

Japanese High School Students :
developing EFL Pragmatic Competence

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松 山 大 学
言語文化研究 第24巻第1号 (抜刷)
2004年9月

Matsuyama University
Studies in Language and Literature
Vol. 24 No. 1 September 2004

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An extensive body of research has documented the pedagogical implications of incorporating the pragmatic aspects of the English language in EFL classrooms (Bardovi and Harlig, 1996 ; Code and Anderson, 2001 ; Kaspar, 1997 ; Rose, 1997 ; Sato, 1998). Evidence supports those who suggest that pragmatics pedagogy in the EFL curricula of Japanese secondary schools, would benefit secondary school learners (Code and Anderson, 2001 ; Sato, 1998). Exposure to native speakers (NS) is considered one of the best ways for students to develop pragmatic competence (Tudini, 2003).

As financial and participatory constraints affect the ability of students to interact with NS—either in Japan through assistant language teachers (ALT's) or overseas (via homestays)—the question remains : how to develop pragmatic competence in English among Japanese school students.

This study is based on the hypothesis that students may develop an increased ability to utilize pragmatic forms through inductive learning—in line with homestay experience—as well as deductive learning, through the existing education system. Four high school students are given a series of tasks to perform. Their subsequent utterances, with particular focus on modal auxiliaries, are analyzed and the findings are detailed. The conclusions confirms the stated hypothesis, and suggestions are made to improve pragmatics pedagogy in EFL.

1. A shortfall of English in Japan

English is a means of discourse that has developed into a de facto world language over the last fifty years (Crystal, 1997). Initially stimulated by the economic hegemony of English speaking countries, such as the United States of America, and further developed by means of the media such as television, radio and the Internet, English today is increasingly studied as a foreign or second language (Crystal, 1997). Japan is no different (Toyama, 2003). English is seen as a core subject for the critical University entrance test, and secondary school students are invariably forced to study EFL for six years from the age of twelve (Ellington, 2001). Extending this programme in 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education decided to implement English education in elementary school curricula (MoE Press release, 2002).

The rationale for recent efforts by the Japanese Education Ministry to improve English pedagogy in the school system, is based on the perception that many Japanese students have found it difficult to internalize the English language. Critics of the education system have pointed to a variety of factors, but common concerns appear to focus on the apparent bias toward lexis and syntactics at the cost of semantics. Difficulties over temporal and financial restraints in English proficiency testing, have meant that testers have commonly resorted to constructing tests that have easily identifiable and objective means of assessment. An unfortunate side-effect, has been the testing focus on written and lexical-syntactic aspects at the expense of oral and pragmatic components. As a result, graduates of the secondary school system have often been unable to carry out any meaningful dialogue in English. Sentence structures have often been rote-learned and students have therefore been unable to adapt lexical-syntactic patterns to their specific semantic needs (Inuzuka, 2001). The pragmatic features of English have often, at best, been

glossed over—or simply not even covered. In response to an interrogative such as,

What's that on the floor ?

student's would most likely answer along the lines of,

"It's my bag."

when in fact the query may have the pragmatic quality of asking the listener to,

"Pick it up."

There is a distinct need for teachers, curricula developers, textbook developers, test constructors and students themselves, to move beyond recognition of just lip service to pragmatic aspects of EFL, and make more effort to incorporate the subtleties that underpin the lexical and semantic components of the English language.

This is not to say that pragmatic knowledge is not already being practiced by Japanese JHS and HS students. Far from it. The proliferation of ALTs in Japan has highlighted some differences in team-teaching in the classroom (Kato, 1998). For example, in a team-teaching environment, the 'normal' lecturing style by necessity moves toward a more communicative style. As the native teacher invariably employs pragmatic principles when teaching English, this can create an awkward situation. For example ;

Japanese Teacher : "Do you like apples, Sachiko ?"

Student : "Yes".

ALT : [...good !]

Japanese Teacher : [..., *I do*...]

Student : "Yes, I do".

Native speakers of English seldom use the grammatical full extension "Yes, I do", often preferring the less pedantic 'Yes' and other colloquial versions such as

‘Yeah’, ‘uh huh’, or ‘Yep’.

