Book Review


Despite greatly expanding research on intercultural communication in applied linguistics, pragmatics still does not receive sufficient attention, even though for successful interactions across linguacultural boundaries, pragmatic – both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic – knowledge is essential. Similarly important is metapragmatic awareness during the learning process, as McConachy and Liddicoat’s edited volume, entitled *Teaching and Learning Second Language Pragmatics for Intercultural Communication*, demonstrates.

Abandoning outdated and simplistic views of pragmatic knowledge as the deployment of *appropriate* (i.e., normative, prescriptive) linguistic behaviors modeled on (non-existent) idealized native speakers, McConachy and Liddicoat adopt a more dynamic view. In the introduction, they establish the framing that communicative contexts are socially and collaboratively constructed by interactants, a message that weaves a coherent narrative link throughout each subsequent chapter. Moreover, McConachy and Liddicoat’s model also recognizes second language (L2) users’ multilingual and multicultural competences, and invites all participants, native- and non-native speakers alike, to share responsibility for the success of intercultural interactions, instead of blaming communicative mishaps or failures on L2 learners’ lack of native-like skills.

McConachy and Liddicoat make two further important points. First, they argue that a key objective for L2 teaching and learning pragmatics and intercultural communication must be “to build understanding and insight through reflection on experiences of language in use and on one’s own reactions and responses to different ways of making and interpreting meaning ...” (p. 10). That is, pedagogy should foster deeper engagement with *interpretation*, and place less emphasis on production. Second, they highlight the importance
of learner agency in intercultural communication, recognizing that learners have choices, including assimilation or resistance to native-speaker norms, with “numerous possibilities lying between the two extremes,” although those choices are not random, but are rather “constrained by the social contexts and social structures in which individuals act” (p. 11). The authors’ overall framing for the studies included in this volume makes it an excellent resource for scholars who seek to understand how L2 learners develop the skills required to navigate multilingual interactions in particular social contexts to perform specific communicative acts.

Following the introduction, nine chapters present empirical studies representing a variety of concepts, learning contexts, languages, and populations; data were collected via diverse methodologies, such as surveys, interviews, and observations. Instead of presenting the chapters in order below, they are grouped thematically for readers’ interest.

Three chapters explore Japanese as an L2. In Chapter 1, McConachy and Fujino report on the experiences of four learners of Japanese following long-term study-abroad sojourns in Japan. Via semi-structured interviews, the authors sought to understand learners’ ability to interpret the way politeness forms simultaneously reflect and impact personal relationships, and how learners’ awareness of these forms incorporate intercultural perspectives. The participants’ reflections highlight the need for L2 pedagogy to move away from oversimplified presentations of politeness and, instead, reflect its dynamic and interpersonal nature, leading to less ‘overpolite’ language use among L2 learners, and fostering explicit analyses of learners’ “own perceptions, identities, and relational agendas” (p. 36). Considering politeness as personal and context-sensitive is an important reminder for teaching L2s beyond this particular language.

Similarly drawing attention to oversimplified textbook presentations of politeness forms, Barke and Shimazu (Chapter 5) analyze discussions between native- and non-native speakers of Japanese regarding the use of honorific and non-honorific forms (desu/-masu and da/-(r)u) after they had watched excerpts from a television series, Motokare (Ex-Boyfriend). While their proficiency in Japanese was not stated, the data indicated that collaborative analyses with their Japanese peers helped learners recognize the dynamic and non-stereotypical ways in which Japanese speakers deployed honorific and non-honorific forms to index a variety of sociocultural meanings and relationships. Moreover, by increasing their (meta)pragmatic skills, the participants became aware of the importance of agency in language use, such as when to conform to typical sociolinguistic practices and when to flout them to express different facets of their identities.
In the third chapter focusing on Japanese as an L2, Pizziconi (Chapter 3) investigated how Hazel, a Kurdish-Turk university student living in London, shifted her understanding of the concepts of “East” (here, Japan, Asia) and “West” (the UK, US) after studying abroad in Japan, from an essentialized understanding of the two concepts to a more nuanced conceptualization of the West, recognizing that dichotomous categories were insufficient for interpreting her own intercultural experiences. With Hazel’s reflections Pizziconi highlighted the need for long-term, critical reflexivity to challenge stereotypes when working with (inter)cultural categories.

Shifting the focus slightly, two chapters examined the role of metapragmatic awareness of EFL students. First, Savić and Myrset (Chapter 2) examined what young learners in Norwegian primary schools considered to be important when making requests in English. Working in small groups, students ranked as more or less important different aspects of pragmatics: “modal verbs, please, address terms, compliments, or appropriate intonation, and contextual factors” (p. 43). The results revealed that children were aware of pragmatic considerations and could offer non-essentialist understandings of requesting behaviors. The authors warned, however, that older learners might rely more “on stereotypical notions in interpreting pragmatic phenomena and in making interpersonal evaluations” (p. 55).

