Technology-enhanced L2 Instructional Pragmatics

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Introduction

Pragmatics is the study of meaning as negotiated by specific language users in specific contexts. A more complete definition of pragmatics comes from Crystal (1997, pp. 301):

“[Pragmatics is] the study of language from the perspective of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.”

Research in pragmatics has grown rapidly and now comprises several distinct subdisciplines: interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993), cross-cultural pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2003), variational pragmatics (Baron & Schneider, 2008), instructional pragmatics (Ishihara, 2010; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Taguchi, 2015), and intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014; Sykes, 2016). Van Compernolle (2014) claims that Kasper’s (1997) “call for investigations into the teachability and learnability of L2 pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics” was an impetus for the development of the field known today as instructional pragmatics. As a well-known researcher in L2 pragmatics, Gabriele Kasper recognized that interlanguage pragmatics research needed to include studies of classroom-based instruction and assessment. Fortunately, scholars interested in L2 learning and teaching heeded Kasper’s call and began to examine the effects of instruction on the learning of pragmalinguistic forms and sociocultural norms. For example, recent L2 pragmatics textbooks such as Ishihara & Cohen (2010), McConachy (2017) and Cohen (2018), and journal articles such as Gironzetti & Koike (2016) and Taguchi (2015), as well as monographs based on empirical studies such as van Compernolle (2014) have shed light on the role of instruction in the development of L2 pragmatic competence. In addition to theorizing and problematizing instructional pragmatics, these works have given second language teachers many useful models of pedagogical interventions that can be adapted for use in their own classrooms. However, many of the interventions do not employ advanced technologies, preferring traditional paper and pencil methods such as discourse completion tasks (DCT) or oral role plays of interactional scenarios meant to practice pragmatic routines. What would a technology-enhanced instructional pragmatics look like?

This Issue

Scope

For this special issue, we sought empirical studies of the use of technology-enhanced methods in the field of L2 instructional pragmatics. In particular, we emphasized a capacious approach to instructional pragmatics that went beyond traditional studies of face-to-face interaction to include newer forms of meaning-making associated with digital literacies such as chat rooms, digital games, video conferencing and collaborative annotation. We welcomed studies that explored perennial problems such as distinguishing the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on pragmatic awareness as well as studies that broke new ground by examining underrepresented populations such as young children or by reframing pragmatics in terms of creative acts of meaning-making rather than adherence to conventionalized behaviors based on
community norms. In short, we wanted to give researchers the opportunity to examine the affordances of technology for learning L2 pragmatics in new and effective ways.

Unfortunately, the response to our call for papers was somewhat disappointing. Based on the abstracts submitted by potential contributors, we invited 11 manuscripts for submission, a figure well below the average number of invited manuscripts. We accepted 4 manuscripts for publication, the minimum number of articles for a special issue. We believe that the small number of manuscripts reflects the status of instructional pragmatics as a relatively new field within L2 learning and teaching. Despite the small yield of papers that focused primarily on L2 English (one study focused on L2 French), we were inspired by the level of instructional innovation evident in the studies published here. The next section presents a brief overview of the four articles.

**Article Overviews**

In the first study of the special issue, Sydorenko, Jones, Daurio, and Thorne investigate the efficacy of computer-assisted video simulations to teach the pragmatics of English requests to international students enrolled in an American university. Previous attempts to develop self-access materials in technology-enhanced environments had employed advanced technologies such as speech recognition and natural language processing that encountered difficulties when confronted with the linguistic production of non-native speakers. Noting that there are few studies that examine the effects of different types of input and feedback on the production of extended oral discourse, the authors developed computerized video simulations of requesting behavior that required students to produce oral responses to specific prompts in English-language scenarios. To test the effects of implicit vs explicit instruction, the authors devised two different conditions within the computerized simulations. In the implicit condition, a cohort of students watched videos of unscripted role plays of a low imposition request and a high imposition request. The videos contained no metapragmatic explanation. In the explicit condition, the other cohort of students watched screen casts of low and high imposition requests that contained explicit metapragmatic information about the relevant pragmalinguistic forms (e.g., polite forms such as “I was wondering if…”) as well as the relevant sociopragmatics norms governing the production and reception of requests. In addition, students in the explicit condition were asked to complete brief exercises on paper to solidify their understanding of the explicit instruction. Finally, both groups were asked to report what pragmatic knowledge they had obtained from the input.

