Chapter 6
Pragmatics and Communication

1. Anecdote: “It’s academic”

One of our colleagues taught an intermediate-level ESL writing class that could have been called a miniature United Nations, because it contained international students from China, Colombia, India, Iran, Japan, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. At the time she was teaching this class, she narrated the following story.

My students are very excited about their writing class. They are eager to improve and want to do everything to make progress. For each chapter covered, we always watch a short video of 2–3 minutes to better understand the writing task to follow. Unfortunately, not everyone finds the video useful.

My Colombian student said angrily. “It’s a waste of time. We should do more grammar and more writing.”

Two other students concurred with a loud “Yeah, yeah!” So I proposed eliminating the video for the remainder of the semester. Suddenly, some of the students voiced loud disapproval.

An Iranian student yelled out, “Just because he doesn’t like it doesn’t mean that the rest of us agree!”

In a second loud voice, the Uzbek student shouted, “I like it and it is good! We should have it!”

Another Iranian student screamed out, “Don’t stop it!” I looked around at the other students.
Then, the student from Vietnam remarked in a low, but audible, voice: "The video is very useful. It helps us to learn by giving us examples of the kind of essay we are going to write later."

The students from China, India, and Taiwan did not say a word. They just sat there. So what did I do?

In an authoritative voice, I said: "This is a democracy; isn't it? We'll go with the majority and continue with the video presentation." There was a sigh of relief from the students, and the lesson went on.

We share the preceding narration not simply to remind you that classroom learning differs among language groups and cultures but to alert you to the differences in acceptable communication patterns from members of different cultures.

**Discussion of Key Issues**

The communicative intent or meaning that speakers intend to convey is culturally based, context specific, and influenced by a variety of variables that carry different weight in different cultures. Cross-cultural misunderstandings often arise because speakers do not share the same cultural presuppositions. Difficulties are often linked to speakers' beliefs or assumptions about such factors as the importance of group harmony and face; the emphasis on directness or indirectness in discourse; the weight attached to social status; and the use of nonverbal aspects of communication, such as body language and physical space.

To foster effective cross-cultural communication, speakers should become aware of cross-cultural differences in the appropriateness of different discourse styles, in rules of speaking, and in the relative importance assigned to different context variables. Such awareness enables speakers to become more cognizant of possible sources for cultural misunderstandings and helps them to understand better their own communicative behaviors and often subconscious reasons for discourse choices. Moreover, this awareness provides speakers the possibility of consciously adjusting their discourse to the cultural and situational context of the exchange.
Chapter 6 explores how speakers use language in social contexts and the relationship between language and culture. It examines the many communicative interactions speakers engage in, ranging from speech acts (e.g., greetings, apologizing, and complaining) to conversations and other types of discourse. We will discuss how culture influences both speakers’ communicative choices and their understanding and interpretation of conversational styles and discourse modes, as well as the miscommunications that occur as a result of cross-cultural differences in these areas.

**Questions for Thought**

- What are some verbal discourse differences that can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings?

- What is the connection between language and culture?

- Why can developing pragmatic awareness lessen cross-cultural misunderstandings?

**II. Theory: What Research Tells Us**

**Language and Communication**

Language is a defining characteristic of human beings. All humans use language in some form or another to communicate with others. Regardless of what culture and language children are born into, normal children will master most aspects of their language at a relatively early age. All languages share underlying universal features; however, they differ in how speakers’ messages are realized. In other words, while all languages share
aspects of universal grammar (UG; see, e.g., Chomsky, 1986; Cook, 1988; Crain & Thornton, 1998), languages differ syntactically, lexically, phonetically, and pragmatically. Language exists within the context of culture; expectations and understandings of language use are conditioned and influenced by the values, belief systems, and worldviews of the speakers' culture.

Since the primary goal of language is to communicate messages from one speaker to another, listeners need to understand the messages speakers are attempting to convey. Being able to understand one another entails more than understanding the core or literal meanings of utterances. Communicative interactions are dynamic processes in which speakers assess myriad variables (including setting, age, gender, and status of the speaker), respond to verbal and nonverbal cues, and adjust speech style and patterns accordingly. Successful communication entails sharing the same or similar interpretations of the intent and meaning of the messages and being able to negotiate successfully one's way through the communicative interaction.

Language is ambiguous by nature. Speakers do not communicate in isolation. Meaning is jointly constructed by speakers within the communicative setting wherein speakers negotiate the messages they wish to convey by manipulating the structures and discourse patterns of the language (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Together, speakers shape the communicative interaction, the nature of which must take into account myriad factors. As speakers negotiate meaning, they need to be able to adapt their speech to the situation and to react appropriately to the messages conveyed by others; speakers need to display competent communicative behaviors. Speakers' participation in communicative interaction is a reflection of their social roles and social identities, the discourse patterns of their language, and the particular context in which the speakers find themselves at any given moment.

Communicative interactions take place within contexts that include setting, status, gender, and age of the participants. These variables are critical in determining how speakers will use language to convey intended messages. However, not all variables carry equal weight in all languages and cultures. The degree of impact these variables have on speakers' choice of discourse style and type of communicative exchange differs cross-culturally. In addition, the range of choices available to speakers re-
reflects the importance that different variables hold in each language and culture. A culture’s beliefs, values, and norms are reflected and reinforced by the discourse patterns of a language. Cultures strongly concerned with the maintenance of face are also the most likely to value indirect discourse styles. Likewise, speakers in cultures that are very concerned with social status and power distance will place strong emphasis on the appropriate use of honorifics, formal terms of address, and other linguistic means to reflect these factors. In cross-cultural encounters, speakers need to be able to recognize and understand how these variables are sensitive to different cultural interpretations and thus produce different realizations of discourse patterns between languages.

Speakers communicate effectively when they share the same expectations, beliefs, and interpretations of the social context and of the speakers’ roles and identities. Cross-cultural variations in communicative behaviors stem from differences in how speakers of different cultures perceive and use language, both verbal and nonverbal. Misunderstandings are based on two major premises. First, people expect members of other cultures to behave according to shared norms and rules of behavior. Second, people do not realize that the same behaviors can have different interpretations in different cultures (Albert, 1983; Albert & Triandis, 1985). Pragmatics examines assumptions, communicative goals, and speech acts used to attain specific goals, namely, how linguistic structures are used by speakers in different interactional contexts. (See Activity A—In the Limelight)

**Communicative intent**

Communicative misunderstandings often result when speakers from different cultures engage in interactions in which the speakers follow the rules or norms of their own speech communities. When these rules and norms differ, misperceptions often result with regard to communicative intent, or the purpose of a message. These misunderstandings occur not only between speakers of different languages or from different cultures but also between intimates, between colleagues and coworkers, between strangers and intimates, and between males and females within the same culture (e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1991; Tannen, 1994; Tzanne, 1999; Wodak, 1996).

Interpretation of speakers’ communicative intent is not predictable based on the core definition or referential meaning of a word or structure
alone. The context in which the speakers produce the utterance is key to interpreting and understanding communicative intent, that is, the actual meaning that speakers wish to convey with their words, rather than the literal meaning of the words themselves. According to Gumperz (1971:285), “Effective communication requires that speakers and audiences agree both on the meaning of words and on the social import or values attached to choice of expression.” To understand this requirement at the word level, consider the statement “That’s an interesting picture.” What does the word interesting mean here? Is this word referring to its core definition of “fascinating” or “engaging,” or is it being used as a polite euphemism for the speaker’s true feelings, for example, the picture is ugly, awful, disgusting, or ridiculous.

At the sentence level, consider the statement “It’s cold in here.” This statement can be construed as a statement of fact; the utterance would then be taken at its literal meaning. At another level, however, it can be viewed as an indirect request or directive, meaning, for example, “Please turn up the heat” or “Please close the window.” The only way the listener can accurately understand the actual intended meaning of the statement (illocutionary intent) is by understanding the context in which the statement is uttered. Speakers draw inferences about meaning that are derived from speakers’ knowledge about language and the world. These inferences are generally fixed and drawn quickly. In many instances, intended meanings are conveyed using phrases that have acquired a conventionalized, nonliteral (“indirect”) meaning. The question “Can you open the window?” does not necessarily question the speaker’s ability to perform such a physical action but, rather, carries the illocutionary or pragmatic effect of a request. Understanding the statement “It’s cold in here” poses no problem for speakers who share the same knowledge about that language, the same rules of speaking, and the same understanding of the particular context in which the phrases are uttered. They understand intuitively the complex relationship between the function or intended function of an utterance, the form or structure by which it is expressed, and the situational variables affecting the intended meaning.

