Recategorizing Instructions for Interlanguage Pragmatics: 
A Research Synthesis for Theoretical Approaches

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Abstract

The effect of instructions on pragmatic development has often been a focus of studies on interlanguage pragmatics. However, the instructions applied in these studies have not been thoroughly discussed and thus have not been expounded upon any further than the familiar dichotomous instructions; e.g., implicit/explicit teaching. For this reason, the author reviews the previous studies that dealt with the effect of instructions, focusing particularly on Japanese EFL learners, and attempts to recategorize them into more appropriate approaches. By doing this, a guideline for the effect of instruction on pragmatic development can be proposed for future research so that the limitations concerning these studies can be addressed.

Initially, this paper defines the study on the effect of instruction since numerous studies unfortunately failed to confirm the effect of instruction but confirmed the teachability of certain pragmatic features. Second, it sorts out instructions in these studies based on their purposes, revealing that the traditional explicit/implicit dichotomy may not necessarily be feasible. Third, it discusses the part of pragmatic competence for which the newly categorized instructions are effective. Finally, the paper concludes that these three considerations should be taken into account for further research on the effect of instruction on pragmatic development.

1. Introduction

From the late 1990s onward, studies of interlanguage pragmatics, which focuses on the process of acquiring L2 pragmatic ability, have been popular in the field of pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). According to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p.3), interlanguage pragmatics refers to “the study of nonnative speakers’ use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language (L2)” and thus differs from the comparative studies of different cultures, which investigate different linguistic action patterns for certain speech acts.
among the learners of different L1 backgrounds. In the field of English language education in Japan, interlanguage pragmatics has drawn attention from numerous researchers.

Studies of interlanguage pragmatics deal with a variety of topics and issues, for example, pragmatic transfer from L1 (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003; Takahashi, 1996) and pragmatic competence and characteristics of L2 learners (Hill, 1995; Niki & Tajika, 1994). The development of pragmatic competence has recently become an intriguing topic (Fukazawa, 2003; Hill, 1998). In particular, researchers’ attention has been drawn toward the effect of instruction on pragmatic development in the field of EFL since the role of instruction becomes more important due to limited exposure to the target language in the EFL environment (Rose, 2005).

Against the backdrop of increased interests in the effect of instruction on pragmatic development, numerous researchers have considered various instructions in their studies. Some of them focus on increasing linguistic forms and typical expressions for certain speech acts (e.g., Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004; Fujioka, 2002, 2004; Murata, 2004), which is the same as providing learners with linguistic knowledge. Others emphasize the need to raise pragmatic consciousness toward differences in L1 and L2 language use or pragmatic transfer from L1 (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991; Fujioka, 2003; Kondo, 2004; Olshtain & Cohen, 1991; Rose, 1994, 1997; Washburn, 2001), which can be categorized as providing learners with metapragmatic knowledge. This variety of instructions considered by researchers illustrates the absence of consensus in the studies on the effect of instruction; this is why the researchers failed to offer appropriate pedagogical implications for L2 classrooms. Moreover, although some studies attempted to confirm the effect of instruction, they went no further than confirming whether or not pragmatic competence can be taught, i.e., the teachability of pragmatic competence. In short, there remains the following question: What kind of instruction is necessary and appropriate—for whom and for what stage of pragmatic development?

2. Aim of this Paper

In order to achieve consensus over the effect of instruction on pragmatic development, the following three concerns need to be addressed:

a) ambiguous definition of the effect of instruction
b) inconsistency in terms of the objectives and types of instruction
c) lack of clarity with regard to the competence that the instruction aims to promote.

With regard to the first problem, the definition of the effect of instruction has been ambiguous and has differed from one study to another in the field of interlanguage pragmatics. Although several different approaches were adopted for the effect of instruction, all of them have been considered as more or less the same studies, i.e., pragmatic instruction studies.

Second, many types of instruction have been adopted by researchers in the name of developing pragmatic competence. Some of them adopted explicit teaching, while others
adopted implicit teaching. However, did these researchers really aim in the same direction to develop pragmatic competence? For example, while the objectives of instruction are set as improving pragmatic competence, the instruction and assessment themselves focus solely in fact on increasing learners’ repertoires of expressions for certain speech acts. This example indicates a gap between the objectives of instruction (i.e., developing pragmatic competence) and the types of instruction (e.g., explicit or implicit teaching).

Third, the objectives of instruction themselves are different. This implies that different instructions inevitably aim at the different aspects of pragmatic competence. Thus, when we compare the results of teaching methods A and B, it often happens that one instruction focuses on providing pragmatic knowledge and the other, on raising pragmatic awareness. This indicates a gap among the objectives of instruction.

In order to confront these limitations, this paper will review the recent studies on the effect of instruction on pragmatic development and will propose to recategorize them into more reasonable entries so that the instructions on pragmatic development may be conducted more effectively and appropriately for future research.

