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Language-Learner Strategies and Their Effect on Speech Act Performance

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For the sake of readers who may not be well-versed on the language-learner strategy field, we first offer some definitions and explanations.

Language-learner strategies are conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and actions deployed by learners, often with the intention of enhancing their knowledge of and facility with an L2. To get a good sense of what strategies actually look like at the operational level, you are invited to access a new Web site that is replete with strategies for learning Spanish L2 grammar: http://www.carla.umn.edu/strategies/sp_grammar/index.html. In an effort to make strategy instruction for pragmatics more concrete, a taxonomy was generated of (1) strategies for the initial learning of L2 pragmatics (e.g., asking a competent speaker how to perform a request); (2) strategies for the use of speech act material that has already been learned to some extent (e.g., alerting the hearer that you are a learner and may not make the request appropriately); and (3) strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating how effectively the learning and use strategies are being applied (e.g., checking to make sure the term of address and the level of politeness are acceptable for the given request). This third category of strategies is referred to as metapragmatics, namely, strategies for supervising their learning and performance of pragmatics (see Cohen, 2005, for more on this taxonomy).

In an effort to test the taxonomy empirically, we applied it to the construction of a Web site for learning Spanish pragmatics by embedding strategy material into the very fabric of the Web site (see Sykes & Cohen, 2008). The initial validation effort consisted of a comparison of two studies involving computer-assisted language learning (CALL). These include both a Spanish pragmatics Web site, *Dancing With Words: Strategies for Learning Pragmatics in Spanish*

(http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home) and Croquelandia (a synthetic immersive environment focused on L2 Spanish pragmatics) (Cohen, 2008; Sykes, 2008, 2009; Sykes & Cohen, 2008, 2009). The self-access Web site, *Dancing With Words*, consists of an introductory module as well as eight additional modules: (1) Compliments, (2) Gratitude and Leave Taking, (3) Requests, (4) Apologies, (5) Invitations, (6) Service Encounters, (7) Advice, Suggestions, Disagreements,

Complaints, and Reprimands, and (8) Considerations for Pragmatic Performance. It includes unscripted video interchanges between native speakers of various regional varieties of Spanish and utilizes activities with varying levels of difficulty for the purpose of addressing the learners' varying levels of language/pragmatic ability. All instructional material on the Web site is in English, with the examples, transcripts, and activities to be completed in Spanish, and activities to be completed in Spanish. The intention is for learners to access all material on the Web site individually.

The synthetic immersive environment was a virtual space that gave learners a chance to practice their pragmatic performance and to test their use of skills for interaction learned when working through the Web site. Learners were able to move through the space and select various clues and tips and then use what they had learned to interact with a native-speaking computer-generated personage or avatar (controlling another avatar in the virtual world). This synthetic immersive environment was designed and constructed by Julie Sykes (now at the University of New Mexico) and a team of designers and programmers at the University of Minnesota.

The research question addressed in examining the two data sets was:

How do learners perceive their strategy development for Spanish pragmatics through the use of two different CALL environments, a self-access Web site, and a synthetic immersive environment?

THE RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THE TWO STUDIES

The Design for Study #1

The first study was undertaken with a group of 10 student participants (5 females and 5 males). The participants had an average age of 23 and came from a variety of language-learning contexts. All were enrolled in upper-division Spanish courses, were native speakers of English, and had an average reported GPA in Spanish of 3.63. The instructional Web site used in this study, *Dancing With Words*, played a major role in content delivery and was the only means of *explicit* pragmatic instruction available to the learners. Utilizing much of the content from the instructional materials in this Web site, the synthetic immersive environment (named Croquelandia) gave subjects a chance to try out their pragmatic performance.

The first study of the Spanish pragmatics Web site and accompanying synthetic immersive environment included the following steps. First, all subjects attended a general descriptive session about the project and completed the informational survey. A week later, participants completed the pretest designed to evaluate their level of pragmatic knowledge. The pretest

took approximately 1 hour to complete and consisted of two components: (1) a written multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task, with five situations based on material from the instructional Web site, calling for two requests, two apologies, and a service encounter, and (2) a three-part role play in the synthetic immersive environment, which allowed for authentic interaction to occur between a native speaker and the participants in a realistic and three-dimensional interactive space.

After completing the pretest, participants then participated in a content orientation session, which consisted of a 1-hour introduction to pragmatics as well as the strategies taxonomy (Cohen, 2005). Following the content orientation session, participants then completed three online modules from the Dancing With WordsWeb site (i.e., requests, apologies, and service encounters). Each was completed in a laboratory setting within a 2-week period in an order selected by each individual student. All of the participants completed one module per session at a self-selected time. The requests and apologies modules each took approximately 90 minutes to complete and the service encounter module took 1 hour.

No more than 48 hours after completing the last module, participants completed the immediate posttest, similar to the pretest, but with varied situations and contexts in the synthetic immersive environment. Finally, a delayed posttest, which was the same as the pretest, was administered. After the posttesting, the subjects engaged in retrospective, one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Each interview was audio-recorded and entailed questions addressing learners' evaluation, reported behavior, and suggestions for improvement of each of the Web site modules. When answering the questions, learners were asked to respond based on what they remembered and were not required to access the Web site or recorded material as part of their interview experience.

The Design for Study #2

The second study represented the second stage of the development of the synthetic immersive environment, Croquelandia, for learning Spanish pragmatics, referred to earlier (see Sykes, 2008 and 2009, for more details). In addition to the assessment space used in the first study, this project entailed a full-scale creation of a virtual space for content delivery of the pragmatics materials. In the space, learners could collaborate and interact in three primary areas: their host family's house, a central plaza and marketplace, and the university. In the synthetic immersive environment, learners were able to move an avatar throughout the environment and talk with a native speaker via a controlled avatar.

