

## Making Pragmatics and Grammar Work Hand in Hand

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### Reference Data:

Oda-Sheehan, S. (2016). Making pragmatics and grammar work hand in hand. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the Learner*. Tokyo: JALT.

Language learners can make unintentional pragmatic mistakes that may lead to serious problems in communication and result in grave consequences. Unfortunately, pragmatic features are less likely to be addressed in the Japanese EFL classroom. Through the use of questionnaire surveys, this study was aimed at exploring possible ways to raise pragmatic awareness and promote pedagogical effort. The results indicate that pragmatic awareness could be improved by teaching pragmatic features through grammar lessons, and they suggest that pragmatics and grammar could be used in the classroom to bring about the desired learning effect. The implication that pragmatic pedagogy could be successfully combined with grammar pedagogy is encouraging to both learners and teachers, especially Japanese teachers of English who may struggle to balance the need for communicative teaching and grammar instruction in the demanding classroom realities they face.

日本のEFL環境における語用論学習への取組みは乏しく、学習者の文法能力と語用論的意識にはしばしば大きな乖離が見られる。コミュニケーションにおける語用論的誤りは、言語上の問題でありながら話者の人間性の問題と受け止められ、対話者間に感情的確執を招き深刻な問題へ発展する恐れがある。本研究では、教育現場での語用論指導を促すことを目的に、学習者の言語語用論的意識が大学受験指導を目的とした文法授業を通いかに改善したかを報告する。語用論と文法学習の融合が可能であるという示唆は、コミュニケーション重視型指導と受験に備えた文法重視型指導の間でジレンマに悩む教師にとっても朗報であるに違いない。

In our communicative endeavors, the portion we can perceive on the surface may be very limited, similar to the tip of an iceberg. At the same time, the part hidden underneath can play a more crucial role, sustaining successful communication and consisting of culture-specific perceptions and values, which are intertwined with linguistic encod-

ing in multifaceted ways. The study of this invisible aspect is called pragmatics. Kasper (1997) defined pragmatics as the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. More simply put, pragmatics is the study of how language is used in context (Lightbown & Spada, 2006) and its main objective is to understand what is meant by what is said.

Due to the invisible and culture-specific nature of pragmatics, learners can make unintentional pragmatic mistakes, which may lead to communication breakdowns. Such breakdowns could cause serious problems, sowing the seeds of discord and mutual distrust between interlocutors, because native speakers are more likely to attribute the breakdown to personality issues rather than linguistic causes (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Nevertheless, for all its gravity and importance in developing communicative competence, “the effort to promote systematic teaching of pragmatics in the L2 curriculum instruction is a relatively recent endeavor” (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 322), and pragmatic awareness is even less likely to be addressed in the Japanese EFL context. It is therefore urgently required to find a feasible approach to promoting pragmatic pedagogy in light of the Japanese EFL classroom realities.

### Review of Previous Studies

Thomas (1983) referred to the communication breakdowns caused by a lack of contextual appropriateness as *pragmatic failure*, and further proposed that there are two types of pragmatic failure: *pragmalinguistic failure* and *sociopragmatic failure*. Pragmalinguistic failure is “basically a linguistic problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force” (p. 99) and is often caused by semantically inappropriate utterances or L1-L2 transfer in which the linguistic codification chosen to carry out the speech acts (speaker’s intention) is not appropriate. Meanwhile, sociopragmatic failure is based on different beliefs and perceptions in complicated and culture-specific manners. For example, learners may make reference to something taboo in the L2 culture because it is

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acceptable to openly discuss the topic in their L1 culture. Although pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features are delicately interwoven and it may be difficult to draw a clear line between them, they both appear to cause difficulties for second language speakers, and even advanced-level learners may show marked imbalance between their grammatical competence and pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998).

It should be noted, however, that although sociopragmatic failure is difficult to address because such errors involve learners' individual insensitivities, which are rooted outside the pedagogical purview (Kawate-Mierzejewska, 2003; Rose, 2005), pragmalinguistic failure is easier to overcome because learners are more likely to try to conform to the linguistic norms of the target language (Thomas, 1983). Still, some pragmalinguistic issues may be caused by negative transfer based on L1-L2 equivalence perception. Unfortunately, there is a risk of teaching-induced failure in the EFL context, as indicated in the following examples of two speech acts: request and suggestion.