As the Japanese EFL teacher may be trying to reinforce grammatical rules that are strictly assessed in a written test environment, they tend to expect the student to practice the full version. Personal communication with a number of ALT’s—along with personal experience—indicates that a number of ALT’s often try in this situation to introduce more flexibility in the approach, such as starting with the full response and encouraging the ‘clipped’ version around the classroom when practicing the same grammatical pattern.

Another example of this difference in classroom teaching style, are greetings. The Japanese teacher (and students) may usually prefer the ubiquitous ;

Speaker A : “How are you ?”

Speaker B : “I’m fine thank you. And you ?”

Speaker A : “I’m fine, too.”

ALT’s may on the other hand often encourage students to respond with a more flexible ‘Great !’, ‘Good’, ‘Not bad’, ‘OK’ or ‘Tired’, as in English, native speakers seldom use the textbook-prescribed precise pattern as it probably would indicate either lack of imagination, boredom or lack of attention. The problem has been that this kind of flexibility has not been reflected in the testing program, thereby reducing the appropriateness of teaching this response.

Team-teaching is a fluid situation however, and over time usually both the ALT and non-native speaking (NNS) English teacher would probably adapt to each other’s teaching methods and philosophy. One of the interesting aspects of pragmatic principles in team teaching, is that over time teachers appear to learn to adjust on a daily basis, sometimes letting one teacher be dominant, sometimes the other. Students may often answer with the strict formulaic response to the Japanese

teachers' query, whilst often providing more flexible rejoinders to those posed by the ALT. Rather than insisting on one common approach, this development may underscore the value of students seeing the options of using different pragmatic principles for different situations. After all, it could well be argued that the dominance of grammatical competence as practiced by the NNS English Teacher, is in effect a form of pragmatic interaction, requiring the recognition by students, that they need to utilize specific communicative techniques with their teachers.

Kasper (2001) postulated that classroom research had largely focused on pragmatics as a *tool* (my emphasis) of interaction analysis. Understanding pragmatics as a function of classroom interaction and L2 acquisition is also a critical and burgeoning part of SLA enquiry (Sato, 1998). Johnson (1995; 6) stated that "full participation in classroom activities requires competence in both the social and interactional aspects of classroom language", and is defined as "classroom communicative competence" by Wilkinson (1982; 6).

Developing lessons that focus on the learner output, rather than the teacher input, can be a rewarding and fruitful experience for both teacher and learner. The contextual element of socio-pragmatics needs to be highlighted for learners to make sense of the learning experience, and thus more effectively internalize socio-linguistic features. At the same time, the teacher can become more attuned to the learner's needs.

1.1 How to evaluate appropriate pragmatic competence

One of the biggest challenges with evaluating pragmatic competence of English in Japan—as already illustrated—is that there are so many different types of pragmatics: ranging from the utility of a semantic response, hedging one's comments, through to the utilization of appropriate apologies/requests (Kitao, 1988).

Another serious problem is that because students make frequent use of

translation strategies, similar grammatical forms are often inaccurately used to translate from Japanese to English. For example, as Code and Anderson (2001) note; *doa o akete kureru*, in Japanese, is more accurately translated as, “Can you open the door, please?” than the direct request, “Open the door please.” Exacerbating this, is the observation that learners are often taught to say “I want ...”, as in “I want you to open the door, please”, rather than a more appropriately coded strategy.

Although a lot of work has focused on social descriptions of pragmatic strategies, such as apologies or requests, students may not have internalized the socio-pragmatic strategies. Accordingly, one aspect of pragmatics has proved to be a very useful tool in evaluating NNS awareness of pragmatics: auxiliaries. There are a number of auxiliaries in the English language that have a certain difficulty for EFL learners. As noted by Gilsdorf (2002);

“What does “should” mean, in a sentence like “You should arrive by 6 p.m.”? Obligation? Moral pressure? Or just likelihood? Our modal auxiliaries can be baffling.”

