong></td>
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<td>- Intended to set things right.</td>
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<td>- In some cultures this may be a more acceptable way of apologising than in others.</td>
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<td>- In cultures where public transportation is unreliable, coming late to a meeting and giving an explanation like, ‘The bus was late’, might be perfectly acceptable.</td>
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<td><strong>(4) Offer of repair: the apologiser makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage which resulted from his/her infraction.</strong></td>
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<td>- This strategy is situation specific and is only appropriate when actual damage has occurred.</td>
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<td><strong>(5) Promise of non recurrence: the apologiser commits him/herself to not having the offence happen again. Situation-specific and less frequent than the other strategies</strong></td>
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Source: Based on Cohen and Olshtain, 1981.

determines the next step (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). It would be an extra infraction for the employee to suggest what the next step would be, while an American might consider it imperative to offer repair as a way of righting the wrong.
In addition to the basic strategies associated with a speech act, there may also be modification according to the familiarity between the apologiser and the person being apologised to (intimate to very formal). Moreover, the intensity of the act could play a role — its gravity, seriousness or importance. For example, bumping into a stranger in a café and splashing hot coffee on the person, an American would be more likely to say 'I'm really sorry', indicating real regret, rather than 'I'm very sorry', which is more a sign of good etiquette, as in 'I'm very sorry to have to call an end to this meeting'.

A learner who is adept at L2 pragmatics has an ability to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed (Yule, 1996: 3–4). Speakers and the hearers, therefore, need to collaborate to ensure that genuine communication takes place. In fact, pragmatics deals with meaning that is co-constructed and negotiated within a given sociocultural context (LoCastro, 2003; Thomas, 1995).

At present there is an ever-increasing body of printed and online materials that can serve in part as teachers' resource books on the teaching of pragmatics in an L2 (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Tatsuki, 2005). In the last two decades, researchers have conducted numerous empirical studies to collect data on such speech acts. They have also begun to validate the benefits of having teachers explicitly describe certain key speech acts as they appear within selected discourse contexts (see e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Rose, 2005), rather than extracting them from their context for the purpose of teaching and learning.

But while there is increasing focus on the teaching of speech act sets, it would appear that little attention has been given to how one might support learners in acquiring these complex speech forms. And a propitious way to support learners in this endeavours is through strategy instruction — hence the focus of a research and development project, which will be described in the next section of the paper. This paper will make the case that a convenient way to deliver this strategy instruction is through an online website which combines pragmatic content with a strategy ‘overlay’ so that students get both at the same time.

Defining and Classifying Language Learning Strategies

One important distinction is between language learning strategies (i.e. learning language material for the first time, such as a new word or phrase, or grammar structure) and language use strategies (i.e. using the material that has already been learned) (see Cohen, 2007). This distinction is played out in this chapter as we first consider strategies for learning L2 pragmatics and then strategies for performing the material that has been learned.

### Strategies for Learning and Performing L2 Pragmatics

In an effort to fine-tune speaking strategies, by focusing on strategies for the learning and use of L2 pragmatics, a taxonomy was designed which included strategies (1) for the initial learning of speech acts, (2) for using the speech act material that has already been learned to some extent, and (3) for evaluating the effectiveness of their use, referred to as metapragmatic strategies (Cohen, 2005). Sources for strategies in this taxonomy include the general learner strategy literature, the speech act literature and insights from 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 (Cohen et al., 2005). For the most part, the strategies listed in the taxonomy are in need of empirical validation so they can be viewed as a series of hypotheses. A few examples from the taxonomy appear in Table 7.2.

