

# Teaching Pragmatics to International Students in Private Language Schools in the UK

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## Abstract

International students travel from across the globe to the UK to attend study abroad language immersion (SALI) programs at private language schools. The students on SALI programs study a mixture of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as they will not remain in the UK indefinitely, and English as a Second Language (ESL), due to their need to communicate with the English speaking community during their studies in the UK. While the goal of these programs is for students to achieve communicative competence, that is they can successfully interact and communicate in English with native and other non-native speakers in a variety of situations, an integral component of communicative competence is pragmatic competence, which is currently omitted from most SALI curricula. Pragmatic competence is the ability to understand inferences, knowing how and when to speak directly or indirectly, and understanding what language to use in a variety of situations. There are a multitude of reasons for this lack of pragmatic instruction: pragmatics is seldom taught on teacher training courses, it is mentioned infrequently or inauthentically in textbooks, and teachers do not have access to pragmatic research data. Teachers often have to rely on their intuition to discuss pragmatics with students, even though research has shown intuition to be unreliable.

As pragmatic competence is essential for achieving communicative competence, and research shows that pragmatic instruction is effective, it is essential that teachers in SALI programs are able to incorporate pragmatic instruction into their lessons. This article familiarizes teachers with pragmatics, pragmatic acquisition and instruction specifically in study abroad contexts, details a lesson plan which teachers can use to introduce their students to pragmatics, and outlines two tasks which promote autonomous pragmatic learning.

**Key words:** pragmatics, pragmatic competence, study abroad, international students, EFL, ESL

## **Introduction**

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to international students at private language schools in the UK is unique because students travel to the UK for a study abroad language immersion (SALI) experience, but continue to learn EFL (as opposed to English as a Second Language (ESL)), even though they are in a native-speaking country. Lessons are taught through communicative language teaching (CLT) and include the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), pronunciation, authentic language, student participation, and pair and group work. The aim is for students to develop communicative competence, which is the ‘concept of what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations (Hedge, 2000, p. 45). Therefore, language is taught in context and students regularly role-play various situations. However, one critical component of communicative competence that is currently omitted from lessons is pragmatic competence, which ‘means knowing how to use language in order to achieve certain communicative goals or intentions’ (Hedge, p. 48). Teachers in SALI contexts often have little or no knowledge of pragmatics because it is left out of teacher training courses, rarely appears in syllabi, and is mentioned infrequently and inauthentically in textbooks (Vellenga, 2004). First, I will define pragmatics and discuss issues related to teaching. Next, I will discuss implications for pragmatic development and instruction in EFL, ESL, and study abroad (SA) contexts. Finally, I will propose one lesson plan and two awareness-raising activities for teachers in SALI contexts who have minimal awareness of pragmatics, but who wish to incorporate it in their lessons.

## **Teaching pragmatics**

### *Introduction to pragmatics*

Crystal (1997, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 2001) defines pragmatics as the following:

the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. (p. 2)

Pragmatics includes speech acts (requests, refusals, compliments), conversational structure (turn-taking), implicature (what the speaker is insinuating), prosodic elements such as tone and stress, and even personal space and gestures (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Hedge, 2000). Pragmatic competence can be broken up into two halves: sociopragmatic competence and pragmalinguistic competence. The former refers to the ‘social knowledge ... necessary to select the language forms to use in different settings, and with people in different roles and with different status’ (Hedge, p. 49). Sociopragmatics encompasses address forms, situational contexts, and acceptable social behavior (Kasper & Rose, 2001). The latter refers to the linguistic resources such as ‘directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts’ (Kasper & Rose, p. 2). Although some pragmatic features are universal, most are deeply rooted in language and culture and each nationality and language will have different strategies for performing speech acts, for being polite, and have different ideas as to what is socially acceptable. With this in mind, teachers need to build upon the knowledge students already have by making them aware of their own pragmatics and the pragmatics of the target language (TL) (Kasper & Rose).

