Raising Pragmatic Awareness of Students through Classroom Activities

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Abstract

English Language curricula pay adequate attention to teaching and testing linguistic competence but often fail to give equal emphasis to pragmatic competence. Students with a high level of proficiency in English do not necessarily have the required level of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980; Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). They are often unaware of the significance of politeness in verbal communication and the manner in which the choice of words, phrases and structure of sentences conveys politeness. Children acquiring their first language usually learn to communicate politely by observing their parents or caretakers using the language. Speakers of English as a second language, however, may not have adequate opportunities to learn about politeness norms in the language. It would be useful, therefore, to draw students’ attention to polite ways of communicating in English. The paper describes some activities that were used in an English course, at a tertiary-level institute in India, to make students aware of the manner in which language can convey politeness or the lack of it, in communication.
**Key words:** politeness, pragmatic competence, face, requests, mitigating strategies

**Introduction**

The fact that there are various ways of conveying a message suggests that a message contains more than the propositional content. Halliday (1967, in Misra, 2009) described the various functions of language such as the textual, ideational and interpersonal functions. As far back as the 1920s, the importance of language in social interaction was recognized by Malinowski (cited in Coupland et.al, 1992), who coined the term ‘phatic communion’ to describe the role of language in establishing bonds between the interlocutors.

McCarthy (2001, p.48), describing the manner in which attitudes towards language have influenced pedagogy, states that there is a ‘cline of beliefs’ about language. At one end of the cline is the view that language is an abstract system, while at the other end is the view that language is a social phenomenon.

As social interaction is one of the important functions of a language, speakers need to be polite to their listeners, unless they deliberately want to be impolite. Effective communication also requires that speakers and listeners have a common code of symbols, which depends on the amount of shared knowledge between them. Linguistic and cultural differences between interlocutors are likely to affect the manner in which a message is encoded or decoded.

Although most students are able to communicate politely in their first language or L1, conveying politeness through verbal communication in the second language often poses a challenge to them. Several studies have highlighted the fact that a speaker’s proficiency in English is no indicator of his/her pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2007). A lack of awareness of politeness norms and strategies in the second language may lead to miscommunication between members of different linguistic groups. Kasper (1990, p.193) observes that speakers who are not very competent in a language, such as non-native speakers, “suffer the perennial risk of inadvertently violating politeness norms, thereby forfeiting their claims to being treated as social equals.”
Commenting on the disparity in pragmatic competence between learners/non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS), Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998, p. 234) state that the difference may be due to the limited input available to learners and the lack of a sufficient range and emphasis on relevant examples. Kasper (1996, p.148, cited in Bardovi–Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998, p.235) emphasizes the importance of three conditions for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge: “There must be pertinent input, the input has to be noticed, and learners need ample opportunity to develop a high level of control.” Teachers of English as a second language, therefore, need to provide the necessary inputs to students to help them notice and understand the importance of pragmatic competence for effective communication. This paper describes the activities used in the classroom to create pragmatic awareness. The activities include role plays, rewriting the dialogues of a literary text, and letter writing. The paper does not attempt a quantitative analysis of students’ pragmatic competence.

The context described in the paper is a national institute of technology, a tertiary-level co-educational institute. Students from various linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds study in the institute, which is largely residential. As a result of the linguistic diversity on the campus, English is the language of communication among students and between students and faculty. Discussions with students of the English course revealed that some of them faced problems while communicating with faculty. In fact, some of them admitted that they were afraid to ask for clarifications in the class, after a lecture, for the fear of offending the faculty. Further reflection revealed that the problem lay in phrasing questions and answers. While students felt at ease when communicating in the mother tongue, which they often did with their peers in informal contexts, they felt less comfortable while using English. Students on the campus are known to use English with a liberal mixture of slang and words from the regional languages. As this variety of language is used for in-group communication, there are fewer chances of miscommunication that may result from the lack of explicit politeness markers in the language. However, when students need to communicate in formal contexts and with people outside their peer group such as elders and faculty, they tend to face problems. Therefore, attempts were made to help students improve their pragmatic competence, in the English course.

