

## Taking on Pragmatics in Oral Communication Classes

by Alice Savage

In print, one voice dominates, but in oral communication, many voices collaborate. This negotiation of culture, personality, and intention makes pragmatics an ideal fit for the oral communication class. However, oral communication already has a lot of moving parts; should we really add one more?

The answer is yes. Research shows that without instruction, students can take up to 10 years to develop a sense of second language appropriateness, but with explicit pragmatics instruction, learners can make informed choices (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Houck & Tatsuki, 2011). With pragmatics instruction, speakers become more confident at navigating social contexts because they can interpret social cues as well as make their own intentions clear.

### Accessing Pragmatics for Teaching

Yet, integrating pragmatics into materials has been an uphill climb. We are only just beginning to see pragmatics-informed elements in course books. Many, though not all, feature cheerful interactions in which everyone gets along and is happy. Pragmatically speaking, these are easy situations. A bigger challenge is to successfully negotiate a conversation that potentially causes discomfort and thus requires sensitivity. To illustrate, notice that it takes far fewer words (and far less grammar) to accept an invitation than to decline one:

#### *Acceptance*

Sure, that sounds great! What time?

#### *Refusal*

Ohhh, I really wish I could. That sounds like so much fun, but I have this other thing, and I really can't get out of it. Maybe another time.

So, if pragmatic material is hit-and-miss in course books, how do we access it? The answer is that we look at our own skills. Native speakers and culturally experienced nonnative speakers have much experience with pragmatics, even if we haven't thought about it deliberately. Here's a test. Check the boxes for which you can remember the last time you successfully navigated each of the following situations:

- Made small talk with a new acquaintance
- Encouraged a friend
- Declined an invitation
- Escaped from a talkative neighbor
- Maneuvered someone into offering you a favor
- Disagreed with a partner without causing distress
- Negotiated an action plan, roles, and activities
- Comforted someone in distress
- Gave critical feedback with a positive result
- Changed the subject of a conversation

- Accepted a compliment (or criticism) gracefully
- Bargained successfully with a contractor or salesperson

It is likely that you have experienced many if not all of these pragmatic situations in English, though you may feel varying degrees of competence. Many of these skills are quite difficult, and some, such as giving critical feedback, can even benefit from training. Yet it is still possible to use your own experiences, skills, and strategies to discover the pragmatics of common interactions. The good news is that there are no hard and fast rules about how to properly disagree, for example. However, there are patterns and degrees of effectiveness.

## Pragmatics Role-Play

A useful way to investigate the moves and language of a delicate conversation is to engage in a scaffolded role-play. When you put yourself into a certain type of interaction with another human, the language that emerges may surprise you as you signal your intentions and read and respond to your partner's. You may notice certain gestures or changes in tone that convey meaning, as well. Often, the experience produces more authentic text than what you might come up with if you simply tried to write a scripted dialogue on your own.

The following template can be used to create an original scaffolded role-play, which can then be used to inform a pragmatics lesson. You need a partner and a way to record your conversation, and/or you can involve a third person who watches, takes notes, and makes observations.

### Part I. Prepare: Discover the Pragmatics Yourself

#### *Step 1. Plan the Scenario*

Organize the scenario by filling out the chart with general information about the people, the place, and the intentions or goals. For additional topic ideas, go back to the checklist of situations.

Questions to Answer	Example
What is the context?	Two ESOL teachers at a conference meet for coffee.
What are the roles?	<b>Partner A</b> works for a community college and is on a hiring committee. <b>Partner B</b> has applied for the job.
What are the intentions/goals?	<b>Partner A</b> must follow protocol and not divulge information about the hiring process or the work of the committee. At the same time, you want to preserve the friendship. <b>Partner B</b> hopes to get some inside information that will give him/her an advantage, but does not want to come across as pushy.