Based on the results of post-tests, the authors concluded that the efficacy of the pedagogical interventions was mixed. For example, the post-test data showed that students who had received implicit instruction by watching videos were judged to be slightly better at performing request strategies than the students who had received explicit pragmatic instruction. However, the explicit cohort produced a slightly greater range of pragmalinguistic forms compared to the implicit cohort. The authors surmised that the implicit instruction did not help students notice the relevant pragmalinguistic forms, a finding in keeping with many research studies that have shown that learners tend to pay minimal attention to form when focused on meaning. Qualitative analysis of the learners’ reports of their own noticing corroborated the quantitative findings. In general, the students given explicit instruction reported that they noticed more forms. The authors argued that the explicit instruction contained a metalanguage that not only prompted the students to notice more pragmalinguistic forms but helped them to talk about those forms during the self-report protocols. Despite these differences, the authors concluded that the overall impact of the type of instruction was rather minimal. Nevertheless, the authors argued that self-access pragmatics materials should include both implicit and explicit instruction, but called for further investigation into different types of pedagogical interventions as well as the different types of pedagogical sequences (e.g., explicit instruction followed by implicit instruction). Finally, the authors emphasized the importance of extensive and repeated oral practice to automatize newly gained pragmatic knowledge.

The next study by Law, Barny and Poulin examined how 216 college students enrolled in multiple sections of a beginning French course at an American university made use of a digital annotation tool (DAT) to interact with their peers during six collaborative, text-based assignments. The purpose of the study was to
investigate how the use of a DAT varied across time, across texts, and across different groups of learners. For each assignment, the students watched a French-language music video. Next, the students were asked to annotate a digital text of each song’s lyrics using eComma, an open-source DAT. The authors noted that most second language teachers conceptualize reading as a skill to be performed by individual learners. However, DATs allow for a more social form of reading in which a group of readers creates a collective interpretation of a text. More specifically, DATs allow multiple readers to annotate a digital text with personal comments and queries and to share their annotations with each other in an online space. Situated within a multiliteracies approach to L2 teaching and learning that emphasizes engagement with a diversity of texts including multimodal texts (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), this study breaks various frames of expectations for research in instructional pragmatics. First, the authors targeted neither a specific speech act (e.g., requests, apologies, etc.) nor a specific pragmatic function (e.g., mitigation of a face-threatening act) for L2 instruction. Rather, their focus was on improving the pedagogical affordances of textual analysis and interpretation for L2 learning. As such, the authors employed the cover term “meaning-making” to refer to a variety of pragmatic moves made by the learners during their online interactions. Second, unlike most studies in instructional pragmatics that seek to teach highly conventionalized patterns of language use, this study explored the creative and idiosyncratic process of interpreting figurative language found in poetic texts. And third, the learners in this study were allowed to use their L1 (English) to construct a collective understanding of their L2 (French).

To investigate the pragmatic patterns of peer interaction during the six social reading activities, the authors conducted a quantitative analysis of 5,065 annotation tokens produced during the semester. The annotations were classified according to their primary function: linguistic, literary or social. Linguistic annotations were comments about the text’s grammar or vocabulary. Literary annotations referred to the text’s various rhetorical tropes (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, etc.). And social annotations were comments about the reading process itself, including comments about other readers. In addition, the authors categorized the annotations in terms of Searle’s (1976, 1979) well-known speech act taxonomy: assertives, directives, expressives, commissives and declarations. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that the majority of the annotations drew on the texts’ literary affordances, followed closely by the texts’ linguistic affordances. Social commentary was very infrequent in the annotations. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the annotations were assertives, that is, declarative statements about the meaning of the texts. In short, the quantitative analysis showed that the students did not use the DAT to engage in dialogic interaction with other readers as had been expected but rather to post personal comments about the text that elicited few responses. In addition to the quantitative analysis, the authors selected annotations from two classes for further qualitative analysis. In contrast to the quantitative results, the qualitative analysis suggested that the students had indeed attended to their peers’ annotations but had not used the DAT’s reply function to post their follow-up comments. In particular, the qualitative analysis revealed that certain groups of students used the DAT to translate the lyrics in a collaborative manner. In their conclusion, the authors noted that multiliteracies pedagogy depends on a community of learners who co-create a set of shared semiotic practices. As such, L2 instructors should remain mindful of the importance of developing a classroom culture of cooperation in order to promote greater collaboration and deeper learning. Finally, the authors asserted that the pedagogical task greatly affects how DATs are used. Therefore, future studies on digital social reading will need to pay more attention to task effects.

