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- Title:** “*Why no tip?*”: Student-Generated DCTs in the ESL Classroom
- Author:** Terence McLean, Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, AB, Canada
- Level:** Intermediate to Advanced
- Time:** Variable (e.g., 1 hour to introduce pragmatics and Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) to students; 1 hour for group discussions; 1 hour for student-generated DCTs; and so on.). Time will depend on teacher commitment and student needs.
- Resources:**
1. A sample of researcher-generated DCTs (see Appendix 1).
  2. A sample of student-generated DCTs (see Appendix 2).
  3. Transparencies/OHP or computer(power point)/projector and screen.
  4. An instructor who places pragmatics at the core of his or her teaching philosophy (recommended).
- Goals:**
1. To introduce pragmatics to students – encouraging pragmatic awareness.
  2. To have students discuss DCTs in groups - encouraging metapragmatics
  3. To solicit student-generated DCTs for future use – collecting authentic resources.

**Procedure:**

I suggest that teachers first take the time to give students an introduction of the topic of pragmatics in language learning by giving concrete examples of how and when grammatical competence alone does not always lead to successful communication (e.g. you can use complex grammar forms, yet still come across as rude). The next step is to use as set of DCTs (see Appendix 1), such as those developed by Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1995), as the basis for group discussions about situations that require the use of speech acts such as requests, apologies, and refusals. The main goal of these activities is to encourage metapragmatics; in other words, get students thinking and talking about how language can or should be used in a variety of situations. The most important step is to ask students to think about sticky situations that they have experienced. When I asked my students to write personal DCTs for the class to discuss (see Appendix 2), they were enthusiastic, frank, and motivated. Not only were they interested in sharing experiences, they were also eager to provide DCTs for me to use in articles, such as

this one. They felt that they were being given the opportunity to let teachers know what they *really* wanted in the classroom: the chance to practice what to say in job interviews, at the doctor's office, and with landlords. All in all, the message of this paper is simple: introduce pragmatics to students; have them discuss DCTs in groups; and solicit student-generated scenarios for future use.

**Rationale:**

“*Ne*, Terry, you’re always talking about that *plagmastics* stuff, right?”

“*Pragmatics*”

“Whatever. Anyway, a big group of young people ate at *Wasabi* tonight and didn’t leave a tip. When *Okasan* (a pleasant woman who manages the restaurant) asked one of the guys, *Why no tip?*, he got defensive and started complaining about little things. She only wanted to find out so that she could improve her service, but I don’t think she should have asked him in that way. What would you have said?”

And so went the conversation with my wife, a non-native speaker of English, about an apparent faux pas that her friend, another non-native speaker of English, made at a Japanese restaurant in Canada. I explained that I would have probably said something like: “*Excuse me, do you mind if I ask why you decided not to leave a tip? Was there something we could have done better?*” This request for an explanation would have mitigated a touchy situation with a little *sociocultural savvy* (Cohen, 1996). Sure, it is possible that the young customers were simply rude; conversely, they may have been disappointed with the restaurant’s service, food, or prices. Regardless, using a speech act such as asking for an explanation, requires pragmatic competence, which can show the listener that you are sensitive to the potential impact of what you are saying. In the case of poor *Okasan* at *Wasabi*, she meant well, but was taken as being too forward. It is scenarios such as this *why no tip incident* that have led me to the conclusion that the teaching of pragmatics in the ESL classroom is not an option: in order to meet the needs of students who hope to function in an English speaking workplace or educational institution, instructors must incorporate a variety of consciousness-raising situations which will prompt learners to discuss and investigate how language can be used to successfully achieve communicative goals. Where

can we find authentic situations? *Ask the students.*

In a previous paper (McLean, 2004), I looked at the issue of the explicit teaching of pragmatics in the language classroom; however, my work was limited to synthesizing the research literature and on interviews with a group of non-native speaking Asian graduate students at a university in Canada. I focused my activities on how these students responded to a small set of DCTs (Hudson et. al, 1995). Rather than use DCTs as a tool for assessing pragmatic competence, I attempted to use them as a springboard for eliciting discussion about pragmatics in general – encouraging metapragmatics. In summary, scenarios about shopping and roommates did not elicit much discussion; however, scenarios that involved workplace requests, refusals, and apologies brought out individual opinions and personal experiences.

In order for learners to have a fighting chance outside the classroom, they must be aware of the consequences of making pragmatic choices (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Unfortunately, most English learning resource materials lack sufficient authentic content and situations necessary for this goal (e.g., Myers-Scotton & Bersten, 1988; Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991; Locastro, 1997). Nevertheless, research provides a valuable source of information for language teachers to make informed decisions about teaching pragmatics: empowering the teacher as decision-makers. Likewise, teachers can help learners to notice pragmatics in L2 situations so that they can better make informed choices in negotiating effective communication: empowering the learner as decision-maker. The problem is this: how can we best meet each of our student's needs in context-specific language learning settings? How can we determine what they need if we do not ask them?

