

# Raising Pragmatic Awareness in the EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

For EFL learners, it is crucial to acquire pragmatic competence to communicate smoothly in the target language. However, teachers recognize that teaching pragmatics in the second language classrooms is no easy matter. The purpose of this study is to propose an effective way to raise students' pragmatic awareness through pragmatic experience using American TV drama. The results of this study indicated that students actively found similarities and differences between their own answers and native English speakers' manner of speaking. It is our hope that the results will be useful to teachers and materials developers by providing insight into the problems that EFL students have in their realization of pragmatic awareness.

## 1. Introduction

An important aspect of communicative competence is pragmatic competence, which requires knowledge of sociocultural rules. Thomas (1983) defined pragmatic competence as the ability to use language effectively to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context. Pragmatic competence refers to the linguistic and sociocultural knowledge necessary to perform speech acts such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals

appropriately, along with the ability to access that knowledge. Speech acts are considered universal, but their realization patterns are vary from culture to cultures and those differences may result in communication difficulties.

Previous studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper, 1997) have shown that learners of high grammatical proficiency do not necessarily possess comparable pragmatic competence. Even advanced learners may use language inappropriately and show differences regarding target language pragmatic norms. When they encounter challenges such as this, it can result in pragmatic transfer.

An understanding of an effective teaching approach that raises students' awareness of pragmatics in English class can address this problem. Textbooks play an important role in most English classes; however, they don't seem to include sufficient pragmatic information to help students communicate appropriately (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Suezawa & Abe, 2012). This study sheds light on a teaching approach that can be used to supplement text material by having students experience pragmatics, which can help motivate them to actively learn second language pragmatics.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Teaching Pragmatic Competence in English Classes

Teaching pragmatics effectively in second or language classrooms is essential but challenging for teachers. Students may rely on what they do in their native language when they perform speech acts in a second language. Teachers should create opportunities to make students more aware that pragmatic functions exist in

language and can encourage them to think about how a particular speech act in the target language differs in their own language.

Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) pointed out pragmatic transfer as employment of L1 sociocultural communicative competence in performing L2 speech acts or any other aspects of L2 conversation, where the speaker is trying to achieve a particular function of language. It can be positive or negative. Thomas (1983) defined misinterpretation of an utterance in a context as pragmatic failure. It is caused by a lack of pragmatic competence, thus it can be defined as “the inability to use language effectively and to understand what is meant by what is said” (p.91). Pragmatic failure occurs when foreign language learners do not understand pragmatic meaning and they do not know what to say or they say something inappropriate. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers need to have their students raise their level of awareness of the pragmatic failure and have them acquire pragmatic competence to use second language successfully.

Textbooks are the center of the curriculum and syllabus in most classrooms, but they seldom provide enough information for learners to successfully acquire pragmatic competence (Vellenga, 2004; Siegel, 2016). Bardovi-Harlig (2001) pointed out that “in general, textbooks cannot be counted on as a reliable source [*sic*] of pragmatic input for classroom language learners” (p.25). Other studies have also indicated that language textbooks are deficient in the following ways: (a) they include little information on L2 pragmatics, (b) they lack explicit discussions of conversational norms and practices, and (c) the language learning materials

within them contain inauthentic, rather than naturally occurring, examples of language (Wong 2001; Diepenbroek and Derwing 2013).

It is often the case that a particular speech act or language function is not represented at all in English textbooks. Suezawa and Abe (2012) found that refusals in requests were rarely used in the conversational sentences of Japanese junior high school English textbooks. In addition, they had a small repertoire of refusal patterns. “Regret + negative willingness + excuse” (e.g., “Sorry, I can’t” and tell the excuse) and “Regret + reason” (e.g., “I’m sorry” and tell the excuse) were commonly used in those textbooks. “Positive opinions” (e.g., “I wish I could but . . .”), which American native English speakers prefer to use, were never found. It is clear that the models of speech acts in such textbooks do not always accurately reflect how people actually speak. This suggests that if EFL teachers rely solely on materials from language textbooks, their students will not develop a sufficient level of pragmatic competence for effective communication in English.