When speakers speak different languages and come from different backgrounds, they often do not share the same schemata for the negotiation of meaning in communication interactions. The meanings and the inferences they draw from an utterance may be wrong. Such misidentification or misunderstanding of a speaker’s intent because of differences in
conversational routines or formulaic expressions is common between speakers from different cultural and language backgrounds (Meeuwis & Sarangi, 1994; Tannen, 1984; Thomas, 1983; Ulrich, 1997; Wodak, 1996). Languages differ in the illocutionary intent of their messages and in the types and use of specific communicative behaviors, routines, and rituals utilized by their speakers. Consider the following situation.

A Greek student in the United States told an American classmate and friend of his that she was welcome to visit him any time. She replied that she would love to come to Athens and see him during spring break. Later, when she booked a reservation at a hotel, George was hurt, and Erica was surprised by his curt behavior.

Both participants are clearly not happy by what has happened, and neither participant is sure as to why this is so. What we can probably conclude is that there was an apparent misperception about the intent of the invitation and the acceptance of that invitation. Erica, the American, thought she was going to enjoy a pleasant vacation sight-seeing with a Greek friend in Greece, whereas George assumed that Erica’s acceptance of his invitation implied that she would stay with him.

**Speech Acts**

*Speech acts* have been defined as all the things speakers do with words when they speak, whether this be greeting, thanking, complaining, apologizing, or other (Austin, 1962). In other words, speech acts refer to the purpose of a speaker’s utterances. Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative, ill mannered, rude, or a combination of all three. Such misinterpretation of communicative intent is heightened in cross-cultural situations. The speech acts themselves are etic; that is, all speakers in all languages engage in greetings and leave-takings, offer advice, utter directives, express apologies, and so on. However, the etic manifestations of speech acts are language specific and culture specific. In other words, when these speech acts are used and how they are expressed differ. There are important differences in how these speech acts are expressed (linguistic or language differences) and when they are expressed (pragmatic differences). Much of the difference between speech-act use is embedded in different cultural norms and assumptions governing communicative interactions. All lan-
guages have some linguistic means and sociocultural norms for greeting another person. It is rather obvious that languages use different phrases to greet; less obvious are the rules governing who greets whom first, what social variables (e.g., status) must be observed in the greeting, and even whom one greets. For instance, North Americans recognizing a neighbor they may only know by sight will still generally offer a greeting when encountering them outdoors, in the apartment hallway, or around town. By comparison, in many Asian cultures, greeting someone whom one really does not know well is not done. These cultures apply different social norms to members of an out-group than to the members of one’s in-group. (See Activity B—Meet and Greet)

Required competences
To understand the meaning of a sentence and the speaker’s intended meaning requires two kinds of knowledge. Understanding the literal meaning is contingent on knowledge of grammar, while understanding the intended message depends on knowledge of context. According to Bachman (1990), we may label these two types of language knowledge as organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence refers to speakers’ grammar knowledge, or their knowledge of linguistic units and how they systematically function together, at both the sentence level and the broader discourse level, according to the rules or patterns of a language. We can subdivide pragmatic competence into illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence can be described as speakers’ knowledge of communicative interaction and the ability to carry out or engage in successful communicative interaction; sociolinguistic competence characterizes speakers’ ability to know what to say and how to say it in a given sociocultural context, or the “rules of speaking” (Fraser, 1990; Hymes, 1969, 1972).

We may also describe sociolinguistic competence as both appropriate and effective ability. Appropriate ability refers to speakers’ capacity to engage in those communicative behaviors deemed as proper and suitable within the parameters and expectations of their particular culture. Effective ability describes speakers’ capacity to employ those behaviors that allow them to achieve desired outcomes (Lustig & Koester, 2003). Shared interpretations of what constitutes competent communicative behaviors are an essential component of speakers’ cultural knowledge.
Communications or breakdowns occur when members of different cultures do not share the same organizational and pragmatic competencies. Of these two types of competencies, pragmatic competency is the more difficult to learn and observe, because it is so closely tied to the often subconscious cultural values, beliefs, and norms governing individuals' behavior and interaction patterns. For example, North Americans are often upset at the perceived rudeness of Koreans who fail to offer an "Excuse me" or "I'm sorry" in situations such as bumping into someone accidentally or touching a stranger unintentionally in public. Americans and Canadians, members of low-context cultures, expect a direct, overt apology embodied in the ritualistic "I'm sorry" or "Excuse me." At the same time the North Americans are attributing rudeness to the Koreans, the Koreans are taken aback at the perceived North American confrontational style in taking such overt notice of their physical contact. In such situations, Koreans, members of a high-context culture, rely on more subtle means to apologize, such as facial expressions, gestures, or even murmuring an "U-meo-na!" [Oops!] to themselves.

Pragmatic competence

Part of the enculturation process for children and adolescents is becoming pragmatically competent, that is, learning how to communicate effectively and appropriately. Pragmatic competence entails knowing how to encode, decode, and sequence discourse within a communicative interaction. Since communicative strategies vary according to the situational context and such factors as social power, social and psychological distance, and the degree of imposition involved in communicative interactions, children must learn to evaluate and to weigh these variables. In learning the language of their culture, children are also acquiring the ability to assess the interplay of contextual variables (e.g., formality and informality) and individual variables (e.g., gender, age, rank, and prestige), and they are learning how these variables affect their discourse choices.

Speakers must adapt or adjust their language according to the social context in which a communicative interaction is taking place. Speakers will choose different ways of communicating when they speak to young children, to peers, or to strangers. When a six-year-old child hits a playmate, the playmate may say, "Stop it! Don't do that!" Or the mother may say, "Matthias, you shouldn't do that." When a teenager hits a friend, the friend may reply, "Cut it out, Joe." When a stranger does the same thing,
one could respond, "Kindly refrain from doing that." Both children and
language learners must develop pragmatic competence to become effec-
tive and proficient communicators.

**Topic appropriateness**

Topic appropriateness is also an area where there are cultural differences
and where misunderstandings often occur. In general, North Americans
are uncomfortable discussing how much money they earn, nor do they
react well to questions from strangers regarding their personal and/or
family lives. Questions such as "Why don't you have any children?" for in-
stance, are viewed as intrusive by Americans and Canadians yet are both
appropriate and necessary in other cultures. As part of their greeting rou-
tine, Koreans immediately ask in which year a person was born, a rather
offensive question according to North American ideas. Because Korea is
a very hierarchical society, it is essential that speakers know each other's
ages in order that they may choose the appropriate verbal and nonverbal
discourse strategies. Even the difference of one calendar year requires the
use of such a respectful honorific as older sister or older brother and the
corresponding discourse strategies. Because Korea is a very collectivistic
society, the honorific system reflects the idea that even though speakers
may not be related through kinship ties, they are all "members of one
family." Arabs tend to impart a great deal more personal information
about themselves than do members of other cultures. Arab cultures are
highly collectivistic cultures where personal status and self-identity are
intimately linked to a person's overall social status and family back-
ground; thus, it is important for speakers to learn about each other's in-
group network as soon as possible so that each person can be classified
appropriately.

"What is your blood type?" is an unusual question from the Western
point of view. From the Japanese and Korean perspective, such a question
is quite normal, as people of these cultures believe that specific personal-
ity traits are related to blood type—a belief very similar to Western no-
tions of astrology and signs of the zodiac. Most Westerners are surprized
by such a question, both because they are unaware of the concept of a re-
lationship between blood type and personality and because many of them
do not even know their own blood type.

In addition to topic appropriateness, the importance of pragmatic
competence is further realized in how topics are introduced into com-
municative exchanges. Scollon and Scollon (1981) found significant cultural differences in expectations about how conversations should be opened and in the consequences throughout the conversation as a result of the opening pattern. For example, Asian speakers have a tendency to provide a great deal of background information before stating their main point. This approach differs from that of Westerners, who expect the main point to be made initially so that the other speaker can react to it. (See Activity C—Critical Incidents).

