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## **AN AWARENESS-RAISING APPROACH TO TEACHING SMALL TALK IN AN EFL CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the effects of pragmatic awareness-raising activities in foreign language settings. Drawing on conversation analysis, we explore the pedagogical possibility of using small talk video clips as sources for an awareness-raising activity in an EFL classroom. An instruction procedure is introduced to teach small talk, particularly conversation starter and topic management. 45 Chinese college students' role play performances were examined. The analyses show that using authentic instructional materials has a positive effect on teaching and learning pragmatic aspects of the target language. Through the pragmatic awareness-raising activities, learners may become aware of the underlying sociopragmatic norms and thus produce the relevant interactional sequence structures in English.*

### **Keywords**

Pragmatic Awareness, Conversation Analysis, EFL

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## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there is an increase interest in pragmatics research on the effect of instructional intervention on the development of learners' pragmatic ability. The positive role of instruction on pragmatic competence of English language learners in ESL settings has been

established by researchers (Rose, 2005). However, the development of pragmatic competence in the EFL classroom has not been studied widely.

In foreign language settings, learners have limited exposure to target pragmatic norms and less practice opportunities outside the classroom compared with L2 learners. Foreign language context is considered as impoverished learning context which may hinder learner's pragmatic acquisition (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). The target language they encounter in the classroom lacks a sufficient range of relevant examples of social interaction.

In addition, the quality and quantity of pragmatic input in textbooks are unsatisfactory. Available textbook materials present learners with "a list of useful expressions" without guiding learners in how to choose a linguistic strategy in order to express the speech act appropriately. Learners are merely being told certain linguistic expressions are appropriate in a specific speech act, but no why. Unfortunately, it is questionable whether it is actually developing pragmatic competence at all (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006).

Therefore, it is necessary to provide learners with examples of authentic interactional moments for them to observe and explore. However, mere exposure to natural conversational structures is not sufficient. Instructors have to direct learners' attention to the sociocultural norms that emerge in the examples. A few researches (e.g. Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Garcia, 2004) have examined the role of pragmatic awareness in the framework of Conversation Analysis. Authentic audiovisual input e.g. films, on-line interactions, learners' interaction (Abrams, 2014; Eisenchlas, 2011; Cheng, 2016) have been used as a resource to raise pragmatic awareness.

The aim of this paper is to propose an approach to teaching foreign pragmatics that utilizes authentic materials in the language classroom in order to increase learners' pragmatic awareness and consequently facilitate development of learners' target language pragmatic ability. The research question is: Does this awareness-raising approach have a positive effect on the learners' acquisition of small talk in English?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 The Noticing Hypothesis**

The theoretical framework of an awareness-raising approach is Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis. It states that in order for input (what the learner is exposed to) to become intake (what the learner notices in the input), learners have to notice particular features in the input such

as “linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features” (Schmidt, 1993, p.35)

For acquiring second- or foreign-language pragmatics, Schmidt (2001) has pointed out that global alertness to target language input is not sufficient; attention has to be allocated to specific learning objects, or “directed to whatever evidence is relevant for a particular domain. In order to acquire pragmatics, one must attend to both the linguistic forms of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated.” (p. 30).

## **2.2 Conversation Analysis**

Conversation Analysis is especially useful in teaching conversation as conversation analysis is concerned with studying the social organization of natural language-in-use (Button & Lee, 1987, p.2).

Conversational actions tend to occur in pairs. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) proposed the concept of adjacency pairs to analyze turns. Adjacency pairs include a first pair part turn and a second pair part turn. Many conversational actions call for a particular kind of conversational response in return, e.g. greetings typically call for another utterance of the same type. Greeting-greeting is a typical adjacency pair. As an accepted part of conversational structure, adjacency pairs have strong in-built expectations, e.g. offers often require acceptances or rejections, questions are generally answered, congratulations are followed with thanks (in some culture). There is a “rule” governing the use of adjacency pairs, which reflects the sociocultural norms at play (Barraja-Rohan, 1997). The notion of adjacency pairs explains the relevance of functional expressions which have traditionally been listed but not explained.

Conversation is organized in sequences. Components in adjacency pairs can be used to build longer sequences. Various participants support and evaluate each other using the known building blocks of adjacency pairs and exchange with pragmatic principles. Students could be taught how conversation works and how interlocutors manage talk in interaction. With its focus on the micro details of talk as it unfolds turn by turn, CA-based materials constitute a suitable tool for the teaching of pragmatics in the foreign language classroom (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006).

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participants**

Participants were 45 Chinese college students who have received between 7 and 10 years formal classroom instruction in English. They fell into instructional level 2 of a 4 level College English Course. Level placement was determined by scores on a 2-hour, institutional placement exam with listening, reading, writing, translating components. In general, these students have little opportunity for interacting with native speakers of English outside the classroom.

