

## LEARNER STRATEGIES FOR PERFORMING INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the strategies that learners employ in an effort to ensure that the input that they process is pragmatically comprehensible to them. Likewise, attention is given to the strategies that learners can make use of so that their output is comprehensible pragmatically to their interlocutors. This entails taking a close look at specific examples of what comprehensibility of language at the level of intercultural pragmatics actually means in terms of intercultural pragmatics. In looking at both the comprehension and production of pragmatic material, the strategies that might be called on in order to avoid pragmatic failure are considered. Focus is first given to what it might take strategically in order to effectively comprehend input pragmatically, whether the input is through language, through gestures, or through silence. Then focus is given to strategies for diminishing threats to comprehensible output, such as negative transfer of norms from the L1 or another language, limited L2 grammar ability, overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms, the effect of instruction or instructional materials, and resistance to perceived L2 norms. The ultimate concern is to identify strategies that might assist learners in their efforts to have their conversational partners correctly interpret the intended pragmatics in their communications, and on the role that ESL teachers can play in facilitating this process.

### INTRODUCTION

This article relates issues of comprehensible input and comprehensible output to an increasingly prominent field: second/foreign-language (L2)<sup>1</sup> pragmatics, where the intended meanings often go beyond the literal ones. While the examples are taken from the learning and use of numerous languages, they are intended to be applied to the teaching and learning of English, either as a second or foreign language. The article is aimed both at learners of English who may well need to perform in a pragmatically appropriate way in high-stakes situations, and is also aimed at developing and practicing ESL teachers, whose role it can be to assist these learners in becoming better at L2 pragmatics. In fact, research findings to date has suggested that being more explicit about pragmatic behaviors – such as how speech acts<sup>2</sup> function in discourse – is a more effective instructional approach than leaving learners to figure pragmatic behavior out for themselves (see Kasper, 2006; Rose, 2005; Jeon & Kaya, 2006).

Having pragmatic ability implies that as listeners or readers, learners are able to interpret the intended meanings of what is said or written, the assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed (Yule, 1996: 3-4). As speakers, pragmatic ability means that learners know how to say what they want to say with the proper politeness, directness, and formality (for instance, in the role of boss, telling an employee that s/he is being laid off; or in the role of teacher, telling a student that his/her work is

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, L2 will serve as a generic label, including both the context where the language is spoken widely and the context where it is not. In principle, pragmatic development in an L2 will be faster in the former context than in the latter, but it depends largely on how the learner makes use of the available resources.

<sup>2</sup> *Speech acts* are the specific social functions that people carry out in speaking and writing, such as apologizing, complaining, making requests, refusing things/invitations, complimenting, or thanking.

unacceptable). They also need to know what not to say at all and what to communicate non-verbally. As writers, pragmatic ability means knowing how to write a message intelligibly, again paying attention to level of politeness, directness, formality, and appropriateness of the rhetorical structure of the message (for instance, in the role of employee, composing an e-mail message to the boss requesting a promotion and a raise, or a paid vacation from the boss; or as neighbor, writing a note complaining about late-evening TV noise).

It can be a real challenge for learners to become fully versed at both the receptive and productive sides of pragmatics. For this reason, learners often need to compensate for what is lacking in their language proficiency by means of strategies – strategies for learning about L2 pragmatics expeditiously, strategies for performing pragmatics effectively, and strategies for simply coping with their lack of language proficiency. This article will be about some of the strategies that could be used to deal with the enormous demands put on learners in their efforts to avoid pragmatic failure, and about steps that teachers can take to assist learners in meeting the challenge.

### **COMPREHENDING THE PRAGMATIC MESSAGES IN THE INPUT**

Input could be through language (e.g. through lexical items, syntax, or discourse), though gestures, or through silence. Whether input is pragmatically comprehensible to the learners depends on various factors, such as: (1) the functional proficiency of the learners in the target language and in other languages, (2) the age, gender, occupation, social status, and experience of the learners in the relevant communities of practice (e.g. talk on the shop floor), and (3) the learners' previous multilingual/multicultural experiences. Let us now relate these factors to a sampling of language and nonverbal behaviors in an effort to illustrate how such factors may contribute to the ease or difficulty which learners have in interpreting the pragmatics of an interaction in a given situation.