Modals are distinguished from other auxiliaries by the fact that they have semantic meaning. Students, therefore, need to become comfortable not only with the grammatical properties of modals, but their semantic properties as well. This is complicated by the fact that there is more than one category of meaning and the same modals are often used in more than one (Thompson, 2002 b).

1.2 Modal Auxiliaries

English modal auxiliaries have been used primarily for their difficulty in usage among Japanese ESL learners (Tono, 2002) to evaluate NNS’s English proficiency.

As one of the aims of the Education Ministry is to enable high school graduates to have the “ability to hold normal conversations (and a similar level of reading and writing) on everyday topics” (MoE Press release, 2002), determining modal usage of the targeted proficiency level (pre-second or second grade by high school graduation ; MoE Press release, 2002) is central to the purposes of this study.

For the purpose of this study, modals will refer to only modal auxiliaries¹⁾. Modal verbs are used to distinguish how the speaker or writer thinks or feels about something. For example ;

I *might* eat dinner now.

We *should* have gone home ten minutes ago.

There are a limited number of modal auxiliaries : can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should and ought.

Modals are complicated in that they comprise of three different components (epistemic, deontic and dynamic) of modality (Thompson, 2002). Epistemic modality denotes lack of certainty, deontic modality refers to the influencing of actions, whilst dynamic modality is more elusive, and refers to ability rather than subject (Palmer, 1990).

John *may* eat his dinner now.

Clearly the ‘may’ has two possible applications ; either that John could possibly eat his dinner, or that John is *recommended* to eat his dinner. The recommendation is usually not clearly apparent to second language speakers (L2) as it is an implicit contextual component. Pragmatic discourse is frequently misused or misunderstood by L2 speakers, and issues of modality have been extensively

1) Modal auxiliaries are those auxiliaries such as *may* and *could* that 1) have no non-finite form ; 2) no *’s* inflection for the 3rd person singular ; 3) cannot be used with other modals in a sentence ; and 4) are inverted for questions. Modal equivalents are auxiliaries such as *have to* and *used to* which function like modals but have different structures (Thompson, 2002 b). The term ‘modals’ will be used to mean only modal auxiliaries.

researched from a pragmatics perspective (Kasper and Rose, 1999; Code and Anderson, 2001; Minagawa, *in progress*). Studies of L2 acquisition of pragmatic features of modals have concluded that even advanced L2 speakers misuse, misunderstand—or avoid utilizing modals (Ellis, 1994).

All modal auxiliaries (can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should and ought) have been taught and explained to secondary school students through to the end of the first year of high school.

2. Methodology

The evaluative process (see Appendix) involved three exercises administered to four EFL learners.

2.1 Participants

Four EFL learners in their tenth year of schooling (first year HS) participated in the evaluative process. Two were female, two were male. All participants went to the same high school in a small rural coastal town in western Japan. The two males have had once-a-week regular contact with the author for the previous six years, whilst the two female learners have had irregular contact for the previous four years, and regular weekly contact (together with the two males) for the previous twelve months. Contact had been largely relaxed and conversational—with participants over the last twelve months being involved with some class projects, along with daily diary entries. Projects and diary entries had been voluntary—although all participants had made extensive effort to be involved. The class was voluntary, and learners had become interested in English through regular contact. One female participant had traveled overseas for two weeks two years previously. Both female participants intended to homestay in an English-speaking country in 2004 for about

four-five weeks. Three of the participants (two female, one male) had successfully passed the second grade of the Eiken test in 2003 : suggesting an equivalent score in the vicinity of 500 for the TOEIC test (Tukahara, 2002). The male who did not take the test had remained interested in English, but for the previous six months had become a little reticent in communication, possibly due in part to heavy extra-curricular activity, and subsequently lower scores from school tests.

2.2 Procedures

The participants took part in an evaluative process on an individual segregated basis. Each session was recorded on video, and took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. There were three components (see Appendix). The process was pre-tested on two male English NS, and two 'advanced' (TOEIC scores of between approximately 850–920) female ESL speakers. Extensive use of modal auxiliaries had been recorded throughout all three exercises by all four individuals.