The paper examines the notion of communicative competence, politeness in communication, and the implications of cultural differences. The paper describes a few activities that were used in the classroom to focus on politeness norms in English, used in the context of requests. The English course titled Communication skills in English was a semester-length course, offered to students in the second year of their undergraduate programme. The age of the students ranged between 18 and 20.
Pragmatic competence – an integral aspect of communicative competence

The importance of communication skills for success in the world has been widely recognized. Studies have also highlighted the fact that a high level of proficiency in a language does not imply that students are equipped with the necessary communication skills. Based on a study of university students in Singapore, Fatt (1991, p.43) observes that students who are ‘structurally competent’ may be communicatively incompetent, and highlights the need to help students acquire communicative competence.

Describing the educational process in the United States in their paper on theory and research in communicative competence, Wiemann and Backlund (1980, p.185) state that educators should identify speech communication competencies necessary for effectiveness in the classroom (as well as in other social environments) and develop curricula for teaching the social skills at all levels.

The term ‘communicative competence’ has been defined differently at different times. Chomsky (1965) distinguished between competence and performance, competence referring to the ideal native speaker-listener’s knowledge of the language and performance referring to the use of the language. The meaning of competence was restricted to ‘linguistic competence.’ Hymes (1971), on the other hand, offered a broader definition of communicative competence that incorporated knowledge of linguistic rules as well as social rules, which enable speakers to achieve their communicative goals.

Wiemann (1977, in Wiemann and Backlund, 1980, p.188) defines communicative competence as “a repertoire of skills appropriate to a variety of relationships and contexts.” His definition includes a speaker’s need to pay attention to the face needs (Goffman, 1967) of the hearer/s. Wiemann states that competent speakers are those who can use their communicative skills to successfully accomplish their interpersonal goals while maintaining the face of their fellow interactants.

The notion of competence was further modified by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). According to their model (Juan and Flor, 2008), communicative competence comprises *grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence* and *discourse*
competence. The term sociolinguistic competence also included pragmatic competence, which implies knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of a language.

Language competence, according to Bachman (1990, in Kasper, 2010) comprises two components – ‘organizational competence’ and ‘pragmatic competence.’ The competences include the ability to organize linguistic units in meaningful ways at the levels of sentence and discourse, as well as the ability to use a language to achieve one’s communicative goals.

Pragmatic competence has been widely regarded as an important aspect of communicative competence. According to Kim and Hall (2002, p.332), pragmatic knowledge and skills that are essential for effective communication include “knowledge of contextually situated vocabulary words, routinized language patterns, and extra linguistic behaviour,” that enables speakers to use a language for various communicative functions such as initiating a conversation, making a request, seeking a clarification, greeting people, making critical remarks, expressing gratitude and emotions and offering apologies. Proficient speakers make linguistic choices that are appropriate to the context, such as a formal or an informal context, the addressee, and the communicative function.

Politeness in language

The recognition of the importance of social rules, in addition to the linguistic rules of a language, for communication contributed to a surge of interest in pragmatics. This, according to Levinson (1983, pp.35-36), “developed in part as a reaction or antidote to Chomsky’s treatment of language as an abstract device, or mental ability, dissociable from the uses, users and functions of language…”

One of the key concerns of pragmatics is the study of politeness rules/behaviour in languages. In his paper on the structure and use of politeness formulas, Ferguson (1976, p.137) states that the use of interpersonal verbal routines such as ‘greetings’ and ‘thanks’ is a universal phenomenon of human languages and is similar to the ‘greeting’ behaviour of animals.

Ferguson conducted an informal experiment in which he did not reply verbally to his secretary’s good morning, but smiled at her. He did this for two days and witnessed the tension that his
behaviour generated in his office. He states: “The importance of our trivial, muttered, more-or-less automatic polite phrases becomes clear when they are omitted or not acknowledged.” (Ferguson, 1976, pp.140 -141).

