Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Competence
Naoko Taguchi (2012)
Multilingual Matters

Reviewed by Renia Lopez Ozieblo

In Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Competence Naoko Taguchi provides a detailed account of research into second language acquisition pragmatics in a Japanese context. Pragmatics within second language acquisition (SLA) is a forgotten field, attracting very little practical attention in the classroom (very few SLA text-books cover more than the most common pragmatic meanings in a handful of situations: greetings, requesting, complementing at most). In SLA, students are dealing with interlanguage pragmatics, combining the pragmatics of two cultures, or even applying those of the mother culture to the second one. This results in SL students syntactically, lexically, and phonetically very competent but unable to understand speech acts such as a polite refusal. Studies like Taguchi’s raise the profile of pragmatics in the SL classroom and the awareness of teachers as to its importance.

Chapter 1 begins with a description of the study and its context, both within the field of pragmatics and of SLA. Taguchi’s study follows 48 Japanese students of English in a bilingual university in Japan for one academic year. At the time
of the study, the author was a visiting lecturer at the institution with no academic role, hence she was able to observe the English classes, conduct surveys and individual interviews, commanding the respect due to an academic but without the closeness that teaching students generates. The pragmatic capabilities of this group of students was tested three times during the period, through a multiple-choice listening exercise and a series of short questions that required oral production. The exercises tested speed of production, pragmatic appropriateness, and grammatical correction (evaluated by native English speakers). In particular, students were tested on their understanding of indirect refusals, routines, non-conventional implicature items, and filler items. Some of these referred to low imposition situations and some to high imposition. In addition, the performance of eight students was qualitatively analysed, including their own introspections and those of their teachers.

Chapter 2 gives an in-depth description of 23 similar longitudinal studies carried out in SLA pragmatics. The author mentions that the last 20 years has seen a growth of pragmatic studies, but that seldom do these concentrate on development (p. 27), even though longitudinal research provides useful information as to how students acquire pragmatic competence (Dynamic Systems Theory). Taguchi focuses on pragmatic studies over time, from 2 months to 4.5 years. These show that pragmatic resources develop slower than other linguistic capabilities and do not follow a linear path, at least in non-immersion contexts (where access to sociolinguistic experience helps develop pragmatic knowledge, p. 54).

The theoretical framework and methodology are provided in Chapter 3, with a more detailed description of the study, including examples of the questions posed to students. The author develops a qualitative and quantitative analytical model based on language knowledge and processing capacities as the main components of pragmatic performance. Sociocultural factors seem not to be included, resulting in some ambiguities. One aspect which is not clear is whether Taguchi is focusing on British or American pragmatics (or others). Her corpus – used to develop the listening tests – is North American, so the assumption is that this is also the target culture. However, it is not clear in her study if the teachers at the university, and the English-speaking native students she uses to evaluate the tests, are also North American. A note on this aspect, for those not familiar with the Japanese EFL context, would have been useful.

The same exercises seem to have been administered three times; understandably, it would be important to maintain the same proficiency level in all the questions, but repeating the same test seems counterintuitive, as students might remember it from previous occasions. The listening exercise allowed for the inclusion of prosody but not for other aspects of nonverbal communication. Little mention is made of nonverbal communication (apart from prosody it is important to take
into consideration at least gestures, face expressions, and body posture and movement, see Poyatos, 2002 for a full list of nonverbal communication elements). The literature review does mention work done by Mori, so the author is aware of its importance. Perhaps future studies could carry out tests of this type with audiovisual inputs and analyse the video-recorded interviews to include more than the verbal production.