#### *Step 2. Conduct the Role-Play*

Set a timer for 5 minutes and begin recording your conversation with a partner—a colleague or friend. If you have an observer, that person watches and takes notes. Initiate the conversation following the guidelines of the scenario. As you speak, try to use whatever skills and strategies you have to achieve your goal.

### *Step 3. Reflect and Observe*

After the conversation, discuss your initial reaction to the conversation with your partner. Share observations and feelings about whether your moves felt aggressive, appropriate, or passive. Use the following questions to guide your conversations, and take notes. You can use this information in lesson planning.

1. What were the moves or shifts from one topic to another or one intention to another? (E.g., “So that reminds of something that I wanted to ask you...”)
2. How did you reinforce social cohesion? What did you say? (E.g., “I know, right!”)
3. How did you inquire? (E.g., “Can I ask you something? You don’t have to answer, but...”)
4. How did you respond or evade? (E.g., “Well, you know how it is...I can’t say much other than the job description.”)
5. How did you handle the response? (E.g., “Oh sure, I totally understand...It’s just that I’m so excited about the possibility. Can I ask you about your program? I’d love to learn more about it. Like, what books do you use to teach...?”)

## **Part II: Build a Lesson**

Once you have material to work with, you can then adapt/write your dialogue for lesson planning. You may alter the context or language to suit your purposes, but the dialogue will be informed by your experience in the role-play.

Use your dialogue to create a lesson. Ideally, you have an audio (or better, a video) recording of the script done with a colleague or friend, but you can also work with the written dialogue. If you do, consider modeling it by playing two sides. Then use the Pragmatics Menu, downloadable here [below] for easy classroom use, to focus your lesson on raising awareness, providing practice, and eventually having students create their own original role-plays.

An example of a lesson plan activity that can prepare students for the role-play might be to provide language practice for handling an evasion. You can provide examples of the language of the two sides for intonation and then have students practice with a partner. Give them some cues, such as asking for a different favor or trying to get information about a person.

<b>Partner A: Evade</b>	<b>Partner B: Respond to an Evasion</b>
You know how it is... I can’t really say.	Oh, I totally understand. That’s fine.

	That's fine.
Um, I'm not sure what to say.	Okay, I get it. I don't want to put you in a difficult position.
Well, I can't really talk about that, but I can talk about...	That would be great, I'd love to hear more about...
I'm not supposed to talk about that.	Oh, right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Let's talk about...

## Including Pragmatics in Your Assessments

Though it is generally advisable for teachers to design and continually revise their own rubrics, the examples in these Sample Role-Play Rubrics [below], taken from our community college ESOL program at Lone Star College System, show how you might value pragmatics in your assessment.

- Give students the rubric when you assign the role-play so they know how to prepare.
- Include prewritten descriptors to save time in the moment. You can also record or film the role-play.
- Structure the rubrics to give feedback on both sides of the conversation, so the evaluation would also include a role switch.
- Set a timer for 3 or 4 minutes to give pairs equal speaking time.
- Give students copies of the rubric and have them practice using it to give feedback to peers while they are waiting for their turn.

## Conclusion

Pragmatics role-plays with colleagues and friends can be a great activity for an in-service lesson or workshop. Participants often discover conversational skills and strategies that they had not been aware of previously. They may also make connections to experiences in which others met or did not meet expectations for cultural appropriateness. These types of conversations remind us of the organic nature of language and its role in helping us communicate all sorts of information above and beyond the simple exchange of facts.

Finally, it is important to note that pragmatics lessons are not rules for behavior. Even within our own English-speaking subcultures, we differ in whether we accept or are offended by other people's choices. We can only inform students about available language patterns and their potential effects. English learners must always be free to make their own decisions about how they want to use these patterns.

## References

Houck, N. R., & Tatsuki, D. H. (Eds.). (2011). *Pragmatics: Teaching natural conversation*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association.

Ishihara, N., & Cohen, A. D. (2010). *Teaching and learning pragmatics where language and culture meet*. Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson Longman, 2010.