One major pitfall though seemingly innocuous is getting the greetings wrong. So, for example, underestimating the *illocutionary force* or pragmatic function of *bonjour* in a French-speaking community can be detrimental to getting some transaction to work (e.g., simply obtaining information about a train or a parking meter). The pragmatics of this apparently simple greeting may have a subtle function attached to it, namely, to establish contact politely, which the less savvy nonnative may miss. An American approaches a man on the street in Martinique, as the author did over a year ago, and launches directly into a request for help in interpreting a confusing parking slip issued by a machine and intended to be put on the dashboard of the car. Instead of responding to the man's question (asked in fluent French), he says, "*Bonjour.*" So an L2 speaker of French needs to know what that *bonjour* means, most likely "I was put off by your focusing immediately and exclusively on the parking slip, without going through the courtesy of extending a morning greeting." A strategic approach to dealing with the pragmatics of greetings is to have a classroom teacher or other highly competent speakers of the language<sup>3</sup> provide guidance as to the function of such greetings in the given language. It is not enough just to memorize the various greetings for different times of day. It is crucial to know the when, how, and why of using them.

In the above example, the author was operating from a US-based pragmatics mode and simply transferring this approach to this parking slip situation, rather than asking himself

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<sup>3</sup> An added strategy for ESL learners is to figure out how to find highly competent users of English who are also good sources of input as to how the language functions pragmatically.

how a speaker of French in Martinique would do it, observing how they do it, or asking how to do it. So being strategic would mean observing how locals do it – if time permits and if there is accessibility to observing the given behavior in action. If an effort is made to ask locals about the proper greeting behavior, then learners have to be careful to qualify the age, gender, and status issues related to the given situation. Otherwise they could be misled by the response that they get and inappropriately overgeneralize this particular greeting to a situation where it is not usually applied. Another factor here could be that the learner brings previous knowledge of the pragmatics of French as spoken in France to bear in another Francophone country, namely Martinique, where the pragmatics could diverge somewhat from those of France.<sup>4</sup>

While differences in greetings between two languages and cultures may be very pronounced, as in the case of *bonjour* in Martinique (where there were few Americans and little English is spoken), they may be more subtle and even blurred in L2 situations such as when French is spoken in a French-speaking community in the U.S. In this intercultural situation, perhaps the need for the greeting as a conversation opener is diminished given the influence of the mainstream language community where “we get down to business” right away.

Other comprehensible pragmatics problems can be attributed to negative transfer from the L1, overgeneralization of material in the L2, or limited proficiency in the L2 (three categories to be elaborated on in the section on pragmatically comprehensible output, below). So at the lexical level, the first time a non-local hears Kiwis say “Good on ya!” (accent on the “on”) in New Zealand, she might be a bit startled, thinking perhaps that she spilled something on herself. So part of pragmatic comprehension includes collecting up those local expressions that are not completely opaque, but may give pause for thought.

At the grammatical level, the nonnative has to interpret correctly the role of grammar (e.g., verb tenses) in pragmatics. It has been seen, for example, that English-speaking study abroaders to Spanish-speaking countries misread their acquaintances’ use of the conditional in requests (e.g., *podrias* ‘could you...’ instead of *puedes* ‘can you’) as being overly formal (Cohen & Shively, 2007). So a strategic approach would be to check with locals as to just what verb tenses are used for what. This can seem basic, but it can actually be rather subtle. Unfortunately textbooks tend to give more emphasis to the plethora of verb tenses, and perhaps not enough to just **when** to use them and **for what**. The problems is that without having the tense usage explicitly called to their attention, learners may not attend to nor acquire some or many of these usages.

