

Investigating pragmatic learning in instructional contexts

Eva Alcón

Universitat Jaume I

1. Defining pragmatics in language teaching
2. Research questions addressed in instructional settings
3. Approaches to investigate pragmatics in instructional settings
4. Examples of classroom-based studies
5. Issues to be addressed in the future
6. Pedagogical implications from classroom research on interlanguage pragmatics

1. Defining pragmatics in language teaching

What exactly is pragmatic ability?

Pragmatic ability

“The study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.”

(Crystal, 1997: 240)

Sociopragmatic-Pragmalinguistic Distinction

A. Sociopragmatics: norms of behaviour for realising a given speech act in a given context, taking into account:

- the culture involved
- the relative age and gender of the interlocutors
- their social class and occupations
- their roles and status in the interaction

(Thomas, 1983)

B. Pragmalinguistics: resources for conveying communicative acts and interpersonal meanings.

✓ Example of the sociopragmatic dimension

In requesting, knowing to what extent it would be acceptable to ask, in a given context and in a given language, how much somebody paid for a new car

✓ Example of the pragmalinguistic dimension

Using an acceptable way to ask it:

- How much did you pay for that, George?
- Boy, that car must have set you back a pretty penny!

Pragmatics in language teaching

“...the process of establishing sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence and the increasing ability to understand and produce sociopragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions.”

(Kasper and Roever, 2005: 318)

2. Research questions addressed in instructional settings

- A. What opportunities are offered for pragmatic learning?
- B. Does pragmatic ability develop without instruction?
- C. What effects does instruction have on pragmatic learning?

A. What opportunities are offered for pragmatic learning?

- Opportunities for pragmatic input: teacher talk (Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1996; Nikula, 2008), textbooks (Salazar, 2007; Uso-Juan, 2007) and audiovisual material (Alcón, 2005; Fernández Guerra, 2008; Martínez-Flor, 2008)
- Opportunities for output (Long et al., 1976; House, 1986; LoCastro, 2003; Ohta, 2001; Alcón, 2002)
- Opportunities for feedback (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990; Alcón and Codina, 2002; Martínez-Flor and Fukuya, 2005; Takimoto, 2006)

B. Does pragmatic ability develop without instruction?

- Pragmatic knowledge is universal (Blum-Kulka, 1991; Ochs, 1996)
- Pragmatic transfer (House and Kasper, 1981, for modality markers; Maeshiba et al., 1996, for apologies; Trosborg, 1987, for requests)

C. What effects does instruction have on pragmatic learning?

- a) Can pragmatics be taught?
- b) Is instruction more effective than no instruction?
- c) Are different teaching approaches effective?

a) Can pragmatics be taught?

Instruction is both necessary and effective (Wildner-Bassett, 1984, 1986; Olshtain and Cohen, 1990; Rose, 2005; Safont, 2005; Rose and Kasper, 2001; Alcón and Martínez-Flor, 2005; Jeon and Kaya, 2006; Alcón and Martínez Flor, 2008; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010)

b) Is instruction more effective than no instruction?

High levels of attention-drawing activities are more helpful for pragmatic learning than exposure to positive evidence (Alcón, 2005; Takahashi, 2010)

c) Are different teaching approaches effective?

Inconclusive results.

- Explicit and deductive instruction is more effective than implicit and inductive teaching (Alcón, 2005; House, 1996; Rose and Ng Kwai-Fun, 2001; Takahashi, 2001)
- Implicit intervention is as effective as explicit intervention (Alcón, 2007; Koike and Pearson, 2005; Takimoto, 2006, 2007, 2008)

The effect of instruction on pragmatic learning

- a) Large effects of explicit intervention are not found in every aspect of pragmatic learning
- b) Explicit intervention is more effective for gains in sociopragmatic knowledge
- c) The need to reconsider the nature of explicitness in interventional studies

3. Approaches to investigate pragmatics in instructional settings

Understanding pragmatic learning:

A. As a cognitive activity

B. As a socially-oriented activity

A. Understanding pragmatic learning as a cognitive activity

- a) The development of pragmatic competence is considered to be an individual mental process
- b) Data is collected under experimental or quasi-experimental conditions (written and oral discourse completion and discourse evaluation tests)
- c) Studies grounded in theories of attention and awareness in SLA:
 - Test the teachability of pragmatics
 - Interventional studies
 - Including a pre-test/post-test design
 - Focus on instructional treatment and learning outcomes

