

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND FAILURE IN THE JAPANESE UNIVERSITY EFL CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence are factors influencing the degree of politeness and appropriateness found in Japanese university students' use of English. What may be a student's best effort to produce an appropriate and polite statement or question using what he or she believes to be perfect grammar, suitable lexical items, excellent pronunciation, and proper intonation can, at times, be perceived by some native English speakers as lacking in the appropriateness and politeness that was intended by the speaker. This paper investigates some of the possible reasons for pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic failure among university students. I will conclude this paper with the results of a discourse completion task (DCT) in which requests were elicited from Japanese university students.

Definitions

Pragmatics is the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between utterances and the contexts and situations in which they are used (Richards, Platt, & Platt. 1992). Pragmatic competence can then be defined as a part of communicative competence that involves being able to use language in interpersonal relationships, taking into account such complexities as social distance and indirectness. (<http://www.bogglesworld.com/glossary/>)

According to Kasper (1997), "Pragmalinguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings" (p.1). In the same article, Kasper offers Leech's description of sociopragmatics: "Sociopragmatics was described by Leech (1983, p.10) as 'the sociological interface of pragmatics', referring to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action" (p.1).

Kawate-Mierzejewska (2003, p.15) in her discussion of the relevance of sociopragmatic failure to language teaching refers to the definition of sociopragmatic competence given by

Harlow: Sociopragmatic competence is the ability to adjust speech strategies appropriately according to different social variables such as the degree of imposition, social dominance and distance between participants in a conversation and participants' rights and obligations in communication (Harlow, 1990).

The Pragmalinguistic Factor

One reason that inappropriate or less-than-polite-sounding language is sometimes produced by students at lower English-language proficiency levels is simply that the students' knowledge of the English language is not at a high enough level to consider the way to sound appropriate and polite when choosing their words. These speakers are searching only for the words and for some arrangement of these words that will convey the meaning of the message that they would like to get across. At this stage, all their effort is being placed into trying to produce an utterance that will be understood; there is no time to consider how polite or appropriate the utterance sounds.

Thomas (1983) states that, "Very often, of course, it is not pragmatic failure which leads non-native speakers to misinterpret or cause to be misinterpreted the intended pragmatic force of an utterance, but an imperfect command of lower-level grammar" (p.94). When second language speakers are focusing on getting meaning across, form is often neglected, resulting in a display of a lack of pragmatic competence in their interlanguage. They simply may not have enough knowledge of the language, or if they do, they may lack the speed in processing to have it come out sounding natural and sociopragmatically correct.

As foreign language teachers, we are constantly exposed to various levels of English language proficiency, and thus, are better able to differentiate between poor linguistic skills and intended rudeness than a person who has little or no exposure to L2 production would be. However, even for foreign language teachers, it is sometimes difficult to determine the factors influencing a student's particular utterance. Beebe (1988) writes, "It has always been a difficult task for the teacher to differentiate variation that is purely a reflex of the developmental stages of learning from variation that is a natural reflex of the desire for sociolinguistic appropriateness" (p.44).

In her discussion of pragmatic consciousness-raising in the Japanese EFL classroom, Fujioka (2003) refers to the surprise that some native English speakers in Japan may experience. "Upon coming to Japan their image of Japanese people as being polite and indirect gets completely overturned by some of the linguistic behavior in English of Japanese speakers. For example, when they talk to native English-speaking teachers, Japanese college students often say, 'I want you to read my essay' when requesting help,

or they say ‘You had better turn off the lights’ when offering advice to a teacher about how to use an overhead projector” (p.12). These utterances may strike native English speakers as being rude or pushy. Regarding “I want you to read my essay”, Fujioka offers two explanations: (1.) the student may not know the more polite forms of requests, and (2.) the issue of pragmatic transfer, or the influence of the non-native speaker’s L1. “As in the case of the Japanese speaker of English saying, ‘I want you to read my essay’ the speaker is attempting to translate an equivalent linguistic form in Japanese ‘*essei wo mitehoshiin desukedo*’ which functions appropriately as a request in Japanese” (p.12). The pragmatic failure of the suggestion “You had better turn off the lights” is perhaps due to misguided classroom instruction according to Fujioka. “For example, Japanese speakers’ typical perception of ‘you’d better’ as being equivalent to ‘it would be better’ is possibly due to inaccurate descriptions of ‘you’d better’ in some English textbooks in Japan (Rinnert, 1995)” (p.13).