Another language-related issue is that speech acts in real time may not show up in a neat, interpretable fashion, but rather be spread over a number of turns in a lengthy interaction, culminating in something like, “Well, then, I’m sorry for that” (see Félix-Brasdefer, 2006). It may be progressive enough and subtle enough that the nonnative does not even realize that an apology is taking place. So a strategy would be for the learners to ask the interlocutor what just happened if they are not sure. For example, a strategy would be to say, “I’m still learning the language, and I want to make sure I understood correctly. Was that an apology?” The same strategy could be used to determine whether the interlocutor just complained, made a request, gave a refusal, or performed some other speech act.

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<sup>4</sup> For a sampling of research on dialect differences in the pragmatics associated with different speech communities, see the treatment of Spanish in an edited volume by Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004).

A rather obvious case of miscomprehension would be with a gesture such as the one for “wait” in Hebrew, which consists of extending the forearm with the fingers and thumb bunched and pointing upwards without moving the hand. It is used to mean, “Just a second and I’ll be with you,” or “Please wait and let me cut in” (when on a bike, in a car or another vehicle). Such a gesture does not exist in American English but does (with the hand moving) in European languages and has a different, sometimes obscene, meaning. All the more reason for ESL learners to deploy the strategy of asking about seemingly curious and perhaps a bit bewildering gestures that they see used in U.S. contexts early on, rather than assuming that the meaning is clear from context, when, in reality, it is not. ESL teachers could certainly play an instrumental role here in helping learners to understand the meaning of these gestures.

Finally, the use of silence itself can have a pragmatic function that is lost on a nonnative speaker who is unaware of the norms. So, for example, an American English speaker may interpret silence in a Japanese speaker as meaning that the person is relinquishing the floor when this may not be the case. As chair of a session at an academic meeting, the author once led a round of applause for a Japanese speaker of English when he interpreted an extended pause as meaning that the speaker had ended his remarks when he had not. So in this case, it was a matter of misinterpreting silence. In a second example, for the many years that hitchhiking was a common practice in Israel, a nonnative hitchhiker could easily interpret silence on the part of the driver as meaning the person was a bit shy, and so all the more reason to fill the silence with banter. In this case, it would be likely that the hitchhiker was unaware that it was appropriate to remain silent rather than to entertain the driver with conversation, which was more likely the norm in the U.S. at the time. The strategy called for here would be for learners to inquire about the role of silence in the target language, something that learners may not even have on their pragmatics agenda. The ESL teacher could comment on the various roles that silence plays (or does not play) in English.

With regard to demographic variables and communities of practice, nonnatives may misinterpret the role of curse words in the discourse. They may be shocked when they first hear them, without realizing that in the particular community of practice, these words may serve an important role, perhaps contributing to bonding between the employer and the employees, and among employees. So, for example, as part of a *Language in the Workplace* project at Victoria University of Wellington, Holmes and her colleagues collected over 2,000 interactions in English (mostly L1) in the workplace in New Zealand (Daly, Holmes, Newton, & Stubbe, 2004). Extensive analysis of their corpus yielded insights into what was necessary for fitting in and becoming an integrated member of the workplace, and one of the things was the ability to curse affectively, especially using the f-word with fellow employees and even with the boss, as a way to fit in and bond. Nonnatives apparently could find themselves ostracized for **not** cursing like the rest. On the comprehension side, the learner may hear these curse words and be put off or even shocked, and certainly not eager to learn when and how to use them. A strategy would be to pull over a working associate and ask to be briefed on how to curse effectively, something which language teachers are often reluctant to deal with. Perhaps if the topic is grounded properly in the research literature and situated respectably within the field of pragmatics, ESL teachers might be more willing to include cursing in the instructional material.

At times learners miscomprehend what is said because of their previous multicultural and multilingual experiences. Their expectations from previous pragmatic experiences in other speech communities set them up for a pragmatic breakdown. Such was the case when the author and his wife arrived at the InterRent shack a ways from the airport in Martinique two Decembers ago and the French-speaking clerk asked him when his license was issued. He

promptly told her "February of 2007," reading the date of issue right off his Minneapolis driver's license. The clerk then looked at him with great dismay and said, "*Je suis désolée*," and proceeded to inform him that she could not rent him a car since the driver must have at least a year's experience driving before being able to rent a car. What was intended within her community of practice in Martinique was when he was issued his **first** driver's license. What followed, once he determined the misunderstanding, was that she needed to calculate the year that he in fact first started driving, which was probably about 1960, but for safety's sake, he just arbitrarily said at age 18, which would mean 45 years ago. She was relieved and then proceeded with the rental agreement.