The first task involved ten DCT exercises that were each written in English. The directions were written in Japanese to ensure a quick understanding of the exercise, and then again explained orally in English. It involved the same tasks as presented by Code and Anderson (2001), with some minor alterations. The findings presented by Code and Anderson (2001), suggested that participants with no or little overseas experience, would have some difficulty in expressing themselves as compared to English NS. In a departure from the method employed by Code and Anderson (2001), the DCTs were not translated into Japanese, and the responses were recorded orally rather than written. The reason for each exercise being presented in English was to avoid enhancing the translative procedure that Code and Anderson (2001) believed was influencing the strategies uttered by the respondents. The reason for using a video recording and subsequent transcription, was to avoid inhibiting participants' freedom of expression and to avoid repetitious

patterns that might be generated via task completion. In case the participants had difficulty in actually reading each exercise—as suggested by Code and Anderson (2001), task one was also written in Japanese, but kept in reserve. The reserve Japanese version, in event, was not needed. The purpose of the first task was to determine if the participants might utilize auxiliary modals to encode politeness strategies.

The second exercise involved the participants looking at a picture and responding to seven associated questions (see Appendix), that were designed to offer no clear or obvious answer. If respondents replied using no modal auxiliaries—or other modals—the author used the secondary question, “Are you sure”, in an effort to elicit modal auxiliaries. Answers were recorded orally. The purpose of the second task was to determine if the participants might use auxiliary modals to encode uncertainty in relation to direct questions.

The third exercise involved the participants looking at a series of pictures (10) that were intended to appear sequentially ordered. Participants were encouraged verbally in English to, ‘make a story’, as they looked at the pictures. The purpose of the third task was to determine if the participants might use auxiliary modals to encode uncertainty in developing a narrative.

It must be stressed that throughout the interview, the author did not explain the purpose of the tasks—merely that performance utterances were to be recorded. The author also tried to avoid using any of the targeted modals in eliciting performance, or in encouraging the participants. The rationale for this was that students are often highly attuned to NS questions—and often try to reply with the ‘pattern’ studied in class. Note however, that task one included “I wouldn’t ask” in the directions, if in the case the participant felt that a request were inappropriate.

2.3 Data analysis

Data was collected by counting the usage frequency (with the exception of clausal repetition) of target forms, and checking that usage was appropriate for each situation given each in its context. Despite this fairly crude method of analysis, it was considered appropriate given the constraints of sample size and temporal elicitation. As one of the main purposes of the study was to determine participant propensity in utilizing modal forms, frequency of usage was considered the best process by which to achieve this aim.

The videoed sessions were transcribed. Relevant modals and pragmatic forms were highlighted.

3. Results and Discussion

The results highlighted the variation of EFL learner ability to express pragmatic modality through different types of communication. The various tasks elicited a wide variation in auxiliary modal usage.

The DCTs used in task one elicited the greatest quantity of the targeted modals (see Figure 1), whilst task two generated no auxiliaries, and task three generated just one. Politeness strategies were quickly generated, despite the situations being written in English. Participants clearly felt comfortable with using modal auxiliaries to augment their politeness strategies. As outlined in Figure two however, participants felt even more comfortable in employing ‘please’ and “I want” to generate their request ploy: not surprising considering the extent to which these strategies are encouraged in the deductive aspect of their English learning. It must be noted however, that the author also tended to use ‘please’ and “I want ...” to push the students to complete assignments for the regular class. Perhaps despite the difference in request strategy from the situations outlined in the DCTs, the

participants employed strategies that they had heard frequently – either inductively *or* deductively.

	Yukiko	Hiroko	Norihito	Kohei
Task 1	3	5	5	9
Task 2	—	—	—	—
Task 3	1	—	—	—

Figure One : Modal Auxiliary Frequency

The absence of auxiliary modals in the latter two tasks raised the issue : did the participants avoid incorporating modals, or did they communicate speaker-intent in other ways. Figure Two illustrates these possibilities.