#### **3.2 Target Expressions**

Small talk is traditionally viewed as an unimportant element in communication which can be observed in various interactions. The study of small talk goes back to Malinowski (1923) who first proposed the concept of “phatic communion,” also known as small talk. Small talk occurs “when the object of talk is not to achieve some aim but the exchange of words almost as an end in itself” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315). The most frequent contexts where phatic discourse appears are openings and closings of a conversation to establish social contact. At those phases phatic utterances are often organized as adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Minimal pairs of phatic acts may expand with other phatic questions or remarks that deal with safe topics, thus giving rise to larger phatic sequences (Pavlidou, 1994). In the present study, the focus is mainly on small talk in the opening phase and topic choice in small talk. We are going to enhance learners’ awareness towards the sequenced structures of small talk.

#### **3.3 Procedures**

Researchers in instructional pragmatics have suggested different frameworks to teach specific L2 pragmatic aspects. This methodological proposal is based on Huth&Taleghani-Nikazm’s model (2006) with a few adaptations. The instruction was carried out at the beginning of a semester, when the textbook usually focus on social rituals like introductions.

##### **3.3.1 In-Class Reflection about Conversational Practices in Chinese**

Students recalled the first time they met in their dormitory and talked about how they started their conversation in Chinese. The discussion was directed at what kind of greeting formulae is used, and how and when first topics may be initiated. By directing learners’ attention towards such conversational details, their attention was effectively directed at the sequence of the conversation in their first language.

### **3.3.2 Using Audio and Video Materials**

Students were presented with short dialogue scenarios which show native speakers interacting in natural, unscripted situations. They watched the video clips and were asked to report what the speakers are talking about after they finished watching. Authentic samples include conversations in radio and TV shows, which exist in the real world and language samples elicited from native speakers through tasks or role plays for the purpose of producing a model (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015).

### **3.3.3 In-Class Analysis of Conversation Sequences**

Teacher led students to discuss the following pragmalinguistic questions (Cruz, 2013):

- How does the speaker start the conversation?
- How many kinds of small talk did you find?
- Where do they occur, in the opening or closing phase?
- Do you think they are expectable?

Sociopragmatic questions:

- Can you describe the context where the conversation took place?
- What topics are selected?
- What is regarded as an appropriate conversational opener?

There are only a few short dialogues containing small talk and a few tips about the sort of “ice breakers” to open conversations in the students’ textbook. It is difficult for them to infer how a conversation unfolds in a real interaction. In this instruction phase, learners were also given a list of phatic utterances collected from naturally occurring interaction. They were required to predict the next sequence of the structure. Besides they were encouraged to guess the context these utterances may occur by considering the questions previously discussed. The teacher should explain the actual context in which utterances were found. After the context has been provided, the whole class can discuss whether their guesses might turn out to be appropriate or not, and why. This procedure enables teachers to offer explanations and facilitate learners’ noticing of the sequence of the conversation and norms underlying it.

### **3.3.4 Practising Small Talk with Role-Plays**

Students were provided with a few situations. See Appendix. They worked in pairs and designed role plays based on situations they chose and acted out various dialogues in front of the class.

### **3.3.5 Reflection and Evaluation**

After they performed their role plays, students could comment on other team's performance and reflect on their own use of new structures. In pairs, they evaluated the conversation with regard to cultural aspects. Learners bring with them their L1 interactional norms and strategies in their conversations. This activity is designed to highlight the cultural differences in cultural norms of interaction between different cultures. However, it also gives students an insight that not only the differences but also the similarities may exist between the sociocultural norms of their own culture and those of the target language culture.

## **4. Analysis**

Data for this study consist of small talk conversations between learners which were audiotaped and transcribed. The first data set was collected at the beginning of the semester prior to the explicit instruction. The second set was collected after instruction. Using conversation analysis, both data sets were examined, particularly in regard to learners' interactional behavior when starting a conversation. In the next subsections, we present only two data excerpts that exemplify typical interactional behavior of learners.

### **4.1 Pre-Instruction Interactional Behavior**

Before learners received the explicit instructional materials, they recalled the first time they met in the dormitory and some pairs were volunteered to act it out.

01 A: Hi! (A enters the dormitory)

02 B: Hello! Are you NAME?

03 A: Yeah. I'm NAME. You're NAME?

04 B: Yeah. Where are you from?

05 A: I'm from SOME PLACE. How about you?

06 B: I'm from SOME PLACE.

07 A: I've heard about it. That's a beautiful place!

08 B: Yes, it is. We will become the best roommates in the next four years. Nice to meet you.

09 A: Nice to meet you, too.

10 B: Let's go to the dining hall to have lunch together.

By examining this short interaction, we can find L1 pragmatic transfer occurs. Learner A used attention getter "hi" to start the conversation. Attention getters are common in Chinese greetings. They were hey, hello and "hi" in English. B used ritualized greeting "Hello" to respond. In Chinese cultural context, "Hello"(你好) followed by "Hello"(你好) is a greeting pattern especially when the two speakers are not familiar with each other.