Perhaps there is no one strategy that can safeguard against this kind of pragmatic failure. Learners just have to be ready to deal with contextual difference in what ostensibly the very same language may mean when dealing with its supposed equivalent in the other language. It may take on a different, contextually mandated meaning. The Peace Corps motto when the author went off to the High Plains of Bolivia in 1965: "Expect the unexpected." That would apply here.

Table 1 provides a summary of the examples presented above of when comprehending the pragmatic message in the input may be problematic for learners. Having given a number

**Table 1.** Comprehending the Pragmatics of the Input

<b><u>Nature of the Input:</u></b>	<b>Proficiency in L2/FL &amp; in other languages</b>	<b>Age, gender, occupation, social status, communities of practice</b>	<b>Former cross-cultural experiences</b>
<b>Language:</b> ➤ <b>Lexical items (words or phrases)</b>	<i>Bonjour</i> in Martinique  Expression of acknowledgement "Good on ya!" (NZ)	The "in" words and how to use them – cool, sweet, bad, etc.  Curse words in NZ	
➤ <b>Syntax (e.g., verb tenses)</b>	Formality of the conditional form of the verb in Spanish in a request to a friend		
➤ <b>Discourse</b>	An apology extending over numerous turns in a corpus		Renting a car: "When was your driver's license issued?" (Martinique)
<b>Gestures</b>	Negative transfer of a gesture from one L2 to another ("Wait" in Hebrew)		
<b>Silence</b>	Silence in the L2 (moments in Japanese; hitchhiking in Israel)		

of possible misunderstandings, the question remains as to the factors which will determine whether pragmatic failure is more likely to occur in the case of a given individual. Presumably it is more likely to occur among the less proficient and more inexperienced users of the L2, and those with more limited contact with members of certain communities of practice for starters. But let us assume that two speakers have the same amount of background knowledge and exposure to the language. What might contribute to one of them understanding the pragmatics of the situation better than the other one? Learning style preference may play a role, such as the relative introversion of the nonnative. Learners who are more extroverted may be more into their speaking than into careful observation of native-speaker pragmatic behavior. Keen powers of observation may assist learners in getting the pragmatics of a message despite the fact that most of the vocabulary and grammatical structures in the message are incomprehensible to them. They simply take the clues that they perceive (e.g., tone of voice, facial expression, body posture, elaborateness or curtness of the utterance) and intuit or infer the rest from there. The robustness of the learners' strategy repertoire could also play a role in that some learners select among their strategies that of being more consciously aware of how pragmatics works in the given speech community and specific situation, even to the extent of asking locals whether they have interpreted a speech act correctly or not.<sup>5</sup>

## **PRODUCING PRAGMATICALLY COMPREHENSIBLE OUTPUT**

What do learners need to do strategically in order for their output to be *comprehensible* pragmatically to their interlocutors? It helps for the nonnatives to accommodate to the local speech community's norms for pragmatic performance, such as in, say, making a request. There are at least five factors that can stand in the way of acceptable accommodation (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010), possibly leading to pragmatically inappropriate output:

- (1) negative transfer of pragmatic behavior from their L1 or some other language they know,
- (2) limited L2 grammatical ability,
- (3) overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms,
- (4) the effect of instruction or instructional materials, and
- (5) resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms.

### **Negative Transfer of Pragmatic Norms from the L1 or Another Language**

In this instance, the nonnatives transfer the patterns for how they would conduct the interaction in the L1 or another language speech community, most likely unknowingly but sometimes knowing it is probably wrong but the only thing they know how to do. Let us suppose that a Korean learner of English responds to an American friend's compliment about how nice a piece of her clothing looks by saying "No, that's not true." Whereas this would be appropriately modest behavior in Korean culture, in U.S. culture this response to such a compliment may make it sound as if she were flatly rejecting or questioning the friend's judgment, and hence creates a somewhat awkward situation or even sounds insulting. The best strategy would probably be to check with local peers as to the most appropriate ways to respond to a compliment.