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## **Pragmatics Menu**

Use this menu to focus your lesson on raising awareness, providing practice, and eventually having students create their own original role-plays.

### **A. Pairs read dialogue and answer questions about place, characters, and context.**

1. Who are they? How old are they? Do they seem male or female? What else can you guess?
2. What is their relationship? Formal or informal?
3. What are the moves (shifts to a new stage in the conversation)?
4. What does each person want? Does he or she get it?

### **B. Compare the conversation to other languages, cultures, and subcultures.**

1. How would this conversation come across in your/another language?
2. Would you feel comfortable having this conversation? Explain.
3. Imagine the characters are all male or all female or a different age. What would you change?
4. How would a nonnative speaker feel at the end of this conversation?

### **C. Listen to or practice the conversation to work on sounds, stress, and intonation.**

1. Listen and read. Mark linking, stress, and/or intonation. Then listen again. Check your marks.
2. Listen and say the dialogue along with the speaker. Practice the pronunciation.
3. Listen to detect any emotions or power relationships that arise from the tone of voice.

### **D. Highlight language that scaffolds the moves in a conversation.**

1. What language supports bonding among speakers?
2. What language shows repair or clarification of meaning?
3. What language helps speakers introduce a topic or prepare listeners for what is to come?
4. What language shows a culturally appropriate response to a situation?
5. What language allows speakers to hedge, delay, or voice discomfort?

### **E. Practice the dialogue.**

1. Stage the conversation. Stand and use gestures. Then process the experience to see if you feel comfortable with the language.
2. Keep the same role but change partners. Practice again.
3. Have speaker A put away his/her script. B reads one part, and A improvises. Switch.
4. Have both speakers put down their script and role-play the conversation from memory.

**F. Create variations on a theme.**

1. Set a pragmatics role-play assignment with a new topic. Put students in A/B groups. Have Group A discuss motives for its half of the conversation. Have students in Group B discuss theirs. Then create A/B pairs to write a new script or role-play.
2. Rewrite the dialogue but change the characters' gender, age, relationship or personality—think about people you really know to establish character. How does language change?

## Sample Role-Play Rubrics\*

### Making Small Talk/Local & Tourist

<i>Check all achieved</i>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Pragmatics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Friendly expression and body language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows interest in others' comments (back channeling)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maintains flow with culturally familiar language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Adjusts to and/or initiates conversational moves</li> </ul>	I could comfortably follow the speaker's intended meaning.  Fluent, uninterrupted speech.	I could follow the speaker's intended meaning with effort.  There were pauses and restatements.	I worked hard to follow the speaker's intended meaning.  There were long pauses and restatements.
<b>Work on...</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sounds</li> <li>• stress</li> <li>• intonation</li> <li>• inflections</li> <li>• grammar/vocabulary</li> </ul>	I understood.	I understood with effort.	I worked hard to understand.

### Asking for a Favor/Declining

<i>Check all achieved</i>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Pragmatics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confident expression and body language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Signals intention to make a request</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Softens request/refusal with nonverbal indicators and/or formulaic utterances</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> May reaffirm the relationship</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Brings conversation to a successful close</li> </ul>	I could comfortably follow the speaker's intended meaning.  Fluent, uninterrupted speech.	I could follow the speaker's intended meaning with effort.  Some pauses and restatements.	I worked hard to follow the speaker's intended meaning.  There were long pauses and restatements.

### Expressing Frustration/Empathizing

<i>Check all achieved</i>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Pragmatics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Attentive expression and body language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Signals support by echoing or restating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Checks partner's willingness to listen</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shifts conversation in a new direction</li> </ul>	I could comfortably follow the speaker's intended meaning.  Fluent uninterrupted speech.	I could follow the speaker's intended meaning with effort.  There were pauses and restatements.	I worked hard to follow the speaker's intended meaning.  There were long pauses and restatements.

\*These rubrics are working documents used in the oral communication strand of the ESOL Program at Lone Star College System.