### Table 7.2 Sample strategies from a taxonomy of speech act strategies

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<th>Speech act learning strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Taking practical steps to gain knowledge of how specific speech acts work, such as by identifying the L2 speech acts to focus on, using criteria such as:</td>
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<td>(1) their frequency of use in common situations encountered by the L2 speaker in the given speech community (e.g. ‘requesting’, ‘refusing’, and ‘thanking’);</td>
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<td>(2) their potentially high-stakes value in discourse (e.g. ‘apologising’ and ‘complaining’);</td>
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<td>(3) their special role in the given community of practice within the speech community the society, such as in creating solidarity (e.g. the use of expletives).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Asking native-speakers (instructors and non-instructors) to model performance of the speech acts as they might be realised under differing conditions, possibly to answer questions about their performance as well.</td>
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<td>A key goal of the learner would be to see if there is variation in the realisation of the speech act(s) according to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) the magnitude or seriousness of the issue prompting the speech act (e.g. apologising for missing a meeting vs. spilling hot coffee on a friend);</td>
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<td>(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);</td>
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<td>(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);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) the relative roles in 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);</td>
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(Continued)
A revised taxonomy of strategies was implemented in the design and development of the later Spanish pragmatics website (Cohen & Sykes, 2006) which is described below.

In reality, strategies rarely function in isolation, but rather in sequences or clusters. In the case of 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 to explore the strategies that L2 learners use in performing speech acts, it would appear that learners do make efforts to combine various strategies—perhaps some learners more than others (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Robinson, 1992; Widjaja, 1997). However, given gaps in their knowledge about sociocultural and linguistic norms for the given speech community, speaking performance among L2 speakers is likely to reflect, at least in part, negative transfer from the norms that they use for speech act behaviour in their local L1 or other language community. According to the research evidence, it can take many years for L2 speakers’ performance to reflect the norms of speech act behaviour for a given speech community (see Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Barron, 2003).

**Strategies for Independent Language Learning**

To date the concern with regard to strategy applications for independent learning has focused on the capacity of learners for self-regulation based on their relationship with ‘external’ factors such as context, environment and materials, and related also to ‘internal’ factors such as personality and affect. Metacognitive strategies (particularly self-management strategies) have been reported to contribute notably to the development of autonomy among distance learners in particular (White, 1995), and have been found to provide the impetus for more effective distance learning experiences (White, 1999). Hurd (2000) noted in her study the importance of demonstrating the direct link between being more strategic in language learning and resulting language gain. While this link has been demonstrated through interventionist studies involving non-distance courses (see e.g. Cohen et al., 1998; Macaro, 2001), according to Hurd the link remains to be studied in the distance learning context.

Language educators have called attention to the dilemma posed by the highly structured nature of distance language courses, such as those

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**Table 7.2 (Continued)**

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<th>Speech act learning strategies</th>
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<td>(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).</td>
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<th>Speech act use strategies</th>
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<td>(1) Engaging in imaginary interactions, perhaps focusing on certain pragmalinguistic aspects of the speech act.</td>
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<td>(2) Engaging in speech act role play with fellow learners of the L2 or with native speakers playing the other role.</td>
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<td>(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 practising speech acts and may say things that are contrary to fact (e.g. apologising for something that in reality they did not do).</td>
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<td>(4) Engaging in interactions with native speakers without them being aware that the learner’s purpose is actually to practise speech acts.</td>
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<th>Metapragmatic considerations</th>
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<td>(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);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(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);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) the appropriateness of the timing for a speech act in the given situation (e.g. whether to make an apology for a work-related incident to a colleague during a social event);</td>
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<td>(4) the acceptability of how the discourse is organised (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);</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) the sociopragmatic appropriateness of the selected semantic formulas and the pragmalinguistic 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!’).</td>
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offered by the Open University (UK), in light of the need that learners have to develop autonomous approaches (Hurd et al., 2001). Using examples from the Spanish Diploma, Hurd et al. have outlined ways in which autonomy can nevertheless be effectively promoted through careful attention to materials design. One such example that they provide is of how learners can work individually to learn about and self-evaluate both their formal and informal expression of politeness (Hurd et al., 2001: 352–353). This and other strategies can be effectively applied to any independent language learning setting.