Another example would be when a Japanese student requests that a professor read a paper he wrote by saying, "Professor, read this paper please." Such a request may come across as

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<sup>5</sup> For more on individual differences in strategy use, see Takeuchi, Giffiths, and Coyle (2007).



too direct, even though the student said “please” which would probably make the request polite enough in Japanese. In this case, a useful strategy could be to collect data on the pragmatics of how to make polite requests in such situations in that speech community, particularly if learners would like the request to be responded to favorably.

### **Limited L2 Grammatical Ability**

Lack of knowledge of certain grammatical forms, or more likely lack of knowledge of how to use them functionally in a given target-language situation, may inadvertently lead to producing language that is pragmatically gauche. A beginning learner of English, for example, might request that a clerk in a repair shop fix an item, with “You must fix this.” because the learner has not learned how to be more indirect and consequently sound more polite (e.g., “I was wondering how soon you might be able to repair this for me.”). Such a request (interpreted as an order) may, in fact, annoy the clerk. Again, an effective strategy might be to obtain models for appropriate ways to phrase such a service-encounter request. The challenge here for teachers then is to determine how to prepare and cover the pragmatic aspects of communication (appropriacy) during the teaching of grammar (see Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

### **Overgeneralization of Perceived L2 Pragmatic Norms**

Some learners may generalize pragmatic norms acceptable in one situation to another situation where that behavior is not appropriate. So, for example, a Korean learner of American English perceives Americans as being very direct and frank about things, a perception that is reinforced when the American male passenger sitting next to him on a flight shares some intimacies. Consequently, the Korean is surprised when the fellow passenger is clearly reluctant to answer a question about how much he makes a month. While the Korean would not ask that question in his home culture, he just assumed that the American’s frankness in discussing intimacies would carry over to other topics as well. So a pragmatics strategy here would be to gather information about delicate topics for conversation in a given speech community, especially with casual acquaintances or strangers. In addition, teachers could lead a discussion with students concerning more taboo topics in U.S. culture these days.

Another example would be that of the American who has heard that Italians talk with their hands so he makes an effort to use a lot of hand gestures to make his points in Italian while studying in Rome. An Italian friend takes him aside to tell him that he is gesturing too much, and also that some of his gestures mean something different from what he intends them to mean. A strategy for learning the proper amount of gesturing would be to do a lot of observing of what locals do. If the learners are acquiring the language as a foreign language, it might be more of a challenge to gather this information, but it could be through contacts with native speakers or through movies. As to what gestures mean, just as in the section on comprehension of pragmatics, it would be helpful if teachers could teach their learners the meaning of some of the non-transparent gestures and also information regarding the extent to which they are normally used. Again, it may also be beneficial to check with other, non-teacher acquaintances, especially since some gestures may be more common within certain age groups or subgroups within the community.

Yet another example would be of an American study-abroad student who has a sense that Spanish speakers are more formal in their commands. So if she wants a glass of water from her host-family mother, she asks for it in a most polite way, “Would you be able to give me

a glass of water, please." Her host mother finds her style overly formal since in their Barcelona home they just say the equivalent of "Water, please." or "Give me a glass of water, please." This kind of situation can be avoided by checking out the pragmatics of how to be pragmalinguistically appropriate. It is not enough just to learn the conditional forms of the verb in Spanish, for example. Rather, it would be helpful if teachers could provide guidance as to when it is advisable or even crucial to use them, and when it is equally important **not** to use them, as in this case.

Finally, there is the example of the English-speaking learner of Japanese whose close Japanese friend offers her more food at an informal dinner meal at her apartment. The learner knows an expression, *Iie, kekkou desu* 'No thanks' in Japanese and uses it. However, she is unaware that this expression is primarily reserved for formal situations and sounds funny or awkward if used with a close friend. Especially when learning languages in which the level of formality plays an important role, a key strategy would be to ask about the formality of expressions, rather than to assume that one expression will work in all situations, as is often the case with English. Teachers may be able to assist here, but since there are so many potential interactive situations, there is a real need for learners to be strategic when they are on their own, outside the language classroom.