The Sociopragmatic Factor

Possible sources of sociopragmatic failure are discussed by Kawate-Mierzejewska (2003). Stating that it is rare for any single source to be responsible for the failure, she provides a table illustrating how failure can be attributed to multiple sources at any given time. “Linguistic, sociocultural, and sociopsychological factors can be influenced by attributes of the person’s L1/Home Culture (L1/HC) and by his or her proficiency or knowledge of the Target Language/Culture (TL/TC)” (p.15).

Table 1 Differences among sources of pragmatic failure

	Linguistic	Sociocultural	Sociopsychological	
L1/HC	L1 negative linguistic transfer	Negative cultural transfer	Generalized insensitivity or deviation from social norms	Generalized misconceptions or illusions
TL/TC	Gaps or deficits in TL proficiency	Gaps or deficits in TC knowledge/proficiency	Insensitivity or deviation from social norms but only in a TL/TC context	Misconceptions or illusions of TL/TC

From: Kawate-Mierzejewska, M. (2003) What is the relevance of sociopragmatic failure to language teaching?. *The Language Teacher*, 27 (5) 15-17 (p.16).

Sociolinguistic failure occurs when the L2 speaker does not have proper knowledge of relevant social and cultural values and the skills to vary his or her speech strategies in

cross-cultural communication. Sociopsychological factors contributing to pragmatic failure include insensitivity to the manners and behavior of the target culture, as well as misconceptions and distortions of the target culture. An example of insensitivity would be when a speaker produces an utterance in the L2 that he or she would not say in his or her L1 because it may cause embarrassment or uneasiness.

Misconceptions and distortions occur because “People tend to create their own pictures of the cultural and social values of other nations based on information obtained from secondary sources...” (Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2003, p.16). One of the examples given is that of Japanese students calling their American professors by their first name, when, in fact, “American students seldom call their professors by their first names unless they are explicitly invited to do so” (p.16).

This situation in which a student innocently assumes a certain social distance — one that is closer than that assumed by the native speaker — between himself or herself and the native speaker, can be explained in part by the results of studies by Hadley & Hadley (1996) and Shimizu (1995). Teachers of foreign languages often try to create a relaxed and friendly classroom atmosphere in order to help the students overcome their fears of speaking a foreign language. English language teachers are encouraged to open up the doors of communication. Arnold (1998) encourages humanistic English teaching which allows the student to express his or her thoughts and feelings. In order for this to happen, the student needs to feel a high degree of closeness with the teacher. This type of classroom atmosphere is often considered to be conducive to second language acquisition from the viewpoint of Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985). According to this hypothesis, the learner can more fully access the available comprehensible input necessary for language acquisition when he or she is not feeling anxiety. The filter is down, thereby, allowing access when the learner is not concerned with the possibility of failure and when he or she considers him or herself to be a potential member of the group speaking the target language. A problem arises, however, when the learners in these types of classrooms develop the misconception that this type of informal atmosphere is common throughout all environments and situations of the target culture.

In a study by Hadley & Hadley (1996), Japanese university students were asked, “What is a good teacher?” The three most frequent responses were: kind, friendly, and impartial. The authors see the results of this study as a means of giving teachers a deeper understanding of the nature of Japanese learners’ affective filters, and hence, the potential to lower the filters.