Many of the strategies related to both learning and spoken performance are generic to any speech act (following the taxonomy; Cohen, 2005). Others appear along with the content – for example, strategies for making a request in English, where the person making the request may well need to identify those language structures that make requests more polite such as the use of modal auxiliaries (e.g. ‘Could you find the time...?’) and the use of the past progressive (e.g. ‘I was wondering if...’).

This now brings us to the issue of how we might enhance the learning of L2 pragmatics, through well-designed and targeted strategy instruction.

**The Role of Technology in Independent Language Learning**

Technology brings with it the promise of new venues for language learners: the rapid evolution of communication technologies has changed language pedagogy and language use, enabling new forms of discourse, new forms of authorship, and new ways to create and participate in communities (Kern, 2006). 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 & Andersen, 1999; LeLoup & Ponterio, 2001), asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication (Biesebach-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 (Belz, 2002, 2003, 2007; Hurstberg et al., 2001).

There are now self-access websites for learners with material to support L2 pragmatic development. The Michigan State University Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR, 2007), for example, provides short video clips in Arabic, Chinese, German, Korean, Russian and Vietnamese at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels, including a variety of speech acts, as well as culture notes and activities based on each clip. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota has three websites dedicated to L2 pragmatics, a general one, one focusing on Japanese (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005), and a third one focusing on Spanish (Cohen & Sykes, 2006).

However, the fact that these websites exist does not mean that they are entirely learner-friendly, since they may be lacking in social cues that learners have come to rely on (Thatcher, 2005). So, 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.

**Website for teachers, curriculum writers, and learners**

With funding from the Office of International Education to the Language Resource Center at 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 six speech acts (requests, refusals, apologies, complaints, compliments and thanking) in as many as 10 different languages: <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechact/descriptions.html> (accessed 17/8/2007). Strategies for teaching pragmatics and sample teaching materials are provided, along with an extensive annotated bibliography which includes information on numerous other speech acts.

Some six years later, after this website had been up for some time, a new project to construct a self-access website for learners of a less-commonly-taught language, Japanese, was initiated, followed three years later by the design and construction of a similar website for learners of a more-commonly-taught language, Spanish.

**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 & Ishihara, 2005; Ishihara, 2007). It 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 17/8/2007). Strategies deemed supportive for the learning and performance of speech acts, and especially for speech acts in Japanese, were identified and built into the curriculum. The website materials include 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. The authenticity of the sample dialogues was evaluated by native speakers.
The following are a few sample strategies from the website. With regard to apologies, depending on the situation and the interlocutors, the following strategies may be appropriate: repeating the expression of apology (sumimasen, gomennasai or moushiwake arimasen) several times within a speech act, saying hesitantly so as to sound properly humble, leaving the sentence incomplete, and keeping any explanation or excuse brief and non-detailed. With regard to complementing someone of higher status, such as a professor on a lecture, instead of saying lekuchawa yokata desu ‘your lecture was good’, which would sound inappropriately evaluative, it would be more appropriate to use a Japanese equivalent of ‘I learned a lot from your lecture’ (e.g. benkyou ninarashita: ‘it was informative to me’ or senseikara takusan ninarashita ‘I learned a lot from you’), a more humble approach.

The introductory section of the website makes it clear as learners encounter these strategies that it is up to them to determine just how native-speaker-like they want to sound. On the website, there is a link to communication strategies as a way for learners to get their message across using their own devices, rather than the normative ones. Raising learners’ awareness about what native-speakers do gives them choices and enables them to decide to what extent they wish to act like native-speakers (see Ishihara, 2006).

### Website for learners of Spanish

A more recent effort at pedagogical applications of pragmatic information involved the design, construction, and evaluation of the Spanish pragmatics website [www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp pragmatics](http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home.html) (accessed 17/8/2007) (Cohen & Sykes, 2006), developed over 11 months and launched in August of 2006. It called for the following:

1. the selection of empirically-based speech act material from naturalistic and elicited sources;
2. efforts to accommodate conversational dynamics in the presentation of the material;
3. attention to directness/indirectness and relative politeness;
4. guidelines for enhancing strategies for learning and performing speech acts.