In the third article of the special issue, Alemi explored the affordances of robot-assisted language learning (RALL) by employing a humanoid robot to teach simple requesting and thanking speech acts to Persian-speaking EFL learners enrolled in a preschool in Tehran, Iran. The participants were 38 children between the ages of 3 and 6 years from a private, bilingual kindergarten. The Persian-speaking children were all novice learners of English. In the study’s literature review, Alemi cites Dore (1974), an early study of L1 pragmatic development in children. Dore claimed that even very young children exhibit a rudimentary awareness of pragmatics despite their novice-level linguistic proficiency. Furthermore, Dore suggested that very young children could be taught L2 “primitive” speech acts based on their nascent L1 pragmatic awareness.
To test Dore’s assertions, Alemi devised a month-long lesson for the teaching of thanking and requesting speech acts that included multiple steps such as modeling, practice, feedback, and a final performance of the targeted speech acts. Next, she randomly divided the kindergarten children into two groups—a control group and an experimental group. Finally, the lesson was taught by an adult teacher in the control group and by a humanoid robot named Nima (a common male name in Iran) in the experimental group. Programmed to “speak” pre-recorded English phrases, Nima was controlled by an engineer in an adjacent control room who assured that the robot interacted in a life-like manner, a method known as the “Wizard of Oz technique” in the field of robotics. With all other variables being controlled, the experimental group (with Nima) outperformed the control group at a statistically significant level on the post-test. In her discussion of the results, Alemi noted that the experimental group showed greater levels of enthusiasm and participation, likely due to the novelty of interacting with a robot. Alemi also pointed out that the humanoid robot was about the same size as the children, which changed the power dynamic of the interactions. Moreover, the study required the adult teacher and the robot to repeat the same speech act in the same manner with 19 different children. Alemi claimed that the repetitive nature of the pedagogical sequence put the adult teacher at a disadvantage compared to the robot who never grew tired delivering instruction.

Whereas the authors of the first three articles focused on specific instructional interventions, in the last article, Winans sought to problematize sociopragmatic norms of politeness, a construct that is central to many studies in instructional pragmatics. For his study, Winans analyzed naturally-occurring email requests made by two groups of college students enrolled in English composition classes—native speakers of English and learners of English. To rate the email request tokens in terms of politeness, Winans followed protocols established by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), who had shown that particular syntactic modifications used in the request head act, such as the use of past tense, progressive aspect and syntactic embedding were correlated with perceptions of politeness. In his review of the literature, Winans noted that many studies in instructional pragmatics rely on the sociopragmatic norms of a single homogenous speech community such as those used in Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) to calculate the level of politeness of L2 requests. However, Winans contended that sociopragmatic norms for pluricentric languages such as English vary widely depending on the regional variety in question. In other words, speakers of American English do not share the same sociopragmatic norms with English speakers from England or Australia, much less with fluent L2 speakers of English from India or Korea. In essence, Winans followed the lead of scholars in variational pragmatics, a field that integrates pragmatics and dialectology to investigate social and regional variation at the level of discourse.

As expected, Winans found that the native speakers of English used more syntactic modifications in their email requests than did the learners of English. However, in contrast to previous studies, Winans assembled a heterogenous group of English-speaking college instructors from four different countries (United States, India, China and Korea) to rate the politeness of the requests. Somewhat surprisingly, the raters judged the learners’ requests to be more polite than the requests produced by the native speakers. Based on these findings, Winans argued that L2 teachers should be skeptical about the pedagogical applications of previous pragmatic studies whose findings are based on sociopragmatic norms from narrowly defined speech communities. Moreover, he maintained that the English learners in his study should not be considered deficient communicators who were unaware of politeness norms. Rather, he claimed that L2 teachers should make room for multiple varieties of English by integrating different sociopragmatic norms into the teaching of L2 pragmatics.

**Future Directions**

As we look towards the future, we remain hopeful that research in the area of instructional pragmatics will expand to include a greater variety of second languages and multilingual scenarios, as well as innovative approaches to the teaching and learning of languages more generally. We anticipate this to be especially relevant in light of the Covid-19 pandemic that has forced educators to move their in-person classes to online formats. While the long-term educational effects of the sudden move to online instruction remain to
be seen, there is little doubt that technology will continue to play an important role in L2 instruction. As such, we are hopeful that future research will address key technological innovations as related to instructional pragmatics and share in Sykes and González-Lloret’s (2020) call to determine which components of L2 pragmatics are teachable and which methods are most effective for teaching L2 pragmatics. In particular, we believe that future studies should address the following concerns:

- L2 pragmatics and digitally-mediated interaction in a growing number of instructional and interactional contexts including, for example, social media platforms, text chat, and video conferencing. (See O’Dowd, 2016 and Sykes, 2019 for syntheses of current work in this area).
- Digital discourse(s) as objects of investigation and instruction (Kern, 2016; Sykes, 2019; Yeh and Swinehart, 2020). This includes understanding the multifarious practices of emergent human interaction via digital technologies such as hashtags, text messaging, emoji use, reddit feeds, and a multiplicity of other pragmatic behaviors unique to digital contexts.
- Human–Machine interaction and the pragmatics of artificial intelligence and robotics (González-Lloret, 2019; Alemi, this volume).
- The application of computational tools for data collection and analysis to explore complex discourse practices more efficiently and effectively (Taguchi and Sykes, 2013; Sykes, 2018; and Law, Barny and Poulin, this volume).

Taken together, these new foci promise to expand what is possible in the field of L2 instructional pragmatics. We look forward to future research studies that seek to enhance L2 instructional pragmatics through the innovative application of emerging technologies.

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