This paper will review and summarize the limitations of the studies on the effect of instruction, focusing particularly on Japanese EFL learners (see Table 1). Through this review, the paper will recategorize the previous studies and set a guideline for further research on the effect of instruction on pragmatic development.

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3. The Three Limitations related to Instruction Study in Interlanguage Pragmatics

3.1 Ambiguous Definition of the Effect of Instruction

In an attempt to resolve the first question mentioned above, this paper examined several approaches of the studies on the effect of instruction and found that the definition of the effect of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics is not solely defined.

According to Kasper and Rose (2001, p.249), the approaches of studies on the effect of instruction attempt to answer the following three questions:

1. Is the targeted pragmatic feature teachable at all?
2. Is instruction in the targeted feature more effective than no instruction?
3. Are different teaching approaches differentially effective?

Although Kasper and Rose listed these three questions such that they could be answered in the studies on the effect of instruction, the issue that the effect of instruction is really related to is question 3. Studies focusing on question 1 are obviously not studies on the effect of instruction but those on the teachability of pragmatic competence since they are mainly interested in confirming whether or not the targeted pragmatic feature is teachable. On the other hand, studies concerning question 2 include features of comparative studies, i.e., to compare the effect of two approaches; thus, they can be regarded as studies on the effect of instruction. However, these studies adopt a "no instruction" approach, i.e., simple exposure without any treatment. Therefore, the studies focusing on question 2 not only aim to confirm whether teaching the targeted pragmatic feature is better than simple exposure but also intend to clarify whether or not it is teachable. In both cases, studies without a control group eventually examine the teachability of the targeted pragmatic feature. To make matters worse, Kasper (2001) reviewed interventional studies of instructed pragmatic learning and reported that "only seven of the seventeen interventional studies include a control group" (p.57), admitting the limitations of institutional constraints for the administration. This tendency is also evident in the studies of interlanguage pragmatics for Japanese learners. Only two of the eight studies listed in Table 1 have a control group.

As is evident from the tentative categories provided by Kasper and Rose (2001) as well as our review of the studies on Japanese learners, the definition of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics is not solely defined; each study interprets and applies the definition in various ways. Therefore, if we are to seek for studies on the effect of instruction in a more precise sense, studies providing answers to question 3 will be needed for the further advancement in interlanguage pragmatic research.

3.2 Inconsistency in Terms of Objectives and Types of Instruction

With regard to the second concern, the typical dichotomous types of instruction in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, known as explicit and implicit teaching, are reviewed. The types of
instruction considered in the previous studies are often categorized into explicit (deductive) versus implicit (inductive) teaching; based on the studies comparing explicit and implicit teaching for pragmatic competence, it is often reported that explicit (deductive) instruction outperformed implicit (inductive) teaching for pragmatic competence (Fujioka, 2002, 2003, 2004; Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004; Kubota, 1995; Murata, 2004; Takahashi, 2001).

The instruction for explicit teaching of pragmatic competence is often conducted in one of the following ways: (1) by explaining grammatical features (Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004), (2) by explaining speech acts (Fujioka, 2002, 2004; Murata, 2004), (3) by providing metapragmatic information (Kubota, 1995; Takahashi, 2001), and (4) by explaining pragmatic differences in the target language (Murata, 2004). These instructions aim at increasing learners’ knowledge of the language or their repertoires of language expressions by explaining or providing the pragmatic and linguistic information of certain speech acts.

On the other hand, implicit teaching aims at raising learners’ pragmatic consciousness (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kubota, 1995). The following are the instructions employed as part of implicit teaching: video/drama activity, role play (Fujioka, 2003), and discussion (Kondo, 2004). Through these activities, learners apply their knowledge of L1 use (Fujioka, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2001) and consciously realize the difference between L1 and the target language including contextual factors that determine the choice of certain forms, such as social/psychological distance, imposition, and power (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Rose, 1994). As pointed out by Bardovi-Harlig (1996), raising pragmatic consciousness is more important than providing pragmatic knowledge. In the more realistic purpose or objectives of teaching pragmatics, the more appropriate activities are to raise learners’ pragmatic consciousness (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Fujioka, 2003) and to provide some viewpoints in order to have the option of selecting better L2 expressions (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). However, it is suspected that this activity of “consciousness raising” itself can be categorized as implicit teaching.

However, the simple distinction between explicit and implicit teaching does not necessarily account for the present situation in interlanguage pragmatics. It is often observed that the instruction regarded as explicit teaching contains some factors that are identical to those in implicit teaching and vice versa. For example, Kubota (1995) and Takahashi (2001) can be categorized as explicit teaching, but in their instruction phase, learners’ attention is also directed toward the pragmatic differences between L1 and L2, which seems to be an attempt to raise consciousness of pragmatic awareness. This is also evident in Murata (2004), explaining the pragmatic difference in the target language. As another example, Fordyce and Fukazawa (2004) applied both an explicit instruction (e.g., grammatical explanation) and a consciousness-raising task (e.g., role play), even though they named their interventional treatment as the effect of explicit teaching. Although dealing with the Japanese language, the four input conditions suggested by Takahashi (2005) are clear examples of a borderline case between explicit and implicit teaching. The following are the four input conditions: providing metapragmatic information (explicit teaching),
instructing to compare the strategies of L1 and L2 (implicit form-comparison teaching), instructing to identify native-like strategies (implicit form-search teaching), and instructing to listen and read the input (meaning-focused teaching). Although she claims that the first one is deductive and the other three are implicit and inductive, form comparison can be considered as explicit teaching since learners are apparently directed to a certain strategy or form in the text.