After they exchanged their names, instead of using ritualized "Nice to meet you" as English speakers might do, B asked about A's hometown. Asking about one's hometown (Where are you from?) is a typical question in Chinese when strangers try to get to know each other. In the following turn, B expressed wishes for future relationships of solidarity, as in (接下来四年我们会成为最好的室友。We will become the best roommates in the next four years.), while English native speakers seldom use this strategy. We may find they showed their gladness of meeting each other in line 08-09, quite different from the sequence of English speakers. At the end of this interaction, B closed the conversation by inviting A to have lunch together. It is a typical strategy that most students adopt in their conversations.

Depending on their proficiency level, learners may bring some knowledge of small talk from their L1 but still be unable to make informed decisions about its use and contents which could be found in the above extract.

#### **4.2 Post-Instruction Interactional Behavior**

After learners were exposed to video and audio materials, they discussed the differences between their own pragmatic norms and those of the native speakers. The second set of data was collected after students experienced these concepts in pairs through role-plays. The analysis of the post-instruction conversation shows that the majority of learners were able to use the target language sequences in their role plays, as illustrated in the extract below.

01 A: Excuse me. Are you in the same math class with me?

02 B: Yes! I saw you in class yesterday. I'm Rita.

03 A: Hi, Rita. I'm Tom. Is this your first class with Ms Wang?

04 B: Yes, it is, but I've heard that she is a great teacher.

05 A: That's nice. What are you studying?

06 B: uh, my major is Computer Science. What about you?

07 A: My major is Electronic Engineering.

08 B: Wow, that sounds interesting.

As seen in the above interaction, learners can be made aware of the sequential structure of meeting someone new in English, i.e. Get the attention (01)-Greeting (02-03)-appropriate topics (04-08). In this conversation, they displayed a fundamental understanding of how a basic conversation worked in English. A started a conversation in a culturally appropriate manner, B responded with a response and a greeting (Line 02). A introduced the first topic (line 03) through a question which was responded by B (line 04) in the next turn. In line 05 A closed a topic with assessment and initiated a new topic. In line 06 B can keep a conversation going through the question "What about you?"

In the reflection and evaluation phase, when students were talking about cultural differences, some pairs mentioned they would say "What a coincidence!" in 02 which is also acceptable in English. But they also noticed the difference in addressing formula. The most frequently used addressing form is "schoolmate" which can be addressed to any fellow student, familiar or unfamiliar, on school campus. In Chinese a conversation in this situation might begin with "tongxue". The learners didn't use this formula at the beginning of this interaction. Such phenomenon might indicate they realized it was inappropriate in English. In the choice of topics, they chose "class", "major" but avoided questions such as "What was your score in your placement test?" which might occur in a Chinese dialogue. We might infer from the pragmatic-awareness raising discussion they realized such a question was too personal.

The analysis of the recorded data segments demonstrates that learners can infer underlying rules after being exposed to input, strengthen previously existing or recently acquired knowledge through explanations and put this knowledge into practice. This sort of activity also makes explicit previous knowledge and stimulates learners to reflect on how small talk works and develop some awareness of the norms underlying its usage.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has suggested a series of pedagogical phases to deal with small talk in the English class. This methodological proposal seeks to raise learners' pragmatic awareness by



explicit treatment of small talk, which facilitate learners' noticing of relevant features, underlying norms and understanding of how it works in the target language. Students made noticeable progress in their production of small talk in the target language.

As for teaching materials, using authentic materials is to enable students to predict, understand and eventually produce the target language sequences so that they may act appropriately when interacting in the target language culture (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Therefore, it is important to supplement classroom materials with data from naturally occurring interactions which could show learners how conversations are sequentially structured. When introducing a speech act, it is suggested to include detailed contextual description.

However, the research is not without limitations. It is a case study in need of supplementary quantitative analysis. To further explore the effects of explicit awareness-raising pragmatics instruction, we should add a control group to the design of this study.

In addition, the situations for learners' practice are limited to campus life. Other contextual factors, such as age, gender and identity in a small talk are not discussed in this paper. Further studies could be designed to examine them.

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#### **Appendix: Role Play tasks**

You and your partner are sitting together on the first day of the class. You two met in a math class yesterday, but have never spoken before.

You and your partner are good friends and run into each other. You just got out of class and are on your way back to the school canteen. Start a conversation.

You are at a bus stop. The bus is late. Next to you is an unknown student (your partner). You decide to chat with him/her.

You are waiting in line in a school canteen. The one in front of you (your partner) seems to be in your English class. Start a conversation.

You are at a welcome party for new students. Try to make small talk as long as you can with the student (your partner) around you.