## **2.2 Pragmatic Experience in English Classes**

Previous studies have found that even advanced learners of English did not have pragmatic awareness of speech acts in the absence of effective classroom instruction and material. An EFL classroom, for example, can provide the context and the explicit instruction necessary for learners to begin developing pragmatic competence in English (Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose 2001; Hilliard, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to propose an effective way of

developing students' pragmatic awareness in second language classrooms. Since there are limitations of pragmatically appropriate explanations provided by textbooks, teachers need to make changes in approaches to L2 teaching that can be beneficial. Brock and Nagasawa (2005) focused on classroom instruction and proposed to teachers that they should create opportunities for their students to improve their pragmatic competence with the "See, Use, Review, and Experience" approach. We assume that using the pragmatic exercise known as experience will be particularly useful for students. These authors explained as follows: "teachers can arrange for their students to experience and observe the role of pragmatics in communication" (p.23). This exercise encourages the active participation of students in observing scenes in the target language culture while practicing conversation and creating a short dialogue.

Hilliard (2017) also proposed 12 activities teachers can incorporate into their classroom to help develop students' pragmatic competence, such as "discussion," "giving examples of speech acts in the second language," "discourse completion tasks," and "role play." This study emphasized the importance of explicit instruction that focuses on separate speech acts, activities that raise students' pragmatic awareness through discussion and comparison with the L1, and activities that allow students to practice completing pragmatically appropriate speech acts in English.

Our study suggests the possibility that students can become aware of the differences in pragmatic rules between their native language and English through classroom instruction, discussions,

and role plays. We concur with Limberg (2015) who showed that class discussions that compare students' native language (L1) and culture with the target language and culture help raise students' pragmatic awareness of cultural norms. As students may be unaware of the pragmatic and cultural differences between their L1 and L2, these discussions help them avoid negative pragmatic transfer when they use their L2.

### 2.3 Research Questions

With this in mind, our research questions for this study are as follows:

- (a) Is it an effective approach to raise students' pragmatic awareness through pragmatic experience using drama as English teaching materials?
- (b) Can students learn to recognize the difference between English and their native language through classroom learning activities?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate effective ways of raising students' pragmatic awareness in second language classrooms and shed light on using material which would promote active learning because we anticipated students would be interested in it. This study utilized a teaching approach that aimed to increase pragmatic awareness using naturally occurring examples of the American TV drama, *Ugly Betty* in second language classrooms. Participants experienced and observed pragmatics in

class. They watched scenes in *Ugly Betty* and compared their own language use and the native English speakers' language use in specific contexts. They also created a role play to reflect on the role of pragmatics when communicating in English. This study analyzed participants' perceptions of differences and similarities between their responses and *Ugly Betty's* characters' utterances.

### **3.2 Participants**

Participants (N=106) were all first year female students majoring in Contemporary Social Studies at Doshisha Women's College, a four year college in the city of Kyoto, Japan. They were 18 to 19 years old. They were not majoring in English, but English was a required subject, and their level of English proficiency was low-intermediate. Students from three English communication classes participated in the study. They were allocated to either a low-intermediate class or an intermediate class depending on the results of an English proficiency test which was prepared by the college. They were informed that whether or not they participated in this study, it would have no impact on their grades for the course. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire (See the Questionnaire in Appendix B), but they were informed that they had the freedom to refuse to do so without any consequences. One hundred percent of the students responded, but since 6 of the participants didn't answer the questionnaire correctly, the data from their questionnaires were eliminated from the analysis.