### ***Pragmatics instruction in the classroom***

Research has found that pragmatics can be taught and that classroom instruction can be effective (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Rose (2005) claims that some of the most teachable aspects of pragmatics include speech acts, discourse markers, hedges, and conversational structure. Explicit teaching, (that is when the teacher demonstrates and explains the pragmatic information before students look at examples) has been found to be more effective than implicit (when students look at examples and try to acquire the pragmatic information without prior teacher explanation) (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Rose, 2005). Explicit and deductive teaching force students to notice language (Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2010) and ‘when pragmatic information is noticed, whether attended to deliberately

or inadvertently, the input has the potential to become intake and may be stored in long-term memory' (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 101). This approach may be particularly effective because 'L2 learners [second language learners] often tend toward literal interpretation, taking utterances at face value . . . and underuse context information' (Kasper & Rose, 2001, p. 6). Explicit instruction is especially important for subtle nuances of language such as back-channels and turn-taking, which students can easily overlook (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Implicit and inductive instruction also have a place, and in fact Ishihara and Cohen (2010) suggest that 'pragmatic knowledge gained through induction may even be longer-lasting and more easily accessible in real time' (p. 117).

In lessons 'teachers can explicitly model and guide students in their use of target practices, engage students in awareness-raising activities of L2 pragmatics, and provide feedback on students' productions' (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 233). CLT, over other methods, is particularly conducive to incorporating pragmatics because 'there are more opportunities not only for a greater variety of input but also for learners to engage in different roles and participant organization structures (for example, pair and group work)' (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 103). Including pragmatic components in commonplace activities such as role-plays for various situations, authentic dialogues, debates, and group work can foster pragmatic learning, and therefore, pragmatic and communicative competence.

Although pragmatics is teachable, there are many obstacles to teaching and learning it in the classroom. First, not all teachers know what pragmatics is, have an awareness of English pragmatic norms, or have access to pragmatic research data, and thus, many will rely on their intuition to discuss pragmatics, which has been shown to be inaccurate and unreliable (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Second, textbooks, the other main source of pragmatic input for students, rarely include pragmatic information, and 'often contain insufficient specific input or insufficient interpretation of language use' (O'Keeffe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011, p. 139). Finally, the classroom cannot possibly replicate the real world and prepare students for all possible encounters with the TL community. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) find 'the target language they [students] encounter in the L2 classroom simply lacks a sufficient range and emphasis of relevant exemplars' (p. 234). For instance, the classroom is

generally more polite than the real world (Kasper & Rose, 2002) and only a few speech acts and discourse strategies are used in the classroom context (Alc ́n Soler, 2005).

### *Prescriptiveness and pragmatics*

Although teachers should be prescriptive in presenting pragmatics, they should not be too strict when enforcing L2 pragmatic norms. Learners come to the classroom with their own identities and beliefs, and ‘exercise active human agency in deciding how to present themselves through their use of language’ (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 108-9). Prescriptive pragmatic correction may feel like cultural indoctrination and bring up issues of power, especially for students who speak minority languages (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Therefore, ‘the chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners’ pragmatic awareness and to give them choices about their interactions in the target language .... [and to] help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language’ (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 5). In this way, teachers are not trying to impose the L2 culture, but allow students to ‘maintain their own cultural identities and participate more fully in target language communication with more control over both intended force and outcome of their contributions’ (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, p. 5). The lesson and activities I will propose in the final section do not teach British culture or force students to speak or act in a certain way, but seek to raise students’ awareness of pragmatics and encourage self-reflection.

## **Teaching and learning pragmatics in EFL, ESL, and SA contexts**

### *EFL vs. ESL contexts*

EFL is taught in countries where English is not an official language, whereas, ESL is taught in countries where English is an official language or serves certain governmental or official functions (Harmer, 2007; Jenkins, 2003). In EFL contexts, English may be taught in schools and universities for the purposes of students’ passing English exams, using English for business, or for communicating with foreign tourists. In ESL, students are immigrants or residents in a native-speaking country for a substantial period of time and need to

communicate in the TL community. Students in this context will need instruction directed at communicating in daily life, such as visiting the doctor or speaking to neighbors and teachers.

In SALI programs, students come from all around the world to learn EFL for any period of time up to a year. Even though this context is in an English-speaking country, students do not remain in the UK indefinitely and do not have the contact with the TL community to the extent that ESL learners would. Most students come to study in the UK because they view English as a commodity which can be exchanged for university placements or careers once they return home (Phillipson, 1992). However, there is an element of ESL in SALI contexts as students do have interaction with the TL community, albeit more limited than permanent residents in the UK. Therefore, targeting pragmatics for some common situations students find themselves in such as host family interaction, service encounters, and informal conversation would be the most beneficial.