In any kind of social interaction, a speaker (S) usually tries to cooperate with a listener/hearer (H), and one of the ways of doing this is by being polite. Describing linguistic politeness as a communicative activity, Axia and Baroni (1985, p.918), discuss the two general rules of pragmatic competence identified by Lakoff (1973). They state that the first rule is “Be clear,” which corresponds with Grice’s (1975) maxims. The second rule, according to Axia and Baroni (1985, p.918), is “Be polite.” The rule implies that a speaker should be friendly and not impose on a listener. A speaker should give options to the listener and make him/her feel good. The rules are believed to be necessary, because the main aim of communication is not only exchanging information and ideas but also maintaining good interaction.

In Brown and Levinson’s view (1978), politeness is shown by paying attention to the hearer’s face (Goffman, 1955, in Allan, 1986, pp.10-11), which refers to the public self-image of an individual. A hearer or a person is said to ‘lose face’ when certain words or actions lead to his or her embarrassment. On the other hand, when there is no threat to the person’s image, the hearer is able to ‘maintain face.’

The concept of face is particularly important in the context of making requests, as orders and requests are viewed as speech acts that usually threaten the addressee’s face. An utterance that has the potential to threaten a person’s face is called a face threatening act (FTA). Any request that requires a hearer to spend effort to oblige the speaker is said to be an imposition. The level of imposition depends on the nature of the task. Requests, therefore, need to be formulated very politely. Axia and Baroni (1985, p.918) state that “a ‘redressive’ action may take the form of linguistic politeness intended to assure the addressee that the speaker recognizes the addressee’s need for non-interference by others.” Thus, the utterances that are exchanged in our daily social interaction can have varying effects on the interactants. Every utterance has the potential to “maintain, enhance or threaten H’s face in just the way he intends to affect it, while at the same time maintaining or enhancing his own face” (Allan, 1986, p.10).

In any communicative situation, the degree of politeness that utterances reflect depends on several factors such as the relationship between the speaker/s and hearer/s or the interactants, their relative social status and the action that an utterance is intended to achieve. Allan (1986)
describes these factors as D rating, P rating and R rating. D rating refers to the social distance between a speaker and a hearer which, in turn, depends on their age, gender and socio-cultural background. P rating refers to the power relations between the speaker and the hearer. If a speaker has more power in a particular context, he/she has a superior rating. R rating is based on the goal that an utterance is intended to achieve. If the speaker was asking the hearer for a small favour, the rating would be low. On the other hand, if S was asking for a big favour, or if the imposition was higher, the R rating would be high as well. Thus, in order to be cooperative, a speaker increases the amount of politeness in proportion to the increase in the ratings, or uses less face threatening ways of communication with the hearer. Using mitigating strategies is one way of reducing the threat to face.

Most native speakers of a language are able to use the language that is appropriate to a situation and the addressee. According to Allan (1986, p.11), knowing how to use a language correctly involves the ability of a speaker to understand the values of various factors such as social status, power and degree of imposition and “correlate them with certain language expressions, ways of speaking, tone of voice etc. in order to produce an utterance that has the intended face affect.” If the score is high and the speaker does not use effective politeness strategies, the hearer may be insulted. If, on the other hand, the score is low and the speaker is polite, the speaker is flattered. When a speaker is uncertain about the strategies to use, it is safer to flatter the hearer unless the speaker wants to insult him/her. Allan notes that non-native speakers often fail to achieve this ability and therefore unintentionally cause offence.

Cultural differences and pragmatic failure

Problems in communication usually arise because of the difference in the pragmatics of different cultures. While speakers may be familiar with the politeness norms in their first language, they may be unfamiliar with the norms in the second language.