### **The Effect of Instruction or Instructional Materials**

Learners might also be led to pragmatic failure as a result of somewhat misleading information that they receive either from the teacher or from the course materials. So, for example, a learner of English may have read in an ESL textbook that Americans tend to give the precise reason why they cannot attend a party that they are invited to. Yet when the learners do the same, they find that in the particular instance (say, an important work-related party) it may be interpreted as an unacceptable excuse (e.g., "I can't come because I have a dinner date with a friend."). So strategizing would need to include checking out the possible exceptions to that pragmatics rule about being relatively honest and explicit in refusals.

As another example, an American learner of Japanese may be taught in class to fill a pause with *eeto* (more informal) or *ano* (more formal), and so does his best to fill as many pauses as he can that way. His native-speaking interlocutor is annoyed by this overuse of these pauses and depending on their relationship, may eventually tell the learner that he is filling his pauses too much – that natives prefer to use silence or non-verbal cues more. Whereas in part this could be considered a case of overgeneralization, it originates from instruction regarding the filling of pauses. What is misleading is that in Japanese silence is favored more than in English, and the teacher neglected to point this out. This filled-pauses example is a perfect case where some data gathering could play a strategic role in helping the learner to avoid speech behavior that annoys native speakers of the language. Teachers could, for example, structure activities in their lessons for learners to pay attention to hesitation phenomena in English during authentic listening or video material.

### **Resistance to Using Perceived L2 Pragmatic Norms**

Another source of pragmatic failure may be an intentional desire not to abide by the L2 speech community's norms in the given instance despite having full knowledge of what is expected – which sets this category apart from the other four. So for example, an English-speaking learner of Indonesian hears natives use the equivalent of "Did you eat yet?" as a regular greeting but avoids using it herself because it does not really seem like a greeting to



her. Or an American learner of Japanese has learned the honorific verbs that are required when speaking to or about people of higher status even if they are not present at the time (e.g., asking if the higher-status person has eaten by using *meshiagarimashitika* instead of *tabemashitika*, the non-honorific verb), but resists using them, feeling they are excessive. While choosing to opt out of conforming to the pragmatic norms is every learner's prerogative, a strategic approach to the matter of conformity would be to find out what the repercussions for doing so are. An ESL teacher could lead a discussion on this issue in a language class. Learners could, for instance, be asked to bring their own examples of language material that they prefer to avoid, so that a discussion as to possible consequences could ensue.

Table 2 presents a summary of the examples of obstacles to pragmatically comprehensible output described above. Obviously whether or not a message leads to pragmatic failure

**Table 2.** Producing Pragmatically Comprehensible Output

<b><u>Nature of the Output:</u></b>	<b>Negative transfer of pragmatic norms from the L1 or other language</b>	<b>Overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms</b>	<b>Limited L2 grammatical ability</b>	<b>Effect of instruction or textbook materials</b>	<b>Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms</b>
<b>Language:</b> ➤ <b>Phrases</b>	Rejecting a compliment with "No, that's not true."	Using a formal request or refusal when the given situation calls for greater informality			Avoiding "Did you eat yet?" as a greeting in Indonesian
➤ <b>Discourse</b>	Request to read a thesis: "Dr. X, please read this."	Being overly frank – asking for salary information	Making a request that sounds like an order	Giving the actual reason for a refusal in a situation where it is inappropriate	Avoiding using honorific verbs to speak to or about people of higher status
<b>Gestures</b>		Overusing hand gestures in Italian			
<b>Silence</b>				Using filled pauses too much rather than silence	

depends not just on the nonnative sender but on the recipient as well. It is possible and often the case that the native speakers of the L2 will go the extra distance to comprehend the nonnative-speaker, even if the nonnative's behavior misses the mark by a long shot in terms of pragmatic appropriateness. In fact, the native-speaking interlocutor often has the wherewithal either to cut the nonnative slack or to lower the boom, depending on factors that may have little to do with whether the intended message was understood. On the other

hand, a perceived breach of pragmatic etiquette may itself be enough to result in pragmatic failure for the nonnative. For example, several years ago while the author was a visiting professor in New Zealand, a Japanese student who had recently graduated from the department came to his office, put her MA thesis on his desk, and said, "Dr. Cohen, please read this," an example of negative transfer mentioned above. The author hesitated for a moment but then had a visceral reaction and responded, "No, I won't. I'm on sabbatical here and they don't pay me to do this. Sorry." He did take a glance at it but no more than that. Had she said, "Dr. Cohen – I was wondering if you might just take a look at my MA thesis and let me know what you think of ...," he may very well have read through it.