### ***Pragmatics instruction in EFL and ESL contexts***

Students in EFL and ESL contexts have different levels of access to pragmatic input. ESL learners may have daily contact and input from native speakers (NSs) outside of class, but EFL students may not, and must rely on instruction and television and film for pragmatic information. Dörnyei and Bardovi-Harlig (1998) collected data from ESL learners in the USA and EFL learners in Hungary to investigate if they were aware of differences in learners' and TL use of grammar and pragmatics. They found that the EFL students rated pragmatic errors much less important than grammatical errors, whereas, the ESL learners found pragmatic mistakes to be more important. At face value, this appears to make sense, because ESL students would have daily communication with the TL community and would need pragmatics more than EFL students. Niezgodna and Röver (2001) replicated Dörnyei and Bardovi-Harlig's (1998) study and came to the same conclusions for the ESL students, but found that EFL learners felt both the pragmatic and grammatical errors were even more severe than the ESL learners felt. It is possible that this difference can be explained through the specific EFL contexts sampled. In Dörnyei and Bardovi-Harlig's study the Hungarian EFL students' lessons were grammar focused because they were expected to pass exams, however, in Niezgodna and Röver's (2001) study, Czech EFL students attended 15 hours of CLT lessons per week, and an emphasis would not have been only on grammar, but on

authentic language, interaction, and communication. EFL contexts, therefore, are not the same and should not be generalized as lesson content and teaching methodology varies country to country, and even classroom to classroom. These studies suggest that ‘it is not the instructed learning context as such but the ways in which it is organized that enables or hinders the acquisition of L2 pragmatics’ (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 220). These two studies are valuable for teachers in SALI contexts because they empirically demonstrate that students who come from grammar intensive contexts will find grammar more important, whereas, the same may not be true for students coming from a CLT background. If a majority of students come from grammar-focused EFL backgrounds, the teacher will need to instill the value of pragmatics in students before regularly incorporating pragmatics into lessons.

### *Pragmatic development in SA contexts*

Even though lesson content is more important than the actual context, it is generally assumed that a period of SA will enhance learners’ fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence in the TL due to the frequency of input from NSs (Kasper & Rose). When learners are in the TL environment ‘the increased availability of input may give learners additional opportunities for noticing, and this in turn may contribute to greater opportunities for acquisition or learning when learners become aware of relevant features in the input’ (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998, p. 236). Indeed many studies demonstrate this view. Röver (1996) found that students’ use of pragmatic routines was related to SA in the USA and the UK even though some students were in native-speaking countries for fewer than two months. Matsumura (2001) studied the development of apologies by Japanese university SA students in Canada and compared the sample with Japanese university students who remained in Japan. Although the home students’ pragmatic ability was initially higher, after eight months, the SA students overtook them by forming more target-like forms and rejecting Japanese ideas of status.

In contrast, other studies have found less conclusive evidence about the benefits of SA. Warga and Schölmerberger (2007) investigated development of apologies in a small group of Austrian learners of Quebecois French in a university SA context. Overall, students improved and forms became more target-like, but the development was not linear and fluctuated over time. In some studies, no differences between SA and at home have been

found. Rodriguez (2001, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 2002), in his study of appropriateness of request strategies in North American students of Spanish, found that although both groups improved, there was no difference in students who studied abroad in Spain for a semester and students who remained at home. Rodriguez puts the SA students' lack of development down to his choosing to study requests over other speech acts. As requests are commonplace in the classroom, data may be indicative of those encounters, rather than ones in the TL community (Kasper & Rose).

The varied findings in these studies may have as much to do with the learners as they do with the SA experience or the particular speech act being researched. Learners' proficiency levels, learning styles, motivation, and interest in the L2 culture can all influence pragmatic acquisition (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Learners who are willing to interact with NSs are better positioned to develop pragmatic competence, even in a short stint abroad (Matsumura, 2001). Therefore, a long SA experience is not always better than a short one, because the quality of interaction is more important than the quantity (Kasper & Rose, 2002). In my own experience, students who not only come to class, but take advantage of their free time by working or volunteering, conversing daily with their host family, going out in the evenings, making NS friends, and even dating NSs, improve the fastest linguistically and pragmatically. Students who are more reserved and choose to speak mainly the L1 outside of the classroom do not improve nearly as much, as in essence they are still in an EFL context even though they are in the UK. Roever (2012) supports this claim by writing that 'residence in the target language country does not just imply being physically present in that country . . . residence means contact with target-language speakers in a variety of settings and situations' (p. 17). Merely being present in a native-speaking country is not sufficient to reap the benefits of living in the TL environment, and students must create opportunities to interact with NSs.