In English, for example, the terms of address sir and your honour are used to indicate respect to the addressee, but English does not encode the social ranks of the participants. In Chinese, on the other hand, “every use of terms of address can be regarded as confirmation of the addressee’s status” (Hong, 1985, p.204). In Japanese, the relative social ranks of the participants and referents are grammaticalized (Levinson, 1983). Although Japanese have their own norms of politeness, they have problems when communicating with Americans. According to Kitao (1988, p.1), “The biggest problem Japanese have in communication with Americans is their lack of proficiency in
English and the misunderstandings that can result. One area of communicative competence in which Japanese people have problems is politeness.”

In most of the languages spoken in India, one of the ways of indicating politeness is using the plural forms of pronouns, or the honorific forms, to address and refer to individuals. In Hindi, for example, the second person pronoun ‘you’ has three variants: *tu, tum* (singular) and *aap* (plural/honorific). *Tu* and *tum* are used among status equals, whereas *aap*, the honorific form, is used when there is greater social distance between the speaker and hearer (Misra, 1977). The verbs are accordingly inflected to agree with the pronouns. Often, the use of honorific forms serves as a mitigating strategy in requests. Other politeness strategies in Indian languages include addressing a person by titles or their names/titles along with honorific forms. Most languages in India also have distinct words and phrases that are categorized as exaltation forms, humble forms and neutral forms, which convey different degrees of politeness. A speaker may exalt the hearer or humble himself/herself through the selection of appropriate words and phrases, and speaking in a low pitch. Sometimes, the speaker may not speak at all (Jain, 1969; Srivastava and Pandit, 1987). Politeness also varies according to the construction of sentences (Pandharipande, 1979). In request situations for instance, interrogatives are usually considered to be more polite than imperatives. However, when direct requests are used, the use of honorific forms and diminutives such as ‘a bit/a little’ serve as mitigating strategies.

Languages differ on yet another dimension in relation to polite behaviour. While some languages frequently employ formulaic expressions, some languages are less dependent on such expressions. Politeness is expressed situationally (Hong, 1985). Ferguson (1976) observes that the structure and use of politeness formulas are culture specific. For example, ‘good morning’ is a common greeting in English, and the response is an echo of the same greeting, ‘good morning.’ This formulaic greeting, however, is not a universal feature.

Politeness rules are usually acquired along with one’s first language. Describing the acquisition of politeness rules in Hindi, an Indian language, Jain (1969, pp.85-86) states that children learn the rules of respect by observing the use of linguistic forms in various domains. Children are also explicitly taught to show respect to others in speech and otherwise. When children aged between 4-5 years use rules of respect, they are rewarded with verbal praise, and wrong use is corrected. After the age of about 8-10, children are reprimanded for incorrect use of the language. Jain states that “the verbalization of respect, particularly in this way, becomes a measure of social acceptability” (Jain, 1969, p.86).
A study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, in Kasper, 2010) highlighted the differences in the pragmatic competence of native and non-native speakers of English. As a consequence of their lack of ability to use mitigating strategies and offer suggestions or reject the advice of the course advisers, non-native speakers were less successful in obtaining the consent of their teachers for the course they preferred.

Rules of politeness vary not only across languages, but also across speech communities speaking the same language. Fatt (1991, p.43) comments on the culture specific nature of communicative competence, based on his study among university students in Singapore. He states: “We cannot insist, for example, that Singaporeans behave with English in a way culturally appropriate in the West. Singapore English as an official language has its own right to local communicative competence…”

As a second language is not acquired like the first language, conscious efforts need to be made to teach speakers to communicate politely. Teachers need to provide sufficient input in the target language, create pragmatic awareness, and provide opportunities to test their pragmatic competence.

Teaching pragmatic competence

Reading is observed to help students improve their communicative competence, including pragmatic competence. A study in Korea (Kim and Hall, 2002) found that children’s participation in an interactive book reading program helped them improve their pragmatic competence. The children’s use of language during role play sessions was observed over a 4-month period. There were significant changes in the mean number of words, utterances and talk management features.

