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Sociolinguistics in Language Teaching
Fall 2011

Week 15 - Answers

Kasper and Rose (2002), Chapter 7

1. What are some of the most important variables in teaching pragmatics in the classroom? (PD7)

The most important variables that we need to think about when teaching pragmatics are really no different than the variables in general language teaching. In fact we may go so far as to say that teaching pragmatics really is the basis of general language teaching or at least it should be. So obviously we have learner variables which involve age, proficiency, learning history, the goals of the learner, and of course affective variables that each learner has in relation to the target language. We also have, of course, situational variables which relate to how many people we have in the class, how many hours each week we have with the students and how those hours are setup, and of course the class syllabus itself. In designing our course we need to try to think about aspects of discourse (texts), pragmatics, and of course how people are supposed to learn pragmatics. This last element is what is often called interlanguage pragmatics. So we need to have a fixed idea for all of these different sides. We need to have a good idea about what texts are and how they're produced blah, blah, blah as well as underlying pragmatics skills or pragmatic competence and how this is supposed to develop within an individual. This knowledge must be tempered with classroom knowledge. This is all a part of good teaching practice regardless of which skill area we are focusing on.

2. What are the basic research findings of classroom pragmatics instruction? (PD7)

Pure and simple, the main research findings on pragmatic construction in the classroom, and remember this means particular pragmatic instruction in a foreign language classroom, is that overt instruction seems to be more effective than covert instruction. The idea being that overt instruction will encourage or hopefully lead to explicit learning. Purely covert instruction, on the other hand, is generally thought to lead to more implicit types of learning. It might seem strange to us (considering Krashen's distinction) and possibly like a bit of a contradiction to try to encourage more explicit learning. Certainly we are told in teaching programs that implicit learning is often better and more effective, particularly when we think about performance. Strictly speaking and based on the research evidence this is not seem to be absolutely true. One way of explaining this is through the noticing hypothesis. The idea being that while we need implicit learning to fire up certain types

of neural mechanisms and we also need to notice certain elements of our own speech in relation to the speech we are hearing. We need to notice patterns and gaps between our own patterns and patterns that others produce, both those more (and here's what they forget to tell you) also less proficient than ourselves. A tremendous amount of covert instruction will provide people with patterns and at some level they will store and have all the patterns they will need, but there's no guarantee that they'll actually focus their attention on the patterns that we want them to, or be able to produce them. For this reason a certain amount of overt teaching would seem to be beneficial, and this is certainly supported by the results of these studies. So what we really find is that we certainly need both overt and covert teaching simply because input alone does not lead to intake or output.

Based on what we said last week we can now not only say that it is better, potentially anyway, to learn something in the classroom as opposed to going to the target language environment, but within the classroom itself a certain amount of overt teaching is also beneficial. Of course there are serious age-related variables to this. Adults are much better at focusing attention and understanding concepts. Therefore, if we have adult students they will certainly benefit from a kind of fixed instruction which guides them and prepares them to deal with both input and practice. For children who, depending on their age, do not understand concepts very well, even their own language, then more overt instruction may not help or at least we need to think very carefully about how we present our overt instruction. For children overt instruction might come much better packaged in the form of directed feedback and not necessarily explanations or presentations of concepts.

3. What are some of the major main teaching approaches and design issues in focused pragmatics instruction? (PD7)

There is overt and covert. Obviously we need to use both but in what proportion and how? The answer is not easy because it really depends on the different variables we mentioned above. In general we should be using much more covert teaching than overt and neither should appear in a solid boring block as we so often do in the classroom. They should both be used and as naturally as possible as we discussed in our new type of classroom environment where we build or create a socialized setting. Input is forever the key!

Based on our answer to the above question it seems to be clear that some overt teaching is helpful in developing pragmatic skills and speaking prowess in general. Exactly how much overt instruction and how it should be applied is are serious questions that need to be answered. The research we read in the chapter really doesn't mention very much about how people went about teaching overtly. When we think of teaching overtly we think of the implementation of a top-down teaching process. This is certainly one aspect, or one possible aspect of overtly teaching pragmatic skills. We did simply mention before that a piece of input is supplied or before an activity aspects of pragmatics and

pragmatic development. So we might actually teach our students something about speech acts by explaining about them or at least naming them. Another approach is in the types of input we choose. Even though we are teaching certain things overtly the input that we give our students is still the most important aspect of our teaching. So we need to find good input and useful input based on what we now know about discourse and how discourse is produced. We also need to make sure that we sequence our input according to elements of pragmatic development. What we deal with the input is that a very important aspect or technique in teaching pragmatics. Nunan (1989) makes an important distinction between what he calls real world type activities and pedagogical activities. Real world types of activities would be things that you would expect your students to have to do in the real world, such as making a phone call, filling out a form, making a presentation. Pedagogical activities, on the other hand, are activities which the students would really only expect to encounter in the classroom. We need to make sure that we used both types of activities in developing pragmatic skill. And getting our students to do things rather than giving top-down explanations we might intermingle or mix and match pedagogical activities, which would certainly be more overt, and real world activities which are much more covert. Finally, one of the last elements of design and when we are thinking about focused pragmatics instruction is feedback. The whole point of this pragmatic focus or overtness in teaching pragmatics, is so that the students can actually notice what is going on in the input and in their output. They somehow need to identify the mismatch between what they do in what they have observed other skill in the type of input that they receive which of course should be good input. Feedback is an extremely important element in getting them to notice. The trick in giving feedback is to make it as overt as possible without stopping a conversation or damaging the ego of the speaker. In doing so the probably simplest rule that we can think of would be to try to make the input meaningful and natural.