Activity: Determining the Sources of Learners’ Pragmatic Behavior

Objectives:
1) Participants will be able to identify potential source or combination of sources for this divergence.
2) Participants will be able to analyze the factors that might have influenced their pragmatic use through reflection on their own experience learning and using an L2.

Suggested time: 40 minutes

Materials:
- Information, “Source of pragmatic divergence (List 1)" on index cards, each indicating a potential source for the learners’ deviant pragmatic behavior (six all together but with some blank cards on which participants are invited to write down other sources)
- Task sheet, “Scrambled list of examples of learners’ divergent pragmatic behavior” (List 2)
- Answer key, “Suggested categorizations for situations involving pragmatics” (List 3)

Directions:
Part 1
1) Form into groups of 4-5 participants.
2) Each group is to get a set of the index cards with a source for pragmatic divergence on each card (List 1) and a copy of task sheet, “Scrambled list of examples of pragmatic behavior” (List 2).
3) Look at each example of learners’ pragmatic L2 use included in the scrambled set of examples of pragmatic behavior and determine the factors that may have contributed to that particular pragmatic behavior. Match each example with one or more of the index cards. Note that there could potentially be more than one reason for a certain pragmatic behavior and it may be difficult or impossible to identify only one cause.
4) After matching all examples with potential reasons, refer to the answer key, “Suggested categorizations for situations involving pragmatics” (List 3), comparing them with the results obtained by your group.
5) As a whole group, share the highlights of your small-group discussion.

1 Appearing in Learners’ pragmatics: Potential causes of divergence (Ch. 5) in N. Ishihara & A, D. Cohen (Forthcoming). Teaching and learning pragmatics: Where language and culture meet. Edinburgh Gate, Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
**Part 2**

1) Get back into your small group.

2) Brainstorm about your own previous experiences learning and using an L2 – particularly with regard to cases of pragmatic failure and pragmatic resistance.

Sample discussion questions:

a) What pragmatic difficulties or failures have you experienced? How did your conversation partner respond to you?

b) Have you felt resistant to any L2 pragmatic norms? In what situations and why? How did you behave in that situation, and how did the listener react to your pragmatic choice?

3) For each example of pragmatic failure and pragmatic choice, determine what factors/sources might have contributed to the communicative difficulties, misunderstandings, and sense of resistance.

4) As a whole group, share some of the examples and highlights of your discussion.

**Discussion/Wrap-up:** Brainstorm about the instructional tasks you would design for helping learners overcome each type of pragmatic failure. If your list of reasons for divergence includes learners' resistance to perceived L2 norms, consider prompts that you might use with your students in order to probe the level of their pragmatic awareness. (Just by observing learners’ pragmatic behavior you may not know whether they are fully aware of the L2 norms and potential consequences of this resistance.) If they are well aware, you might remain respectful of their pragmatic choice. If they are unaware, what awareness-raising tasks would you provide them?
Information: Sources of pragmatic divergence (List 1)

NEGATIVE TRANSFER OF PRAGMATIC NORMS

LIMITED L2 GRAMMATICAL ABILITY

OVERGENERALIZATION OF PERCEIVED L2 PRAGMATIC NORMS

EFFECT OF INSTRUCTION OR INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

RESISTANCE TO USING PERCEIVED L2 PRAGMATIC NORMS
Task sheet: Scrambled examples of pragmatic divergence (List 2)

- Stephanie 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 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.”

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

- An L2 speaker of Japanese starts teaching English in a Japanese junior high school. A Japanese colleague approaches him and asks in Japanese if he wants to clean the school with the students, a customary daily routine in most schools there. Knowing that a Japanese teacher would probably say yes, he chooses to decline, because he believes that he did not go to college to clean a school.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

- A learner of English who reads in an ESL textbook: *Americans say ‘thank you’ to a compliment received*, starts responding that way to *all* compliments she receives and expects all fluent English speakers to react that way.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

- Unaware of grounds for refunds in Japanese society, an American insists that his niece complain to the receptionist at a public bath resort in Tokyo after she is expelled from the bath because she has a small rose tattoo on the back of her shoulder (which, according to the bath house rules, is grounds for expulsion). He insists that they refund her $29 entrance fee.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