Vygotsky (1978, in Kim & Hall, 2002) highlighted the usefulness of role plays for language development in children. Role plays provide opportunities for participants to act in accordance with the norms associated with the characters they are playing. Kim and Hall (2002, p.336) observe that “these opportunities not only allow the children to explore through language, trying out different voices, and rehearsing different constructions. They also provide compelling evidence of the children’s understandings of their sociocultural worlds.”
Wiemann and Backlund (1980, pp.195-196) described some of the common strategies that are used to study communicative competence, and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the methods. They classified the methods into three broad categories: third person observation, vicarious participation and actual participation, including self-reporting.

The present study used role plays, the vicarious participation method, by using an extract of a literary text, and letter writing, to raise the pragmatic awareness of students.

Raising pragmatic awareness in the classroom

In order to emphasize the significance of politeness in communication, a few activities were used in the classroom.

Role plays

Students at the Institute come from various linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Some students have studied through the English medium, whereas some students have studied through the vernacular medium. Although students have different levels of proficiency in English, they are compelled to use English when speaking to faculty and to students whose first language is different from their own. Problems in communication arise sometimes because students are not aware of the linguistic politeness strategies in English.

For the role plays, three request situations that are a normal part of students’ lives on the campus were selected. The situations were arranged according to the degree of imposition on the hearer, from the least to the most imposing. Two groups of students were selected for each task. The students were asked to perform the role plays in the specified order, with the least imposing request being performed first. The students were not aware of the purpose of the activity. The students who were to perform the role plays were asked to remain in a separate room till they were called to the classroom, and join the class after their role play. The role plays were recorded so that the linguistic as well as the prosodic features such as the intonation could be discussed. The rest of the class was told about the purpose of the activity. They were asked to note the language used by each group for each of the three situations. Given below are the instructions for the role plays:
a. You need a ride up to the main gate of the campus. Request your friend to give you a ride on his/her bicycle.
b. You are writing an exam and your pen has run out of ink. The only person from whom you can borrow a pen, without disturbing the rest of the class, is your teacher who is invigilating the exam. Request your teacher to lend you a pen.
c. You are short of the required percentage of attendance in order to appear for your examination. If you do not complete the course, you will not be awarded your degree. Request your teacher, who is known to be very strict, to condone the shortage in attendance.

After all the groups had performed the role plays, the language that was used was analyzed. The recordings were played in class and the significance of linguistic features as well as the intonation was discussed. The students were asked to make judgements about which group was more polite in each situation.

For the first situation, students performed the role plays without any hesitation. The ‘head acts’ (Blum-Kulka et. al, 1989) or the actual requests, which do not include the other aspects of the speech act used in the situation, were as follows:

Situation a, Group 1: “Can you just drop me at the gate?”
Situation a, Group 2: “I want a ride up to the gate.”

Commenting on the role play, most of the students said that the indirect request “Can you just drop me at the gate?” was more polite than the direct request, “Drop me at the gate.” The occurrence of the word ‘just’ before the verb, is quite frequent in Indian English, and serves to mitigate the imposition of a request. This is probably due to the fact that in Indian languages diminutives such as /zǝra/ (Hindi) and /konjem/ (Tamil), which mean ‘a little’, and denote quantity or intensity, are used as mitigators in requests. The students who felt that direct requests were polite argued that students were not very formal when they spoke to their friends. In real situations, they would even signal to indicate that they wanted a lift rather than make an explicit request, especially if they were familiar with the hearer. Students, however, agreed that the use of ameliorators such as ‘please’ and modals such as ‘can’ and ‘could’ would sound more polite than an imperative sentence such as “I want a ride.”

For the second situation in which a student had to request the teacher to lend him/her a pen, one group made the request bald on record saying, “I want to borrow a pen.” The second group, however, used hints such as “My pen has run out of ink”, and “I don’t have an extra pen.”
class was unanimous in their opinion that the second group was more polite. In the discussion that followed, some students pointed out that the utterance “I am losing time” (appendix 1) did not sound very polite and indicated the student’s impatience. Moreover, the sentence reflected a concern for the speaker rather than the hearer. The students’ attention was drawn to the face threat involved in the utterance.

