A Pragmatics Lesson Plan on the Speech Act of Requests: Softeners

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ENES 8656: Enhancing the Authenticity of Oral Skills Instruction with Pragmatics

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August 1, 2022

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Intended Teaching Context

The intended teaching context for this pragmatic lesson on softening English requests is aimed at English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university learners in Japan. This private university is in the Chubu Region in central Honshu. The university is known for having dispatched athletes to the Olympic Games for 16 consecutive summer and winter competitions. This global recognition in sports has inspired the university to advance its education standards. This worldwide ambition for international recognition now extends beyond athletics with the recent establishment of an International College of Liberal Arts Department in 2015, which implemented two different English programs (Program A and Program B) with a recently revamped curriculum in April 2022. Although I have not taught at this university, the description of the intended learning context is based on a past curriculum analysis before the newly adopted 2022 curriculum. This curriculum analysis was part of a course project at Temple University Japan Campus.

The English program aims to increase learners' Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores to at least 550 to increase students' choices when fulfilling their study abroad graduation requirements. Program A targets low-to-mid intermediate level students with a TOEFL score below 500, and Program B targets mid-to-high intermediate level students with a TOEFL score above 500. Once students complete Program A, they must complete Program B to study overseas as degree-seeking students and further their English proficiency at universities in English-speaking countries.

This lesson is intended to complement Program B's existing curriculum. Program B classes meet for 16 weeks for 1.5 hours each class and are designed for a class size of 30

students; however, these numbers now vary because of the coronavirus pandemic. The average age of students is 20 years old. The existing curriculum is divided into reading and writing courses and speaking and listening courses and follows their appropriate textbooks. Although there are sections in these books where students have an opportunity to practice pragmatic concepts (e.g., politeness, requests), these sections often lack a detailed explanation of contextual usage. Therefore, a more detailed lesson expanding on softening requests to make them sound more polite seemed appropriate for these students.

Description of Pragmatic Skill Focus

Iwai and Rinnert (2001) stated that among speech acts (apology, request, refusal, suggestion, complaint, and invitation), apologies and requests are an extensively analyzed type of act in the literature concerning pragmatics and social linguistics due to the face threatening nature of such acts. Additionally, Iwai and Rinnert (2001) considered apologies and requests as instigators of severe cultural misunderstandings. Iwai and Rinnert (2001) administered a survey to a group of university students in different regions (U.S., Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan). They found that for requests, the Japanese group preferred to use 'please' as a softener than the other groups in their study and that the Japanese group most often used direct requests. In contrast, the other groups favored conventionally indirect requests and hints.

Understanding the perceptions of requests among first language (L1) Japanese speakers and respective perceptions of politeness can shed light on how these L1 speakers view and use requests. Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) examined such a relationship by administering a questionnaire to a group of Japanese and English L1 speakers. Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) found that direct requests were expressed more in English than in Japanese as opposed to indirect requests in university office settings. Nevertheless, although such direct requests could be

considered appropriate usage among friends in Japanese, these types of direct requests could be judged inappropriate among English L1 speakers (Rinnert & Iwai, 2010).

However, due to a lack of exposure to English outside of the classroom (Alcón Soler, 2005), transfer strategies (Rinnert & Iwai, 2010), or an assumption that English speakers are naturally direct, Japanese EFL learners might fail to realize appropriate usage of requests given under a particular context (Rinnert & Iwai, 2010).

Furthermore, given the short exposure in the EFL classroom for intercultural communication, lack of opportunities to practice requestive speech acts in the EFL context, and a lack of experience in mitigating these requests tends to impede the learning of such speech acts as they are often presented using isolated and decontextualized communicative situations typically presented using textbooks (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Therefore, EFL students deserve appropriate awareness-raising opportunities to mitigate requestive speech acts. Learning these internal mitigating devices (i.e., openers, softeners, fillers) and external mitigating devices (i.e., preparators, grounders, disarmers, expanders, promises of reward) require that learners become "aware of the social and cultural context in which a particular communicative situation takes place" (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008; p. 351).

Some of the factors that EFL learners should be exposed to in which requests need to be softened are interactional requests that involve power (e.g., boss/employee status), social distance (close friends/strangers), and imposition (e.g., borrowing a pencil/borrowing a lot of money) scenarios, so EFL learners would benefit from lessons that integrate pragmatics as a way to overcome communication difficulties (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008).

