Linking L2 pragmatics and intercultural understanding in the foreign language classroom

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Part of a larger attempt to rethink L2 pragmatics from an intercultural perspective.

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McConachy, T. & Liddicoat, A.J. (Eds.). *Teaching and learning second language pragmatics for intercultural understanding*. Routledge.

Outline

- Conceptual/theoretical barriers to developing an intercultural orientation in L2 pragmatics

- Linking L2 pragmatics and intercultural understanding
  - Pragmatic resistance in learners of Japanese
  - 'Experience talk' as a potential locus of learning: examples of Danish students learning Spanish

Pragmatics as 'meeting point' between language and culture

- Tends to be taken for granted that pragmatics is inherently 'cultural' but relationship not unpacked.

- 'Politeness' often seen as the most overt manifestation of the relationship.

- Historically, a marginalized discipline. The 'wastebasket' of linguistics?
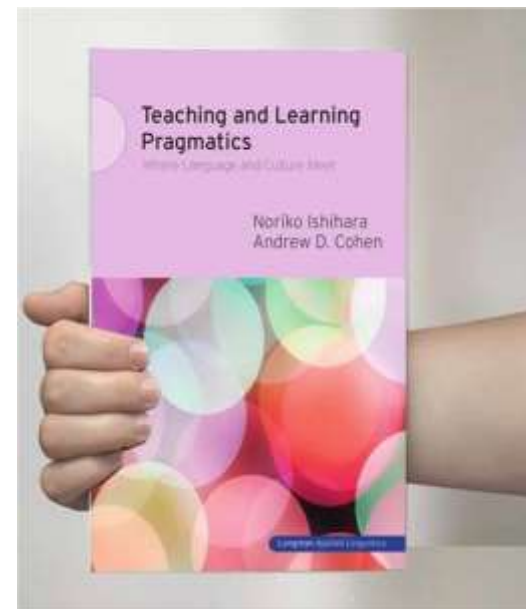
The idea of cross-cultural pragmatic failure

"If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person*"(Thomas 1983: 97, italics in original).

"Since the focus in pragmatics in the real world involves the use of language in a host of social and cultural contexts, learners of a language invariably have a lot to learn if they do choose to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings" (Ishihara & Cohen 2010:14).

Problems

- Perpetuates asymmetrical framing of intercultural relations (L2 speakers assimilate towards native speakers in order to avoid judgment).

- The learners' own linguistic and cultural backgrounds framed as a hindrance -- i.e. elements that lead to 'negative pragmatic transfer'.

- Engenders a pedagogical focus on learning how to make 'correct' linguistic choices according to context, as per the reified pragmatic norms of native speakers.

- Overall, a 'cultural' rather than 'intercultural' focus.

Reliance on 'rules of thumb'

- "Rules of thumb": broadly and simplified description of a given communicative phenomenon.
  - Simplified context
  - Generalisations
  - Stereotypes
  - Intuition-based interpretation

(1) Extending the invitation: The person extending the invitation requests that the hearer (the person being invited) attend his/her function. In Spanish, this is often done with an initial invitation and then, if the person refuses, insistence that he or she attend.

https://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/Invitations_and_Refusals/invitations_and_refusals_home.html

Metapragmatic awareness

- Conceptualisation and elicitation of metapragmatic awareness tends to reflect the learners' ability to make "correct" selections (see next slide)

- Teachers often do encourage cross-linguistic comparison and reflection but lack of research on how this shapes learning (for exceptions, see McConachy, 2013, 2018, 2019, McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016; Morollón Martí, 2017, Forthcoming).

From Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998

John: Good morning, Anna.
!Anna: Good night, John.

☐   ☐

Was the last part appropriate/correct?   Yes   No

If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?

Not bad at all ____:____:____:____:____:____ Very bad

Linking L2 pragmatics and intercultural understanding

Recognising learning as a 'disruptive', morally anchored process

- The learning of pragmatics is not a psychologically neutral process – it deeply engages the whole person as a social and moral being.

  -Involves dealing with the adaptive demands of needing to carry out social acts through language in ways which may conflict with one's existing identity or assumptions about social relationships.

  -Our embodied 'attachment' to our own pragmatic norms makes us liable to cast negative evaluations of the L2 and its speakers.

'Pragmatic resistance'

The learner's reluctance to take on certain L2 pragmatic features or communicative practices, such as:

- Personal pronouns and other form of person reference

- Compliments and compliment responses

- Modality/ Epistemics (e.g. expressions of certainty)

(see Ishihara & Tarone, 2009, Ishihara, 2019; McConachy, 2018)

The case of "Watashi" (I) in Japanese

私 -- Watashi   Most 'polite'/'neutral'; standard in professional contexts, symmetrical

僕 -- Boku   Masculine, familiar

俺 -- Ore   Masculine, **very** familiar

My experience of pragmatic resistance to 'watashi'

NOT a cognitive understanding but an EMBODIED reaction.

"The act of using this 'word' to refer to myself as one part of expressing an idea, preference, or stance made me feel awkward and squirmy. This word seemed to bring into being a persona which was detached from my usual way of 'feeling myself' inside language. It felt colourless and stiff, even effeminate. It robbed from me my ability to present myself as the laid-back Aussie surfer that I thought I was. To refer to myself as '*watashi*' would be taking myself too seriously. Even though I knew that '*ore*' was completely inappropriate in a professional context, I would let it slip out. In fact, often, it was deliberate".