Discourse styles
Speakers must also understand and follow the generally unwritten and subconscious rules for different modes of discourse, whether telling stories, discussing in a classroom, presenting a proposal, or conversing with friends. Often, speakers’ preferred mode of discourse conflicts with the majority notion of appropriateness, both consciously and unconsciously. Esikovits’s (1998) work on sex differences in Australian speech revealed that discourse styles used by adolescent girls and boys followed different rules of speaking. While the girls used speech similar to that of the larger society, the boys preferred to deviate from the accepted rules of speaking, to “affirm their own masculinity and toughness and their working class anti-establishment values” (p. 51).

Heath (1983, 1992) found that the white middle-class literacy expectations of American schoolteachers negatively affected the school performance of children from blue-collar and African American households. The type of language interaction and discourse styles found in the classroom differed radically from the use of language, both oral and written, found in the children’s homes. Unaware of these (sub)cultural differences, the students were unable to participate successfully in the classroom, often leading to their eventual failure in the school system. Such pragmatic differences and resultant miscommunications are often exacerbated in cross-cultural situations (Delpit, 1995; Taylor & Whittaker, 2003). Wintergerst’s (1994) research on ESL student-teacher interaction found that the types of questions teachers ask students affect student language output in the classroom. An awareness of different expectations regarding question types and functions, as well as modification of discourse patterns, can help teachers engage students more actively in discussion and can improve students’ overall school performance (Mehan, Lintz, Okamoto, & Willis, 1995).
The norms governing pragmatics are strongly rooted in the larger cultural context in which they occur. Collectivistic cultures place great importance on saving face and avoiding confrontation. Speakers from such cultures employ politeness rituals and indirect communication strategies that foster a balance between the competing goals of desired outcome and maintenance of relationship harmony. For example, a Japanese businessman avoids issuing an order or a directive but only hints at one. The justifications or reasons for the implied directive are listed in varied subordinate clauses presented before the main clause. The illocutionary or communicative intent of the main clause is clear to the Japanese staff members. The English command “Complete the task by tomorrow morning” is represented roughly by the Japanese statement “Your boss hasn’t been around today, but he could show up unexpectedly at any time.” Although no directive is issued in the latter case, the Japanese staff members understand exactly the communicative intent of the message and act accordingly.

**Conversational exchanges**

The nature of the structure of conversational exchanges often leads to cases of miscommunication between native and nonnative speakers of a language. Speakers expect that certain utterances will lead into other specific communicative exchanges or turn-taking sequences. When an exchange sequence is broken because of cross-cultural or crosslinguistic differences in turn-taking sequences, miscommunication occurs (Schegloff, 1984, 1987, 1992). In other words, breakdowns in the expected organization or sequencing of communicative interactions cause misunderstandings and miscommunication. When invited to a person’s home, Americans and Canadians will often offer compliments on the host’s home and furnishings. In addition to being a sincere show of admiration and appreciation, such compliments evince rapport and friendliness between guest and host. In India or parts of the Middle East, however, a person’s compliment on an object is often interpreted as an indirect request for that particular object. In some cultures, such as in Korea or Egypt, an offer of something to eat or drink should be refused the first time. The first invitation is offered out of politeness norms; it is courteous to always offer a visitor to one’s house refreshments. Likewise, out of politeness, the visitor should refuse this initial offer and wait for a second or even third offer of refreshment before accepting. Then and only then has the host signaled that the invitation to partake is truly a sincere one and not a cour-
tesy offer. Along similar lines, a "no" response to a request by a Russian will not necessarily be interpreted as a refusal. "No" must often be repeated several times in order for the Russian to accept the refusal as definite and not as something still open to negotiation.

In addition to differences in expectations regarding turn-taking sequences, different expectations with respect to pause length in turn-taking behavior between members of different cultures also result in misunderstandings regarding speaker's intent (Clyne, 1994). Examining informal dinner conversations between Americans and Spaniards, Berry (1994) found that differences in the amount of overlap between turns between Spanish and American speakers led each group to attribute negative characteristics to the other. The Spanish participants in the study indicated that they thought the Americans "didn't really listen and didn't like to talk," and the Americans perceived their Spanish counterparts as "aggressive" and unwilling to let "anyone else have the floor" (p. 189).

Another potential area of cross-cultural misunderstandings is the use of backchannel cues, utterances listeners make in the course of a conversational exchange to signal to the speaker that they are indeed paying attention. Boxer (1993) found important differences in the use of such backchannel cues as "uh huh" or "hmmm" between American English speakers and Japanese speakers of English. Additionally, backchannel cues can encompass utterances—such as "wow" or "that's nice"—that indicate the listener's reaction to or make general comments about the speaker's words and utterances. Japanese norms of interaction both allow for and expect much more frequent use of such backchannel cues than does English (White, 1989). Many times, Japanese will use backchannel cues at points in conversational exchanges where English speakers expect an actual conversational rejoinder. When Japanese speakers transfer their norms of use for these backchannel cues into English, American and Canadian speakers feel frustrated and uncomfortable because they expect more substantive turn-taking responses to their comments. (See Activity D—Evaluate Your Voice)

The larger social aspects that are negotiated and conveyed through language use can be quite difficult for nonnative speakers to learn. For instance, outsiders often characterize Americans as insincere, because the former perceive in the latter a tendency to offer "insincere" invitations. International students often complain that an American student will say
something like "Let's get together sometime" and never follow up with a phone call or visit. Similarly, we have had experiences where our former students from other cultures have dropped by unexpectedly after we have casually said, "You'll have to come over some time."

The issue is not whether or not Americans are insincere but the pragmatic function of an invitation in different cultures. In American English, invitations are not necessarily invitations at all but conversational routines to express camaraderie or rapport with another speaker. Research has shown that there are actually two types of invitations: those that are truly invitations and those that are pseudo-invitations (e.g., Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson et al., 1983). Real or sincere invitations are something that must actually be negotiated among speakers; they are part of an elaborate negotiation process that allows speakers to withdraw from the interaction at any time without losing face or injuring the feelings of other participants. Pseudo-invitations, however, function as indicators of positive social interest without making a firm social commitment, which speakers may not wish to keep. Pseudo-invitations are characterized by vague or ambiguous lexical choices, such as anytime, sometime, soon, one of these days, and so on. These types of invitations often begin with when clauses, as in the following examples.

Let's get together when things settle down.

Let's plan on meeting when the project is finished.

Consider the following conversations.

**Conversation 1**

A: We should really try to get together sometime.

B: I know, I know. I'd really like to, but things are so crazy now.

A: Maybe we'll have more time when the holidays are over.

B: Yeah, once Christmas and New Year's are over, I'll have time to breathe again.

A: Me too. Let's talk again sometime after the holidays and see what our calendars look like.

**Conversation 2**

A: We should really try to get together sometime.
B: Yeah, that would be good. The next couple weeks are really crazy for me, but the last week in January would probably be OK.

A: Let me check my calendar (pulls out PDA, checks the week). I'm open on that Wednesday. How about you?

B: (Checking appointment book) Mmm, Wednesday would be OK if it's after 10:30.

A: OK. Let's do lunch. How about 1?

B: You got it. I'm putting you down right now for 1 on the 27th.

Note the speakers' use of indefinite lexical phrases and **when** clauses in conversation 1. Contrast this with conversation 2. Although Speaker A begins the communicative sequence with the word **sometime**, Speaker B begins the negotiation toward a true invitation by focusing on a specific time (the “last week in January”). Speaker B picks up on this by pulling out a PDA and focusing on a definite date and time. In conversation 1, a pseudo-invitation has been issued and acknowledged. Both speakers have established the desire to get together, without actually fixing a firm date and time; however, the issuance and acceptance of this pseudo-invitation has functioned to establish positive feelings between speakers. In conversation 2, a pseudo-invitation has been negotiated into an actual invitation.

Real invitations involve a negotiating process that allows speakers to either commit to an actual time, date, and/or place or withdraw gracefully if either party is in truth not interested in going beyond the pragmatic function of a pseudo-invitation. This type of conversational negotiation is below the level of awareness of most speakers; they are not consciously aware of the function (or even existence) of pseudo-invitations or of the negotiation process involved in securing an actual invitation. Because this communicative behavior is below the conscious awareness of most native speakers, it is difficult for them to identify it and hence for them to explain it to nonnative speakers. For nonnative speakers, this type of conversational routine leads to misinterpretation because it is outside their ken of experience or their schemata of discourse processes.