### **Pragmatic Error When Making a Request**

Gore (1987) pointed out an error by a Japanese English speaker who said, in her eagerness to be polite, "Open the door, please" in a situation where it is more appropriate to say, "Could you get the door for me?" He surmised that the error came from the instruction generally given in Japanese EFL classrooms that *please* is "a polite way of making a request" (p. 65). As a result, many students overgeneralize that they can make a request politely as long as they use *please*, without realizing it could be a command that seems to expect compliance depending on the context or on pragmatic factors. Although such instruction may be correct for some situations, it is quite dangerous for learners to automatically use an imperative plus *please* without considering pragmatic aspects.

### **Pragmatic Error When Making a Suggestion**

Fujioka (2003) referred to an example of "You had better turn off the lights," uttered by a Japanese college student who was trying to offer advice to her professor. In that situation, a more appropriate way would have been to say "It may be better if you turn off the lights," which the speaker actually meant without realizing the form *had better* can be taken as abrupt-sounding direct advice or a warning. Stephens (2003) surmised that this pragmalinguistic failure in using *had better* stems from the grammar-translation method, which prevails in traditional Japanese classrooms and can mislead learners to believe "equivalents across languages do in fact exist" (p. 374). Rinnert (1995) had pointed out this misperception of *had better* as representing weak force instead of a warning "may

result from inaccurate descriptions in some English textbooks in Japan of 'had better' as being equivalent to 'it would be better'" (p. 171). This usage of *had better* is often taught by using the Japanese translation of *shita ho ga yoi*, which can be used to give kind advice or make a polite suggestion, regardless of the relative power relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. Naturally, learners would believe the English phrase could be used in situations in which the Japanese translation can be used and remain unaware of the gap between their perception and native speakers' norms. This lack of explanation on semantic and pragmatic aspects as well as the negative transfer based on the L1-L2 equivalence perception could be quite dangerous, leading learners to try to comply with what they perceive to be native speaker norms, only to put themselves at risk for pragmatic failure.

### **Issues of L2 Pragmatics in the Japanese Classroom**

Matsuura (1998) claimed that politeness in second language acquisition usually involves pragmalinguistically appropriate language usage. If so, although sociopragmatic aspects may be difficult to teach, learners could benefit from receiving instruction about pragmalinguistic matters.

In the EFL context in Japan, however, pragmatic awareness among Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) is quite low and the fact that JTEs, who account for the majority of teachers, are advanced learners themselves adds another layer of difficulty and complexity. This is because, as Borg (2003) suggested, teachers are more likely to follow their own learning practice when they teach, because their conceptualization of L2 teaching tends to be based on their own learning experience. Many JTEs, unfortunately, have not had the experience of learning pragmatics explicitly in the classroom. In addition, as Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) reported, EFL teachers are likely to consider grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors. On top of that, although pragmalinguistic aspects are important components in the development of communicative competence, JTEs are often in a dilemma between their beliefs in communicative language teaching (CLT) and the classroom constraints such as high-stake entrance examinations (Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005), which usually stress grammar learning and could be a hindrance to promoting pragmatic pedagogy.

Although there are previous studies focusing on learners and effects of explicit instruction on raising pragmatic awareness (Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004; Kondo, 2004; Rose, 2005), pragmatic awareness focusing on teachers and their perceptions has not been fully investigated to date. If we are to promote pragmatic pedagogy systematically, we need to work with teachers. What would be best way to do so taking into account the current

classroom realities? To answer this question, I have come to realize that, instead of seeking a new methodology, it may be more feasible to fully utilize what is already available in the classroom while coping with the constraints and the learners' needs accordingly. That is the integration of pragmatic pedagogy and grammar pedagogy, teaching pragmatic features through grammar lessons. As many JTEs seem to consider grammar instruction as one of their strengths, the effort to raise pragmatic awareness within its scope could prove to be the most effective and sound approach.

### Research Questions

The aim of this study was to explore possibilities of promoting pragmatic pedagogy through explicit classroom grammar instruction. This research was designed to explore an issue regarding pragmatic awareness among EFL learners in Japan and find out if explicit instruction in grammar classes can improve pragmatic awareness based on a pilot study previously conducted (Oda-Sheehan, 2015). The following research questions were examined and analyzed by means of questionnaire surveys administered to four groups of Japanese learners of English:

- RQ1. How does the level of pragmatic awareness differ among learners of different EFL levels and backgrounds?
- RQ2. Is it possible to raise pragmatic awareness through explicit instruction in combination with grammar lessons?