(McConachy in Shaules & McConachy, Forthcoming)

Another example of resistance to L2 politeness

Tim (Anglo-American)
- Studying Japanese for 3 years
- Been living in Japan for 18 months

Resistance to Japanese 'keigo' (honorific language) (Ishihara & Tarone 2009:11).

"I didn't know how to use it, and then I would get upset, because we would go out with my friends, and we would bump into like their older friends, and they had to speak *keigo* to them, and they were kind of treated like little children and I was like, this is, you know, this isn't proper. And I didn't learn".

Underpinning assumptions

- **Egalitarianism is the norm** – we should not unnecessarily emphasise vertical distance between people (e.g. A small age difference is irrelevant!)

- **Using language means speaking as an individual** – Why should I have to conform to social expectations around language use that bury my individuality?!

Evaluative judgments and norms

So…. we can see the power that normative assumptions about social relationships have on evaluations of L2 pragmatics.

- Useful to note social psychologist Cialdini's (2012) distinction between two types of norms:

    Descriptive norms = What usually happens.
    Injunctive norms = What people think should/should not happen.

- Judgments about pragmatic norms can trigger adverse reactions and ethnocentric judgments towards a language ("Japanese is stupid") or people ("Japanese people have no individuality").

What theoretical and pedagogical shifts are required?

- Repositioning the language learner from 'the evaluated/judged' to 'evaluator'.

- More emphasis on how language learners themselves interpret notions of 'appropriate' language use in the L2 and how pragmatic triggers lead to negative moral evaluations.

- More opportunities for reflection on learners' evaluative reactions to pragmatic differences and L2 speakers & assistance to 'decentre'.

(Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001)

Working definition of intercultural understanding

'awareness of and respect for diverse (linguistic) behaviours, beliefs, and values in different linguistic and cultural communities, particularly awareness of how assumptions about social relationships, social categorisations, and power interface with speakers' judgments about language use in context'.

(McConachy & Liddicoat, Forthcoming, p.1)

Promoting reflection and experience talk

Experience talk

- Experience talk central to the exploration of evaluative reactions and decentring.

- 'the various **descriptive**, **evaluative**, and **explanatory** accounts of interactional experiences that are collaboratively constructed amongst classroom participants on the basis of reflection'

(McConachy 2018:92)

Reflecting on invitations in Spanish

Danish university students of Spanish participated in three type of sessions:

- Online intercultural exchange with native speakers of Spanish.
- Theoretical explanations about pragmatics and sociopragmatics.
- Reflections on the significance of some of the communicative acts that appeared in the online conversations from a sociopragmatic perspective.
  (See Morollón Martí & Fernández (2016) for a description of the intervention)

Experience talk: resistance, emotions, agency

Reflecting on invitations in Spanish

"Eh, that kind of offers, well, it's not so
real, only to keep the friendship or
 relationship, I think is weird, I don't really understand it.
In fact, I can understand the point, but I don't share it.
I would never do it (laugh), then it is, it is difficult to understand"

"and in fact, some of the problems that I had in Alicante
with people that I wanted to know
it was that all the time we had, ah, then we meet on Friday,
or we meet on Saturday and we can go to the beach,
then, ah, I am not going or, where are you? Ah, I'm
not going, I'm at home or, I'm visiting my grandma and
nobody said anything, but people didn't expect me to come (...)"

"(...) and I've had (laugh) many problems of this kind many times, and
it was because I didn't understand
it, eh, in fact. I understand the point, but I don't share it (laugh)"

Morollón Martí (Forthcoming)

Concept-mediated reflections

- Concept-Based Instruction (CBI) approach (Negueruela, 2003) within the framework of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978).
- Scientific concept vs. everyday concept.
- Main goal: to support the development of L2 students' intercultural understanding of the communicative actions around them and the process of integrating this understanding into their communicative practices and make informed decisions in L2 interaction.

    Two examples:
        Reflections on communicative interaction through the concept of (im)politeness and other pragmatic-related concepts (facework, context, role, participant's relation, social effect, autonomy and affiliation).

(1) [Correo electrónico de un alumno a su profesora]

Disculpe. Sé que quedé con usted en que me pasaría hoy a recoger el trabajo corregido, pero me ha surgido un imprevisto de última hora y no voy a poder ir hoy. Disculpe y prometo ir la semana que viene en uno de sus dos días de horario de atención. Gracias, y lo siento de nuevo.

Albelda Marco y Barros García (2013, p. 7)

Mia: Like, em, because it is a context, it is a relation of teacher with student, em, and it's not the same, em, the student is asking and, um, the teacher needs to spend some time, and that's why the student apologizes, em, because he doesn't want to impose, but he wants to show, em, respect

S: It's very formal, um, I think

Mia: Hmm, I don't know, it depends on the teacher and how, um, I don't know, sometimes I write quickly, and I don't write sorry, because, em, I don't know if it is different, that I can write more informally, or, um, I don't know, it can be the same, and, yes, it depends on the teacher and why I'm writing

- A toolkit for reflection
- Conceptual-mediated-reflection
-Learner's agency: she positions herself as speaker

Conclusion

- Important time for developing an agenda around the potential for the learning of pragmatics to contribute to intercultural understanding.

- Need much more attention to the different ways that processes of interpretation, reflection, and comparison help learners develop insight into the basis of (their own) evaluative judgments.

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