### 3.3 Materials

Kasper and Rose (2001) showed that films, television shows, and other video programs are excellent resources for teachers and students to experience and analyze language use in specific contexts. Through our teaching experiences, we found that using movies and TV dramas for studying English highly motivated students. We assumed that offering a model of a native English speaker's manner of performing particular speech acts would lead to an increase in learners' pragmatic awareness. American comedy-drama TV series were used because they are relatively short, and characters and situations are easy to define. They allow students to observe the characters' use of language within those situations. Although the situations are not spontaneous, observing and analyzing the use of language within simulated situations can provide students with vicarious experiences in the ways pragmatics spreads communicative events and contexts (Brock & Nagasawa, 2005). By watching the first episode of *Ugly Betty* in season 1, students can recognize speech acts according to types of situations. Students discussed those speech acts with their classmates to understand them in more detail and to recognize the difference between their own language and the target language. Role play situations were used to practice those speech acts with the aim of helping students to raise awareness about acquiring them.

In this study, all participants experienced pragmatics by watching the TV program *Ugly Betty* (See the Lesson Plan in Appendix A). They were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and they discussed their answers with their classmates (See the



Questionnaire in Appendix B). The questionnaire consisted of the following four parts: (a) a self-evaluation about refusals, requests, and apologies in English (before and after the classroom experiences), (b) writing down their own answers according to given situations, (c) their perceptions of differences and similarities between their own answers and *Ugly Betty*'s characters' utterances, and (d) writing a dialogue for creating a role play. The instructions and the explanations for each situation were written in English on the questionnaire. The participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire in English. However, since they had difficulty in explaining differences and similarities between their own answers and utterances by the characters in *Ugly Betty*, they responded to some of the questions in Japanese.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, we examined the following point from the questionnaire: the perception of differences and similarities between their responses and *Ugly Betty*'s characters' utterances. The qualitative data were analyzed. This analysis allowed us to discover characteristics that students recognized through pragmatic experiences.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Participants were asked to comment on the similarities and the differences between their own answers and *Ugly Betty*'s characters' ways of making refusals, requests and apologies in English. (See the Transcripts in Appendix C). To gain insight into how to guide

students and changes we can make to raise students' L2 pragmatic awareness, we focused our analyses on the differences which students recognized.

#### 4.1 Situation 1

In regards to Situation 1, students were asked to imagine what they would say when they have to break up with their romantic partners. They saw a scene of *Ugly Betty* in which Betty got rejected by her boyfriend. Participants mainly recognized similarities between their own responses and Betty's boyfriend's utterances such as, telling the partner that they are in love with someone else and apologizing to their partner. Some participants commented that they did not find similarities between their utterances and Betty's boyfriend's utterances.

Two participants perceived that they used vaguer expressions than those depicted in the drama. For example, in their imagined scenarios, they would withhold the information that they were in love with someone else. Interestingly, in these imagined scenarios, some of the participants in the study perceived a use of direct expressions to break up with their partners, such as "I don't like you anymore," or "I want to break up with you." When students such as these recognize that their own responses tend to include more direct expressions than the native English speakers' generally use, it can lead to students' perceptions of pragmatic differences between their first language and English. In addition, there is a possibility that their lack of language proficiency made them difficult to express concern in English, but in this situation, they

might also recognize it may be appropriate to include expressions which show concern about a partner.

The greatest difference which participants recognized was the language used to wish Betty luck. In the drama, Betty's boyfriend wished her luck, but only two participants included such expressions in their imagined responses. In certain circumstances, it is common for Americans to wish others luck, but we generally don't have that custom. Therefore, even if these participants recognized the meaning and usage of "Good luck" in English, they might not think to use this expression in such a serious situation because it is not considered to be appropriate in their own culture. From our perspective, this is an example of negative pragmatic transfer. Therefore, in this context, students need to understand ways to express concern about a partner's feelings.

#### **4.2 Situation 2**

In regards to Situation 2, students were asked to imagine that they are working at an office and they want to make a request to their assistant to take out cabbage from the coleslaw that was prepared for lunch. Then they saw a scene of *Ugly Betty* in which her boss requested that Betty take out cabbage from his coleslaw. In this situation, most of the participants indicated that they would make a direct request, clearly stating that they don't like cabbage.