### Research Design and Methodology

#### Participants

The participants were 155 English learners (84 males and 71 females), who came from four distinct categories. Group A were 26 advanced-level adults, including English teachers, international business people, academic researchers, and professional English-Japanese translators. Group B were 33 preservice teachers from a national university. Group C were 64 students (55 freshmen from the same national university and 9 precollege students). Group D was made up of 32 precollege students who were preparing for college entrance exams. I deliberately made Group C the largest sample because right before and after taking the college entrance exams, they may better represent those in the typical Japanese high school classroom, who have experienced the washback effect of testing or the impact that exams have on their learning.

### Materials and Procedure

In order to compare and see the effect of explicit instruction provided in grammar classes, Group A, Group B, and Group C took the survey without receiving any instruction about the contents, but Group D did so after attending a 100-minute grammar lesson which was designed to teach the grammar and general usage of modals and auxiliary verbs. During the class, instruction on pragmalinguistic aspects of the usage of *please* and *had better* was additionally provided as explained in the literature review. It is noteworthy that the pragmatic instruction was added only orally and briefly, and the entire lesson was conducted in a typical college-entrance-test-prep style, stressing lexico-grammatical aspects as often featured in entrance exams and using textbooks specifically designed for test preparation. Thus, the participants were led to perceive the class as a grammar lesson for test preparation.

### Questionnaire

A questionnaire in written discourse completion tasks (DCTs) was prepared in English with the aim of assessing the level of awareness in both grammatical and pragmatic aspects, based on Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998; Appendix A). Eight different scenarios were introduced by a short narration, followed by a dialog between two people. The responses in the dialog fell into three categories: five sentences that were grammatical but pragmatically inappropriate, two sentences that were pragmatically appropriate but ungrammatical, and one sentence that was both grammatically and pragmatically appropriate (see Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998, for the original questions). The participants were asked to judge whether the responses were appropriate or not and mark *Yes* or *No* in the questionnaire. For administrative and practical reasons, the survey was administered only through a written questionnaire instead of the videotaped format used by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei.

One of the ungrammatical responses (regarding the usage of *look forward to* plus infinitive) was specifically added because the construction is often asked in entrance exams for Japanese universities, in which *look forward to see you* is regarded as a grammatical error. Thus, noticing the error might reflect a washback effect on the learners.

### Results

Out of the 155 responses, five were incomplete and thus excluded from the data analysis. Appendix B lists the number and percentage of the participants who judged the response in each question as inappropriate. Correct identification of the inappropriateness is

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scored as 1 and incorrect identifications as 0 (see Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998, for the judgment of correctness), and the results of Question 4 (both appropriate) were excluded from the analysis due to the complication of reverse calculation and excessive subjectivity.

It is clear from the list that Group D participants (precollege students who attended the grammar class) showed a higher percentage overall, suggesting their awareness is higher than that of the other groups. The descriptive statistics of the results are shown in Table 1, and the validity of the grouping was confirmed by ANOVA:  $F(3, 146) = 25.54, p < .01$ .

Table 1. Participant Error Identifications by Group ( $N = 150$ )

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
A	26	4.65	1.47	2	7
B	33	2.90	1.35	1	6
C	59	2.71	1.40	1	7
D	32	4.87	1.21	3	7
Averages	-	3.55	1.67	1	7

Table 2 shows the results of Question 3 (inappropriate usage of *please* for polite requests), Question 6 (inappropriate usage of *look forward to* plus infinitive), and Question 8 (inappropriate usage of *had better* for polite suggestions). Those questions are focused on because the pragmalinguistic features included in Question 3 and Question 8 have been discussed in the literature review and also had been orally explained to Group D during the grammar lesson. In addition, the grammatical feature in Question 6 was included because the feature is often asked in entrance exams and thus is more likely to reflect the washback effect.

Table 2. Number and Percent of Participants Who Judged Responses as Inappropriate

Criterion	Without explicit instruction			With explicit instruction
	Group A Advanced adults ( $n = 26$ )	Group B Preservice ( $n = 33$ )	Group C Freshmen/ precollege ( $n = 59$ )	Group D Precollege ( $n = 32$ )
Q3. Pragmatic: Polite request using <i>please</i>	18 69%	9 27%	16 27%	27 84%
Q6. Grammatical: <i>Look forward to</i> plus infinitive	16 62%	20 61%	23 39%	23 72%
Q8. Pragmatic: Polite suggestion using <i>had better</i>	17 65%	12 36%	16 27%	30 94%

As can be seen in Table 2, the lack of pragmatic awareness in Group C (freshmen and precollege students without explicit instruction) is salient, with only 27% judging both Question 3 (polite request using *please*) and Question 8 (polite suggestion using *had better*) as inappropriate.