**Communicative Styles or Registers**

The rules governing social interactions are in large part an integral part of a speaker's cultural knowledge, although these rules generally lie be-
low the level of conscious awareness. Since these rules are generally subtle, unwritten, and unconscious, even native speakers may have difficulties understanding them, as evidenced by the popularity of such mavens of social etiquette as Judith Martin, who publishes regularly as “Miss Manners” in a syndicated advice column. Until speakers find themselves in situations where the rules or norms of conversational interaction are broken, they are often unaware that such rules or norms even exist.

Speakers also do not express themselves identically in all social situations. The relationship between speakers and the context in which the communicative interaction is taking place determine which communicative style and register speakers will choose to use. In a communicative setting, speakers evaluate the degree of formality of context and the relationship between participants based on such variables as age, status, gender, and distance. Based on their evaluation of the context, speakers use different communicative styles, that is, different types of language and/or grammatical structures, including such elements as formality or informality, colloquialisms, dialectal differences (e.g., accent), and semantic choices.

Consider, for instance, the following greetings.

[1.] Yo, Joe!
[2.] Hi, Joe!
[3.] Hello, Joe.
[4.] Good afternoon, Joe.

Based on nothing more than these printed words, we can infer the following. Greeting 1 is most likely to be used between younger males of the same peer group, in informal settings such as walking across campus or running into one another at a coffee shop. Greeting 2 will be used in almost any informal situation between two people who know each other, regardless of gender. Greeting 3 can be regarded as somewhat more formal, but it would not necessarily be so, depending on the speaker’s intonation and the social context. If, for instance, the speaker drew out the hello, as in “Helloooo, Joe,” the greeting immediately becomes less formal and more sociable. Greeting 4 is the most likely to be employed as a more formal greeting among speakers who know each other on a first-name basis. Knowing which greeting is appropriate in which social context is part of
the cultural knowledge of speakers. When nonnative speakers are unaware of the pragmatic ramifications of an utterance, they will fail to communicate successfully their intended meaning. An overly casual greeting can set the tone for a brusque, rather than pleasant, exchange.

Inappropriate communicative style is not limited to communicative interactions between native and nonnative speakers. In cultures experiencing rapid change and where language does not reflect explicit social hierarchies through the use of formal/informal pronouns and the use of extensive honorifics or other devices, confusion is widespread with respect to choosing the appropriate style or register. In such cultures, it is not unusual to read and hear comments like those in the following excerpt from a syndicated U.S. newspaper advice column.

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Dear Miss Manners:

I sometimes need to telephone a “support staff” for assistance on the operation of my computer and other technologically advanced pieces of equipment in my home. The person taking my call invariably requires, before serving me, that I give my first name, which is then used in an apparent attempt to create a sense of intimacy between us. Although put off by such a request from an individual utterly unknown to me, as well as often two generations younger than I, I feel pressured to acquiesce for fear that I will be denied the information which only that company can provide me. I would appreciate advice on handling this situation.

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Let us imagine that the young person who helps you has been doing so for years, carefully addressing you as Mister and Sir. Implausible. Miss Manners knows, but bear with her for the sake of argument.

One day, overcome by the bond that has grown, you might say impulsively, “I’d be very pleased if you would call me Horace.” Your tone of voice would show that you meant it as a compliment.

Okay, now use that tone to say, “I would be very pleased if you would call me Mr. Sleeks.” (Martin, 2002)

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Language is part of social situations; it is a socially situated behavior subject to an interplay of sociopsychological factors (e.g., Eckert &
Rickford, 2002; Giles & St. Clair, 1980). A speaker's language is never "fixed" or "constant." Rather, it is perpetually in a state of flux, changing according to the setting; the relationships of the speakers; the speaker's purpose, mood, and attitude; and any number of other variables. In response to these and other variables, speakers change their style of speech. How speakers express themselves with peers in an informal setting such as a restaurant or classroom will differ from how they express themselves in a job interview for an important career opportunity. Moving between any of these styles is not necessarily a conscious effort.

Miscommunications can arise when speakers differ in their interpretation of which style is appropriate. In communicative interactions involving native and nonnative speakers, a lack of information about or a lack of understanding of the parameters of successful interactions is common. Nonnative speakers may, for instance, be unaware of nuances or subtleties conveyed by certain language forms; in addition, pragmatic transfer, the transfer of sociolinguistically appropriate forms from the native language to the new language, may also occur. DeCapua (1989, 1998), in her research on complaints, found that Germans speaking in English often used the modal verb must in situations where Americans would expect the use of the softer should. Both must and should translate directly into the German müssen and sollen; however, the pragmatic uses of the terms differ in the two languages. The miscommunication of intent was a result of a negative pragmatic transfer of the appropriate use of müssen. Consequently, native speakers of American English often evaluated the German speakers negatively. The American speakers based their judgments of German rudeness not on speakers' actual character but on their (mis)use of English.

Part of the enculturation and socialization process of children and adolescents within any language community is helping them understand the differences in use and appropriateness of different communicative styles. Subconscious pragmatic rules need to be brought to the level of conscious perception (Scollon, 1999). This kind of knowledge needs to be brought into teacher training classrooms to enable students to develop a greater awareness of where communication difficulties are likely to arise when working with particular cultural groups. Even speakers sharing the same language but coming from different cultures encounter similar difficulties. In the southern United States, speakers use ma'am or sir, as a sign of respect. In England, such use is unusual; sir, for instance, is used only with royals or senior aristocracy, in the military, and at public formal
occasions. Thus, an American from the south answering a British policeman with “Yes, sir” would find himself regarded not as polite but, rather, as ironic or sarcastic. Among the police, the use of guv or guvner, rather than sir, would be the rule in all but the most formal circumstances.

Several Japanese students have recounted that upon coming to the United States, they were initially reluctant to order at McDonald’s, because they thought the workers were always angry. The Japanese students thought that maybe because they themselves were Asian or maybe because their English wasn’t that strong, the workers were angry about having to wait on them. Later, as they spent more time here, they realized that the discourse patterns of the McDonald’s employees, which are characterized by rapid rotelike questions and minimal personal interaction, are the norm for fast-food restaurants, where the emphasis is on service that is fast and, from the North American standpoint, friendly. For these Japanese students, the terseness and brevity of the communicative exchange, as well as the type of questions asked by the workers, indicated a lack of politeness, respect, and/or willingness to help the customer.

Stylistic variations are often very subtle and are often the most difficult for nonnative speakers of the target language to learn. For example, nonnative speakers may use colloquial expressions in more formal situations, male speakers may use syntactic forms or make semantic choices viewed as “feminine,” or speakers may employ syntactic structures that are unsuitable for a particular situation. It is often jarring for American college professors to be greeted by international students with “What’s up?” Although an atmosphere of (relative) informality is the norm in American university classrooms, the degree varies and may not be readily apparent to the nonnative speaker unaware of the nuances. A greeting that is appropriate among friends, peers, and even certain people of higher status is not necessarily appropriate in other situations. A colleague has pointed out, for instance, that when she teaches writing courses in the ESL institute, her students address her by her first name, but when she teaches freshman composition, she is addressed with her title—a somewhat confusing situation for students who have made the transition from one program to the other.