No distinction was made in Hadley and Hadley’s study between Japanese teachers and

non-Japanese teachers; however, in a study by Shimizu (1995) this distinction was addressed. Again, university students were surveyed in the study. When asked for their overall impression of English classes taught by foreign teachers, the responses (multiple responses were allowed) were: Cheerful (75%), Fun (71%), Can feel relaxed (69%), Energetic (69%), Interesting (67%). These responses compare with those for classes taught by Japanese teachers as follows: Cheerful (3%), Fun (5%), Can feel relaxed (16%), Energetic (4%), and Interesting (8%). In this same study (Shimizu, 1995), the students were asked to indicate which qualities and attributes they felt were important for English teachers to possess. The two most popular responses regarding foreign teachers were how easy the teachers were to get acquainted with (28%) and how entertaining they were (26%). However, the responses given for Japanese teachers showed that the students regarded different qualities and attributes as being important: knowledge of the subject area (34%), pronunciation (33%), intelligent (28%), and ability to explain clearly (28%). Another interesting difference is found in the responses concerning the respectability of foreign and Japanese teachers: 26% of the students felt it was an important quality in Japanese teachers, but only 7% felt it was an important quality in foreign teachers. The results of Shimizu's study indicate that Japanese students seem to be more concerned with the personality traits of foreign teachers than they are with the teachers' academic or pedagogical skills.

After completing a course with a foreign language teacher, students take away with them some impression — good or bad, correct or incorrect — of that teacher. If one considers the large number of Japanese students who have been taught English over the years by native-English speakers who may have had the friendly personality characteristics attributed to them according to Shimizu's study, it's no wonder that some Japanese students mistakenly assume that the relatively close social distance that exists or existed between themselves and their teachers also exists between themselves and other foreign people they happen to meet who are native-English speakers. This would be especially true if the teachers happen to be the only non-Japanese people with whom the students have had personal contact. They may not realize that the teacher has purposely tried to set up a relaxed and friendly classroom to make the atmosphere more conducive to learning a foreign language.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are three social factors that determine the level of politeness which a speaker will use to an addressee: the relative power of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, and the ranking of the imposition involved in doing the face threatening act (p.15). By creating an anxiety-free, friendly classroom atmosphere, the social distance between the teacher and

the student has become smaller. In this situation Brown and Levinson's (1987) idea of negative politeness strategies, which would usually be employed between a student and teacher, are replaced with positive politeness strategies, which show the closeness, intimacy, and friendliness between a speaker(S) and hearer(H). "Positive politeness is approach-based: ...S wants H's wants (e.g. by treating him as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked)...S considers H to be in important respects 'the same' as he, with in-group rights and duties and expectations of reciprocity..." (p.70). In Yule's (1996) discussion of solidarity strategies, we see a description of the atmosphere of many English language classrooms in Japan.

The tendency to use positive politeness forms, emphasizing closeness between speaker and hearer, can be seen as a solidarity strategy. This may be the principal operating strategy among a whole group or it may be an option used by an individual speaker on a particular occasion. Linguistically, such a strategy will include personal information, use of nicknames... . Frequently, a solidarity strategy will be marked via inclusive terms such as 'we' and 'let's'... (p.65)

Students who have been in classrooms where this friendly atmosphere is encouraged may find it difficult to change to a more distant social relationship — employing more negative politeness strategies — with other English teachers or perhaps even with other native English speakers they may meet.

Sociopragmatic failure can also be attributed to home-culture transfer. Conlon (1996) in investigating Japanese ESL speakers' politeness dysfunctions in English, found that the effects of linguistic interference through cultural transfer required more attention than the effects of linguistic interference through language transfer. Ide (1989), in her definition of politeness, refers to "the speaker's choice of expression to conform to the expected and/or prescribed norms of speech appropriate to the contextual situation in individual speech communities" (p.225). Problems arise when the expected norms of speech are not the actual norms. Conversation topics that are socially acceptable in one speech community may not be acceptable in another. For example, in Japan it is quite common to hear people asking about age. Naotsuka, et al. (1981) in writing about the inter-cultural communication blocks between Japanese and non-Japanese give the following foreigner's reaction to Japanese: "They ask too many personal questions (age, marital status, number of children, etc.) and too earthy questions (questions about sex, etc.), which is very embarrassing" (p.3).