Another noteworthy point can be seen in Group A (advanced adults without explicit instruction), with only 69% judging Question 3 inappropriate and only 65% doing so for Question 8. Although the correct percentages may seem high at first glance, conversely they imply that over 30% of the advanced-level learners show a lack of pragmatic awareness. This is problematic in the light of the fact that these participants included English teachers, business people, and so-called English experts, who have to use the language for their work on a daily basis and cannot afford to make such errors. Also, the fact that some of them have had many years of experience living in English-speaking countries suggests that learning implicitly or being immersed in an English-speaking environment alone may not be effective enough to raise pragmatic awareness.

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Yet another problematic aspect emerges in analyzing the data for preservice teachers in Group B, many of whom will start teaching English soon. Whereas their grammatical awareness is higher (61%), their pragmatic awareness is about the same level as that of the freshmen in Group C, which implies that the preservice training they had received may not be helpful in developing pragmatic awareness. This finding is consistent with what previous studies have suggested: Many teachers perceive that they received little training in CLT during their teacher education program (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Sato, 2002).

At the same time, the higher percentage for Question 6 by those preservice teachers (61%) is certainly caused by the washback effect, as is the result of Question 6 by Group D (precollege learners preparing for entrance exams). Although no instruction had been given about the usage of *look forward to* during the 100-minute grammar lesson, Group D participants still show a high percentage (72%) in their awareness of the grammatical feature. Also, it should be noted that comparison of the two data results implies many of the preservice teachers, who will soon be graduating from college, still possess this particular knowledge even several years after learning it as part of their test preparation.

Meanwhile, the most striking finding can be seen in the data from Group D. After receiving explicit pragmalinguistic instruction on making requests and suggestions, which was given in a rather casual manner during the specifically designed grammar class, 84% of the participants judged the response to Question 3 as inappropriate, as did 94% for Question 8. The success rate, which is much higher than that of the other groups, implies improvement in their pragmatic awareness as a result of the instruction given in the grammar class. This finding is supported by previous findings by Thomas (1983) that pragmalinguistic features “can be taught quite straightforwardly as ‘part of the grammar’” (p. 91) and can powerfully bring theory and practice together.

## Discussion

The above results are, for the most part, consistent with the findings from the pilot study (Oda-Sheehan, 2015), which had only 33 participants in total and no group of preservice teachers. The present study is more extensive in terms of data analysis and the number of participants, but still shows consistencies in the results that serve to support the reliability of the data.

One of the consistencies that answer Research Question 1 is the imbalance between the participants’ pragmatic awareness and grammatical awareness. Also, confirmed as a consistency is the lower amount of awareness among lower level learners. The contents of those pragmatic features have been analyzed in the literature review (see Fujioka,

2003; Gore, 1987; Rinnert, 1995). The results in this study can also confirm that teaching-induced factors could be a major reason for the lack of pragmatic awareness.

This leads to the fact that, of the various findings from this study, the most problematic appears to be that of the lower pragmatic awareness group, both in-service and preservice teachers. The preservice teachers with a lack of pragmatic awareness are likely to introduce even more pragmatic deficiencies to their students in a few years. This negative chain reaction must be broken at any cost, and it is urgently necessary to raise pragmatic awareness among JTEs, including preservice teachers, while addressing the realities of the Japanese classroom.

In terms of how to accomplish this, the results of Group D seem to answer Research Question 2, suggesting that pragmatic learning could be successfully combined with explicit instruction in grammar lessons. Also, this approach might become even more effective if taken in connection with the washback effect. The washback effects confirmed above in the grammatical awareness of Group B and Group D may indicate that learners who study hard for entrance exams could learn what is taught explicitly as part of test preparation and could maintain the knowledge for the long term. This implies that they might also be able to learn and maintain pragmatic knowledge if they received it through explicit instruction during the test preparation process.

The combination of pragmatics and grammar may initially seem somewhat of a mismatch, especially when the grammar-oriented approach is often cited as being one of the major causes for ineffective EFL learning. In fact, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) suggested that the focus on grammatical competence could hinder the development of pragmatic competence through certain priorities implicitly indicated to learners. Nevertheless, I maintain that there is a great potential in integrating pragmatics and grammar learning, especially when grammar is required as in the current examination system. The results of this study have made it clear that teaching pragmatics and grammar could work hand in hand, without contradicting each other.