Conversational or interactional routines
Miscommunication and misunderstandings also arise in the area of conversational or interactional routines. Conversational routines are phrases
and rejoinders that carry specific pragmatic meaning for a discourse function that has either subsumed or replaced the literal referential meaning and that allows for one of a limited set of responses (Aijmer, 1996; Hymes, 1962; Leech, 1983). All languages make use of numerous routines or formulaic speech patterns, especially for such speech acts as greetings, thanks, leave-takings, apologies, and so on. In American English, a common greeting is “Hi, how’re you?” A speaker’s use of “How are you?” is usually not to inquire about a person’s state of health or being but as a phrase that is part of the greeting routine. The expected response is something along the lines of “Fine, and you?” A response detailing the state of one’s health is generally not appropriate. In other languages, part of the greeting may include conversational routines such as “Have you eaten?” or “Where are you going?” Nonnative speakers often feel frustrated when they are unfamiliar with the pragmatic functions of conversational routines, because their focus on literal referential meaning can cause them to misunderstand the meaning or intent of the message. (See Activity E—Telephone Endings)

Communication styles in high- and low-context cultures

Chapter 2 discussed Hall’s (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication. High-context cultures are those cultures that rely on implicit and shared meanings to communicate. Speakers from such cultures tend to use indirect speech strategies, subtle nonverbal cues, and setting to impart the intended message. Low-context cultures, in contrast, rely on explicit codes—such as direct verbal strategies and overt nonverbal cues—to convey the intended message. Various cross-cultural studies have found that people’s communication styles are influenced by their cultural background (e.g., Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Clyne, 1994; DeCapua, 1998; Meier, 1996). Speakers use discourse strategies that assume shared knowledge of the norms and rules of communicative interaction, shared sets of attitudes and values, and shared interpretations of context, setting, and speaker variables.

In individualistic cultures, speakers tend to choose more direct discourse styles to convey their intent to their hearers. There is less emphasis on or concern for the “we,” or how the speaker is a representative of a group or larger network. The stress in an individualistic culture is on the “I,” or how the speaker comes across as an individual in his or her own
right; thus, speakers tend to elect speech strategies that clearly convey the intended message (Ting-Toomey & Kirogi, 1998).

Overall, members of collectivistic cultures generally prefer indirect means of discourse as a way of maintaining face and avoiding face-threatening acts. Rather than directly make requests of, engage in conflict with, or offer a refusal to one’s hearer, members of collectivistic cultures tend to use speech strategies that indirectly signal their intent (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1999). According to Hofstede (1991), most collectivistic cultures avoid saying no because doing so is too direct and confrontational and thus threatens the face of both speaker and hearer. Speakers from collectivistic cultures prefer indirect responses, such as “Maybe,” “We’ll get back to you,” or “I’ll see,” which they will use whether or not they agree or acquiesce. When the teacher asks, “Do you understand?” Asian students in the classroom often say yes, even when they do not understand. This yes response does not entail understanding on the hearer’s part but only suggests that the hearer has heard the speaker. To say no would show disrespect for the teacher by implying that the teacher did not or could not present the material clearly. In a collectivistic culture, it is important to maintain harmony by acknowledging and preserving status and rank, while simultaneously shifting the possibility for blame, shame, or any sort of dishonor away from a speaker.

An American teacher in Japan recounts that when she first went to teach in Japan, she would smoke in the English teachers’ staff room. Since there was an ashtray in the room, she thought smoking was acceptable, when in fact the ashtray was only there for special or important guests. Smoking by teachers in the staff room was actually frowned on. She finally learned of the other teachers’ disapproval of her smoking when a Japanese teacher from another department who had lived several years in the United States came and explained to her that smoking was not permitted in staff rooms. She was very embarrassed and asked why no one had told her so previously. The teacher said that the teachers had indicated their disapproval but that she had not noticed—they had opened the windows, regardless of the outside temperature; left the room when she lit up; or made various indirect comments. This Japanese teacher realized there was a communication problem between the Japanese English teachers and the American, because he had lived in the United States and knew that more explicit communication was required in order to get the message across to her.
In Arab cultures, hearers will offer an affirmative response to a request as a discourse strategy to signal rapport and simultaneously maintain face. When an Arabic speaker says yes in response to a request, it does not necessarily mean that the speaker's request will be honored. Rather, such a yes implies that the speaker's request has been heard and that the hearer has all intentions to act on it accordingly. However, the result is actually viewed separately from the request. If something is not acted on, no blame rests on the individual; rather, it is *inshallah*, or "as God wills." Consequently, Arab speakers are not necessarily upset if there is no follow-through to a request because by saying yes the hearer acknowledged it and stated his or her intentions to act on it, though circumstances came between the hearer's intentions and ability to act. Through this discourse strategy, the speakers have maintained their face even though they cannot feasibly comply with or fulfill the request.

People from different cultural and language backgrounds may see conversational roles or the context of a conversation differently (see Huang, 1996; Keenan, 1976; Spencer-Oatey, 1993; Tannen, 1986) and may therefore get different messages from the same utterance in the exact same context. For example, Asians tend to have a preference for an inductive pattern for topic introduction, while Westerners show a preference for the deductive pattern. Facework (see chap. 2), which entails a period of speakers' getting warmed up to each other, is apparent in the Chinese inductive pattern in Taiwan. The speaker introduces the topic, but the actual topic discussion will be delayed until speakers have engaged in facework. Delayed topic introduction by Asians has frequently resulted in cross-cultural miscommunication, since Westerners and Asians are often unaware of the cultural and traditional practices regarding the initiation and continuation of their respective discourse patterns. (See Activity F—Learning to Look)

**Teaching and Learning Connections**

Second language learners' understanding of a second culture is affected by their culturally shaped worldviews. In our daily lives, we use language unconsciously; we predict and explain other people's behavior based on our shared language and cultural knowledge. When we step out of our cultural world, we find that there are other ways of communicating—ways that go beyond just learning the lexicon and syntax of a language. We must
learn to look beyond our own cultural lenses to become more open to seeing unfamiliar or unexpected behavior from a different perspective. When confronted and confounded by what is different, we need to consider what the contributing factors might be. Does failing to thank someone in a service encounter signal rudeness or the lack of a corresponding norm in the other culture? While saying thank-you is the accepted conversational routine in most Western cultures in service situations such as checkout lines at stores, the same is not true in some East Asian cultures. There, a thank-you in such contexts signals a reprimand, as people who are doing their jobs appropriately do not need or expect thanks.

Even when different languages share the rules and norms for speech-act production, the actual realization of the speech act may differ. Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein (1986) found that Hebrew learners of English were unaware of certain distinctions that native speakers of American English made between forms for expressing apology. In several situations in their study, the learners spoke only the word sorry, a translation from the commonly used Hebrew stīxa, where native speakers of American English expected more involved apologies. Thus, participants in cross-cultural encounters must learn how to become discriminating observers of behaviors in order to better predict probable pragmatically appropriate language use, while learning what types of pitfalls and negative situations result from inappropriate language use and interactional norms and how to avoid them. The importance of becoming aware of differences in the norms of communicative interaction cannot be stressed enough. As Thomas (1983) has pointed out, when speakers are confronted with violations of expected norms (pragmatic failure), they attribute negative personality or behavioral characteristics to the person violating these norms, rather than considering the violations a matter of the learner’s second language proficiency.

Pragmatics is concerned with how speakers use language and construct meaning within social contexts. Pragmatic competence entails knowledge of speech acts and speech function, as well as knowledge of dialect, register, and other cultural factors in language use. Second language learners should become aware of the various options available to them as a result of the pragmatic system of the target language. Learning how to do things appropriately with words involves learning how to use a combination of linguistic resources in a contextually appropriate way. The potential problem in teaching the pragmatic system of any language is
both the sheer number of speech acts and language functions and the paucity of research in this area to date. A more productive approach is for language teachers to help their students become aware that pragmatic functions exist in a language and to help them learn to become better observers and interpreters of language in social context.

Because culture is part of most contexts, communication is rarely culture free. Language learners need to be aware of differing cultural frameworks, that is, their own and those of others. If they are not, they will use their own cultural assumptions to interpret the messages of the target language, where the intended meaning may be based on quite different assumptions about culture. In some cultures, students simply call out the answer to a question in the classroom without waiting for the teacher to recognize them first. In others, students only respond when being called on, and in still others, students raise their hands and wait for teachers to acknowledge them. Different classroom behaviors can cause confusion in multicultural classrooms when students' and teachers' expectations of classroom etiquette differ or even conflict. Some students may find it difficult to ever respond, others may dominate the classroom, and teachers may feel frustrated or threatened. (See Activity G—On the Spot)

In work on international teaching assistants (ITAs), gender issues, and cultural interpretations of appropriateness, Boxer and Tyler found that there were cultural differences with respect to teacher-student relationships (Boxer & Tyler, 1996; Tyler & Boxer, 1996). While the majority of the American undergraduates in their studies did not think it appropriate for an ITA to stop by a student's apartment unannounced, many ITAs found the scenario acceptable. Some of the ITAs noted that this type of behavior would be neutral and normal in their home cultures (Boxer, 2002:191). Thus, developing students’ skills in intercultural communication is an appropriate part of language teaching.