In the second EFL-based study (Chapter 9), Sánchez-Hernández and Maíz-Arévalo report on 3rd- and 4th-year students of English linguistics at a university in Spain. The participants, representing various L1s, evaluated three critical intercultural communicative scenarios for pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic mishaps. Their written reflections, which were rated for pragmatic awareness and cultural adaptability, revealed that learners were very adept at recognizing pragmalinguistic problems, but less so at identifying interpersonal and contextual causes of intercultural misunderstandings. The results also suggested that learners’ intercultural adaptability lagged behind their L2 pragmatic skills. These findings support the use of critical scenarios for teaching and assessing intercultural communication and emphasize the need for paying attention to affective and psychological development, in addition to focusing on cognitive skills, when teaching intercultural communication.

While learning an L2 where that language is spoken broadly offers ample opportunities for pragmatic development, this process can be more challenging in foreign language contexts, such as learning German in the US or Spanish in Denmark. Chapters 4 and 6 focus on such learning contexts. Alfred and Warner (Chapter 4) report on a study with L2 learners of German at a university in the US who engaged in a digital social reading of a poem, a collaborative analytic and creative process that explored “the relations between
literary language use and its users” (p. 85) and prompted learners to consider diverse perspectives of interpretation. The comments revealed that even beginning-level L2 learners were able to explore “the meaning-making potential of different pragmatic and stylistic choices and the ways in which they position the fictional and readerly addressees of the text” (p. 101).

Morollón Martí (Chapter 6) also investigated learners’ ability to modulate their language use in intercultural communication. Over 12 weeks, four L2 learners and two native speakers of Spanish at a university in Denmark were taught about (im)politeness in the Spanish-speaking world. After learning about concepts such as context, social effect, (im)politeness, and affiliation in lectures and academic readings, participants analyzed authentic conversations in Spanish, which guided them to create, reflect on, and revise their own representations of each concept. Using their models as a springboard, next, participants performed communicative tasks, demonstrating their ability to express (im)politeness according to the interactional context. The author concluded that explicit (meta)pragmatic instruction enabled the participants to examine the social meaning behind linguistic forms, promoting a more nuanced understanding of intercultural communication.

Chapters 7 and 8 transfer the attention from the L2 learner to the instructor. Ishihara and Mendes Porcellato (Chapter 7) describe a pedagogical workshop organized by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. The participants, high-school and university teachers of various L2s, discussed sociopragmatic concepts and metapragmatic awareness, focusing on intralinguage variation. Their conversations revealed that pragmatics is hardly covered adequately in typical teacher-training programs, pedagogy books, or language textbooks, and that the participants wished for a systematic, nonessentialist pragmatic pedagogy to provide learners with opportunities to discover and implement diverse pragmatic L2 practices themselves.

Recognizing how divergent definitions of concepts are challenging for L2 teachers, Schauer (Chapter 8) attempts to identify core concepts associated with intercultural competence, shared across educational contexts and needs, through an online survey of EFL teachers from diverse L1 and national backgrounds. Overall, understanding, sympathy, openness, and politeness emerged as being most relevant for intercultural competence, but the survey also revealed a disconnect between the intercultural components that participants considered to be important and available teaching materials. These findings prompted the author to suggest that teacher educators, curriculum developers, and textbook creators place more emphasis on intercultural competence, so the pedagogical realities match important pedagogical objectives.
The book’s numerous strengths include the forward-looking framing offered by McConachy and Liddicoat, which introduces nine theoretically and methodologically sound empirical studies that represent an array of student populations. Despite the diverse contributions – in terms of learning contexts, languages and methodologies – the book offers a coherent overview of pragmatics and intercultural communication. In a welcome move, the notion of the native-speaker ideal is resisted throughout the volume. These characteristics make it a wonderful addition to the collection of any scholars and researchers studying the relationship between pragmatics and intercultural communication, and there are very few instances where more diverse perspectives or additional content might have strengthened it.

First, the chapters overemphasize Japanese pragmatics as representing Eastern communicative practices; the rest of the studies are Euro-centric, grounded in the UK, Denmark, Norway, and Spain, alongside one study on German taught in the US, and one international survey (conducted from a German university). A broader range of contributions, including studies reflecting Asian cultures outside of Japan, Africa, Australia, the Pacific region, Central and South America, could have provided more diverse intercultural communicative perspectives. Second, based on the volume’s title, it was surprising to note that few chapters included a section that even implicitly offered pedagogical and teaching implications. As is, it is mostly up to the reader to figure out what and how to adapt the content to their own pedagogical contexts. In a related vein, a few discussion questions in each chapter could have fostered a deeper engagement with the content among pre- and in-service L2 educators.

As the book clearly presents, though, pragmatics has rightly gained importance in discussions on teaching and learning L2 intercultural communication, and this edited volume is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on this issue. It helps reiterate the message that teaching pragmatics explicitly is essential for fostering “deeper thinking about language, culture, and the ways in which they interrelate to shape communication and to lead to intercultural understanding” (p. 15).

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