## Conclusion

The implications of this study are very encouraging to both learners and teachers, especially to JTEs who struggle to balance practical communication and grammar for test preparation in the classroom. As described earlier, many JTEs are caught in this challenging situation. Even when they seek to implement CLT, they often feel their first obligation is to prepare students for entrance examinations. They feel they have no choice but to teach through the traditional grammar-based approach. However, with an integrated approach of teaching pragmatics and grammar, teachers’ perception can change from

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“communication or grammar” to “communication AND grammar,” opening up more pedagogical opportunities in that direction.

There are, of course, some limitations in this study. One of these includes the fact that the research method of using written DCTs has been criticized for being too artificial and for not reflecting real-life oral communication. Also, as pragmatics involves many complex communication and discourse issues including not only “what to say” but “how to say” utterances, even native speakers may show variations in interpreting the appropriateness of pragmatic expressions. The issue of subjectivity in questionnaire rating is always a concern. Although the research procedure should no doubt be further refined, this study has some significance by providing an initial insight into this obviously under-researched area.

In a society where cross-cultural interactions frequently take place, raising pragmatic awareness is one of the keys to successful communication. It is time for teachers to start addressing what learners really need to learn to bring about maximal learning effect on classroom instruction and practical applications of classroom learning.

### Bio Data

**Sanae Oda-Sheehan** works as an EFL teacher in Tokyo and also as a communication consultant for US academic societies working with Japanese organizations. Her research interests include communicative task effectiveness, pragmatics, and teacher education.

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## Appendix A Questionnaire

1	Anna and Haruka are talking about their favorite movie stars.
Anna:	I love Johnny Depp. Did you see "Pirates of the Caribbean"?
Haruka:	No, I didn't saw it.
Is Haruka's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
2	Mike and Saki are discussing Japanese literature. Mike is interested in Yukio Mishima and wants to know more about his works.
Mike:	Saki, are you familiar with the work of Yukio Mishima?
Saki:	Yes, I am familiar with his work. I am also familiar with Soseki Natsume.
Is Saki's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
3	Yuka came back to the office carrying a few bags in both hands. She ran into her boss, Tom, at the door.
Tom:	Are you okay?
Yuka:	Yes, I am, but open the door for me, please.
Is Yuka's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
4	Mary invites Keiko to her house, but Keiko can't come.
Mary:	Keiko, would you like to come over to my place this afternoon?
Keiko:	I'm sorry, I'd really like to come, but I have a difficult history test tomorrow.
Is Keiko's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	

5	It's Yasuo's day to give his presentation in class, but he is not ready.
Teacher:	OK, next. Yasuo, it's your turn to give your talk.
Yasuo:	I can't do it today but I will do it next week.
Is Yasuo's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
6	Sarah and Takashi are planning to go out together this weekend.
Sarah:	Let's meet in front of Hachiko, Shibuya at 11 o'clock.
Takashi:	Great! I'm looking forward to see you then.
Is Takashi's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
7	Ichiro is visiting his client's office but can't find the meeting room where he is supposed to meet his client. He goes to the receptionist for help.
Receptionist:	How can I help you, sir?
Ichiro:	I want to know where the meeting room is.
Is Ichiro's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	
8	A professor is trying to use an overhead projector in class, and Yoko, one of the students, is trying to help.
Professor:	I wonder what's wrong with this projector.
Yoko:	You had better turn off the lights.
Is Yoko's response appropriate?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If you feel it is not appropriate/correct, please write down what you would say in the above situation.	

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**Appendix B**
***The Number and Percent of Participants Who Judged Responses as Inappropriate***

Criterion	Without explicit instruction			With explicit instruction
	Group A: Advanced adults	Group B: Preservice	Group C: Freshmen/precollege	Group D: Precollege
# of total valid responses	26	33	59	32
Q1 Grammatically inappropriate (“didn’t saw”)	24 92%	28 85%	53 90%	26 81%
Q2 Pragmatically inappropriate (ignoring the interlocutor’s interest)	8 31%	8 24%	10 17%	13 41%
Q3 Pragmatically inappropriate (polite request using “please”)	18 69%	9 27%	16 27%	27 84%
Q4 Both appropriate	14 54%	25 76%	21 36%	9 28%
Q5 Pragmatically inappropriate (refusal)	18 69%	15 45%	27 46%	18 56%
Q6 Grammatically Inappropriate (“look forward to” plus infinitive)	17 65%	20 61%	23 39%	23 72%
Q7 Pragmatically inappropriate (“want to”)	19 73%	4 12%	15 25%	19 59%
Q8 Pragmatically inappropriate (polite suggestion using “had better”)	17 65%	12 36%	16 27%	30 94%