Almost all the participants indicated that they were surprised to see her boss did not directly tell Betty that he hated cabbage. Instead of telling her that, he was trying to say what he likes

about coleslaw by giving detailed instructions to Betty in the drama. Participants found that their own responses were more direct and threatening than the utterances of Betty's boss. This can be related to participants' English lack of proficiency in using correct vocabulary and appropriate expressions according to the situation. Students might make pragmatic mistakes simply because they lack linguistic knowledge of how to complete the speech act in their L2. As with the analysis of Situation 1, the common comment given by the participants was "There are no similarities at all between my words and the boss's words." On the other hand, instead of writing this comment, some participants wrote wide varieties of comments to express the differences they felt when they heard Betty's boss's utterances in the drama. For example, "The boss pushed her to do something but I did not," or "The boss is using colloquial expressions." Their wide variety of comments shows their well-developed skills of observation. It should be noted that these skills are important to improve one's English skills.

### 4.3 Situation 3

In regards to Situation 3, students were to imagine a situation in which they would be working overtime and must take a call from their sister to say that they cannot go home to celebrate their father's birthday. Then they saw a scene of *Ugly Betty* in which Betty had to do the same thing. The most common similarity found by all participants was to respond to the sister that she couldn't go home because she was busy working.

There were two remarkable differences that participants pointed out in this situation. First, Betty said, "I'll get home as soon as I can," but only one participant used this expression. Because work is given a high priority in Japanese culture, it is acceptable in Japan to use the excuse of working as a polite refusal. Having said that, it is evident that students need to learn how to express their intention of trying to solve a problem in this context.

Second, all participants apologized in the aforementioned situation even though Betty didn't apologize in the drama. Apologizing at first when one cannot fulfill others wishes is common in Japanese even though the person who is apologizing is not at fault. For that reason, they tended to apologize at the start of their conversations. This is evidence of pragmatic transfer in Japanese learners of English. Betty did not use any words of apology but none of the participants commented that she was rude or her behavior was disrespectful. The participants seemed to be surprised by Betty because she showed them the way to apologize without expressing words of apology in an obvious way. The comments given by the participants can be related to their own sociocultural norms.

## 5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

### 5.1 Conclusion

The participants of this study found similarities and differences between their own answers and *Ugly Betty's* characters' strategies in each situation. They noticed that they used more direct expressions than *Ugly Betty's* characters used in Situations 1 and 2.

Additionally, the vast majority did not wish Betty luck, unlike the way Betty's boyfriend wished her luck in Situation 1. Participants also realized that they took the initiative to apologize first; however, Betty didn't apologize to her sister in Situation 3. These findings indicate that students can recognize pragmatic differences between English learners and native speakers of English through pragmatic experiences.

## 5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Speech acts are realized in different ways from culture to culture, so they have potential to cause problems for students who are acquiring EFL. Pedagogical implications are discussed in terms of raising pragmatic awareness of EFL learners.

As previously mentioned, previous studies have shown that EFL textbooks don't include sufficient pragmatic information, such as explanations and practice of speech acts (Vellenga 2004; Suezawa and Abe, 2012; Siegel 2016). In our study, one participant commented, "I didn't know that there is the way [*sic*] to apologize [*sic*] not telling sorry." In addition, other participants of this study recognized that they used more direct expressions than those found in the drama. Our findings are consistent with Seigel's (2016) study which showed that students are exposed to alternate options for apologizing that they may not have realized were steps for the usual apologizing speech act sets used in English. As there is not always a standard order for speech act sets, teachers should also suggest possible variations to students and how to use them. Doing so can help raise awareness of pragmatic options and

targets pragmatic knowledge at a receptive level. The aforementioned reveals that EFL learners lack knowledge of L2 pragmatics. They should understand ways to express their intentions more indirectly in English and better understand native English speakers' manner of speaking clearly. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to help their students acquire pragmatic competence through English classes.