## **Pragmatics lesson and awareness-raising activities**

### ***Introduction to pragmatics lesson and activities***

I have created an introductory pragmatics lesson and I have expanded upon two separate awareness-raising activities from Ishihara and Cohen (2010). The lesson will introduce students to sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic failures through short entertaining television and film clips, and the activities will help students become aware of their own L1 pragmatics, L2 pragmatics, and the pragmatic norms of other students. The lesson and activities can be used with pre-intermediate levels and higher. They are not suitable for beginner and elementary students because they require at least a pre-intermediate level in comprehension to understand the video clips, writing to do the activities, and grammar to understand the pragmatic input.<sup>1</sup> The same lesson can be used for all levels above pre-intermediate and the only modification teachers may need to make is the language they use and the amount of metalanguage they include. Teachers must keep in mind that pragmatic competence does not necessarily develop in line with grammatical competence (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005), so they must be prepared for the possibility that lower level students might be better at understanding and interpreting pragmatic information than higher levels.

### ***Introductory lesson plan***

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) claim that one of the best ways to begin pragmatic instruction is with a personal anecdote about an instance of pragmatic failure. An anecdote will not only ‘communicate the importance of learning about pragmatics’ (p.193), but also create solidarity between the teacher and the students. Teachers can use their own personal anecdote or present the following one of pragmalinguistic failure:

One day, while I was studying in the library a Korean acquaintance came up to me and asked, ‘Have you eaten lunch yet?’ I assumed this was an indirect way of asking, ‘Would you like to go and get some lunch?’ When I responded, ‘No, not yet’, she became concerned and told me to eat something soon and left to go back to her studies. After this exchange happened a second time, I asked a Korean friend of mine why she was asking me if I had eaten, when she had no intention of eating with me. My friend replied that in Korean, ‘Have you eaten yet?’ is the equivalent of ‘How are you?’ in English. Therefore, her question was never about food, but about how I was. The pragmatic failure created a misunderstanding even though her question was grammatically and phonologically accurate.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bardovi-Harlig (1999) for discussion of the necessity of grammatical competence for pragmatic development.

Next, the teacher can begin by telling students that another part of language learning, just like grammar or vocabulary, is pragmatics and explain that each language has different pragmatic norms and each student has pragmatic knowledge in their own language, but it is mostly unconscious. Learning pragmatics can help decide what is polite or impolite, how direct or indirect to be, and what is socially acceptable to say or do in certain situations. In addition, pragmatics will be useful for social situations in England, such as interacting with host families, talking to teachers and directors, making conversation, and ordering in the pub or buying items in shops. Next, the teacher will introduce the three video clips (see CD) and ask students the following questions:

- When your boyfriend or girlfriend says ‘I love you’ for the first time, how do you respond?
- What do you call your teachers at school? Do you use their first name or last name? Why?
- Are there any places where you would not speak on your mobile phone?
- If you’re looking around in a shop and a shop assistant comes up and asks if you need help, how do you respond?

Lasting three minutes in total, the clips from *Star Wars*, *The Inbetweeners*, and *Black Books* (the latter two are British sitcoms) will demonstrate language and behavior that is pragmatically incorrect. In the *Star Wars* clip, Princess Leia tells Han Solo she loves him and he responds ‘I know’ instead of the formulaic response, ‘I love you too.’ In *The Inbetweeners* clip, the strict headmaster, Mr. Gilbert, is enraged after a 6<sup>th</sup> form student calls him by his first name, and in *Black Books* a customer speaks loudly on his mobile phone and another customer screams abuse at the shop assistant.

These clips have simple language and can also be easily understood visually, therefore, no language needs to be pre-taught. These clips will be relevant to students because they will most likely be familiar with *Star Wars*, and they will have been, or at least can easily imagine themselves, in all of the situations. This should be an enjoyable way for students to understand the importance of pragmatics and the problems pragmatic failures can

cause. After watching the clips twice and discussing the pragmatic failures, the teacher can ask students the following questions:

- What should be done or said differently in these situations?
- These situations are funny on TV and film, but would they be funny in real life? How would you feel/react in these situations?

