Possibilities and Limitations in the Pragmatic Language Teaching in a Japanese EFL Context: A Case Study of a Junior High School

FUJIWARA, Yasuhiko
Chugoku Junior College

1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to examine possibilities and limitations of pragmatic language teaching (hereafter, PLT) in secondary EFL classrooms in Japan. There are mainly two reasons for pursuing this issue. One reason is that in comparison to grammar teaching, very few articles have been devoted to the study on this matter in applied linguistics (Kasper 1997, Rose 1999). The other is that amongst the few studies on PLT that do exist, there is almost no research observing secondary classrooms. This is mainly because previous classroom-based research has predominantly focused on the tertiary level for practical constraints (Kasper 2001a), and because we have just recently begun to consider PLT at the secondary English classroom level. Therefore, the data extracted from pilot classes at junior high schools is worth investigating from as many angles as possible.

More specifically, I will explore a little further into PLT in Japanese secondary classrooms with the main focus on inductive/deductive learning, implicit/explicit teaching, tasks, and input availability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Here, we will review the literature on PLT in terms of 1) teachability, 2) teaching contexts, 3) target forms, 4) inductive/deductive learning, 5) implicit/explicit teaching, and 6) potentially useful tasks. These points then will be summarized as the ideal conditions for PLT.

First of all, one can safely state that many pragmatic features are teachable. The proposition seems highly valid according to the previous research (for an overview, see Kasper 1997, 2001a). The literature shows the positive effect of instruction by comparing instructed and uninstructed learners regardless of different target languages (e.g. English, French, Japanese, etc), different target features (e.g. gambits, T/V system, speech acts, etc.), different teaching contexts (foreign/second language: henceforth FL/SL), and different subjects in terms of L1 background and L2 proficiency.

Secondly, we will draw attention to teaching contexts. Although the dichotomy between FL and SL is overlapped in some contexts like Hong Kong (Rose 1999), most research shows that SL environment could yield better results than FL in terms of pragmatic learning on the ground that the former takes an advantage over the latter with regard to 'input availability' (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1996). Learners in second language contexts have rich exposure to a target language and a great deal of opportunities to use it for real-life purposes while ones in foreign language contexts simply not (Kasper 2000). Furthermore, many drawbacks of teacher-fronted teaching, though it seems a usual practice in
EFL, are well documented (for details, see Kasper 1997).

Thirdly, we will consider what target forms should be taught in PLT. Although it is clear that all grammatical forms should be more or less interconnected with pragmatics, ‘not all grammatical features are good candidates for studying the relationship between pragmatics and grammar’ and ‘nor are all aspects of pragmalinguistic good candidates for studying this relationship (Kasper 2001b: 510).’ According to Kasper (2001b) and Bardovi-Harlig (1999), some potentially good candidates are: 1) modal verbs/adverbs (e.g. may/must/shall/ please, probably), 2) tense and aspect (e.g. Can/will → could/would, I think → I was thinking of...), 3) sentence type (e.g. single/bi-clausal request. Would you→? /would it be possible→?), 4) negation (e.g. I’m unhappy. → I’m not so happy.), and 5) prosody (supra segmental features: e.g. sentence stress/intonation).

The fourth and fifth issues concern the matters of teaching method. The research findings vary as to whether an inductive or deductive approach in the presentation stage is better. Kubota (1995) reported the superiority of the inductive approach to implicature teaching in a Japanese EFL context while Rose & Ng (2001), investigating the difference of both approaches to compliments and compliment responses in a Chinese EFL context, conclude that ‘although inductive and deductive instruction may both lead to gains in pragmalinguistic proficiency, only the latter may be effective for developing sociopragmatic proficiency’ (p167). The matter remains to be proved in the future research. In contrast with the inductive/deductive approach, there is considerable agreement, without any exception, that explicit instruction is superior to implicit instruction (e.g. House 1996, Fordyce & Fukazawa, 2004).

The last issue to be considered is the potentially useful task in the practice phase. Although there is, to my knowledge, no research that empirically verifies effectiveness of a certain task for pragmatic development, there are a number of suggestions about the use of the task. Most researchers argue that for receptive skills, the use of media like video or audiocassette may be helpful providing the authentic and contextualised input (Kasper 1997, Judd, 1999), and that for productive skills, one of the better tasks is a skit or role-play/simulation (Judd 1999, Rose 1999). Through these activities, it would be desirable to raise cognitive awareness of pragmatic features of a target language (Schmidt 1993, Rose 1999).