Another possible factor accounting for rude-sounding language spoken by people who would try not to sound rude in their native language is the freedom one may feel when speaking a non-native language. The speaker may feel that they are not tied to the cultural

restraints of their own language. In a sense, they are taking on the role of a different person — they are no longer themselves, but a native English speaker. This role gives them greater freedom to express themselves. A Japanese woman once told me that when she argues with her Japanese husband she uses English because she feels she can say things in English that she could never say in Japanese due to cultural restraints.

Requests by Japanese University Students

Using a discourse completion task (DCT), responses were elicited from 70 second-year university students. The students are enrolled in English classes, but are not English majors. The DCT includes both English and Japanese instructions and consists of 6 situations involving a teacher and a student. The students were asked to write: (1.) what they would say in Japanese to a Japanese teacher in the particular situation and (2.) what they would say in English to a teacher who is a native speaker of English in the same situation. The students were given the option of indicating that they wouldn't say anything in the particular situation. Five different speech acts were used in the DCT: one greeting one apology, two compliments (one to a male teacher and one to a female teacher), one request, and one offer of help. For this paper, however, I will present only the results of the elicitation of a request since it offers a good range of responses on which appropriateness and politeness can be judged. The students were asked to give responses that were as close as possible to what they would say in a real situation.

Below are the Japanese and English responses given by the 70 students surveyed. They have been recorded as they were written by the students and maintain the actual variety of writing styles used. The situation presented to the students for which requests were elicited is: "You have lost the 'print' that the teacher gave you in the last class. You would like another one."

The students were asked to provide both Japanese and English requests so that the results could be used in a subsequent class meeting as a pragmatic consciousness-raising activity in which the students compared and discussed the politeness levels used in each language. I have provided both sets of responses, as they were written by the students, for your interest; however, I will discuss only the English responses.

1. MOUICHIMAI PRINT WO KUDASAI

Please give me another print?

2. すいません なくしてしまったのでもういちまいください

Please give me another paper.

3. すみません。先週のプリントをもう一枚ください
Excuse me, won't you please give me the print of the last class?
4. すみません 先週のプリントを失くしてしまったのですが
Excuse me, I have lost the print you gave me last class. Please give me?
5. すいません 紙をなくしてしまったので もう一枚もらえますか
I'm sorry. I have lost the print. Please give me another one.
6. 1枚ください
One more please.
7. もう一枚ください
Please give the print in the last class.
8. プリントをなくしてしまいました。もう一枚もらえませんか
I had lost the print. Will you give me another one?
9. もう一枚ください
Please give me another one.
10. プリントがないので下さい
I'm sorry. I've lost my print. Please give me another one.
11. 先週のプリントをなくしてしまったので、もう一枚下さい
I've lost the print of the last class, please give me it again.
12. すみませんが、もう一枚下さい
Excuse me, please give me another one.
13. nakushitanode mouitimai kudasai.
Please take me one more paper because I lost it.
14. すいません 先週のプリントください
I'm sorry. Give me the print.
15. 失くしたので もう一枚下さい
I lost it, so please give another one me.
16. ぷりんともういちまいありますか
Please give me another print.
17. MOU ICHIMAI KUDASAI
Please give me another one.
18. Print wo nakusitanode ichimai kudasai.
Please give me a print because I lost it.
19. もう一枚ください
I want another one.
20. なくしてしまいました。もう一枚ください