A variety of studies conducted by Gumperz and various colleagues (e.g., Gumperz, 1977, 1978, Gumperz & Tannen, 1979; Gumperz, Gurinder, & Kaltman, 1982) found that Indian and Pakistani immigrants often experienced communication difficulties with native speakers of British English. These communication difficulties often resulted in negative character judgments on the part of the British. British speakers' perceptions of Indian and Pakistani speakers as rude were based primarily on differ-
ences in which lexical, syntactical, and intonational choices were considered appropriate to convey communicative intent. What the Pakistani and Indian speakers intended to convey was not what their British hearers interpreted as having been said. One reason for this was a tendency by the Pakistanis to say no throughout their conversations. For the Pakistanis, saying no functioned as a pause filler in their native language; however, in English, saying no has no such pragmatic function but conveys instead a negative and antagonistic attitude.

**Developing pragmatic awareness**

As Kramsch (1993:8) points out, culture awareness training should be seen both as enabling language proficiency and as being the result of reflection on language proficiency. Such a perspective on culture and the language classroom allows teachers to view the classroom as a promoter—and at times even a source—of cross-cultural investigative fieldwork. Judd (1999:154) categorizes the techniques for developing pragmatic awareness in second language learners into three broad categories: cognitive awareness, receptive skill development, and productive use. An awareness of the differences that occur between speech acts in the native language and those same acts in the target language constitutes *cognitive awareness* activities. Such awareness may be achieved through presenting and discussing research findings on speech acts and having learners procure information through observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Merely presenting linguistic formulas without sufficient background or discussion of context is inadequate. Language learners need to be given detailed information on such participant and contextual variables as status, gender, intimacy, location, and degree of formality.

**Receptive skill development** moves beyond simple cognitive awareness and enables learners to recognize and understand speech acts through actual practice, using teacher-designed materials, published textbooks, media (e.g., video or cassette recordings), or naturally occurring data. To successfully complete a receptive skill activity, learners should be able to identify the speech act occurring and the sociological environment in which it takes place. Beyond receptive skill development is the development of *productive use*, which encourages learners to use appropriate communication strategies. Cloze-type activities, role plays, and simulations may be used to help learners produce specific pragmatic features.
Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the range of all potential meanings and interactional moves, participants in cross-cultural communicative interactions need to develop skills that allow them to become discriminating observers of behaviors. Moreover, it is difficult to actually teach pragmatic competence. Not only is there a paucity of research to support such teaching, but the research that exists tends to be insufficient, tends to be drawn from elicited or laboratory-style data, and covers few speech acts in a limited number of languages (for further discussion of these issues, see, e.g., Kasper, 1999; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Meier, 2003; Rose, 1994; Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989). Better cross-cultural observation skills allow speakers to better predict probable pragmatically appropriate language use and interactional moves used in another culture. At the same time, language learners need to develop the skills that will help them be aware of the potential pitfalls and negative situations that can result from inappropriate language use.

Numerous researchers and teachers (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Kramsch, 1993; Meier, 2003; Rose, 1994) recommend that learners become amateur ethnographers, collecting their own data through actual examples of speech acts occurring in their daily environment. For learners in foreign language situations, media such as television or movies can serve as a rich source. Hymes (1969) posits that education should be comprised of both ethnography and research on the influences of culture on language, since these endeavors can complement each other. Radio, television, and films are media that display naturally occurring speech acts. For example, television broadcasts that include news shows, political debates, talk shows, or situation comedies get students involved in discussing direct and indirect ways of disagreeing, asking questions, making requests, and so on.

A set of commercial television sitcoms can be used to clarify differences in cultural patterns for common everyday social interactions. Commercial television is a rich source for bringing unconscious cultural codes to the level of conscious perception. Washburn (2001:22) has pointed out the particular usefulness of television sitcoms for developing pragmatic awareness.

Sitcoms present many models of appropriate pragmatic language use among various characters of differing status, familiarity, gender,
and in varied settings, such as at work, at home, in public places, and at formal gatherings.

Washburn discusses how to choose appropriate sitcoms as a teaching tool, offering concrete suggestions for developing and incorporating pragmatic activities into the second language classroom. Rose (1994) suggests that videos are a powerful tool for developing pragmatic awareness, particularly in foreign language teaching situations where learners have little or no exposure to the target language outside the classroom. He offers suggestions and outlines several activities for incorporating video into foreign language classrooms. Kramsch (1993:211–223) describes using television commercials as a tool for sharing information about the culture of the target country. Commercials can also be used to raise pragmatic awareness. For instance, Kramsch discusses an American Coca-Cola commercial that highlights (among other information) differences in social role expectations, topic appropriateness, and conversational style.

A caveat to be added is that not all types of activities are suitable for all learners. Students from cultures that value indirect discourse strategies, harmony, and group consensus will find it difficult and uncomfortable to participate in certain language activities, such as debates. Change is not only “not easy” but should be weighed against the importance of maintaining one’s own cultural interaction patterns. What we are advocating is creating awareness, not forcing radical transformations of one’s self.

### Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Discuss the statement “Language exists within the context of culture.” How does this statement relate to your personal situation?

2. How do speakers negotiate meaning?
3. Describe what communicative misunderstandings are and some circumstances under which they occur. Provide one example from the text and one from your own experience.

4. What are speech acts? What is meant by illocutionary intent? What original examples can you provide?

5. Discuss organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Give examples of each.

6. What are some factors that influence speakers' choice of communicative style or register?

7. Discuss how high-context and low-context styles influence communication.

8. What role does pragmatics play in conversational exchanges?

9. What are some ways speakers can develop their pragmatic awareness? Which way(s) do you consider most effective? Why?

III. Practice: What Activities Show Us

A. In the Limelight (25–30 minutes)

Communication does not occur in isolation; it occurs within a context and potential range of variables, such as setting, status, gender, and age. These variables are crucial when determining how speakers
use language to convey an intended meaning. Awareness of these variables is critical in conversational interactions.

**Purpose:** To practice distinguishing different variables of conversational interaction

**Procedure:**

1. Randomly divide into two groups. Group 1 will be the “observers,” and group 2 will be the “participants.”

2. *Observers:* Arrange yourselves so that you can observe the participants as they discuss their topic. Only observe; do not comment or partake in the conversation in any way. You may wish to take notes during the discussion. Consider the following variables.
   - Who dominates the discussion?
   - How does turn taking take place (length of pauses, interruptions, etc.)?
   - What types of fillers do speakers use?
   - When do speakers use pauses and hesitations?
   - How close do the participants sit to one another?
   - What kind of eye contact takes place?
   - Who avoids speaking, and who tends to jump in?
   - What variables in human identity seem to be involved (e.g., gender, age, social status)?
   - What is the effect of the topic on the discussion?

*Participants:* Hold a topical discussion for 15 minutes. You may choose your own topic or take one from the following list. If the discussion lags, begin another topic.

Possible discussion topics:

- Your favorite/least favorite things about the United States (or any other country)
- Which teacher most influenced you in your life and why
• The advantages/disadvantages of living in an urban/rural area
• The hardest thing you have ever done
• Your most embarrassing/happiest moment
• The problems/successes/challenges of the (American) educational system
• The status of women in relation to men
• Your first day at school/in a foreign country/driving a car

3. Discuss step 2 as a full group.

*Sample Questions for the "Observers":*

• What factors influenced the dynamics of the discussion?
• What cultural variables impacted on these dynamics?
• Was it difficult not to be able to partake in the participants' discussion? Why or why not?

*Sample Questions for the "Participants":*

• Do you agree/disagree with the observers' observations?
• How did it feel to be under observation as you participated in the discussion? Did this influence your participation?

*Sample Questions for the Full Group:*

• What did you learn about communicative interactions from this activity?
• What did you learn about yourself as a speaker/listener?
• What differences did you notice between those from different parts of the United States, those from different English-speaking countries, and native and nonnative speakers of English?