		Yukiko	Hiroko	Norihito	Kohei
Task 1	Aux. Modals	3	5	5	9
	Modals/tr. verb : ‘want’	5	4	10	7
	Other forms : verbs (think), tags, conjunctions	12	7	7	3
Task 2	Aux. Modals	—	—	—	—
	Modals	3	—	2	—
	Other forms : verbs (think), tags, conjunctions	—	7	4	—
Task 3	Aux. Modals	1	—	—	—
	Modals	—	—	—	1
	Other forms : verbs (think), tags, conjunctions	—	—	—	—

Figure Two : Frequency of various pragmatic forms

Besides using modal auxiliaries, participants utilized various other plays. In the DCTs, participants used a variety of techniques to impart recognition of the imposition (for an account of imposition measurement related to these DCTs, see Code and Anderson (2001)). Modal forms included ‘maybe’, ‘have to’ ; relevant verbs included ‘want’ – as in “I want you to ...”, ‘think’ – as in “I think ...” ; conjunction usage such as ‘so’ and ‘if’ ; and finally, some usage of tags, such as

“—, aren’t you”. These are all important indicators of pragmatic intent, and despite the fact that they were not targeted as such, their inclusion in the analysis was critical given that we were trying to establish whether the participants had internalised pragmatic components.

Task two was notable in that two participants used some modal forms : ‘maybe’ and ‘have to’. Also, two participants used the verb ‘think’ ten times collectively, with one instance of ‘guess’, as in “I guess ...”. Such extensive use of this verb might be attributive to the use of ‘think’ in the first question for task two (see Appendix). The fact that the other two participants did not use it however, suggests that it might be more likely the two participants were using it to express uncertainty—certainly a pragmatic feature when stressed. That the participants did not use any of the targeted modal auxiliaries for task two implies that they may be unaware of the need to express uncertainty in a lexical-semantic way. Using pauses and a stressed ‘think’, despite successfully imparting obvious uncertainty to the listener, does not develop the option of possibility that a modal auxiliary such as ‘could’ or ‘might’ would do.

Task three, despite the wider analysis of the participant utterances, still failed to reveal any forms of spoken uncertainty (other than repetition, or non-verbal strategies such as silences), which raises the important question of whether this task was in fact appropriate. The pre-testing suggested however, that as forms would have been used by those who were highly proficient—it was therefore appropriate, and would have been able to elicit, if not auxiliary modals, at least some form of pragmatic intent. Perhaps the ‘difficulty’ level was too high : this was designed to elicit a narrative, and would have involved more retentive linguistic ability by the participants than the two earlier tasks.

The DCTs had explicit situations that were intended to generate explicit forms of requests. The second task involved questions and follow-ups that at least

‘guided’ some form of ‘appropriate’ response. The fact that the participants were given a generalised directive, with little subsequent interaction for the third task, suggests that participants might have begun to feel a little unsure of their statements. Rather than using a modal form to indicate this directly in their utterances, participants appeared to either speak less, make repetitious comments, or lose control of their plot. Spoken narrative, therefore, although needing further research to confirm, would appear to pose a difficult challenge for EFL learners (with a proficiency level similar to that exhibited by the participants) to utilize modals—or in fact—most other lexico-semantically pragmatic aspects of uncertainty.

Location of the modal auxiliary was in most cases at the front of the clause. In three clauses however, one participant utilized tags that incorporated the target modals, for example ;

Um ... eh ... you like Oasis, don't you ... I like that too ... so ... I
want you to lend me the oasis CD you have ... can you ?
(*Norihito*)

The use of tags, although also widely used by NSs to encode requests, was possibly interlanguage transfer of Japanese pragmatic markers, due to the incorporation of “I want you to ...” at the head of the clause. Japanese uses clause-final morphological devices to encode pragmatic information—such as speaker’s certainty (or affective stance) toward the proposition, or even the social distance between the speaker and the referent (Suzuki, 1995 ; Yamamoto-Wilson, 1997). Belated clause-final inclusion, indicated that the participant wished to ‘soften’ the imperative ‘want’. Rather than focusing on this an example of interlanguage semantic error, this feature is indicative of successful internalization ; a desire to not only be aware of the modal auxiliary—but to recognize the need for oral expression.