Unlike the Japanese site, the Spanish one includes unscripted video interchanges between speakers 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. The material is in many ways idealised for the sake of instructional purposes, and does not necessarily reflect the way pragmatic behaviour actually presents itself.

One of the strengths of both the Japanese and the Spanish pragmatics websites is the inclusion of the above-mentioned taxonomy of learner strategies to enhance pragmatic development (Cohen, 2005). The Spanish website has a far more developed strategy overlay than the Japanese website. Aside from an introductory unit, the website, ‘Dancing with Words,’ has the following speech act units or ‘modules’:

- Compliments
- Gratitude and leave taking
- Requests
- Apologies
- Invitations
- Service encounters
- Advice, suggestions, disagreements, complaints and reprimands
- Considerations for pragmatic performance

While the content within each module varies according to the empirical research available, all modules contain the following basic sections:

- Introduction
- Encountering the speech act
- Strategies for pragmatic performance:
  - Sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic strategies
  - Important sociocultural factors
  - Language varieties
- Summary

Although the model dialogues on the website are based on elicited interactions and not natural data, they are nonetheless unscripted and largely spontaneous, thus lending them some authenticity. The website also calls attention to the fact that the patterns vary (something that is all the more evident when using natural data). Thus, it is not only a matter of having ‘the right’ data, but also having an effective instructional approach as well. Other features of the website include a focus on varieties of Peninsular and Latin American Spanish, video clips to demonstrate conversational dynamics, 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.

Suggestions are provided for ways to make use of the material in pragmatically appropriate ways. In the apology module, for example, learners are given strategies that are both hearer-oriented and speaker-oriented, with hearer-oriented ones focusing on the hearer as someone who can grant forgiveness (Disculpe profesora, me perdí la hora, ‘I’m sorry, professor,
begin to cover the full range of material to accommodate age, gender, status and other distinctions in the given sociocultural context.

**Adding a virtual environment to the learning of Spanish pragmatics**

Using the Spanish pragmatics website ‘Dancing with Words’ as the core, the project has now been expanded to include a virtual online environment for the practice and assessment of speaking skills. This new venture has involved the creation of a Synthetic Immersive Environment (SIE) for L2 pragmatics, using computer software modelled on ‘Second Life’ (<http://secondlife.com/> (accessed 17/8/2007) but on a more modest financial scale. This pragmatics work builds on experiences over the last decade with synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) (Belz, 2004, 2005; Healy-Beauvois, 1992; Payne & Ross, 2005; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Sykes, 2005). The current work attempts to apply the positive features of SCMC to the design of virtual environments for learning and especially practising pragmatics (see Sykes, 2008, for further discussion of the relationship between SCMC and SIEs as related to learning L2 pragmatics).

The SIE used in conjunction with ‘Dancing with Words’ is an online virtual world named *Croquelandia* that was designed as part of a larger project financed by the University of Minnesota. The Spanish model is the first environment of its kind designed for language learners and is intended to serve as a model for similar SIEs in other languages. The space was developed to foster L2 pragmatic development by maximising the potential benefits of the new technological tools. At present, activities in the space give students an opportunity to interact with native speakers and use the speech act strategies that they have learned from ‘Dancing with Words’ in order to make requests, handle service encounters, and apologise. The plan is to eventually add the other five speech acts modules from the ‘Dancing with Words’ website, as listed on page 127.