The third situation for the role play proved to be challenging for the students. Shortage of attendance is viewed as an offence in the institute. Students often try to persuade the faculty to condone the shortage in attendance, but rarely succeed. The students realized that the first role play situation demanded only a few words/sentences, whereas the other role plays required more negotiation and tact. Whereas the first group used the bald-on-request strategy, the second group began with an apology (self-humbling) and impersonalizing the request by using a passive sentence: “We were requested to get your permission.” Both the role plays contained hedges. In the discussion that followed, students felt that bald-on-request strategies were not polite in the given context.

The use of role plays helped illustrate the fact that the amount of politeness depends on the degree of imposition of a request. The importance of the context of communication and the role relationships between interlocutors and the manner in which these factors influence linguistic choices was discussed. Students were made aware of the politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1978) used in requests, in English.

After a week after the role plays were performed, the students had to write an examination and one of the students actually had to borrow a pen because her pen had run out of ink. The student apologized profusely for having to borrow a pen and conveyed the request indirectly, in contrast to the direct request used in the role play (appendix 1). A comparison of the texts of the role play (text A) and the real-life conversation (text B) shows that the text of the role play is much longer than that of the real-life conversation. Text B is shorter because of the urgency of the situation and the spontaneity of the speech. The language employed, however, is polite. The incident provides anecdotal evidence of the usefulness of teaching pragmatic competence in the classroom.

_Dialogue writing_
A scene from a play (Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*), which had three characters, was chosen for the experiment (appendix 2). Copies of the extract were handed to students. The class was divided into groups, with two groups working on the dialogues of each character. Thus, there were six groups.

The scene is one in which the characters, a mother and her two children (a boy and a girl), are out in the cold weather. The son has been sent to fetch a cab for the three of them to return home. It is raining, and the characters are desperate to reach home. They are impatient, as the son has not brought a cab although he has been away for a while.

The students were asked to judge which of the three characters was polite or rude, based on their speech, and rewrite the dialogues, making the characters appear the opposite of what they thought they were. The mother, for example, is very gentle with her son and does not use language that is face threatening, whereas the daughter speaks rudely. Students were asked to rewrite the dialogues of the daughter to make her sound more polite. As there are various ways of indicating politeness through language, two groups of students were assigned the same tasks. The dialogues written by each group were compared and discussed in class.

The students were told about the strategies that could be used to attend to the positive and negative face of the hearer (Goffman, 1967). For example, in order to attend to the positive face of a hearer, S may complement H, empathize with H, avoid disagreeing with H, or humble himself/herself (Allan, 1986, p.15). In order to attend to the negative face of a hearer, a speaker may impersonalize the imposition, avoid explicit reference to H, suggest that he/she would share in carrying out the act (an expression of solidarity with H), use hedging (use words such as *perhaps* etc.), ameliorators such as *please*, and tag questions (that appear to seek H’s consent).

The class was able to successfully rewrite the dialogues. Given below are the original dialogues by one of the characters, and the dialogues written by both the groups of students.

*(Original lines in the play) The Daughter:* And what about us? Are we to stay here all night in this draught, with next to nothing on? You selfish pig-

*Rewritten dialogues by Group 1:* Could you please think about us? It would be difficult to stay here all night in this draught, wouldn’t it?
Rewritten dialogues by Group 2: Oh Freddy! Please try again to get a cab. I know we are being selfish and unreasonable, but please understand we are extremely tired.

The dialogues written by the first group of students show that they have used an ameliorator, please, and a question tag, which make the request sound more polite than the original dialogue of the play. Some of the words and phrases used in the original dialogues such as ‘with next to nothing on’ and ‘you selfish pig’ have also been removed to reduce the intensity of the face threat.

In the dialogues written by the second group, the character is addressed by his name, appealing to his positive face. The group has not only used the word please twice, but has also used self-humbling strategies by saying “I know we are being selfish and unreasonable.” Certain words from the original dialogues such as ‘selfish pig’ have been dropped and the sentences have been rephrased by removing the face threatening content.

