Introducing pragmatics-focused materials in the foreign language classroom

What are the benefits of incorporating pragmatics in the EFL classroom?

Here are 5 tips on fostering language learning by effectively developing our learners’ pragmatic competence in the target language.

By Joanna Nifli (MA TEFL/CELTA certified EFL instructor) http://joannanifli.com

While native speakers are usually able to identify a grammatical error produced by a non-native speaker, they may not do the same or react in the same way with an ‘error of appropriacy’ (pragmatic error). The consequences there are potentially more serious as such errors may not only impede communication, but they may also be considered as signs of rudeness. In their article on designing pragmatics-focused materials for the EFL classroom, Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) note that “foreign language textbooks offer very limited examples of real-life language use and the pragmatic connotations that these entail”. Coursebooks usually limit their content to “useful expressions”, without offering
opportunities for further analysis of when and how these TL phrases are used in everyday life.

What can we, therefore, as teachers do to foster language acquisition and at the same time shift our learners’ focus to the functionality and the use of the basic ‘speech acts’ they will encounter while using the target language? Below you will find some key points to consider when focusing on raising our learners’ awareness of the basic rules of pragmatics and how these can be implemented to improve communication in the TL.

1. **Enriching the TL input**

When introducing pragmatics in the foreign language classroom, Ellis (1997) advises teachers to first consider the following factors:

- Can my students do it?
- Will they benefit from focusing on speech acts?
- How will this foster their linguistic development?


Since we will be focusing on *talking about the language*, we first of all need to keep in mind our students’ age, level, L1 background and linguistic needs. We need to examine whether or not our learners will benefit from an explicit focus on discourse analysis and on certain speech acts and their appropriate use in the TL. If we believe that turning them into ‘discourse analysts’ for a while and shifting their focus on pragmatics will be beneficial to
their linguistic development, we then need to carefully examine the added linguistic input we will provide to them and offer them the most **appropriate examples of language use** for them to focus on. Our students need as much **useful and authentic TL input** as possible and as many **instances of the speech acts** we want them to shift their attention to as possible.

## 2. **Enriching textbook materials**

Using the coursebook materials as a starting point or as a source of inspiration can help us in finding ways to incorporate pragmatics in our language lesson. For example, when coming across a textbook unit on apologizing, we can provide our learners with added material (ex. **dialogues or data derived from language corpora**) that will offer further clarifications and opportunities for practice on the **cultural and contextual information** our students need on how native speakers apologize in the target language and on how this may differ from their mother tongue. Teachers may also find an opportunity to focus on certain speech acts after a request from a student or when they may feel that their learners need further practice in order to fully grasp the culture specific connotations of a certain language function.

## 3. **Class analysis of authentic data**

In order to make sure that our learners know when and how it is appropriate to make certain speech acts in the TL, we first of all need to focus on offering them enough examples of **real life TL use** and **transcripts of authentic speech**. We need to give them the opportunity to examine these materials through the use of **questionnaires, whole class discussions** and **concept questions** that will clarify certain misconceptions or misunderstandings.

We need to raise our learners’ awareness on the factors that affect what we say in the TL and how we say it, on the appropriacy of expressing ourselves, on the TL cultural and linguistic background and on how this can affect our conversations.

### Reading dialogues

When focusing on pragmatics, it is important to provide our learners with as much relevant input as possible. The more the TL scenarios our learners are exposed to, the better their understanding will be on how certain language functions are used in the target culture. To enrich our lesson, we can give out **listening tasks/ short videos** to the class or **transcripts** of dialogues from real life language use that contain the speech acts we want to focus on. In groups, students can **discuss** these language functions, **compare** them to their L1 and examine what factors influence the ways TL native speakers express themselves in certain situations.
4. Focus on the TL culture

The goal is for our students to begin making links between what is being taught in class, what the norms are in their culture and how these differ from the TL context. By raising our learners’ awareness on the pragmatics of the TL and providing them with as many opportunities as possible to study the TL language forms in various contexts of use, we give our students the tools they need to communicate effectively and appropriately in the foreign language and to develop their interlanguage in a culturally appropriate manner that will boost their learning and their communicative development.

5. Involving students in communicative tasks

In many cases our learners will rarely find the opportunity to practise the TL outside the language classroom. It is therefore essential to encourage them to speak in the foreign language as much as possible. We must give them the freedom to interact in the TL, to try to communicate successfully and appropriately to get their message across. We need to carefully select the interactive tasks we give out to our class by always keeping in mind the ultimate goal of improving our learners’ pragmatic competence. By working in pairs or groups on a role play for example, our students will combine their imagination and their knowledge of L2 lexis and grammar and will learn from one another. Real-life simulations, games and quizzes will not only increase student talking time (STT), but will also enhance our learners’ communication skills.

Practice on different TL scenarios (Role play)

For a communicative activity to be successful, we must encourage a friendly, relaxed learning environment. If there is a trusting and supportive rapport amongst the learners and between the learners and the teacher, then there is a much better chance for useful interaction to take place. Our focus should be on setting up interesting and stimulating speaking activities where our learners carry out role plays that focus on the socio-pragmatic features of language use and the appropriacy of context. Variety in the topics for discussion and in the task types plays an important role here. Variety kills boredom and triggers our learners’ interest.

Below you can find a list of pragmatics-based themes that can be used as a basis for inspiration for designing speaking tasks that focus on certain ‘speech acts’:
During the speaking activity, our main role should be that of a facilitator, making sure that the task is being carried out smoothly and that all learners participate equally. We must also try to reduce TTT (teacher talking time), step away from the central scene, monitor from a distance and try not to interrupt the flow of the activity. Effective feedback is an important part of these tasks, as teachers need to carefully select the points they need to focus on and whether or not they need to intervene and comment ex. on the appropriateness of language use, etc.

References


https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/teachers-corner-simple-ways-incorporate-pragmatics-efl-classroom