The graphics in the space were created using photos from the Spanish-speaking world. These were then adapted and redesigned into the space by the graphic design and programming team. In the SIE, learners can collaborate and interact in three primary spaces – the study-abroad host family’s house, a central plaza and market place, and a professor’s office at the university. The players in the environment can collaborate with their group members or other players using voice or written chat and can interact with the environment by clicking on different items, walking around the space, and observing and talking with an avatar (i.e. a graphical image of a user) present in each of the spaces. In the future, SIE users will be able to create their own content and link to other areas outside the virtual space. (See Figures 7.2 and 7.3 for images of the SIE *Croquelandia.*)
A Small-Scale Study

Thanks to a grant from the University of Minnesota, a small-scale study was conducted in February 2007 with the following aims:

- To examine how learners use strategies-based materials on a website and a virtual, immersive environment for learning L2 pragmatics (e.g. strategies for the learning and performance of the material, time spent on videos, answers to questions posed, comparisons of learner approaches to the website).
- To examine the effect that using the website for learning Spanish pragmatics has on their ability to perform a subset of the speech acts on the website (i.e. requests, apologies, service encounters) during actual interaction.

We note that no effort was made to compare the use of the website and virtual environment with more traditional approaches to teaching pragmatics, such as the study of print materials and face-to-face interactions. Hence, the study was simply exploring the impact of these more recent vehicles for learning of L2 pragmatics.

Research design

The research design and available budget called for the recruitment of ten advanced learners of Spanish who received a technological orientation and were then asked to study the pragmatics modules appearing on the *Dancing with Words* website, and then to have that learning assessed in the SIE. All actions and oral language in the tasks that they performed on the computer were recorded using *Camtasia Studio* (<www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp>) (accessed 17/8/2007). The pre-test required three role-plays in the SIE for assessment purposes: a request to borrow their study-abroad host sister’s course notes, a service encounter with a street vendor (buying souvenirs), and apologising to their sister for spilling Coke on the notes in their backpack and ruining them. The students interacted with an avatar representing the host country sister and one representing the seller in the market place, both played by the Colombian native Spanish speaker. The pre-test also included a written multiple-rejoinder DCT, with five situations based on material from ‘Dancing with Words’. Participants had to provide two requests, two apologies, and a service encounter (buying food at the market).

There was then a content orientation session, focusing on the taxonomy for L2 pragmatics, after which each of the participants completed three online modules from ‘Dancing with Words’, calling for requests, apologies, and service encounters (1–2 hours per module). After the completion of these modules, the participants took part in a reflective interview (10–20 minutes) which was recorded and transcribed. Next they took the immediate
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Participants demonstrated an increase in reported use of almost all strategies for the learning and use of pragmatics, with notable increases in awareness and consciousness-raising strategies, such as: I pay attention to what native speakers do by noting what they say, how they say it, and their non-verbal behaviour, and I will identify the communicative act I need to focus on. About half the students focused on the specific pragmalinguistic (i.e. language structure) strategies for performing a given speech act, saying things like, 'Now I can memorise what language to use in different situations.' The other half considered the general awareness of sociopragmatic (i.e. sociocultural) strategies associated with the given speech act, saying things like, 'I may not know exactly what to say, but I am more aware of what is going on ...'

Findings from the reflective interviews showed that the students had varying reactions to the features found in 'Dancing with Words' and in the virtual environments. Here are some examples:

**Susana:** [The website] kind of puts into written order what you kind of hear on your own, but you don’t really know how to order it ... it helps to have it all written down and put together.

**Henry:** I’m kind of a fan of interactive things like if they were drop-down boxes.

**Abri:** I don’t need like fancy stuff to help me learn, I guess.

So Susana appreciated having this information in one place, Henry felt that the way it was packaged made a difference, and the packaging of it was not important to Abri.

The following are a few student comments relating to their awareness of the impact of the Dancing with Words website on their own language, learning process, and social interaction:

**Interviewer:** Do you think you’ll use the other modules?

**Callie:** I think so, yes. Spanish is a big part of my life ... I want not just to be able to know the words, but be able to use the same pragmatics as native people would.