However, as previously highlighted, the difficulties that EFL learners have in developing pragmatic competence, or the "knowledge of speech acts and speech functions" (Eslami-Rasekh,

2005; p. 200) is the lack of pragmatic input outside of the classroom, and so teachers could benefit students by giving explicit instruction when it comes to teaching pragmatics.

Nevertheless, is it better to teach pragmatics explicitly, or should teachers rely on the exposure alone? Rose (2005) reviewed different literature on the effects of instruction in 2L pragmatics use. Rose (2005) concluded that not only that some features of 2L pragmatics are teachable (e.g., discourse markers and strategies, pragmatic routines, speech acts), but also that pragmatic instruction has a facilitative role and that without instruction, learners might not achieve the ability to improve on a broader range of pragmatic areas. Understanding that pragmatic instruction is beneficial for learners, however, is only the beginning. Instructors must also have ideas as to what type of instruction best fits their teaching contexts.

One type of pragmatic instruction recommended for implementation in EFL contexts is through activities involving videos, films, and TV programs (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Thornbury, 2005). This audiovisual material can also be helpful in conjunction with a corresponding script (Alcón-Soler, 2005). However, one caveat to maximizing the benefits of these materials is that they are most useful if the teacher possesses the skill and knowledge to explain "cultural knowledge that is necessary to make sense of such texts" (Thornbury, 2005; p. 45).

An example of a study that used audiovisual input to improve pragmatic awareness of requests by EFL learners was a study by Alcón-Soler (2005). In her research, Alcón-Soler (2005) presented participants with excerpts from TV series episodes focused on requests. Participants watched an entire episode of the TV series *Stargate* and the corresponding script as part of one of the lessons. The goal of watching the episodes was so that students could identify direct requests, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect requests, thereby raising

participants' metapragmatic awareness. Subsequently, learners were instructed to read information about making requests and find examples of different request types in the video excerpts. Learners were also directed to produce a dialogue of someone making requests, considering the interlocutor's social distance and the kind of favor asked. Alcón-Soler (2005) measured her participants' metapragmatic awareness of requests. She had her participants explain why the actors in the film used pragmatic expressions by having participants write a dialogue based on the film about somebody making a request. Alcón-Soler (2005) found that "films can be used for pragmatic awareness-raising in foreign language contexts" (p. 427). The researcher measured participants' ability to use requests appropriately (direct, conventionally indirect, non-conventionally indirect) by allocating up to 10 points on a written role-play exercise. She attributed participants' positive effects of instruction on the development of pragmatics to Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis since the instructions helped learners notice request strategies.

Another way EFL Learners could benefit is through training that promotes awareness raising on these mitigating requests by practicing request softeners and different levels of directness (Rinnert & Iwai, 2010). Rinnert and Iwai (2010) categorized these requests into varying levels of directness (i.e., direct, conventionally direct, non-conventionally direct – hints) and softeners (i.e., past-tense markings, please, hesitation markers, preparatory expressions leading up to the request) conveniently organized in an easy-to-follow chart (see Appendix A).

Other activities (i.e., use of softeners, range of interlocutors, pragmatic appropriateness discussions, adding a background to role plays) can also be implemented in pragmatic lessons so that learners have opportunities to practice them (Siegel, 2016). Siegel (2016) described softeners as words "which can make a request more polite" (p. 17). That is, instead of simply

saying, "It's nosy," a person could add the words "a bit," "kind of," or "a little." Siegel (2016) also suggested using interlocutors so that learners have an opportunity to adjust their requests according to the person's age, position, and social status.

Another lesson that Siegel (2016) suggested is engaging students in discussions about the appropriateness of pragmatic usage. These lessons take the form of prompts associated with different contextual situations. The intention is for the students to engage with the pragmatical situations and for teachers to provide feedback. Finally, Siegel (2016) promoted using role-play scenarios in class. In these types of role-play exercises, Siegel (2016) suggested that teachers be involved and supply any extra contextual information necessary to encourage students to imagine the background of the situation.

Rationale for Choice of Pragmatic Skill and Pedagogical Tasks

Learners in this university must study abroad as part of their graduation requirements. However, the emphasis on achieving higher TOEFL scores under the older curriculum left little room for a specific focus on developing students' pragmatic competence. Additionally, students' required study abroad experience is only a year which might not be enough time to become aware of pragmatic skills such as requests by exposure alone (Alcón Soler, 2005). One drawback to this lack of attention to pragmatic skill development has the possibility for learners of having their messages misunderstood, resulting in communication breakdown or language learners being considered insensitive, rude, or inept (Thomas, 1983) because of the L1 transfer strategies learners use (Rinnert & Iwai, 2010). Therefore, developing a lesson plan for a class meeting focusing on the use of softeners in English requests has the advantage of creating awareness and noticing of this pragmatic skill before their study abroad experience (Schmidt, 1993).