In order to clarify this context-specific predicament, I will explain my experience with ESL classes at a college in Canada. I teach advanced ESL courses and have attempted to incorporate pragmatics into my daily instruction. Many of my students were professionals (i.e., engineers,

pharmacists, teachers), in their home countries and they have immigrated to Canada for various family, economic, and/or political reasons. Intermingled with these mature students are some young international students who are trying to improve their English skills so that they can enter a Canadian university. Given this mix of goal-oriented language learners, it is challenging to meet the particular needs of each student. Nevertheless, there is a curriculum to follow and required textbooks to use – none of which mentions pragmatics.

I decided to introduce pragmatics to my students with an explanation of how pragmatic competence fits within the larger spectrum of language ability. That is, I explained how proficiency in a second language involves more than grammatical competence: proficiency in a second language also requires pragmatic competence. I continued my talk with how DCTs can be used as impetus to classroom discussion, and, while I was sure that I taught with scholarly prowess, I was even more convinced that they were dazzled with my sagacious delivery. Wrong. Well, to give myself some credit, the students did engage in energetic group discussions about the appropriateness of particular speech acts (requests, apologies, and refusals) in certain scenarios. For example, the following scenario from Hudson, et al. (1995) elicited interesting discussion:

Situation 8: You are the president of the local chapter of a national hiking club. Every month the club goes on a hiking trip and you are responsible for organizing it. You are on this month's trip and have borrowed another member's hiking book. You are hiking by a river and stop to look at the book. The book slips from your hand, falls in the river and washes away. You hike on to the rest stop where you meet up with the owner of the book. You say: (p. 90)

This situation brought up a discussion about situation-appropriate ways of apologizing and when or where one might use humour in doing so. Following suggestion by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996) one of my goals was to use class discussions of pragmatics to trigger new awareness of form. In the end, I found that the students were interested in pragmatics, but they were not necessarily interested in the situations that I was providing them. Then, one of those teachable moments occurred. From the back of the classroom, a reserved gentleman from Iran explained that he was having problems communicating with some customers in the pharmacy at which he was doing a practicum. He wanted to

know more about how he could improve his pragmatic competence in order to become a pharmacist who can better meet customer needs. *Bingo*. The rest of that afternoon was spent discussing how to apologize to people when what they ordered is not ready, how to request personal information for administrative purposes, and how to suggest products to people who are not sure what to buy. The class earnestly participated in health care related discussions, and, of course, everyone came up with anecdotes about when they or their children were ill and they had difficulties communicating with health care professionals. The lesson I learned that day was that rather than researchers and teachers, the students themselves are the best resource for authentic scenarios: we need student-generated DCTs. Remember the Why no tip episode? It is everyday situations such as this unintentional rudeness by a sushi restaurant Okasan that can provide second language teachers with consciousness-raising material for helping students to develop pragmatic competence in English.

### **Reflections - A Call to Instructors**

In order to illustrate the kinds of situations that have troubled some of my ESL students, I have included some actual DCTs that I have collected (see Appendix 2). One pattern that emerges is that many of the students want to know how to make requests in various situations. Furthermore, these student-generated DCTs are only samples of what our students can provide. Researchers and teachers can rack their collective brains to come up with potentially helpful scenarios; however, the best resource for problem situations is experience itself. By asking students about situations they have been in (and/or intentionally avoid) we can begin to build a truly authentic base of materials for use in our classrooms. Therefore, I call for instructors who incorporate pragmatics into their lessons to take the time to ask students to write self-oriented scenarios. This activity can be used as a combined writing/speaking task that is relevant to students' lives. My examples relate to the lives of ESL students in Canada; however, scenarios can also be prepared by college students in EFL settings. For example, rather than limiting EFL students with contrived task-based scenarios that deal with shopping or getting a hotel room, we can ask them to think about what problems they fear regarding an upcoming two-week home stay in a foreign

country. Maybe they would like to know how to delicately request for a different host family. Or perhaps they would like to practice how to apologize for not liking the food that a host mother has prepared. Whatever the situation, the more authentic practice that we can provide to students the better. A collection of student-generated DCTs can be a welcomed addition to the library of any English language studies department. Who knows, if poor Okasan at Wasabi had studied about pragmatics in her younger ESL days, maybe she would now be thriving on tips. What do you say?