In the second study, though 53 participants completed two modules in a three-dimensional, immersive environment as part of their undergraduate course in Spanish at the university (Sykes, 2008), only a subset of 25 reported on their perceptions as to the impact of the materials on their strategizing about pragmatics. This group was the source of information on pragmatics strategy use in this analysis. As in the first study, the entrance survey in this study was designed to collect demographic and experiential information from each of the learners before they began the instructional activities. The intent was to establish a baseline as to the types of learning and performance strategies students perceived themselves to already be using.

During the third week of the semester, learners participated in two class sessions dedicated to pragmatics and the course project. After completing all activities in the synthetic immersive environment, the participants worked as a group to present their findings about apologies and requests in Spanish. Following the presentations, an in-class discussion was used to summarize the content learned. The participants then completed an exit survey similar to the entrance survey, as well as a final one-on-one interview. Each interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes and addressed overall perceptions of the project and experience in the synthetic immersive environment. All responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

So in summary, the first study provided access to a Web site intended to provide extensive instruction regarding Spanish L2 pragmatics and limited access to a virtual space where learners could test out what they had learned about Spanish pragmatics. The second study also utilized the instructional Web site but added more elaborate access to the virtual space. So in this study learners did not just test out what they had learned, but also engaged in a series of exploratory quests as well, each involving encounters with avatars and a need to exercise their knowledge of L2 pragmatics and ability to use this knowledge strategically.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the first study showed a minor increase in the reported frequency of strategies for learning and performing L2 pragmatics, and no change for the metapragmatic categories. The opposite was true in the second study, which suggested hardly any change in the learning and use categories and a minor increase in perceived use of metapragmatic strategies. These findings suggest that participation in different types of mediated contexts (i.e., a self-access Web site and an immersive space) may have a minor impact on perceived strategy use. The minor increase in learning and use strategies in the first study and no evidence of change in the second study could be attributed to the type of strategies-based

instruction each group of learners received through the Web site and the synthetic immersive environment. In the Web site, explicit identification and exploration of each of the strategies was included as part of the instructional activities. In the synthetic immersive environment, the strategies-based approach entailed experiential learning. That is, instead of explaining to the learners how they might use a specific strategy to improve their pragmatic abilities, the synthetic immersive environment quests and activities required that learners implement each of the strategies through practice and use. Both groups received introductions to a strategic approach to pragmatics; however, the distinct delivery method of instruction may explain the differences found in the learning and use strategies categories.

It would appear that delivery method alone does not explain why there was no evidence of change in the first study and a minor change in the second study in the metapragmatic category. If context of instruction were the only factor, it would be expected that learners in the first study would also exhibit an increase in perceived use of metapragmatic strategies because they received explicit instruction similar to that of the learning and use categories. A likely explanation for the difference across groups in reported metapragmatic strategy use was that subjects in the second study employed and practiced metapragmatic strategies more as they worked in the immersive space. For example, in order to complete a quest successfully, learners had to select whom they were going to talk to and decide what they were going to work on before beginning. In addition, monitoring one's own pragmatic behavior was a central component of the synthetic immersive environment experience and was built into the immersive space itself.

These findings are congruent with those from current educational gaming research demonstrating the positive impact that engagement (i.e., the complex, immersive, emotional experience of participating in an activity) can have on cognitive processing of certain skills (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2001; Taylor, 2006). Therefore, it could be the case that the synthetic immersive environment is especially useful for developing metapragmatic strategies and that learners were more aware of their importance based on their experience in the virtual world. It has been pointed out by both White (1999) and Hurd (2000) that effective L2 learning via Web sites requires users to be able to harness the necessary metacognitive strategies in order to benefit from the Web site in general. Because metapragmatic strategies are a subset of metacognitive strategies, it would appear that in this case the learners perceived themselves as getting a handle on some of the key strategies for evaluating their pragmatic performance.

With regard to strategies for learning and performing pragmatics, two learning strategies (*Ask native speakers to model how they perform the communicative act* and *Identify the second language speech acts learners*

want/need to focus on) and a performance strategy (*Ask native speakers for feedback on your pragmatic abilities*) are especially noteworthy because there was a moderate increase in perceived use from the participants in the first study and no change in the second study. One feasible explanation for this difference across the two studies may be the emphasis on the use of a native speaker as a resource for pragmatic learning in the Web site itself. In the activities on the Web site, learners utilized models and examples in improving their abilities. However, for additional information they would need to talk with native speakers in the real world and, as a result, were instructed to do so. In the case of the synthetic immersive environment, learners had the ability to “talk” with virtual native speakers throughout their experience and to repeat their own observation of behavior as many times as they wished. Therefore, participants in the second study may not have viewed explicitly asking for help from native speakers as a necessary resource for pragmatic development.

Further research is undoubtedly needed regarding the role of strategy instruction in enhancing pragmatic performance, especially given the importance of pragmatics in L2 interaction. Not only has pragmatics been somewhat neglected in L2 instruction over the years, but also strategy instruction itself has not been particularly fine-tuned up until now. Our talk reported on efforts at direct strategy instruction in specific areas of concern in L2 pragmatics—namely, the learning and performance of speech acts. The pedagogical justification would be that most learners do not simply acquire the ability to be pragmatically appropriate in a given sociocultural context. Rather, there is a need to explicitly point out to them some of the crucial elements of pragmatics in order to enhance their L2 interactions in more basic areas such as greeting, requesting, and complimenting, and in the more confrontational interactions of apologizing and complaining. In addition, it is helpful to provide learners with a set of strategies that they can use both for learning and for performing pragmatics, and to remind them that strategies are called upon differentially, depending on the context.

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