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The effect of instruction on conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of instruction (input plus focused metapragmatic noticing) on the oral production of conventional expressions, particularly those conventional expressions which perform specific pragmatic functions in English. Using a pre-test–instruction–post-test design we tested 36 university-level students in six intact intensive English classes in order to determine whether guided metapragmatic noticing activities help learners increase oral production of targeted conventional expressions and whether such gains (if they are realized) can be generalized to other conventional expressions. Students were divided into two groups of three classes each; the two groups received instruction on a different set of expressions. Results showed that both instructional groups showed significant gains on one set of conventional expressions but not another, suggesting that learning conventional expressions is sensitive to instruction but also constrained by the transparency of the expression and the learners' level of linguistic development.
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Keywords: Conventional expressions; Formulas; Pragmatics; Instruction; Awareness; Noticing

1. Introduction

The motivation for this study comes both from claims in the pragmatics literature about the communicative value of conventional expressions and the subsequent empirical research on the acquisition of conventional expressions by L2 learners. Conventional expressions consist of strings such as *No problem, Nice to meet you,* and *That'd be great*, which native speakers use predictably in certain contexts. Often called *pragmatic routines* in pragmatics research, conventional expressions are described as crucial to social communication (e.g., Coulmas, 1981). In a pedagogical context, House (1996, pp. 227–228) claims, "From a sociolinguistic point of view, it is important to learn routines at any learning stage because they embody the societal knowledge that members of a given community share …routine formulas are thus essential in the verbal handling of everyday life." In spite of their communicative value, conventional expressions are not acquired seamlessly even by advanced learners: Learners may be uncomfortable with the use of some common expressions (House, 1996); others may not link expressions to their target language function or context

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(Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Kecskes, 2000; Scarcella, 1979); and still others may not control the form (Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Yorio, 1989).

In this study we investigate the effects of instruction—here defined as contextualized input plus focused meta-pragmatic noticing during pair work—on the oral production of conventional expressions which perform particular pragmatic functions in English. Instruction addressing conventional expressions (known by many terms including *formulaic sequences*) has varied from relatively incidental to very focused. Schmitt et al. (2004) targeted 20 expressions of high academic value that appeared in the normal EAP curriculum. Each expression appeared at least once in the teaching materials during the 2—3 months between pre-test and post-test and teachers drew attention to formulas at some point in the course. In contrast, Jones and Haywood (2004) took an intensive approach, allowing 2 h per week for instruction over 10 weeks, integrating the use of reading passages modified by adding formulaic sequences with and without highlighting, training in holistic production, and use of sequences in the writing courses.

In contrast to the EAP focus on written expressions, pragmatics research investigates conversational production. Olshtain and Cohen (1990) contrasted two competing expressions *I'm sorry* and *Excuse me*. The instruction took place in three 20-min lessons which included use of model dialogues, discussion of differences between the expressions, explicit descriptions of differences (metapragmatic information), and an intensification scale for English apologies. In addition, practice in both listening and production was included. Whereas most pragmatic instruction is conducted as special units within a curriculum, House (1996) studied pragmatics instruction as an integral part of a semester-long communication course for very advanced students. Two sections of the course received input that included lists of the pragmatic routines. In addition all students were given tapes of their own role-play production with transcripts. The implicit treatment group had extensive production practice and also received feedback with rules, but no meta-pragmatic explanations. The explicit treatment group received explicit metapragmatic information at all stages.

These four studies showed a range of approaches to the instruction of conventional expressions and all reported positive changes in production using various measures. The pragmatics studies used oral role plays to assess improvement, whereas the studies that focused on written language employed c-tests in which blanks and letters are cues to the formula; Schmitt et al. (2004) also gave a meaning gloss: I've been watching the news report and they say that **there's a go___cha____that** the international debts of poorer countries might be cancelled (*this will probably happen*). Jones and Haywood (2004) also examined free production in essays.

In the present study we adopted an input-based approach which could be integrated easily into existing curricula in the hope of encouraging teachers to undertake pragmatics instruction where there may currently be none. We also employed a controlled task for assessment which simulated oral production in conversation.

1.1. Research questions

In this study we investigate the effects of instruction on the oral production of conventional expressions.

1. Does instruction promote the production of conventional expressions for L2 pragmatics?
2. If so, are gains generalized to conventional expressions that were not taught?

Question 1 falls into the first of Rose's (2005) three categories of research questions in L2 pragmatics instructional research, namely "Is the targeted pragmatic feature teachable?" Question 2 "Are gains in oral production of conventional expressions generalizable to other expressions?" has multiple sources. Although conventional expressions are inherently lexical and as such would not be expected to generalize, there are competing reasons for why learners could show general improvement. Noticing activities may lead students to pay attention to recurring expressions in speech, and closely related to that, they may come to understand how conventional expressions are used in interaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We identified six intact classes of appropriate levels in the Intensive English Program of a large public university in the American Midwest. Instructional levels 4 and 5 of a seven level program were targeted based on earlier