An outline of the findings on teachability, teaching contexts, target forms, inductive/deductive presentation, implicit/explicit explanation, and potentially useful tasks is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Ideal conditions for PLT according to the previous research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-methodological</th>
<th>Methodological</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teachability</td>
<td>Teachable</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Inductive/deductive</td>
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<td>presentation</td>
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<td>Deductive&lt; Inductive?</td>
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<td>Teaching context</td>
<td>FL &lt; SL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implicit/explicit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Implicit &lt; Explicit</td>
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<td>Target forms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>tense &amp; aspect/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sentence type/negation/</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prosody</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for practice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The use of media</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(video/audiocassette)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skit/role play/</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>simulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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With the basis of these ideal conditions above, this paper will examine possibilities and limitations of pragmatic teaching in junior high school classrooms with the specific reference to the following points: 1) inductive/deductive learning in presentation (Do the teachers present target features inductively or deductively?), 2) implicit/explicit teaching in explanation (Do they explain them implicitly or explicitly?), 3) the use of the task in practice (What kind of tasks do they use when they practice?), and 4) input availability of the classrooms (How rich/scare is appropriate input in the classrooms?). Although, in such a short paper as this, these aspects can be mentioned only summarily, I believe this paper can provoke readers' thoughts and present many directions for further research.

3. METHOD

3.1. Data

The data consist of transcripts extracted from the video recordings of three pilot classes of the Okayama University Attached Junior High School in June, 1999, and their teaching plans including task sheets. First of all, I will describe 1) teachers, 2) learners and 3) target structures and functions.

The teachers responsible for the classrooms were three Japanese, one female and two males, and one American male as an assistant language teacher (ALT). The pupils were aged 12-15 in grades 1-3. The number of students in each class was approximately 40. The duration of the class was 50 minutes respectively. At this junior high school, they had been taught in ‘weak’ communicative language teaching (Littlewood 1981).

As for the target forms and functions, all the classes focus on modal verbs, which are regarded as good candidates for the grammatical forms involved in PLT (see Table 1 above). In Class 1 (for the first graders), a Japanese female teacher with the ALT team-teaches how to make self-introduction, emphasising the function of may (e.g. May I introduce myself? May I ask a question?). Class 2 (for the second graders) provides will/would you as the target structure and request as the target function. Class 3 (for the third graders) gives opportunities for students to learn the difference between should and must, focusing on the speech act, suggestion. These are the background of the data in this study.

3.2. Procedure

Before turning to a closer examination of the classrooms, we will briefly look into the procedure of analysis. In terms of the framework of classroom interaction, I mainly refer to FLINT (Moskowitz 1971) since this framework is well specialized in terms of the analysis of speech acts in the classroom (Kasper 2001a). Also, we shall confine our attention to qualitative aspects of classrooms rather than quantitative aspects, partly because the data of the discourse in the three classrooms are not enough for any kind of generalization, and partly because as mentioned above, the main aim of this paper is to explore the potentialities and constraints of PLT by classroom observation. Therefore, I adopt the qualitative approach for the analysis of the classroom discourse.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Methodological issues

As for teaching methodology, all three teachers take the inductive approach rather than deductive in introducing the target features. The common procedure of the lessons is 1) presenting some model conversation in live or recorded role plays between T-T or T-S, and then 2) asking questions: ‘who and
who are talking?" or 'what did he say to me at first?' Consider the excerpt below. (see Appendix for transcription conventions)

Excerpt 1

1 ALT: How <ff> beautiful!> Excuse me.
2 T Yes.
3 ALT May I introduce myself?
4 T <ff> Yes!>
5 ALT I'm Jack. Dawson
6 T Pardon me?
7 ALT Oh, My name is Jack Dawson, please call me Jack.
8 T [Umm]. Okay, I'm Rose. Please call me Rose.
9 ALT <ff> Rose! Such a pretty name!>
10 T Nice to meet you Jack.
11 ALT Nice to meet you, Rose.
12 {The end of the role play between T and ALT}
13 T Okay good. Okay, what did he say --- at first? Okay, okay, you, okay, {S's name}.
14 S1 <sp> Excuse me.>
15 T Excuse me, Yeah. Excuse me, and next? Hai, {S's name}.
16 T Say. Can I introduce myself?
17 ALT [Yes.] Can I, can I?
18 S2 Oh, that's good. May I, may I introduce myself? {Putting the target sentence card on the blackboard} Okay please repeat Mr {ALT's name}. You say...