- I lose. Please give me.
21. プリント なくしたんで ください
I'm sorry. I lost the print. Please give me it.
22. プリント失くしたので もう一枚下さい
Please give me one more print because I lost it.
23. すみません なくしたのでください
Sorry. Please give me, so I lost it.
24. プリントをなくしたので, もう一枚ください
I have lost the print. Please give it.
25. 失くしたんですけど もう一枚もらえますか
Please give me one more.
26. プリントがあまっていますか
Please give me the print.
27. これじゃなくて 別のがほしいんですけど
I would like another one.
28. I wouldn't say anything.
I wouldn't say anything.
29. I wouldn't say anything.
I wouldn't say anything.
30. プリントあまっていませんか
Please give me the print once more.
31. Gomennasai. Print Nakusitanode. mouichimai kudasai.
I'm sorry that I lost the print. Please want the print one more.
32. Suimasen print wo kudasai.
I'm sorry, lost the print. Please give me another one.
33. Sumimasen Mou Ichimai kudasai.
Sorry please another one.
34. すいませんですが, プリントを失くしたので もう一枚頂けますか
I'm sorry, but I have lost the print. Could you please give me another one?
35. 先週のプリントを下さい
Please, give me a print that teacher gave me in the last class.
36. すいません
Thank you.
37. 先週のプリント 失くしちゃったんですけど もう一枚もらえますか
I wouldn't say anything.

38. 先週もらったプリントがほしいのですが
I would like the print that I got in the last class.
39. 前回くれたプリントもう一枚欲しいんですけど
I want to print you gave in the last class.
40. Sumimasen, Print kudasai.
Please give me a print.
41. Nakusita Kure.
I have lost the print. Please give the print.
42. プリントなくしたんですけど
Please give me one more print that you gave me in the last class.
43. もう一枚 ください
One more piece of paper (print). Please.
44. プリントを 1枚ください
Please give me the print.
45. MOUICHIMAI KUDASAI
I would like another print.
46. ごめんなさい
I'm sorry.
47. MOUICHIMAI KUDASAI
I want another print.
48. 失くしたのでください
Please give me another print.
49. プリントをなくしたので、もう一枚ください
I'm sorry. I lost the print. So please give me one more print.
50. すみません。プリントを忘れてしまったので、1枚もらえますか。
I'm sorry. I forgot to bring the print. May I take another one.
51. SUMIMASEN MOU ICHIMAI KUDASAI
I'm sorry for losing the print. Please give me a same print.
52. すいません。もう1枚ください。
I lost it. Please give me another one.
53. すみません、なくしたので下さい。
I'm sorry, I lost my print, please give me once more.
54. すみません
Thank you.
55. プリントをなくしたので1枚下さい

Please give me the another print.

56. すみません 前回のプリントがほしいのですが

I'm sorry. Would you give me the print of the last class.

57. プリントをなくしてしまったので もう1枚 もらえますか？

I'm sorry. I have lost the print that you gave me. Please give me another paper.

58. プリントを失くしたので下さい。

I have lost the print. Please give me another one.

59. すみません, 失くしてしまったので, もう一枚ください

I'm sorry. I want a copy because I lost it.

60. 友達にコピーをたのむ

I ask my friend to copy the paper I lost.

61. なくしてしまったので下さい

Please give me another one.

62. 先週のプリントを 1枚ください

Please give me the print that you gave me last class.

63. すいません 先週のプリントをなくしてしまったので, もう一枚いただけますか？

I'm sorry. I lost the print. Can I get another one?

64. 昨日もらった紙をなくしてしまったので, もう1枚ください

Please give me another paper.

65. Senshu no print wo mou ichimai kudasai.

Please give me the print which you gave us in the last class.

66. すみませんが, プリントをまたいただけますか？

Could I have another one?

67. うっかり 忘れてしまいました。1枚下さいますか？

I'm sorry. I lost it. Please give me another one.

68. Sumimasen, mouichimai kudasai.

I'm sorry, please give me another one.

69. プリントをなくしてしまったので, 新しいのをもらえますか

I'm sorry I have lost the print that you gave me in the last class. Please give me another new one.

70. プリントをください

Please give me the print that you gave me in the last class.