B. Understanding pragmatic learning as a socially-oriented activity

- a) Social interaction is considered crucial to pragmatic learning:
- Sociocultural (Ohta, 1999, 2001; Alcón, 2001)
 - Language socialisation (Kamagy, 1999; Duff, 1995, 2009)
 - Conversation analysis (Kasper, 2004; Young and Miller, 2004; Ishida, 2006)

- b) Studies theoretically motivated by socially-oriented approaches:
- Observational studies
 - Provide information on pragmatic development over time (Barron, 2009; Ellis, 1992; Kanagy and Igarashi, 1997; Ohta, 1999; Schmidt, 1983)
 - Pragmatic learning is constructed through classroom interaction (see Markee and Kasper, 2004)
 - Data collection: extended observation and combination of observational periods, interviews, retrospective and concurrent verbal reports

4. Examples of classroom-based studies on pragmatic learning

- A. A cognitive classroom-based study (Alcon, 2005)
- B. A socially-oriented classroom-based study (Alcón, 2001)
- C. A socio-cognitive classroom-based study (Alcón, 2002)
 - Research goals
 - Research design
 - Results
 - Theoretical and methodological issues

a) A cognitive classroom-based study (Alcon, 2005)

- **Research goal:**
examine the effects of instruction on learning how to use requests.
- **Pre-test and post-test research design:**
132 intermediate EFL learners in their last year of secondary education
- **Explicit group:**
use of explicit awareness-raising tasks and metapragmatic feedback on the use of requests
- **Implicit group:**
use of implicit awareness-raising tasks and input enhancement techniques
- **Control group:**
instruction on the use of requests was not provided

Example of some of the activities used in the explicit group

In making requests the less you know someone or the higher the position someone has, the more polite and formal you need to be.

Example: O'Neill has a higher position than Carter, so he uses a conditional tense to indicate more polite language (*if you're gonna go back and tell General Hammond, I would like to stay here and take a look at their fusion technology*)

Other examples:

Example of some of the activities used in the less explicit group

We use a variety of ways to ask people to do something. Here you have different examples of requests taken from the Stargate excerpt you have seen. Find them in the printed version, and complete them:

- Listen...
- Perhaps you'll...
- Would you mind if...?
- I'd like to...
- I want to...

Results:

- H.1: Both explicit and implicit treatment groups will improve learners' pragmatic knowledge and production of requests on the post-test over the pre-test, but the control group will not.

Results: There are statistically significant differences for the explicit and implicit group in knowledge and production of request realisation strategies at the beginning and end of the instructional period.

- H.2: There will be no significant difference between the two treatment groups (explicit and implicit) in their pragmatic knowledge and production of requests.

Results: Gains in knowledge are not significantly different, but gains in production are significantly different in favour of the explicit group.

Theoretical and methodological issues

Based on Schmidt's (1983; 1990) noticing hypothesis:

- Test the teachability of pragmatics
- The effectiveness of different teaching approaches
- Interventional study
- Focus on learning outcomes

b) A socially-oriented classroom-based study (Alcón, 2001)

- **Research goal:** to examine the nature of collaborative dialogue while a request-focused task is performed in teacher-students and peer interaction

- **Research design:**
 - a. Recording verbal interaction in intact EFL classrooms
 - b. A detailed analysis of participants' use of mediating strategies in the performance of a task focused on requests

Coding the use of mediating strategies in teacher-led and peer interaction:

- D.A. (Direct appeal): participants directly indicate that there is a linguistic problem by asking for their interlocutor's help.
- I.A. (Indirect appeal): participants indirectly indicate that there is a linguistic problem by repetition of the utterance, use of pauses, silence, and so on.
- M.C. (Metalinguistic clues): participants provide information, comments or questions about the appropriate language to be used.
- E.C. (Explicit correction): participants clearly indicate that an utterance was incorrect and supply the correct form.
- I.C. (Indirect correction): participants implicitly reformulate all or part of the incorrect utterance.

Results:

In teacher-led interaction: frequent use of direct appeal strategies to draw students' attention to form:

- S: Can you do a favour...?
- T: **How would you use a more polite form?**
- S: Could...? Would...?
- T: **Could you...?**
- S: Could you do a favour...?
- T: Could you do me a favour, please?

by eliciting correct forms from students:

- S: Go and bring
- T: **Can you repeat?**
- S: Go... Can you go and bring?
- T: Yes... can you go and bring it to me, please?