(extracted from Class 1)

As the example shows, the teachers demonstrate the role play as a model, expecting the students to induce the rule about what the situation is, what the function of may is and why the ALT says 'May I introduce myself?'

Turning to the issue of the explicit/implicit instruction during the explanation stage, the implicit way is adopted in the Class 1 while the explicit way is implemented in Classes 2 and 3. More specifically, the teacher in Class 1 does not orally explain the overt rule about the use of may by using metapragmatic terms though she put a card with L2 words and L1 equivalents on the blackboard. This is assumed to be implicit according to the explicitness continuum proposed by Sharwood Smith (1980: 161). On the other hand, the teachers in Classes 2 and 3 adopt the explicit approach in the sense that they exploit metapragmatic terms like 'request', 'order' or 'suggestion' in L1, raising the learners' conscious attention to the speech events, the participants in the video-recorded conversations, the relative difference of their status, and the speech act realization strategies. Furthermore, they compare the situations where the interlocutors have an equal status (e.g. T-T) with ones which are unequal (e.g. T-S), which may enable learners to 'notice the gap' of the social contexts (Schmidt 1993). On these grounds, I refer to the explanation methods in Classes 2 and 3 as 'explicit.'

Turning now to the practice phase, the three classes have similarities as well as differences in the use of activities. In terms of the use of media for the receptive skills, Classes 2 and 3, as noted above, make use of self-made video scenarios, providing well-contextualised information. However, it must be noted that the task is used not for the purpose of practice, but for the presentation of new materials. All practices focus on production skills rather than comprehension. The first similarity is that all the teachers exploit skits as a warming-up activity at the beginning of the class. Secondly, the use of role
play for productive skills is a common feature in all the lessons. In Class 1, the learners practice the
target in the role play with the ALT while in Classes 2 and 3, they take certain roles conducting the
conversations with their classmates.

As for the differences, in only Class 2, the teacher uses printed cartoons as the production practice.
To be more specific, he presents some cartoons designed to elicit requests in various situations. Learners
then do things with words using contextualised cues in them. The use of the cartoon is also regarded as
an important task because lower-level learners can interpret them more easily than written presentations
(Rose 2000). Table 2 below summarizes the details of the presentation, explanation, and practice stage
in each classroom, where a plus sign means a positive feature according to the elicited ideal conditions.

Table 2: The teaching methodology in the presentation, explanation, and practice stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[± inductive]</th>
<th>[± explicit]</th>
<th>[± media use]</th>
<th>[± cartoon]</th>
<th>[± skit]</th>
<th>[± role play]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class3</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Non-methodological issues: availability of input

In this section, I will shift the emphasis from methodological to non-methodological variables:
teaching contexts (i.e. FL/SL, see also Table 1 for reminder). It has already been mentioned that EFL
contexts such as Japan are less favourable than ESL for pragmatic development on the grounds that the
former could not provide rich input available to learners. The notion of “input availability” proposed by
noticing is not a sufficient, but rather a necessary condition for grammatical and pragmatic language
acquisition. For noticing, learners must observe a native speaker or nonnative expert model. In an EFL
context, however, input for noticing may be seriously scarce as well as the input source itself. Kasper
(2000) thoughtfully made a pessimistic statement on the possibility of PLT in EFL.

In a second language context,..., learners have rich exposure to the target language and ample
opportunity to use it for real-life purposes. In a foreign language situation such as ELT in Japan,
however, students lack the need and opportunity of genuine communication in the target language:
therefore, it is nearly impossible for students to develop pragmatic ability... (emphasis added, p1)

It is well-known that learners’ use of foreign language is mostly restricted to the language classroom.
Therefore, the availability of input in teacher and pupil talk may be one of the most crucial issues that
cannot be overemphasised. For the moment, we shall concentrate on the issue of input availability in the
classrooms focusing on the following speech acts found in the data: 1) greeting, 2) gratitude, 3)
compliment/compliment response, and 4) request.

Greeting

Greetings occurred at the beginning and the end of all the classes. It is obvious that this speech act is
a kind of ‘routinised’ action since the class follows the same procedure everyday at the opening and closing. As an example of a routinised greeting, consider the samples below.