The exercises contained the transcript of an everyday conversation and a related question. Students had to select the best answer out of four. The multiple-choice answers were developed to include one with a meaning opposite to that implied in the conversation. One of the possible answers was written to contain words that had occurred in the conversation and another answer had information relating to the conversation overall (p. 86). This seems to have resulted in answers which are clearly wrong (even for a low-proficiency English speaker) and which do not really test pragmatic understanding, as a student mentions in a face-to-face introspective session (p. 108). It might have been more appropriate to offer three correct answers and only one pragmatically incorrect.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the results, quantitatively and qualitatively, respectively. Taguchi provides the results as an easy to follow narrative, with multiple figures to illustrate the data, and many comments from both students and staff analysing their actions and language use. The quantitative data is analysed in depth at different levels, providing also a semantic database of students’ expressions that could be very useful for future comparisons of politeness studies in SLA. The results are first categorised by type of implicature (conventional or non-conventional) and within conventional as refusal or routine. These are given separately for the listening and oral production exercises and are further separated into pragmatic understanding, grammatical correction (for the oral production only), and response time. These are provided for the three tests conducted, one at the beginning of the academic year, one in the middle, and one at the end, and also compared to those of 25 native English speakers. Furthermore, the data is then categorised as belonging to low- or high-imposition speech acts, analysing as well the type of expressions used, direct or indirect, and any strategies used to modify requests in particular. The detail provided is such that Taguchi’s methodology and results could be used to replicate her study and compare sets of data from different participants.

The qualitative section, just as interesting as the quantitative results, although for a different reason, develops the study into a more personal one, making its benefits obvious for all SLA professionals. This section details the individual circumstances of each of eight students, including previous experience as English students, overall academic performance, but also affective elements that motivate them. This is given as a summary with additional introspective comments from
the students. In some instances it is interesting to note that pragmatic awareness might be well developed, even in lower achieving students, where semantic or grammatical knowledge is not always present. The author also develops various cases in depth, seeking comments from teachers to give a full understanding of the event from the points of view of all involved. One of the comments the reader might have, after reading this chapter, is that pragmatic awareness also needs to be taken into consideration in teacher training, especially when SL teaching takes place in a second country.

The last chapter (Chapter 6) summarises the findings and conclusions. Through the literature review, Taguchi found these pragmatic situations to be the most problematic for students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the pragmatic capabilities not developing at the same time as other linguistics skills (such as syntax or semantic control, as measured by TOEFL scores). Her study confirms these findings, with some variations due to individuals’ characteristics. Overall, students improve their pragmatic understanding, but at a slower pace than their grammatical capabilities, and although there is a marked improvement in low-imposition situations, this is not the case in high-imposition situations. Taguchi concludes that pragmatically appropriateness in low-imposition speech acts are perfected throughout the time period tested, with faster responses and better syntax. High-imposition speech acts also see better timing and grammatical scores, but pragmatical appropriateness does not improve as much. Slower progress is also made in the appropriateness scores of implicit opinions and requests. Students have a tendency to use directness with a marked lack of hedging or mitigating expressions to avoid or minimise confrontation, although they might use in some cases native line circumventions (p. 131). This results in a perceived lack of politeness that teachers note but seldom deal with (p. 161). Taguchi concludes that students seem to make little use of target pragmalinguistic structures, although they are aware of necessary semantic strategies. One of the explanations given is that students are not able to retrieve from long-term memory the necessary semantic expressions due to the pressure of online production (p. 139). Another reason (given by students themselves) is a preference for clarity over politeness (p. 141).

There seems to be little discussion about the sociocultural aspects that develop pragmatic meaning. In the qualitative part, students explain the reason for using certain structures (such as: ‘you had better’, p. 182). These are learnt at school, possibly out of context, perhaps with just an indication as to their applicability to formal situations, but no further explanation is given as to how these structures are taught at university. If the teaching at university is similar to that followed at school it is hardly surprising that grammar (and other linguistic skills) are developed faster and better than pragmatic understanding, as the latter requires
explicit development of the sociocultural elements of the situation. It seems that this was only done accidentally with very positive results (p. 160) when a teacher corrected the politeness aspect of a student’s email.

This study is a welcome source of pragmatic data for teachers of foreign languages. The analysis of the qualitative results is a necessary reminder to most language teachers not only to be aware of students’ difficulties with implicature, but also to realise the shortcomings of SL programmes and of the importance of external factors in the learning of languages. Through the descriptions given in Chapter 5, it also provides a useful review of teaching methodologies used in SL classrooms, such as journals, listening and oral tests, as well as the importance of informal communication and feedback between teachers and students. It also highlights the importance of error correction and explicit teaching for issues of a sociocultural nature (as defended by Escandell-Vidal, 2010).

References