**Alternative:**

1. If the full group is very large, divide into four groups: two groups of "observers" and two groups of "participants."
B. Meet and Greet (10-15 minutes)

Speech acts refer to what speakers do with words and to the reasons for their utterances. Using pragmatically inappropriate language often results in being considered rude or even ill mannered. There are important differences in how and when speech acts are expressed, and an awareness of these differences is essential for effective communication.

**Purpose:** To examine how one particular speech act is enacted

**Procedure:**

1. Stand up. Push all chairs and tables out of the way so participants can circulate freely.
2. Circulate and introduce yourselves to different people. Talk to each person for a few moments.
3. Stop after 5 minutes.
4. Discuss the interactions as a full group.

**Sample Questions:**

- How did you go about introducing yourself?
- What words did you use? What nonverbal cues did you use?
- How did you decide how you were going to introduce yourself? For example, what variables, such as gender, intimacy, and so on, influenced your form of greeting?
- How did you “end” each greeting and move on to the next partner?
- After the initial greetings, what topics did you discuss? What pattern do you see to the topics (discussion of this question can be facilitated by listing the topics on the board)? Why do you think this is?
- What did this activity teach you about culture and communication?
Alternative:

- Videotape the activity. Have students review the tape and discuss it as a full group; using the sample questions from step 4.

To adapt for the language classroom,

Follow-up:

1. With a partner, prepare a written dialogue for a role play using meeting and greeting routines.
2. Present the role play to the class.

C. Critical Incidents (15–20 minutes)

The following critical incidents are exercises focusing on an area of cross-cultural conflict or miscommunication. The situation described in each incident presents a problem related to differences in the norms governing sociocultural communicative interactions, or the “rules of speaking.” There are no right or wrong answers in this exercise; the point of the exercise is to stimulate thought-provoking discussion based on the incidents. The goal of considering critical incidents is to increase an awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences and, in this case, to develop an understanding of cultural influences on language behavior.

Purpose: To expand an awareness of differences in communicative behavior

Procedure:

1. Prepare different sets of two to four critical incidents. How many sets you prepare will depend on the total number of participants (e.g., for a group of 12 participants, prepare four sets).
3. Pass out the sets of critical incidents, and ask participants to brainstorm possible solutions.

4. As a full group, discuss the critical incidents, possible solutions, and the cultural values underlying the areas of cultural conflict.

5. Write your own critical incident. Share this with a partner or the full group.

**Critical Incident 1**

You are at a welcome party organized by the ESL program at your school. You meet several very nice international students who have just arrived in the United States. After a few minutes of chatting, they ask you such questions as “What is your salary here?” “What is your father’s occupation?” “Why are so many Americans divorced?” and “Why don’t Americans respect old people?” As their questions continue, you feel more and more uncomfortable.

**Critical Incident 2**

An international student is living in a dormitory with many American students. On Tuesday, she is walking to the cafeteria on campus when she runs into one of the American girls from the dorm. The international student says, “Hi!” and the American student says, “Hi! How are you?” The international student stops for a second to tell the American student how she is, but the American student keeps on walking. The international student is confused and disappointed and feels that the American is fake and superficial.

**Critical Incident 3**

Shirley, a student from Taiwan, met her two new American female friends at a restaurant for lunch. When she arrived, the American friends hugged and kissed each other and Shirley. Shirley felt quite uncomfortable and did not know how to react.
Critical Incident 4

At an international business meeting, the delegations from various countries are gathered to conduct the business at hand. Mr. Gomez and Mr. Valdez appear to be arguing fiercely with each other; their voices are loud, and they are gesticulating emphatically. The Asian delegation is afraid that a fight will break out shortly. Then, all of a sudden, Mr. Gomez and Mr. Valdez pat each other on the back as if they were lifelong friends. This chain of events puzzles the Japanese and Chinese greatly.

Critical Incident 5

An American teacher runs into some of her former students in the university cafeteria. After the initial greetings, one of the students says to her, "You're looking much older, and you've gained weight." The American is taken aback and feels rather offended.

Critical Incident 6

Jack, an American, is in Japan. He asks a Japanese man whom he sees on the street for directions. Jack asks in basic Japanese where a certain building is. The Japanese man seems to be thinking very hard for awhile, tilting his head and wrinkling his forehead. Jack expects that this man knows where the place is, but after 10-15 seconds, the Japanese man says, "Sorry, I don't know." Jack is disappointed and a bit annoyed and wonders why it took this man such a long time to say that he didn't know. He could have said no in a second if he really didn't know anything about where this building was. Jack asks another Japanese man on the street. Again he waits for an answer. Five seconds and then 10 seconds pass. "Maybe this man knows where it is," Jack thinks. "Uh, ... I'm sorry, I'm not sure," says the man. At this point, Jack is very annoyed and frustrated. "These Japanese ...," he mutters to himself.
Critical Incident 7
Moon-Whan and Anna were jogging in the park on a hot summer day. Both of them were really perspiring. They had just spent two hours running, and both were thirsty and hungry. After their jog, they went to the house of Anna’s friend Erna, where they had hoped to rest for awhile and reenergize before going home. On their arrival, Erna asked the girls whether they wanted a cool drink of iced tea and some cookies. Anna jumped at the opportunity and said yes immediately. Moon-Whan said no. Anna was surprised by Moon-Whan’s response.

Critical Incident 8
Students in Professor Padilla’s speech class are enthusiastic about their active involvement in learning oral communication skills. They participate in a wide range of skill-building communicative activities. In their eagerness not only to respond to questions but also to engage in dialogue with the professor, they raise their hand and call out “Teacher,” “Ma’am,” and “Miss” when trying to get the professor’s attention to be called on. Professor Padilla squirms as a visible sign of disapproval to this type of address.

Discussion

Critical Incident 1
The international students are clearly operating under different rules of speaking. Cultures differ on what are considered appropriate topics of conversation and on which types of questions may be asked of whom. Questions that may be considered intrusive in one culture may be part of another culture’s way of seeking information to build rapport among speakers.

Critical Incident 2
Different languages have different formulaic greetings. In American English, “How are you?” is usually intended not as a question about one’s health but simply as a way of greeting another person. The re-
ply expected is another formula (e.g., "Not bad," "Fine," not a recitation of one's actual health. Similarly, in other languages, other formulaic patterns exist. For instance, one may be greeted in Thai with "Where are you going?" and in Chinese with "Have you eaten?" These are generally not actual information questions but part of formulaic greetings. Until nonnative speakers learn these formulas or patterns of speech, they may misinterpret the communicative intent and form negative opinions about a speaker who uses them.

*Critical Incident 3*

In many cultures, it is inappropriate to kiss friends publicly as a form of greeting; in other cultures, such kissing is both suitable and expected. Public displays of affectionate greeting can be disconcerting to someone brought up in a culture emphasizing restraint.

*Critical Incident 4*

Paralinguistic features such as tone of voice, loudness, and the use and frequency of gestures during communicative interactions differ between cultures. Speakers from different cultures with significant variances in such areas may find themselves unable to understand the actual intent of an interaction. The loud argumentation by members of the Spanish delegation impressed the Chinese and Japanese participants as disagreement or fighting rather than as a normal mode of conducting business, but it is in fact the usual way in which the Spanish conduct business.

*Critical Incident 5*

There are different possible reasons underlying the student's comments. In some cultures, gaining weight and growing older are valued conditions. In cultures where many people face starvation, excess weight is an indicator of prosperity; in cultures where the old are revered, aging is a positive component of the cycle of life. Another possible reason for the student's comments may be that blatant comments on another person's appearance do not hold inherently negative connotations. In the United States and Canada, people frequently compliment one another on personal aspects such as a new hairstyle or item of clothing; however, it is rude and offensive to point out any perceived defects or blemishes in another person's appearance or dress. In other cultures, pointing out anything "negative" about a person's personal appearance is no more than a simple statement of fact, with no animosity, offense, or malice intended.
Critical Incident 6
Japanese tend to avoid saying no in any type of communicative interaction. In this incident, where no must be said, the Japanese speakers soften the no through the use of an initial pause. The pause is followed by an apologetic no, to indicate the person’s regret in not being able to offer the requested assistance. This signals to the hearer that the other person is thinking the question over, regardless of whether he or she already knows the answer. Through such response, the speaker avoids being too direct or rude. While Americans may also pause before responding negatively to such a question, the pause time is generally brief and preceded by the backchannel cue “ummm.” Moreover, when American speakers do insert a brief pause, the function of this pause is not to delay providing a negative response but only to indicate they are thinking the question over.