**Excerpt 2**

{Ss standing up}

1 T: Hello, everybody.
2 Ss Hello, Mr. {T’s name}, how’re you?
3 T I’m always very fine, thank you, and you?
4 Ss I’m fine, thank you.
5 T Okay, sit down, sit down please. (extracted from Class2)

**Excerpt 3**

1 T: That’s all for today.
2 S Stand up.
3 {Ss standing up}
4 T Good-bye everyone.
5 Ss Good-bye, Mr. {T’s name}.
6 T Have a nice day!
7 S Thank you. (extracted from Class3)

This type of interaction admits two interpretations. One is positive since the interactional routines like this kind of greeting provide a framework for L2 competence, and learners ‘can store highly predictable discourse as scripts in long-term memory and activate them in appropriate contexts’ (Kanagy, 1999: 1448). The other is negative since this discourse provides only one type of greeting while there would be at least eight kinds of greetings depending on the length of time, the social intimacy of the participants, and the recurrence (see Eisenstein 1996).

**Gratitude**

The majority of gratitude statements are given to students by the teacher at the end of their performances as the function of ‘praises or encouragement’ in FLINT (Moskowitz 1971:213) or so-called ‘reinforcement.’ In other words, the occurrences of gratitude are mainly restricted to the teacher’s Follow-up in the so-called IRF framework (i.e. I-Initiation, R-Response, F-Follow-up, see Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). The linguistic realization is the thank-you formula in nearly all cases as in Excerpt 4.

**Excerpt 4**

1 S1 Hello, {S2’s name}.
2 S2 Hello, {S1’s name}.
3 S1 I enjoy the school life. How about you.
4 S2 Yes--I---(???)
5 S1 Ee--------what---what are you---member of the club.
6 S2 Ee----I member of the basket ball club.
7 S1 I member of the --- Tennis club.
8 {The end of the role play between S1 and S2}
9 T Okay, thank you, hai, clap your hands. (extracted from Class2)
Although the main function of this gratitude is to encourage pupils, it must be noted that it works as the indicator of the end of the performance and of topic continuation on the part of the teacher. This seems to be a specific characteristic of teacher talk.

In pupil-pupil talk, though usually a minor part of classroom discourse, students seem to enjoy the opportunities of gratitude in a skit as in Excerpt 5.

**Excerpt 5**

1. S1  This question is too difficult.
2. S2  Who is your teacher?
3. S1  Our teacher is Ms. {T's name}.
4. S2  Oh, she is very beautiful. You need my help?
5. S1  Oh, thank you, you're great brother!  (extracted from Class 1)

This example may be relatively more natural than in Excerpt 4.

**Compliment/response**

The major characteristics of compliments are nearly the same as the ones of gratitude in the sense that after the students' performances, the teachers give them for the purpose of praise, encouragement, or reinforcement in the feedback turn in the IRF. Naturally, the topics for praise must be ascribed to the students' knowledge or abilities of English although some researchers show that the most popular topical content in English-speaking countries is related to people's appearance (see Barnlund & Araki, 1985, Brown & Holmes 1987). The linguistic realization varies from a couple of words (e.g. good, okay, good!, very good job!) to a sentence (e.g. Oh, you're a very good student, aren't you?, you sang very well today, you know very well.). Here is an example from Class 3.

**Excerpt 6**

1.  {closing gap task}
2.  T  What words come here?
3.  S  Hospital.
4.  T  Hospital, okay, that's right. Very good job! {clapping}
5.  Ss  {clapping}  (extracted from Class 3)

Contrary to teacher-delivered compliments, the interactions elicited from a role play have some possibility to allow learners to make more natural compliments as shown in Excerpt 7.

**Excerpt 7**

1.  S  Our class is very cheerful, and everyone love the English lessons. Because Ms
2.  {T's name} is very kind and beautiful.
3.  Ss  {laugh}
4.  T  Thank you.  (extracted from Class 1)

**Request**

Requests would be the most available speech act for learners, for the teacher should give directions
for the organization of classroom activity (Ellis 1984). Therefore, it is not surprising that the providers of requests are predominantly the teachers who lead the classes. In the data, though small, there is indeed no request made by students. In other words, there may be few opportunities for learners to make requests as output.

The first characteristic of teacher’s requests as input is, not surprisingly, extreme directness. Nearly all their requests are realized in imperative with or without an external modifier (e.g. Look at this, Please talk to your friend, alright?, So, listen to the tape carefully). The second feature which must be noted is that after their request, there is, in most cases, no response from a recipient since it is taken for granted by both teachers and students that teacher’s request does not need any negotiation or resistance because it is an ‘unequal status encounter.’