- A Japanese learner of English is invited to a concert on the weekend, but wants to decline because he would rather spend the night with his children at home. He literally translates what he would say in Japanese into English and says, I have something to take care of at home.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________
• A Japanese speaker writes an email message in English, acknowledging feedback from an anonymous reviewer on a chapter: "I certainly received your feedback. Thanks a lot." The writer’s intention was simply to indicate that he had received the feedback and appreciated it. He used "certainly" as an intensifier since tashikani would work in formal contexts in Japanese. But the effect in English was to sound as if he had gotten more feedback than he had bargained for and that he is even perhaps a bit miffed. Even the "Thanks a lot" could be interpreted as facetious.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• An English-speaking learner of Indonesian hears an expression, Did you eat yet? as a regular greeting used among native speakers but avoids using it herself because it does not really seem like a greeting to her.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• An English-speaking learner of Japanese is offered some more food at an informal dinner table by a close friend. The learner knows an expression, iie, kekkoudesu, an equivalent of "no thanks" in Japanese and uses it. However, the learner is unaware that this expression is usually used in formal situations and sounds funny or awkward if directed to a close friend.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• A Western learner of Japanese hears a female Japanese speaker use a combination of higher-level honorifics (humble and polite forms) to an elderly male and says to herself: "I'll play it safe with the polite form. She sounds too humble for me." Although she gets a perfect score in a quiz on humble forms in her Japanese language class, she decides not to use it in speaking to the elderly male.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• A beginning learner of English asks a good friend to help him/her with a course paper written in English. The friend says: "If you’d told me earlier, I could’ve helped you." The learner catches the "...I could...help" portions of the message and is somewhat confused about what the friend means: Can s/he help or not?

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________
• When invited to a special office party of a friend in Mexico, an American checks her calendar and sees she has a conflict, so she declines the invitation straight away – causing her friend to respond with surprise and disappointment since an acceptance, however reluctant, would be expected (regardless of actual intention to attend).

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• A beginning learner of English requests that a clerk in a repair shop fix an item, with “Do this for me now” because the learner has not yet 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”).

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• A Korean visitor to the U.S. heard that Americans tend to be friendly so she is surprised when the middle-aged man next to her on the bus seems unwilling to have a conversation with her. In response to her question, “What can I see in this town?” he just responds with “Oh, lots of things” and goes back to reading his novel. The visitor is put off by this response.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• An American learner of Japanese is taught to fill a pause with *eeto* (more informal) or *ano* (more formal) in his Japanese class, and so does his best to fill as many pauses as he can that way, only to be told by a Japanese teacher that he is filling his pauses too much – that they prefer to use silence or non-verbal cues more.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• Joe heard that Italians talk with their hands a lot so he made an effort to use a lot of hand gestures to make his points in Italian while studying in Rome. An Italian friend took him aside and told him that he was gesturing too much, and also that some of his gestures meant something different from what he intended.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

• An Israeli asks an American colleague how much she makes a month, assuming that it is fine to ask this question because it would indeed be reasonable in his
home community. The American colleague is put off by the question since she takes it as unacceptable prying.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________

- A male Spanish learner of English gives an inappropriate compliment (piropo) to a female English speaker (e.g., “My god! So many curves and me without brakes!” – a literal translation from the Spanish: ¡Dios mio, tantas curvas y yo sin frenos!) This Spanish speaker isn't aware that such piropos, which are likely to be socially acceptable in a certain subculture of Spanish speakers, are much less so in English-speaking culture. In this case, the female English speaker in fact interpreted his utterance as rude and chauvinistic.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence: ___________________
Answer key: Suggested categorizations for situations involving pragmatics (List 3)

Note that the following examples do not necessarily fall exclusively within one category or another. The causes of divergent pragmatic behavior may result from multiple sources that are intertwined with each other. It may be difficult to determine a single cause, especially just by observing learners’ pragmatic behavior. However, it is still important for language teachers to speculate on what combination of reasons might have caused learners to diverge from pragmatic language use. Such analysis of learners’ pragmatic use can lead to more effective and more culturally sensitive language instruction in closer alignment with their needs.

1. Pragmatic failure resulting primarily from negative transfer of pragmatic norms

- An Israeli asks an American colleague how much she makes a month, assuming that it is fine to ask this question because it would indeed be reasonable in his home community. The American colleague is put off by the question since she takes it as unacceptable prying.

