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“Quick-chatting”, “smart dogs”, and how to “say without saying”: Small talk and pragmatic learning in the community



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A B S T R A C T

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In this paper we focus on the perspectives and practical needs of a group of adult immigrants from language backgrounds other than English as they encounter the pragmatic demands of communicating in the workplace and in the community. Drawing on a subset of data from a large-scale longitudinal study of recent adult immigrants with low levels of English, we explore what they notice about the pragmatics of communication in Australia and the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic skills they need to ‘fit in’ and function successfully through English. The pragmatic issues they identify encompass a range of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic issues not normally addressed in interlanguage research, including the importance of small talk and how to participate in it, the role and interpretation of informality and indirectness, different perceptions of sociability and the ‘need to be nice’, recognition of the need to be pragmatically flexible, and differences between the language taught in the classroom and that used every day in the community. We consider the implications for language classes in an ESL setting and suggest some activities designed to help immigrants prepare for the transition from classroom language learner to competent language user in the community.

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1. Introduction

As an area of intellectual inquiry, interlanguage pragmatics has had an enormous impact on our understanding of a whole range of research questions of great relevance to language learners at all levels of competence. We now have an increased awareness of the pragmalinguistic resources available to both native speakers and learners and the role of transfer (Barron, 2003; Gass & Houck, 1999; Su, 2010; Takahashi, 1996), the differences in performance by native and non-native speakers (Dahm & Yates, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003; Gass & Neu, 2006; Lundell & Erman, 2012; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010; Taguchi, 2007; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Yates, 2010a) and how the behaviour of both can vary across different situations (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Issues of learnability, teachability and the effectiveness of different approaches to instruction have also attracted increasing attention over the last 15 years (Alcón-Soler, 2012; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001; and see reviews in Barron, 2012; Bardovi-Harlig, 2015).

Nevertheless, as Diepenbroek and Derwing’s (2013) survey of commonly used teaching materials in Canada illustrates, there still seems to be something of a gap between the intensity of this research activity and its regular application to everyday teaching. While this gap has been addressed of late by some professionally oriented publications (Ishihara & Cohen,

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2010; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010, 2011; Yates, 2008, 2013: and see also CARLA, n.d., for a list of useful resources on the teaching and learning of speech acts) and direct teaching materials (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Barraja-Rohan & Pritchard, 1997; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012; Language in the Workplace Project, n.d.; Riddiford & Newton, 2010), it can still be challenging for teachers on the ground to know where to start with the learners in their class, particularly in immigrant ESL settings, which have generally received less attention in the interlanguage literature.

A crucial question here is exactly what it is that our learners, whoever they are, would find it most helpful to learn about the pragmatics of their context. While such questions have been addressed through comparisons of learner and native speaker performance for both ESL and EFL settings, that is in settings where learners are immigrants (ESL) or students learning English formally where English is not the dominant language or during short stays in English-dominant settings (EFL) (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Han, 2005; Suh, 1999; Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007), the perspective of the learners themselves, that is, what it is that *they* feel they need to learn, is often left out of account. Yet, what learners 'notice' as different about pragmatic behaviour in the community can provide vital insights into what it would be useful to teach, and where to start. Since motivation appears to be important in the development of L2-appropriate pragmatic behaviours (Kuriscak, 2010; Takahashi, 2005) and 'noticing' plays an important role in language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990), then those pragmatic aspects of communication that learners notice are likely to provide a practical and motivating starting point on which to build pedagogical interventions. If communicative success for our students is our pedagogical goal, then we need studies that illuminate the range of both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic issues that learners face in communicating with the community, including the perspective of the learners themselves.

In this paper we focus on the perspectives and practical needs of a group of adult immigrants from language backgrounds other than English as they encounter the pragmatic demands of communicating in the workplace and in the community. Drawing on a subset of data from a large-scale longitudinal study of recent adult immigrants with low levels of English, we explore what they notice about the pragmatics of communication in Australia and the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic skills they need to 'fit in' and function successfully through English. In the following section we briefly overview the relevant literature before outlining the study in Section 3. Section 4 provides an overview of the pragmatic issues that they noticed as they started to interact in the community, while in Section 5 we summarise our findings and consider the implications for language classes designed to help them prepare to transition from classroom language learner to competent language user.

2. Context, interlanguage pragmatics and what learners need

An important first step in designing appropriate pragmatic interventions is to understand who the learners are, what they already know and what they will need to know in order to operate successfully in the target language – in other words, to have a closer appreciation of the pragmatic demands of the contexts in which they will be communicating. The important role played by context in language acquisition generally has attracted more research attention since the 'social turn' in SLA (Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003; Ortega, 2011; Swain & Deters, 2007). With some honourable exceptions discussed below, interlanguage pragmatics research has been a little slower to embrace a range of learner and learning contexts. Thus, while context has had some attention in institutional discourse and study abroad (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005; DuFon, 2006; Shively, 2011), much interlanguage research has focussed on a particular kind of learner – young, affluent and well-educated students studying in university programmes or language centres. Such students are, however, likely to approach and react to a social situation very differently from newly arrived immigrants, who may be older, come from less privileged backgrounds and have experienced considerable hardship *en route* to the classroom and their new life in the target language.

Learners from different backgrounds have different needs and different levels of confidence, not only because of what they bring to an interaction, but also because of how they are perceived and positioned in the host environment (Norton, 2000; Norton & McKinney, 2011). Their investment in language learning and their target language community is also likely to be different. For immigrant learners, acquiring skills in how to use language appropriately in their new environment can impact crucially on their ability to gain, retain and prosper in suitable employment (Burns & Roberts, 2010). Pragmatically appropriate communication skills are thus vital for both their economic viability and the development of their social networks, and thus potentially for their feelings of acceptance into the community (Major, Terraschke, Major, & Setijadi, 2015; Yates, 2011). Moreover, the consequences of regular pragmatic failure can have potentially serious short-term and long-term impacts, not only on their language learning, but also on their self-esteem and sense of belonging. For immigrants, therefore, getting it right in their new language can be very high stakes as they build their lives and relationships in a new community. Yet even very proficient speakers who have spent long periods actively engaging in a culture can under-use important pragmatic devices (Lundell & Erman, 2012; Yates, 2005).

Studies have identified informal language use and pragmatics as crucial areas of need for immigrant ESL (Derwing & Waugh, 2012; Duff, Wong, & Early, 2000) but studies of interlanguage pragmatics in ESL contexts have lagged behind those of EFL learners. A few have explored the performance of speech acts in naturally occurring immigrant contexts (Clyne, 1994; Holmes & Riddiford, 2011; Li, 2000; Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Yates, 2000, 2005) and less often in role play simulations (Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007; Yates, 2010a). The findings from these studies suggest that, like their EFL counterparts, immigrant learners have difficulty in approaching various speech acts, or at least that they approach them in a way that is different from their native-speaking peers (and those from other language backgrounds – see Clyne, 1994), and that this can sometimes cause communicative difficulty. For example, studies have found that immigrants' requests can be not only more

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