What I would like to say here is though requesting is the most common speech act in the classroom and the goal related with the classroom organization afford learners opportunities for the comprehension or production of a range of illocutionary acts (Ellis 1984), it might be the case that learners cannot incorporate the instructor’s input as it is, because it would be too straight and require no responses. To put it simply, teacher talk would not be appropriate for student talk.

5. Conclusion

So far, we have seen how the teachers present and explain the target materials, and what kind of tasks the learners practice. We may be now in a position to say that the teaching methods they employed are not so far from the ideal conditions for PLT (Compare Table 1 with 2 above). In the first place, the choices for the target grammatical forms in all the classes are modal verbs. As we have seen, they are considered to be closely related with pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig 1999, Kasper 2001). In the second place, the preferred way to introduce the forms and functions is inductive. The inductive presentation has been verified as a better way in a Japanese EFL context (Kubota 1995) though there are, as noted above, some contradictions among researchers (Kubota 1995, Rose & Ng 2001). In the third place, the two instructors exploit explicit teaching in the explanation stage, which has been highly regarded for PLT in the recent research (e.g. Schmidt 1993, House 1996, Fordyce & Fukazawa 2004). Furthermore, teachers use various kinds of potentially useful tasks like media use, cartoon tasks, and skits/role plays (Judd 1999, Rose 1999; 2000). Those methodological features would lead us to feel the great possibility of PLT at a junior high school.

Contrary to the possibility in methodological variables, now we are able to see how scarce the input availability is in the classroom. The Greeting is somewhat fixed although the routinised characteristic may contribute to learner’s interactional competence (Kanagy, 1999). The Gratitude and compliment are, in most cases, strictly confined to the teachers’ turn as the function of praise or encouragement. The Request is obviously dominated by the teachers obviously because of the nature of the classroom. Therefore, it would be reasonable to suppose that little input availability is one of the most problematic limitations in a Japanese EFL context.

We cannot deny that those limitations do exist, but I would suggest that we should not dwell on them since due to “the lack of pragmatic input outside of the classroom in Japan, the teaching of pragmatics skills needs to be carried out in classroom settings” (Fordyce and Fukazawa 2004). In short, for practitioners, it is simply impossible or even undesirable to change the “non”-methodological variable of the teaching context. Rather, it should be more productive to concern about how PLT in the
class can be best organized and implemented or how a textbook is composed for the pragmatic development of Japanese learners. Given the fact that pragmatic language teaching has not been well considered, there must be ways to be found by continuous efforts. The point is that within an EFL context in Japan, we should pursue the best teaching practice possible.

Along with this argument, let me point out some future research directions. First, the result on the input availability issue should be compensated by a quantitative analysis on the frequency of speech acts in the classroom with larger corpus data. The data in this study is unquestionably inadequate for generalizations. Therefore, a larger corpus must be required to statistically analyse the input availability of the classrooms. Second, process-product-classroom research should be conducted. According to Kasper's classification of classroom-based research (2001a), this paper is regarded as a 'process' rather than 'product' study because it observes the phenomenon of the classrooms from many perspectives, but does not refer to the learning outcome concerning pragmatic competence. Therefore, it must be necessary to implement the 'process-product-classroom research' combining interventional with observational research strategies in a more longitudinal perspective for a fuller understanding of PLT (Kasper 2001a).

Though this study slightly contributes to the understanding of possibilities and limitations of PLT in a Japanese secondary classroom, there is much room for further investigation in these directions above.

Note
1. This is not to say that these ideal conditions can be fully generalized here. I would, however, apply them as a reference because they are the only relevant and available information for this research.
2. It may be desirable to describe the distinction between skit and role-play. The skit means here that conversation is totally fixed or pre-determined while in role play, it is, to a certain degree, flexible.

References


Appendix: Transcription Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unintelligible text</td>
<td>(???)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlapping text</td>
<td>[word]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loudly/very loudly</td>
<td>&lt;&lt;&gt; word &gt;&lt;&lt;ff&gt; word &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softly/very softly</td>
<td>&lt;&lt;p&gt; word &gt;&lt;&lt;pp&gt; word &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lengthened/very lengthened segment</td>
<td>wo:rd/wo::rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant additional information</td>
<td>{descriptive comment}</td>
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</table>

(Based on the coding system by Spencer-Oatey 2000)

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