Of the 70 students surveyed, 2 students said that they would not say anything, 2 students responded inappropriately with "Thank you.", and 1 student responded with "I ask my friend to copy the paper I lost." The remaining 65 responses are divided into 4 categories:

bald on record requests (direct requests using imperatives, performative verbs, or statements related to the speaker's needs or wants; e.g. "Please give me a paper." or "I want a paper."); hearer-dominated conventionally indirect requests (e.g. questions using modals: "Could you ...?"); speaker-dominated conventionally indirect requests (e.g. questions using modals: "May I ...?"); and hints (e.g. "I don't have a paper.").

Bald on record: 58 (89.2%) (46 of the 52 direct requests contain the performative verb "give" (79.3%))

Conventionally indirect hearer-dominated requests: 4 (6.2%)

Conventionally indirect speaker-dominated request: 3 (4.6%)

Hints: 0

The politeness marker "please" was used in 50 of the 65 requests (76.9%).

The politeness marker "sorry" was used in 20 responses (30.8%).

Grounders (offers of explanation) were used 23 times (35.4%).

In examining the results, one will notice that a large percentage of the students used direct requests, which are usually found in the language of speakers at lower levels of pragmatic competence. However, the results also show that the students were trying to be polite by making use of the politeness markers "please" and "sorry." One example in particular demonstrates a student's pragmatic failure: "I'm sorry. Give me the print." Here the student is mixing a politeness marker with an imperative, resulting in an inappropriate-sounding utterance. It is my belief that this student intended to politely ask for another paper and would be surprised to find out that the request sounded rude to a native English speaker.

The results confirm Scarcella's (1979) findings that "the acquisition of politeness forms appears to precede the acquisition of the sociolinguistic-interactional rules and mechanisms underlying the use and distribution of the forms" (p.285).

We can find further support for this view in Kasper (1997). She writes that even though learners have been shown to understand and use the major realization strategies for each speech act in their native language, they can't use them in the second language. "For instance, in requesting, users of any language studied thus far distinguish different levels of directness...know that requests can be softened or intensified in various ways...and that requests can be externally modified through various supportive moves, for instance justifications...or imposition minimizers" (p.2). However, "...learners may not be able to use such

strategies because they have not yet acquired the necessary linguistic means” (p.2). We can see that the students have acquired the politeness forms of “please” and “sorry,” but many of them still have not acquired appropriate usage of these forms, which results in sociopragmatic failure.

Looking through the responses, one can find a variety of grammatical errors, but those errors aren’t what make some of the responses sound inappropriate or rude. It is the lack of pragmatic competence, not the grammar or choice of words, that may offend some native speakers. Unfortunately, it is far more difficult to teach pragmatic competence than it is to teach rules of grammar, but it should not be avoided or neglected. When we hear rude-sounding comments or questions spoken in English by non-native speakers in social situations, we are not in a position to correct the speaker’s English. However, in the classroom, we have the right and duty as teachers to help the students become aware of their inappropriate or less-than polite use of English by offering suggestions and corrections, and by instructing them by using awareness-raising activities in addition to teaching politeness as a set of cultural rules. Thomas (1983) tells us, “It is the teacher’s job to equip the student to express her/himself in exactly the ways she/he chooses to do so — rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborate polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being unintentionally rude or subservient” (p.543). In answering the question of why any attempt should be made to address pragmatic competence in an EFL context, Rose (1994) answered:

The answer to this question is fairly simple, but not necessarily helpful: in teaching language, issues of language use simply cannot be avoided. While there may have been a day when form (phonological or syntactic) was supreme and function was ignored, the contributions of people like Hymes, Austin and Searle have created an awareness that language is more than a rule-governed formal system, and learning a language involves more than mastery of that formal system. (p.96).

Suggestions of ways to raise students’ pragmatic awareness can be found in Rose, 1994; Kasper, 1997; and Meier, 1997.

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