**Ronaldo:** Before I would just ramble on, but now I would use the three steps that I devised. You can start on one and work on that. Once you get done with that, then move on to the next.

**Interviewer:** What did you like about the materials?

**Veronica:** The one on Ecuador stood out. That’s where I want to go.

Students indicated that they were likely to continue working with the materials to improve their pragmatic skills (Cohen & Sykes, 2007). In a reflective interview, a student made the following observation:

... what you are getting at with the programme is really, really positive because I really don’t think there is enough emphasis on real

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Selected findings

The following are initial results based on preliminary analysis of data. In the pre-test virtual interaction with the native Spanish-speaker playing the role of the avatar for the host country sister and the one for the vendor, students experienced some stumbling and difficulty with the tasks. They indicated that they had not had previous practice with this type of interaction, and, in fact, three of the subjects reported not having had any experience of talking to a native speaker outside of the language classroom. As for their strategies for using the pragmatics material from the online modules, there was notable individual variation. While all 10 students used the written transcripts provided along with the video clips, they were reportedly used for different purposes. Two students reported using them in order to answer questions and six said they used them to help comprehend the video clips. As regards the built-in feedback on the website, two reported using it as instructional input prior to completing the activities, while eight said they used it afterwards, just to check their answers. Since in piloting it was not clear whether the website provided more information than students would want, we were curious about students’ reactions to the level of detail provided along with the online activities. While interest in details varied by module, learner, setting, and time of day, in general students were found to want even more details about the speech acts that they were interested in, as well as more practice and learning activities. There was only minimal difficulty with the technology itself – only one student indicated having trouble with the embedded videos.

The website’s focus on strategies for learning, performing, and evaluating speech acts seemed to have produced the desired effect.
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 emphasising 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 utilise complex linguistic systems, but are unable to express and interpret meaning in order to perform language functions (e.g. apologies, requests) appropriately. Even when pragmatic features are 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).

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter started by calling attention to the importance for language learners of having some control of L2 pragmatics, especially with regard to improving their speaking skills. The ability to make a request, refuse an invitation, complain, or apologise in high-stakes L2 situations may make or break a important relationship. Language learning strategies have a key role in enhancing pragmatic performance, both at the stage where the material is being learned for the first time and when what is learned needs to be accessed in order to perform it. Technology, as we have seen, can also play a major part in supporting the efforts of learners working on their own in various contexts. The three websites—a general one for teachers, curriculum writers, and learners; one dedicated to Japanese L2 pragmatics; and a third for Spanish L2 pragmatics—are all stages on the way to providing high quality state-of-the-art opportunities for students to develop spoken competence. A virtual environment for the learning of Spanish L2 pragmatics promises learners an effective and convenient way to practise their use of the language.

Finally, the small-scale study of the Spanish website and virtual environment would suggest that such efforts go a long way to enhance the learning of a language, covering areas that course work and even out-of-class experience do not cover. Findings from preliminary research with the Spanish pragmatics website indicate that learners utilise online content (i.e. videos, transcripts and feedback) in a variety of ways relevant to their own learning context. In addition, the learners in the Cohen and Sykes study (see Sykes & Cohen, forthcoming) displayed different characterisations of their online experience and tended to categorise their own focus on either pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic factors relevant to each of the three speech acts being addressed. Perhaps the most encouraging finding was that the subjects of the study displayed a positive perception of the experience and indicated that they would continue to use the website materials in the future.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, L2 refers to the learning of a foreign language both in a context where the language is spoken widely and 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.

2. While corpora have been heralded as the true way to describe pragmatic behaviour, more complex speech acts than leave-taking, such as complaints or apologies, may be performed in indirect ways such that a search of words and phrases in a corpus may be of limited value. In addition, complex speech acts may be performed over a series of turns, making them difficult to retrieve from a corpus.

3. A speech act set refers to a set of possible strategies, where one or more members of this set could constitute the speech act, depending on the situation.

References