Lesson Plan and Materials

Objectives

The 50-minute lesson plan's objectives are to help learners develop pragmatic competence in identifying and using softener requests, types of requests, level of politeness, and an opportunity to write a dialog using given hypothetical situations. Here is a summary of the objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify softeners in English requests used in a video.

2. Students will be able to identify the type of request (Direct, Indirect, or Hints) made on the video.

3. Students will be able to identify the level of politeness (informal, more polite, even more polite) made on the video.

4. Students will be able to write a dialog using requests given hypothetical situations.

Introductory Text

The lesson plan consists of a 10-minute awareness-raising activity involving watching a video excerpt (Ortmeyer41, 2009) and reading a script from *Seinfeld*, an American situational comedy program. It also consists of a 20-minute individual, group, and class work controlled practice and a 20-minute dialog writing meaning-focused activity (see Table 1). These last two activities use a Strategies for Making Requests in English handout (see Appendix A) and the Lesson Plan and Materials Handout (see Appendix B).

Table 1

Lesson Plan Summary

Plan	Time Needed	Activity	Materials
Focus on Form and Function (awareness raising)	10 minutes	Watching Video & Reading Script	Video & Script
Controlled Practice	20 minutes	Individual work Group work Class work	Strategies for Making Requests in English (Appendix A)
Communicative Practice (meaning-focused)	20 minutes	Dialog Writing	Strategies for Making Requests in English (Appendix A)

Focus on Form and Function (awareness raising)

  The Focus on Form and Function (awareness raising) lesson section is based on Alcón-Soler's (2005) study and Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis where participants in the study were able to develop pragmatic awareness on requests by having participants notice and explain the reasons the actors in the film used pragmatic expressions, and by having participants write a dialogue of somebody making a request. This relatively short exercise has the advantage that students can easily watch the video multiple times, and teachers have an opportunity to explain the context of the video so students can enjoy and make sense of the lesson better.

Controlled Practice

  The first exercise of the controlled practice activity also follows Alcón-Soler's (2005) study implementation by having students find examples of different request types found on the video excerpts just watched and opportunities for students to explain why they think the particular use of pragmatic language was used. The second exercise of this activity also allows students to work in groups and notice other students' interpretations of requests made on the video excerpt. The results of these activities can be shared with the whole class for comparison.

Finally, the third exercise of the controlled practice involves students interpreting the different request types and levels of politeness used in the video using the Strategies for Making Requests in English (see Appendix A). This last exercise has the added benefit that additional types of request softeners not encountered in the video can be practiced and explained if sufficient class time is available.

Communicative Practice (meaning-focused)

The communicative practice (meaning-focused) lesson plan section is also based on Alcón-Soler's (2005) study. In this section, students have an opportunity to create their dialogs using either direct quests or request softeners, depending on the type of situational context described in the lesson plan. Students must consider the imposition on the situational contexts and give an appropriate request. This part of the lesson can be completed in groups, or it can be completed as a class exercise, and students are also allowed to use the Strategies for Making Requests in English handout they used in the controlled practice exercise (see Appendix A).

Conclusion

This pragmatic lesson plan on request softeners (Rinnert and Iwai, 2010) was created with a university EFL learner focus to create awareness and help learners notice (Schmidt, 1993) these types of speech acts before a future study abroad experience. The lack of English pragmatical exposure outside of the classroom setting in these contexts presents teachers with an opportunity to use different activities involving watching and reading scripts excerpts from television programs (Alcón-Soler, 2005; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Thornbury, 2005) and participating in role-play scenarios (Siegel, 2016) to deliver request softeners pragmatic instruction. The 50-minute lesson plan comprises three activities: watching videos and reading

awareness-raising scripts. The individual, group, and class work activities for controlled practice

and a dialog writing activity are included for communicative practice.