Finally, the teacher should elicit the speech acts (request and refusal) performed in the *Black Books* clip and then elicit other speech acts and get students to make examples. After taking questions from students the following two awareness-raising activities can be implemented at any time.

### ***Student journals***

Self-reflection is an important skill that helps learners acquire the L2 and also promotes autonomous learning (Ishihara & Cohen). In self-reflection tasks students can ‘observe others and reflect back on their own language use for improvement’ (Ishihara & Cohen, p. 214-15) and ‘think deliberately about their own L2 production and comprehension’ (p. 307). Keeping a journal of interaction with NSs and non-native speakers (NNSs) is one way to encourage self-reflection (Ishihara & Cohen). Examples of authentic language, misunderstandings, and pragmatic successes and failures can be included in the journal. Furthermore, notes on context and situation, interlocutors, and personal feelings about a situation can also be included. I recommend that teachers collect the journals every two weeks and provide students with written feedback and also look for patterns in students’ entries that can be addressed in a pragmatics-focused part of a lesson. In addition, students can periodically bring their journals to class and share some of their experiences in groups and receive peer feedback. Journal keeping should make students more attuned to pragmatic issues and better at interpreting NSs’ language and behavior. Initially, I expect entries will be minimal as pragmatics is new to most students, but entries will become much longer and detailed as students become more familiar with the subject and the task. This activity will also contribute to cross-cultural pragmatic awareness, as students will not only become more

aware of their own pragmatics and those of NSs, but of the pragmatics of other nationalities, as many of their encounters will be with other NNS students.

### ***Learner as an ethnographer***

Teachers should take advantage of being in the UK and encourage students to interact with NSs. One way this can be accomplished in lessons is called *learner as an ethnographer* or *learners as researchers* (Ishihara & Cohen). In this task, small groups of students leave the school and canvas public opinion, interview members of the TL community, or listen-in to authentic language in different situations. This task is successful with most topics. For instance, if students are learning about love, they could survey NSs on how they ask someone out on a date, or if students are learning about food and drink, they could ask NSs how they order in the pub, interview publicans, or sit in a pub and write down the language and actions people use to order. These surveys and interviews take advantage of easy access to the TL community and allow students to ‘collect naturally occurring linguistic samples from speakers of the L2’ (Ishihara & Cohen, p.115) which may not be possible in their own contexts. In addition, students can include observations such as context of the interaction, characteristics of speakers, (e.g. age or status), behavior, or tone of voice. In class, students can analyze language and contextual factors in groups and share their findings. This activity can form the foundation for future autonomous learning of pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen) because it is student-led and permits students to choose for themselves which elements of pragmatics they would like to incorporate into their vernacular.

### **Conclusion**

Some of the main benefits of SA are access to the TL community, NS teachers, and in SALI, the emphasis on communicative competence. However, a SA context alone does not make students develop pragmatic competence as some students may have minimal contact with the TL community even while living in the UK. Teaching language in context, teaching pragmatics explicitly for common situations students are exposed to, and giving them the opportunity to practice and ask questions in the classroom, should provide them with the skills and the confidence to seek out more opportunities to interact with the TL community

and enable successful communication in those interactions. Those students who have quality interaction whether through work, NS friends, or their host family, will be at a great advantage to becoming pragmatically competent.

The awareness-raising lesson and activities I have proposed do not require the teacher to be well-versed in pragmatics and in no way try to force the L2 culture and norms onto students. Rather, the lesson is entertaining and relevant to students, and the two activities give students autonomy and the tools to explore pragmatics for themselves, with the teacher acting merely as a guide. The construct of the activities shows students that the teacher ‘respect[s] learners’ individuality and freedom of choice and their systems of values and beliefs’ (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005, p. 207), in regards to the implementation of pragmatic norms. Communicative pragmatic activities can easily be implemented into the CLT classroom, for instance, by having discussions on pragmatics after performing role-plays (Eslami-Rasekh).

Teachers’ lack of knowledge of pragmatics is the main hindrance in SALI contexts. Pragmatics cannot be taught accurately without prior knowledge because it ‘is a highly complex and challenging task, as pragmatic behavior varies to a large extent depending on social and cultural contexts’ (Kondo, 2008, p. 172). Moreover, teachers need to be aware of meta-pragmatic information, understand learners’ identities and cultures, and know how to teach and assess pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). More teacher training courses and in-school teacher development sessions need to include practical pragmatic information and methods for implementing pragmatic instruction in the classroom.

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