
Summary

In this text, Hinkel makes the case that pragmatic, cultural competencies are not implicitly acquired when one learns English, but that explicit attention must be given to these features of language and culture. Having the lexis to perform certain functions (e.g. saying “thank you”) is not enough to show competence in the use of such expressions. Inappropriate usage can lead to communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, or can result in lower placements in or exclusion from social groups, often unbeknownst to the student. With a growing number of English students worldwide, the need is even greater to intentionally teach this invisible culture. English instructors must be aware of their students’ goals, needs, and settings in which they are using English in order to teach the social competencies necessary for successful communication exchanges. Also covered are sociocultural effects on writing and reading in a foreign language. Hinkel ends with practical suggestions for raising students’ awareness of such differences between their culture and that of English in order to implement and exercise this knowledge in their own use of English.

Response

What I appreciate about this study is Hinkel’s ability to clearly define and illustrate when culturally sensitive interactions break down and to build a great case for raising students’ pragmatic awareness by examining their own culture and then comparing it to the English-speaking culture. This paper strongly purports that pragmatic pedagogy be explicit, so I seek to provide such clear and direct pragmatic instruction in all my classes. An example of this is modeling two contrasting dialogues in the same context, such as peer feedback. As a class, we first notice the differences, then explicitly discuss them and the specific language that is used to achieve very different pragmatic effects.
Another thing I value from this study are the questions Hinkel provides that students can use in interviewing native speakers about the social practices in their culture. This activity can also influence cross-cultural sensitivity, mitigating misjudgments when miscommunications occur. All of these things are quite valuable in diverse ESL classroom contexts, or in mono-cultural contexts with students preparing to study or do business in the US. I seek to incorporate pragmatic awareness into all my future teaching contexts, and this article provides great support in doing so.