Although the method used English to generate responses in order to avoid the ‘translation process’ indicated by Code and Anderson (2000), the evidence of a large number of ‘pleases’ in direct clauses, such as ; “... please lend your eraser to me (*Yukiko*)”, implied that the translative process involves more than written Japanese to spoken English, it implied the truism that the process is cognitive. Certainly this would be supported by the evidence in task three that involved extensive cognition. Secondary school students need to be exposed to the inductive nature of English learning that enables them to internalize the cognitive process, move beyond written Japanese (translated to) spoken English, and enable themselves to express utterances that involve cognition instead of merely memorization.

Conclusion

Inductive exposure to English through regular contact with a NS, combined with deductive pedagogy through the school curricula, may increase EFL learners’ adoption of various pragmatic ploys in oral communication : a finding supported by similar research. However, analysis indicated that type of discourse may have a significant effect on the ability of EFL learners to incorporate modals in some aspects of their L2 : for example, narratives are more difficult than requests. Accordingly, deductive pedagogy focusing on types of discourse : such as narrative, request, description, and information, may improve the ability of the EFL learner to have confidence in utilizing pragmatic aspects of language.

Evidence suggests that it would be beneficial to involve inductive pedagogy as a critical component of language learning. The findings in this study suggest that the cognitive process needs to be developed more-through inductive pedagogy - if EFL learners at the secondary school level in Japan are to move beyond the written

Japanese (translated to) spoken English approach that epitomizes the currently dominant deductive pedagogy. English teachers, whether they are NNS or NS, need to encourage their students, by accepting their pragmatic differences in pedagogy, to utilize their interaction as a model for their learners to move beyond simply regurgitating syntactic patterns, and to explore the semantic realities of English.

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Appendix : Tasks

Task One : (*Read and say your answer*).

問題の解き方：下記の10種の状況のときの説明文を読んでください。英語でどのように相手に話すか書いてください。もし下記の状況のとき相手に何も言わない場合は I wouldn't ask. と書いてください。

1. You left your wallet/purse in the English conversation classroom. When you go to get it, the classroom is locked. The English conversation teacher has the key and they do not speak Japanese. If you ask the teacher to open the door for you, what would you say ?
2. You are on a homestay in New Zealand. A New Zealand classmate has a CD of the rock group Oasis. You like Oasis, too, and you want your classmate to lend it to you. If you asked your classmate to lend it to you, what would you say ?
3. In an English conversation class, you are checking the answers to an exercise, but you didn't hear the answer the teacher gave for the last question. The person next to you didn't hear either. If you asked the teacher to repeat it, what would you say ?
4. At school on your homestay, a New Zealand classmate is going to the vending machine to buy a cola. You want one too. If you asked the classmate to buy one for you what would you say ?
5. You are on a homestay in New Zealand. You have to call your family in Japan urgently. If you asked your homestay mother to let you call Japan, what would you say ?
6. Yesterday, while at school on your homestay, you lent your notebook to one of your New Zealand classmates. You want your classmate to give it back. If you asked your classmate to return it, what would you say ?
7. Your homestay father is going to the town in his car. You have arranged to meet one of your friends in town. If you asked him to give you a lift, what would you say ?
8. At your homestay school in class, you lost your eraser. Your New Zealand classmate has an eraser. If you asked your classmate to lend it to you, what would you say ?
9. You have to write a letter to the family you will be staying with in New Zealand. Your English conversation teacher is a foreigner and doesn't speak Japanese. If you asked your teacher to look at your letter, what would you say ?
10. During your homestay you caught a cold and missed Math class and don't know what the homework is. If you asked a classmate to tell you what the homework was, what would you say ?

Task Two : (*Read, and answer. Don't use only yes or no.*).

Look at the picture below. Connect on the questions.

1. Do you think this person is married ?
2. How old is this person ?
3. Where is this person ?
4. Does this person have any wrinkles ?
5. Is this person tired ?
6. Is it in the afternoon ?
7. What color hair does this person have ?



(Source : *American Streamline : Connections*. Oxford University Press ; p. 78)

Task Three : (*Look, and answer*).

Please look at the series of pictures and make your own story.