At the end of the classroom exercise, the role relationships between the characters were discussed in order to account for the variation in the degree of politeness in the speech of the mother and daughter, when addressing the boy. Students were able to understand that a lack of politeness markers is also due to the intimacy between the interlocutors. The exercise helped illustrate the manner in which linguistic choices influence meaning. Students not only enjoyed the activity but also became aware of the politeness strategies used in English. In most of the Indian languages, for example, the use of honorific forms of address helps to mitigate the degree of imposition. The use of address forms, however, depends on the role relationships. Politeness markers are used when the addressee are status unequals rather than when they are status equals. (Srivastava and Pandit, 1987).

Letter writing

Letter writing is one of the tasks that most English language courses in India include. Yet, many students, in spite of their linguistic competence, and their knowledge of the discourse genre, appear to lack pragmatic competence. In letter writing, for example, students use the honorific terms of address such as sir or madam and even the self-humbling strategies such ‘yours faithfully’, in a formulaic fashion. Often, however, they do not use the necessary politeness
strategies in the body of the letter. They tend to convey a request or a complaint in a blunt or ‘bald-on-record’ manner (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

As writing letters and emails is an important part of business communication, students in the English course were tested on their letter writing skills in the summative examination. A letter of complaint was given, and students were asked to rewrite the letter, making the necessary changes in the format and content of the letter (Appendix 3). For example, the date, subject line and the complimentary close were missing in the letter that was given to them. The letter was also not written in the three-part structure, with an introduction and the interactional elements, the body of the letter, and a request for action, that is usually recommended in business communication textbooks. The letter also contained a few grammatical errors that students needed to correct. The aim of the task was to test their linguistic, sociolinguistic (including pragmatic competence) and discourse competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

Most of the students were able to write the letter quite effectively. There was a significant change in their letter writing skills when compared to the first time they wrote letters. Students were able to write the letter in the correct format, correct the grammatical errors and also use politeness strategies. Some of the letters (see sample in appendix 3) reflected an improvement in their pragmatic competence.

Conclusion

The activities used in the classroom helped sensitize students to the importance of not only linguistic rules but also the socio-cultural rules of a language, for effective communication. The activities enabled students to understand the significance of politeness in verbal communication, and more importantly, the function of language in social interaction. It was possible to demonstrate the manner in which language varies, depending on various factors such as the context, the status and role relationships of the interlocutors and the functions of language. The language of requests, for example, necessitates a careful choice of linguistic elements.

Role plays provided opportunities to students to test their communication skills, and to teachers to assess the students’ perceptions of the language used by different people in different situations. Extracts from literary texts provided students the necessary language input and vicarious
experience of social interaction. Dialogue writing as well as letter writing activities helped students test their writing skills that included their knowledge of linguistic and social rules.

In order to be good communicators, students need to know what constitutes communicative competence and how to use language appropriately. Students should have a theoretical knowledge of pragmatic competence, as this is an often neglected aspect of second language curricula. Further, students should be given opportunities to test their abilities in the classroom. As Wieman and Backlund (1980, p.190) state, “students must not only know about communication, but know how to communicate effectively.”

References:


A note on the author

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Appendix 1

*Text A: Role play of a student asking for a pen in an examination hall*

Student: Ma’am! My pen has run out of ink. Ma’am, can I? ... (pause)

Student: I don’t have an extra pen.

Teacher: You have come to an exam; you’re supposed to carry all these things. Aren’t you?

Student: I know. I know ma’am, but. I thought I got an extra pen. Can you please lend me your pen?

Teacher: I just have a red pen and your professor will not evaluate your paper, if you write with this.
Student: Ma’am, it is ok ma’am. I am losing time. I have to write my exam. Otherwise I don’t know.

Text B: Anecdote in an examination hall that shows a student asking for a pen.

Student: Excuse me ma’am!

Teacher: Yes

Student: I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be doing this. … (pause) My pen isn’t writing.