In peer-interaction, students ask their partners to repeat, verify or reformulate the utterance that triggered the problem:

- S1: How about the cinema?
- S2: How about?
- S1: Yes... How about go the cinema?
- S2: OK. How about. Did you say go or going?
- S1: Go... no, going

Theoretical and methodological issues

- New insights into the nature of peer and teacher-students interaction in the EFL context.
- Further evidence on three functions of output (noticing, hypothesis testing, and the metalinguistic function) in peer interaction and teacher-student interaction.

- The cognitive and the socially-oriented approaches represent two different ontological positions and they follow interventional and observational approaches to classroom research on ILP.

- Cognitive and socially-oriented approaches may merge in the instructional setting in an attempt to understand how participants' behaviour in interaction can influence learning outcomes.

c) A socio-cognitive classroom-based study (García Mayo and Alcón, 2002)

- **Research goal:**

- a. To examine teachers' and learners' behaviour in teacher-led versus learners' interaction
- b. To analyse the effect of collaborative dialogue in constructing learners' pragmatic knowledge of requests

Research design:

- a. Recording verbal interaction
- b. Identifying mediating strategies and isolating the language-related episodes (LRE) with a focus on requests
- c. On the basis of knowledge constructed in language-related episodes pragmatic learning was measured:
 - Uptake (learning diaries)
 - Awareness (discourse evaluation tests)
 - Production (discourse production tests)

You and your father are watching a football match on television and suddenly the telephone rings. You go to the kitchen and answer it. When the telephone conversation is over, you go back to watch the football match, but you do not know what has happened while you were on the phone.

What do you say to your father?

Example: Language-related episode

- S1: Would you tell...?
- S2: But, it's father and son?
- S1: Yes, but...
- S2: If the son, then could you...
- S1: Yes, could but also will
- S2: No, yes, and can...
- S1: Can you now...?
- S2: Can you tell me...?
- S1: Can you tell me what happened...?
- S2: What happened now?
- S1: Yes, has happened now...
- S2: Can you tell me...?
- S1: Can you tell me what has happened?

Discourse evaluation task

State whether the following sentences or expressions are correct or incorrect and/or if they are appropriate or inappropriate to the situation. If they are incorrect and/or inappropriate, write down the correct answer.

1. A son to his father while they are watching a football match on television:

Excuse, would you be so kind to tell me what has happened, please?

- Correct
 - Incorrect
 - Appropriate
 - Inappropriate
 - Suggestion:
-

Discourse completion task

You are at home and you want to ask your dad to help you with a written assignment. He is not working at the moment.

What would you say?

Results

Table 1. Proportion of mediating strategies in Peer interaction and Teacher-led interaction

	Peer interaction	Teacher-student
D.A.	25.31%	74.68%
IA	53.94%	46.05%
M.C.	47.05%	52.94%
E.C.	38.38%	61.61%
I.C.	51.59%	48.40%

Table 2. Percentage of focus on pragmatic issues in language-related episodes resulting in students' reporting of learning (uptake), awareness, and production in both

	Peer interaction	Teacher-student
Uptake	23.67%	76.32%
Awareness	62.65%	37.34%
Production	52.94%	47.05%

Theoretical and methodological issues

- Pragmatic language learning as a mediated process (Lantolf, 2000; Ohta, 2000; Swain, 1995)
- Cognitive and socially-oriented approaches may merge in classroom-based studies (Alcón, 2008)
- Participants' behaviour in interaction can influence pragmatic learning in the classroom (Ohta, 1995)

Issues to be addressed in the future

- A) The emergence of new language-learning environments

- B) The operationalisation of SLA constructs

A) The emergence of new language-learning environments

- Computer-mediated communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Belz and Kinginger, 2002, 2003; Kinginger, 2000; Kinginger and Belz, 2005; González-Lloret, 2010)
- Content and language integrated learning contexts (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Nadasdi et al., 2005; Nikula, 2005, 2007; LLinares, 2008)
- Multilingual settings (Cenoz, 2007; Safont, 2007, Alcón, forthcoming)

B) The operationalisation of SLA constructs

- Alternative ways of operationalising explicit and implicit instruction, or deductive and inductive learning
- The potential of CA as an approach to studying pragmatic teaching and learning (see Felix-Brasdefer, 2006; Alcón, forthcoming)

6. Pedagogical implication

- Awareness-raising tasks and input enhancement techniques (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003; and Tatsuki, 2005; Kondo, 2010, for apologies; Boxer, 2010 for complaints; Alcón, 2010, for refusals)
- Instruction and selection of material offer opportunities for noticing, understanding and producing speech acts (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991; Judd, 1999; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2006; Kondo, 2008; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010; Alcón, forthcoming)
- The relationship between instruction and pragmatic learning ignore learners' individual variables

Thanks!