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Appendix A

Strategies for Making Requests in English Handout
Adapted from Rinnert, C., & Iwai, C. (2010)

DIRECT	Plain/Informal	More Polite/Formal	Softer, Even more polite
	Command form	Add Please	Add softeners and/or hesitation markers
	Give me the book	Please give me the book.	If possible, huh, please give me the book for a second.
INDIRECT	**Conventional formulas**	**Past tense/more polite and formal**	**Add softeners and hesitation markers**
Ability	Can you give me the book?	Could you give me the book?	Do you think you could perhaps give me the book?
Possibility/Permission	Can I have the book?	Could I have the book?	Would it be possible to have the book for a minute?
	May I have the book?	Might I have the book?	If it's not too much trouble, might I possibly have the book?
Willingness	Will you give me the book?	Would you give me the book?	Do you think you would maybe give me the book?
	Do you mind giving…?	Would you mind giving …?	I was wondering if you would mind giving me the book?
HINTS			
Feasibility	Do you have the book?	Was it you who had the book?	Did you, by any chance, happen to have the book?
Grounder	I don't have the book.	I forgot to bring the book.	Oh, it looks like I may have forgotten to bring the book.
Vague question	Do we need the book today?	Was it necessary to bring the book?	Oh dear, I wonder if we might need the book today.

Appendix B
Lesson Plan and Materials Handout
Adapted from Alcón Soler, E. (2005)

Today we will learn about different types of requests in English, and we will use a video and a script from

the American sitcom "Seinfeld" to review one of these requests.

Focus on Form and Function (awareness raising) (10 minutes):

First, read the context below before watching and reading the script, and then watch the video

(https://youtu.be/_tcVPVXGoww) and read the script.

Context: Kramer promises a boy in a hospital that he will ask his favorite baseball player, Paul O'Neill, to hit two home runs. Kramer does not know O'Neill but manages to sneak into O'Neill's dressing room, and Kramer has an opportunity to make the request.

[Yankee Stadium]

KRAMER: Mr. O'Neill?

O'NEILL: Yeah.

KRAMER: Yeah, uh, look, you don't know me.

O'NEILL: I can give you an autograph there, but my pen's kind of screwed up. You'd only like half a "P" or something.

KRAMER: No, it's uh, not that see; it's about a little boy in a hospital. I was wondering if you could do something to lift his spirits.

O'NEILL: Sure, I could help you there.

KRAMER: Sure, well, I promised you would hit him two home runs.

O'NEILL: Say what?

KRAMER: You know, Klick!. A couple of dingers.

O'NEILL: You promised a kid in the hospital that I would hit two home runs?

KRAMER: Yeah, well, no good?

O'NEILL: Yeah. That's no good. It's terrible. You don't hit home runs like that. It's hard to hit home runs. And where the heck did you get two from?

KRAMER: Two is better than one.

O'NEILL: That, that's ridiculous. I'm not a home run hitter.

KRAMER: Well, Babe Ruth did it.

O'NEILL: He did not.

KRAMER: Oh, do you say that Babe Ruth is a liar?

O'NEILL: I'm not calling him a liar, but he was not stupid enough to promise two.

KRAMER: Well, maybe I did overextend myself.

O'NEILL: How the heck did you get in here anyway?

Controlled Practice (20 minutes) :
Adapted from Alcón Soler, E. (2005).

Exercise 1: Individually, identify the phrases or set of phrases in the Seinfeld video or script used when Kramer asks O'Neill to do something. Explain the type of language used in each of your choices.

Request 1: Why does Kramer use this type of language?
Request 2: Why does Kramer use this type of language?

Exercise 2: Divide into groups of four or five members and compare your responses with other group members. Select a group recorder who will take notes of everyone's responses.

Exercise 3: The recorder reads each group response, and the teacher summarizes the class's answers on the board for everyone to read. The teacher hands out a table of different strategies for making requests in English (Appendix A) and asks the class to identify the type of request (Direct, Indirect, or Hints) made in the video and to identify if the level of politeness (informal, more polite, even more polite).

Communicative Practice (meaning-focused) (20 minutes):
Adapted from Alcón Soler, E. (2005).

Write a dialog for each of the following situations. In each situation, you are requesting a specific person and asking different types of favors. You may use the Strategies for Making Requests in English (Appendix A) as a guide.

   Situation A: You are in class, and you want to use your friend's pen.
   Situation B: You are going on holiday and can't take your pet with you. You want to ask your parents' friends if they can take care of him. You know they don't like animals.
   Situation C: You are in a shop, and you want to get information about games for computers. Your friends told you that the lady in the shop is not very kind.