As illustrated by the studies mentioned above, the present definitions of explicit and implicit teaching as well as inductive and deductive teaching in interlanguage pragmatics remains unclear and researchers have defined the term according to their own interpretation. Moreover, many studies point out a gap between the objectives and types of instruction. Therefore, other criteria are required to categorize the studies of pragmatic instruction. This paper suggests that pragmatic instructions should be categorized based on the aspects of pragmatic competence, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The left side of Figure 1 shows that instructions on pragmatic development were perceived as a large category and that this category had explicit and implicit teaching considered along with other types of instruction. On the other hand, the right side of this figure illustrates what the author proposes as a new distinction in categories for instructions/teaching: one attempts to raise the pragmatic awareness, directing learners' attention to the differences in the languages and tuning them in to L2 and the other tries to increase the learners' repertoires of linguistic expressions.

![Figure 1. Disambiguating objectives of instructions on pragmatic development](image-url)
3.3 Which Aspect of Competence does the Instruction Attempt to Influence?

Now that we are aware that the category of explicit and implicit teaching does not necessarily fit the present situation in interlanguage pragmatic research, we need to determine how each group of instructions works on learners’ pragmatic competence, particularly what aspects of pragmatic competence do they influence. The fact that different instructions have different purposes implies that each group of instructions works on different aspects of pragmatic development.

In 3.2, we proposed the purpose-based categorization for future research in interlanguage pragmatics: tuning into L2 for the differences between the learners’ L1 linguistic patterns and L2 use and increasing the linguistic repertoires of learners’ pragmatic competence. Similar to the case with instructions for increasing repertoires, activities such as explaining grammatical patterns and building up knowledge of linguistic expressions will be conducted so that learners can have more options for utilizing their intention in a certain speech act. On the other hand, to fine tune in learners’ L1 linguistic patterns for L2 use, the objectives of these instructions are set at raising learners’ pragmatic consciousness or filling the gap between L1 and L2 in order to avoid the pragmatic transfer from L1. As is clearly illustrated by Figure 2, the two groups of instructions are influencing different aspects of learners’ pragmatic competence. Therefore, it seems to be a hasty conclusion or even a potentially confusing conclusion that explicit teaching precedes implicit teaching in order to develop learners’ pragmatic competence.

Figure 2. Categories of instruction and their targeted aspects of pragmatic competence
Since the new distinction makes two purposes of instructions work in different aspects of pragmatic competence, this distinction should be taken into account when comparing the effect of instructions. Therefore, first, comparisons should be made within each category based on the purpose of developing pragmatic competence, not “between or among” categories such as explicit and implicit pragmatic teaching.

Once this distinction is made, new questions will arise. In what order of the group of instructions should we adapt in order to develop learners’ pragmatic competence? Should we increase the linguistic repertoires first and then tune the learners’ interlanguage into L2 use or vice versa? Further, what kind of combinations of instructions would be the most effective for pragmatic development? Should we combine the activity of explaining and providing metapragmatic information with the activity of increasing pragmatic awareness?

4. Implications for Future Studies on the Effect of Instructions in Interlanguage Pragmatics

We dealt with the above three issues in order to resolve from the studies on the effect of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics as follows (also listed in section 2). Only discussions have been held so far to solve these problems. This section discusses the points and guidelines that future research should take into consideration are discussed.

Future research on the effect of instruction will require us to be well aware of these three issues and be well prepared for them. First, confusion pertaining to teachability studies as compared with approaches will have to be avoided in order to typify our studies as “effect of instruction.” In addition to having a proper control group, two or more instructions will have to be compared appropriately. Therefore, the results of teaching methods A and B will have to be compared and examined appropriately.

Second, we need to be more attentive to the objectives of instructions. A simple dichotomy such as explicit and implicit can lead us to mix up activities that in fact attempt to promote different abilities. It also causes difficulty in answering the simple question regarding the method that is more effective for pragmatic development. Therefore, we must be well aware of the pragmatic competence that the instruction aims to influence because different instructions influencing different competences should not be compared.

In summary, studies on the effects of instruction on pragmatic development should (1) consider an appropriate control group, (2) compare instructions with the same purpose, and (3) attempt to enhance the same aspect of L2 learners’ pragmatic competence. By doing so, the following most intriguing question can be researched carefully: “What kind of instruction is necessary—for whom and for what stage of pragmatic development?”
References