### References

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## Appendix 1 - Pragmatics Discourse Completion Task

*Note:* Adapted from Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995).

*Situation 1:* You are shopping for your friend's birthday and see something in a display case. You want to look at it more closely. A sales clerk comes over to you. *You say:*

*Situation 2:* You live in a large house. You hold the lease to the house and rent out the other rooms. You are in the room of one of your housemates collecting the rent. You reach to take the rent cheque when you accidentally knock over a small, empty vase on the desk. It doesn't break. *You say:*

*Situation 3:* You work in a small shop that repairs jewelry. A valued customer comes into the shop to pick up an antique watch that you know is to be a present. It is not ready yet, even though you promised it would be. *You say:*

*Situation 4:* You work in a small department of a large office. You are in a department meeting now. You need to borrow a pen in order to take some notes. The head of your department is sitting next to you and might have an extra pen. *You say?*

*Situation 5:* You are a teacher at a large school. You see the lead teacher on campus. The lead teacher asks you to call all of the other teachers tonight and tell them that there will be a meeting tomorrow. You cannot do it because you know that it will take hours and you have friends coming over to your house tonight. *You say:*

*Situation 6:* You work in a small department of a large office. Last week the head of the department loaned you a computer file on disk. You can't find the disk, and think you have lost it. You have just finished a meeting with your department when the head of the department passes near you. *You say:*

*Situation 7:* You are shopping in a department store. You have selected an item and are waiting to pay for it. The salesclerk helps you, explains that there is a special offer on a new product, and offers to give you a short demonstration. You cannot watch the demonstration because you are on your way to meet someone for lunch. *You say:*

*Situation 8:* You are the president of the local chapter of a national hiking club. Every month the club goes on a hiking trip and you are responsible for organizing it. You are on this month's trip and have borrowed another member's hiking book. You are hiking by a river and stop to look at the book. The book slips from your hand, falls in the river, and is washed away. You hike on to the rest stop where you meet up with the owner of the book. *You say:*

*Situation 9:* You are a member of the local chapter of a national ski club. Every month the club goes on a ski trip. You are in a club meeting now helping to plan this month's trip. The club president is sitting next to you and asks to borrow a pen. You cannot lend your pen because you only have one and need it to take notes yourself. *You say:*

*Situation 10:* You are applying for a new job in a small company and want to make an appointment for an interview. You know the manager is very busy and only schedules interviews in the afternoon from one to four o'clock. However, you currently work in the afternoon. You are

in the office this morning turning in your application form when you see the manager. *You say:*

## **Appendix 2 – Student-generated Pragmatic DCTs**

*Note:* Most of the grammar and spelling errors have been corrected, and all of the students have provided written permission for their DCTs to be used. Also, it must be emphasized that I use situations such as these for classroom discussion purposes only. I go over each scenario with the students and explain the contexts in as much detail as possible.

*Situation 1:* The director of a college comes to your class and tells you that, for class size reasons, you have been changed to another section (same level). You do not want to change because you feel that you will do better with the class you are in. After class, you go to the director's office to make the request. *What do you say?*

*Situation 2:* Your phone is out of order and you need to make an emergency long distance call to your family back home. You want to ask your neighbour if you can use his or her telephone. *What do you say?*

*Situation 3:* You are about to graduate from school and you remember that you had lent a book to a classmate. When you had previously asked for the book back, she promised to return it to you soon. The end of the term is approaching and the classmate is avoiding you. You finally see her in the hallway. *What do you say?*

*Situation 4:* You are applying for acceptance into a university program and you need a letter of recommendation from your ESL instructor. You go to his office. *What do you say?*

*Situation 5:* You are in a restaurant and someone at your table says something funny. You laugh and spray a little food. You are embarrassed and think that you should apologize. *What do you say?*

*Situation 6:* You are working at a café and accidentally drop some chocolate ice cream in the lap of a customer who is wearing a white dress. You feel terrible. *What do you say?*

*Situation 7:* You are in school and each class is helping in the preparations for an anniversary celebration. Your class has not finished in time and the teacher wants everyone to stay after class until the work has been completed. You have plans to meet some other friends for dinner and you don't want to stay after school. *What do you say?*

*Situation 8:* One of your classmates has obvious body odor problems. Everyone in the class is aware of this, but nobody knows what to say. You want to suggest to your classmate that he bathe or shower more often. *What do you say?*

*Situation 9:* A neighbour (a native speaker of English) wants you and your husband to go to her place for dinner. Your husband does not like this person and her husband, so he does not want to go. You think that you should politely refuse the request (without lying), but you do not want to ruin your friendship with your neighbour. *What do you say?*