Textbooks play an important role in most English classes; however, we provided instruction and additional learning materials that went beyond the textbooks. While providing opportunities for practice in pragmatic competence, we found out that students quite actively discussed similarities and differences between their own responses and utterances in the drama. Additionally, it seems that they enjoyed making their own role plays and practicing them. Even if we allow for the possibility that expressions in the drama were not spontaneous, it is clear that using dramas as English teaching materials can raise the pragmatic awareness of EFL learners and motivate them to understand and develop pragmatic competence.

Furthermore, pragmatics and culture are diverse and can vary from region to region and even from person to person. Pragmatic competence requires the ability to communicate appropriately with speakers from different backgrounds in a variety of situations; thus, it is important to include a range of variability within pragmatic lessons. For example, students need flexibility so they can adapt to a wide range of communicative situations, exposure to non-native speakers and discussion activities that treat culture

as a multifaceted concept (Limberg 2015; Hillard 2017).

### 5.3 Limitations and Further Research

Although this study yielded interesting findings, there were some limitations. The data collection in this study was limited to a ninety minute session, so recommendations for further study of this topic include extending this time in order for students to have more experience using English pragmatics. This will enable researchers to have more opportunity to study participants' reactions when they use pragmatics. Furthermore, since the data was collected only through three situations, we expect that dealing with a greater variety of situations would lead to improvement in EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Suffice it to say, the aforementioned matters demonstrate a need for further study of second language learners' acquisition of pragmatic competence.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Lesson Plan

#### *Experiencing Pragmatics with Ugly Betty*

1. Explain 3 scenes from *Ugly Betty*. Try to make certain that

students understand the context of the aforementioned scenes.

2. Students will write down their own answers to the question, “What utterances in English would you use in the situations in these scenes?” (Tell students these situations might seem unrealistic, but please answer this as honestly as possible.)

Have them talk to a partner about things they would say.

3. Students will watch the first episode of *Ugly Betty*.
4. Students will watch 3 segments from one episode one more time, which involves refusals, requests, and apologies (i.e. making an excuse for one’s behavior) again.
5. Students will write down utterances or sentences characters from the *Ugly Betty* show used.
6. Students will compare and discuss the differences between their own answers and *Ugly Betty’s* characters’ utterances. After that, they will write down a minimum of 2 cross-cultural differences that they have noticed and submit them.
7. In groups or pairs, students will develop a context for a role play similar to the scenes found in *Ugly Betty*. Students will perform the role play activity chosen for: (a) refusals, (b) making requests, and (c) apologizing.

## Appendix B: Questionnaire

### A. How competent do you feel about making refusals, requests, and apologies to others in English?

1	2	3	4	5
not competent				competent

**B. For this exercise, you will be asked to refuse, make a request, or apologize to someone. It seems these situations might be unrealistic, but please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. What would you say in English if the following things happened to you:**

1. You are in love with someone else, so you have to say good-bye to your lover. How would you refuse him?

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2. You have coleslaw with cabbage for your lunch, but you don't want to eat cabbage. You ask your assistant to get rid of the cabbage from your coleslaw. How would you make this request?

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3. You are working overtime. Today is your father's birthday. Your sister called you to make sure that you remembered to celebrate his birthday, but you forgot. How do you apologize to your sister?

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## 2. &lt;17:40 ~&gt; Request (On the phone)

- Betty's boss: Hi, Betty, there's a problem
- Betty: OK.
- Betty's boss: I love coleslaw. I hate cabbage.
- Betty: But ... coleslaw is ....
- Betty's boss: No, no, no, no, I know, I just .... I like the tart, tangy dressing.  
Can you do something about it? Before it gets to room temperature.
- Betty: Nods with a smile on the phone.)

## 3. &lt;18:48 ~&gt; Apologize) (On the phone)

- Betty: Hi.
- Betty's sister: Betty where are you?
- Betty: I'm still working.
- Betty's sister: You forgot, didn't you?
- Betty: Oh, my god. Dad's birthday.  
Yeah, I was busy. Look, I gotta go.  
I'll get home as soon as I can.