Teacher: (I give my pen).

Student: Thank you ma’am.

Student returns the pen after the exam, smiles and says:

Student: Thank you for the pen ma’am. I’m very sorry… (voice trails).

Appendix - 2

A scene from Act I of Pygmalion (1916) by Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

London at 11.15 p.m. Torrents of heavy summer rain. Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Pedestrians running for shelter into the portico of St. Paul’s church (not Wren’s cathedral but Inigo Jones’s church in Covent Garden vegetable market), among them a lady and her daughter in evening dress. All are peering out gloomily at the rain, except one man with his back turned to the rest, wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing.

The church clock strikes the first quarter.

A1. The Daughter: [in the space between the central pillars, close to the one on her left] I’m getting chilled to the bone. What can Freddy be doing all this time? He’s been gone twenty minutes.

B1. The Mother: [on her daughter’s right] Not so long. But he ought to have got us a cab by this.
A Bystander: [on the lady’s right] He won’t get no cab not until half-past eleven, missus, when they come back after dropping their theatre fares.

B2. The Mother: But we must have a cab. We can’t stand here until half-past eleven. It’s too bad.

The Bystander: Well, it aint my fault, missus.

A2. The Daughter: If Freddy had a bit of gumption, he would have got one at the theatre door.

B3. The Mother: What could he have done, poor boy?

A3. The Daughter: Other people got cabs. Why couldn’t he?

Freddy rushes in out of the rain from the Southampton Street Side, and comes between them closing a dripping umbrella. He is a young man of twenty, in evening dress, very wet round the ankles.

A4. The Daughter: Well, haven’t you got a cab?

C1. Freddy: There’s not one to be had for love or money.

B4. The Mother: Oh, Freddy, there must be one. You can’t have tried.

A5. The Daughter: It’s too tiresome. Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?

C2. Freddy: I tell you they’re all engaged. The rain was so sudden: nobody was prepared; and everybody had to take a cab. I’ve been to Charing Cross one way and nearly to Ludgate Circus the other; and they were all engaged.

B5. The Mother: Did you try Trafalgar Square?

C3. Freddy: There wasn’t one at Trafalgar Square.

A6. The Daughter: Did you try?

C4. Freddy: I tried as far as Charing Cross Station. Did you expect me to walk to Hammersmith?

A7. The Daughter: You haven’t tried at all.

B6. The Mother: You really are very helpless, Freddy. Go again; and don’t come back until you have found a cab.

C5. Freddy: I shall simply get soaked for nothing.

A8. The Daughter: And what about us? Are we to stay here all night in this draught, with next to nothing on? You selfish pig-
C5. Freddy: Oh, very well: I’ll go, I’ll go.

Appendix 3 (Letter writing)

Text A

Task: Given below is a letter of complaint. Rewrite the letter, adding any missing information and making the necessary changes in the format, content and tone of the letter. Grammatical errors, if any, should be corrected.

Omega Furniture
76, Mount Road,
Chennai

Ref: AB/932

The Manager
Comfort Mattresses
Chennai

Dear Sir

I have received the mattresses for which I have placed an order through the order number AB/932. I want to inform you that 65 of the mattresses that were sent are soiled or damaged. I am very unhappy. I was placed an order with your company because one of my friend had recommended it. How can you do this to me?

Nitin Agarwal
Text B - A letter written by one of the students in response to the task (refer to text A)

Dear Sir,

Sub: Replacement of damaged mattresses.

Thank you for delivering the 200 mattresses that I had ordered through order number AB/932. I wish to inform you that 65 of the mattresses that were sent to us are either soiled or damaged.

Your company has a good reputation in the field. In fact, one of my friends had recommended your company. However, we are disappointed with the quality of the products. I am sure, it is a mistake. We need the mattresses in a week’s time as we have received several orders from hotels and hostels.

I hope you understand the urgency of the situation and replace the damaged mattresses. I would be grateful to you if you could send the products within a week.

Yours faithfully,

Nitin Agarwal
[General Manager]