- When invited to a special office party of a friend in Mexico, an American checks her calendar and sees she has a conflict, so she declines the invitation straight away – causing her friend to respond with surprise and disappointment since an acceptance would be expected (regardless of actual intention to attend).

- Unaware of grounds for refunds in Japanese society, an American insists that his niece complain to the receptionist at a public bath resort in Tokyo after she is expelled from the bath because she has a small rose tattoo on the back of her shoulder (which, according to the bath house rules, is grounds for expulsion). He insists that they refund her $29 entrance fee.

- An English-speaking learner of Japanese is offered some more food at an informal dinner table by a close friend. The learner knows an expression, *lie, kekkoudesu*, an equivalent of “no thanks” in Japanese and uses it. However, the learner is unaware that this expression is usually used in formal situations and sounds awkward or comical if directed to a close friend.

- A male Spanish learner of English gives an inappropriate compliment (*piropo*) to a female English speaker (e.g., “My god! So many curves and me without brakes!” – a literal translation from the Spanish: ¡Dios mio, tantas curvas y yo sin frenos!) This Spanish speaker isn’t aware that such *piropos*, which are likely to be socially acceptable in a certain subculture of Spanish speakers, are much less so in English-speaking culture. In this case, the female English speaker in fact interpreted his utterance as rude and chauvinistic.
A Japanese learner of English is invited to a concert on the weekend, but wants to decline because he would rather spend the night with his children at home. He literally translates what he would say in Japanese into English and says, *I have something to take care of at home.*

A Japanese speaker writes an email message in English, acknowledging feedback from an anonymous reviewer on a chapter: “I certainly received your feedback. Thanks a lot.” The writer’s intention was simply to indicate that he had received the feedback and appreciated it. He used "certainly" as an intensifier since *tashikani* would work in formal contexts in Japanese. But the effect in English was to sound as if he had gotten more feedback than he had bargained for and that he is even perhaps a bit miffed. Even the "Thanks a lot" could be interpreted as facetious.

2. Pragmatic failure resulting primarily from limited L2 grammatical ability

A beginning learner of English asks a good friend to help him/her with a course paper written in English. The friend says: "If you’d told me earlier, I could’ve helped you." The learner catches the “…I could…help” portions of the message and is somewhat confused about what the friend means: *Can s/he help or not?*

A beginning learner of English requests that a clerk in a repair shop fix an item, with “Do this for me now” because the learner has not yet 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”).

3. Pragmatic failure resulting primarily from overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms

A Korean visitor to the U.S. heard that Americans tend to be friendly so she is surprised when the middle-aged man next to her on the bus seems unwilling to have a conversation with her. In response to her question, “What can I see in this town?”, he just responds with “Oh, lots of things” and goes back to reading his novel. The visitor is put off by this response.

Joe heard that Italians talk with their hands a lot so he made an effort to use a lot of hand gestures to make his points in Italian while studying in Rome. An Italian friend took him aside and told him that he was gesturing too much, and also that some of his gestures meant something different from what he intended.

Stephanie 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 a most polite way, “Would you be able to give me a glass of water,
4. Effect of Instruction or instructional materials

- A learner of English who reads in an ESL textbook: Americans say ‘thank you’ to a compliment received, starts responding that way to all compliments she receives and expects all fluent English speakers to react that way.

- An American learner of Japanese is taught to fill a pause with eeto (more informal) or ano (more formal) in his Japanese class, and so does his best to fill as many pauses as he can that way, only to be told by a Japanese teacher that he is filling his pauses too much – that they prefer to use silence or non-verbal cues more.

5. Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms

- A Western learner of Japanese hears a female Japanese speaker use a combination of higher-level honorifics (humble and polite forms) to an elderly male and says to herself: "I'll play it safe with the polite form. She sounds too humble for me." Although she gets a perfect score in a quiz on humble forms in her Japanese language class, she decides not to use it in speaking to the elderly male.

- An L2 speaker of Japanese starts teaching English in a Japanese junior high school. A Japanese colleague approaches him and asks in Japanese if he wants to clean the school with the students, a customary daily routine in most schools there. Knowing that a Japanese teacher would probably say yes, he chooses to decline, because he believes that he did not go to college to clean a school.

- An English-speaking learner of Indonesian hears an expression, Did you eat yet? as a regular greeting used among native speakers but avoids using it herself because it does not really seem like a greeting to her.