## **STRATEGIES FOR NEGOTIATING MEANING AND MAKING CONVERSATIONAL REPAIRS**

Some learners are better at getting the L2 pragmatics right than others. Part of it is due to their strategic ability as a language learner in general and especially in terms of their strategic ability with regard to pragmatics (Cohen, 2005). These individuals are strategic both in how they go about learning pragmatics and in their L2 performance so that both their comprehension and production of language are pragmatically appropriate for the given situation. They also have strategies for evaluating how well they understood the pragmatics of a given message and also how effective they were in producing a pragmatically appropriate message. Such strategies can make the difference between pragmatic failure and pragmatic success, since as illustrated in this article, learners can take strategic action to avoid pragmatic failure or to remediate the situation once pragmatic failure has occurred. For example, nonnatives can check to make sure that they interpreted a message (such as a key request from a co-worker) correctly, "So let me see if I understand your request, George. You want me to speak to the boss for you, correct?" Nonnatives could also include an alerter before a delicate speech act so that the addressee will be lenient in interpreting the intent of the message: "Hi, George. I want to make apology but not so sure it is OK. I try now..."

In Krashen's (1982) terms, some nonnatives are better monitor users than others when it comes to pragmatics. In Long's (1985) terms, some nonnatives are better at making sure there is rich interaction that serves to clarify the intended pragmatic meaning in both the input and the output. In part this can be a function of the personality-related style preferences of the learner, such as being more extroverted or more closure-oriented (i.e. less tolerance of ambiguity; see Cohen & Weaver, 2006). In Schmidt's (1990) terms, some nonnatives are better at noticing the pragmatic aspects of discourse, both in classroom settings and out in the real world. And there are some nonnatives who more actively create situations where they can check to see if they, in Swain's (1998) terms, are producing output that is comprehensible pragmatically. The point is that what works for one L2 learner in terms of strategically gaining pragmatic awareness and enhanced performance may not work for another. Some learners may, for example, benefit from extensive observation of what natives do without actually engaging in interaction with natives very much, while others start interacting extensively from the very start.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose for this article has been to take a pragmatically-oriented look at both the input and output sides of what is comprehensible, and to suggest to learners strategies for making the input and output more comprehensible in terms of the pragmatics. The

companion purpose has been to provide ESL teachers ideas for supporting their learners' efforts to use English in pragmatically appropriate ways.

So what needs to happen for nonnatives to achieve success at comprehending and producing language pragmatically? It would appear that part of an L2 learner's pragmatics is acquired without explicit instruction. Nonetheless, there are pragmatic features that most likely would benefit from explicit instruction (whether from a teacher directly or through a website such as the three posted at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/>) if the intention is to have the learners achieve relative control over them within a reasonable amount of time. An exploration of how to do so would be of great value. In addition, and especially in cases where fine tuning is advisable or crucial, learners may need to be proactive and seek out special coaching in order to comprehend and produce some of their target-language pragmatics appropriately.

\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at Denver TESOL 2009.

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Andrew D. Cohen was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bolivia, a Fulbright Scholar in Brazil, and a professor of Language Education in Israel for many years, before assuming his position at the University of Minnesota, where he is currently in phased retirement from the Program in Second Language Studies. His two latest books are *Teaching and learning pragmatics: Where language and culture meet* (co-authored with N. Ishihara; Pearson, 2010) and *Strategies in learning and using a second language* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Pearson, 2011). Cohen is currently studying Mandarin, his 12<sup>th</sup> language after English.

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