Critical Incident 7
In some cultures, such as in Korea and Egypt, politeness norms require that when someone is offered something to eat or drink, it must be refused the first time around. However, such a refusal is often viewed as a rejection of someone’s hospitality and thoughtlessness in other cultures, particularly when no excuse is made for the refusal. Americans and Canadians, for instance, expect refusals to be accompanied by a reasonable excuse or reason.

Critical Incident 8
Nonnative speakers are often unaware of the titles to be accorded to those in positions of authority. Frequently, there are equivalent terms in different languages, but their usage differs. In many cultures, anyone engaged in teaching may be addressed simply as “Teacher.” In North America, however, a university professor commonly expects to be addressed as either “Professor” or “Doctor,” the form of address commonly used for university professors in order to distinguish them from K–12 teachers.

To adapt for the language classroom,

Writing Critical Incidents
• See chapter 2, Activity F, for suggestions.
D. Evaluate Your Voice (homework assignment; 30-40 minutes of discussion)

Communication is comprised of both verbal and nonverbal components. To communicate more effectively, individuals need to be aware of the numerous subcategories of these two components, so that they may use them to their advantage in an attempt to foster better communication.

**Purpose:** To gain a better perspective on how speakers sound to their listeners

**Procedure:**

*Homework assignment.*

1. Tape-record yourself while talking on the telephone to a friend or colleague. You will need to bring this tape in to the full group.

2. Record only your side of the conversation. This will provide you with a good representation of what you sound like to others.

3. Listen to your tape and answer these questions. You might also ask someone else you know to listen to your tape and answer these questions.

   - How was your rate of speech? Fast? Slow? Varied?
   - How was your vocal variety? Varied? Energetic? Lethargic? Harsh?
   - Did you alter your stress and intonation, as in “It’s been so long since we’ve talked.”
   - Did your voice fade out at the end of your sentences or phrases?
   - Did you use question intonation in declarative sentences?
   - Did you run out of breath or hear yourself sigh?
• Did you hear yourself using backchannel cues, such as *uh-huh, um, yes, oh, really*? If yes, how did these help the flow of conversation? If no, did the lack of these hinder the interaction in any way? Explain. Where might you have appropriately inserted backchannel cues? Which ones might you have inserted?

• Did you emphasize certain words for extra emphasis? What did this contribute to the interaction?

• Did you display any nervous mannerisms such as coughing, throat clearing, or giggling?

• Did you interrupt, or were you often interrupted? Explain how this impacted on the interaction.

*Group discussion*

4. Present and discuss your findings about your speech in small groups of 3–4. Listen to any excerpts from participants’ tapes as appropriate.

5. Discuss your observations and findings with the full group.

*Sample Questions:*

• What did you learn about yourself as a speaker?

• Are there any generalizations you can make about your group’s findings?

• How could you use this activity in a cross-cultural or multicultural teaching situation?

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**E. Telephone Endings (20–25 minutes)**

Although all languages share the ability to convey the same meanings, how they convey these meanings differs. An integral part of any language is its conversational patterns or routines. These are ritualized or rule governed, yet the rules are not necessarily generated by the grammar of the language. These routines are functional and pragmatic in use and vary among languages. It is essential for speakers to share an understanding of both the function of a conversational routine and the constraints on its conditions of use.
Purpose: To demonstrate how everyday routines are governed by sets of rules and how these rules differ cross-culturally

Procedure:

2. Develop a set of “rules” for ending a telephone conversation.
3. Write the rules as if writing a manual for someone that does not know how to end a telephone conversation.
4. Share the rules.
5. Discuss the rules as a full group.

Sample Questions:

- Who are the speakers? For example, what is each speaker’s social role, status, age, and gender?
- Who initiates the phone call?
- What sorts of greetings do the speakers exchange?
- What is the subject of the conversation?
- Which speaker initiates the end of the conversation?
- How do the speakers end the conversation?
- What factors did you take into consideration? Example factors are status, gender of speakers, degree of intimacy between speakers, and purpose of conversation (e.g., social vs. business).
- What differences are there between ending telephone conversations and ending face-to-face conversations?
- What generalizations can you make about telephone endings?

Follow-up:

- Read and comment on the following resource.

F. Learning to Look (30–35 minutes to introduce the activity; homework assignment: 30–40 minutes for review and discussion)

One of the most difficult things to do in life is to learn to observe or to record the everyday things occurring around us. So much of what takes place in our daily lives is mundane, so much a part of ourselves and our behaviors, that we often never become aware of what we are doing or how we are behaving until something happens to violate that which we (usually unconsciously) assume to be the norm.

**Purpose:** To help participants become better observers of the world around them

**Procedure:**

**Pre-class preparation**

1. Photocopy enough handouts for each student to receive three copies of worksheet 7.

2. Preview movies for scenes that illustrate different elements of communicative interaction. Choose one or two movie clips to use in class. Some movies that are useful for this activity are *Annie Hall*, *Barbershop*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *The Contender*, *Dave*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *A Great Wall*, *Miss Congeniality*, *Rush Hour 1 or 2*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *White Men Can't Jump*, and *What About Bob?*

**Introduction**

3. As a full group, discuss the various elements of communicative interactions.

**Sample Questions:**

- What aspects are involved in communication? List as many as possible. Examples are intonation, type of language (formal vs. informal language), and eye contact.

- What are some ways in which these aspects differ cross-culturally? How might these differences interfere with successful cross-cultural interactions?

- What factors influence a communicative interaction? List as many as possible. Examples are gender of participants, age of participants, and setting (e.g., restaurant, meeting).
• How might these factors carry different weight in different cultures?

4. Pass out one copy per participant of worksheet 7.

5. Watch the first video clip once through.

6. Complete worksheet 7 with as much information as possible. Refer to the lists generated in step 3. A sample observation sheet has been provided for the 1977 movie *Annie Hall*, starring Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Although both the hero and heroine of this film are from the same larger culture (the United States), they are members of rather different subcultures. Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) is an all-American girl from the Midwest, while Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) is a Jewish man from New York. There are several useful scenes in this particular movie. The most productive of these is an Easter dinner scene where Alvy Singer has gone with his girlfriend (Annie) to Minnesota to meet her family. Annie’s family and Alvy find themselves having difficulties at dinner, most of which are related to differences in conversational style, topic choices, body language, rate of speech, and so on.

7. Discuss your observations as a full group.

*Sample Questions:*

• What were some of the key participant variables affecting communication?

• What were some pragmatic variables influencing the flow of conversation?

• What were some differences in nonverbal communication?

• How was setting important here?

• What conclusions can you draw about topic choice? About humor?

• This video clip illustrates differences from two American subcultures. Why might speakers be surprised or shocked by such communication difficulties? What examples can you provide from your own experiences?
Sample Observation Sheet

**Source:**

Annie Hall video clip

**Setting:**

Easter dinner in family home in Minnesota/Jewish holiday dinner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Characteristics</th>
<th>Verbal Behavior</th>
<th>Nonverbal Behavior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwestern family &amp; a Jewish New Yorker</td>
<td>Longer pauses between turns</td>
<td>Relatively wide spacing between members at the table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish family holiday dinner in NYC</td>
<td>Conversational overlaps; frequent interruptions</td>
<td>Little space between members at the table</td>
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Worksheet 7. Observation Sheet

Source: 

Setting: 

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Characteristics</th>
<th>Verbal Behavior</th>
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This page is reproducible.
• How can we benefit from using video clips such as this in a cross-cultural or multicultural classroom?

8. View the video clip again.
   • What information can you add to the worksheet that you did not pick up on earlier?
   • What information that has been pointed out in group discussion do you notice now?

**Homework assignment**

9. Give each participant two additional copies of worksheet 7.

10. Assign participants to observe two of the following situations, and complete a worksheet for each one.
   • a meal with at least four participants
   • a scene from a movie filmed in a language other than English
   • a scene from a TV sitcom
   • a meeting
   • a party

**Review and discussion**

11. As a full group, share your findings. If the group is very large, discuss findings in groups of 3–4 first, then share five of the most important findings of the small-group discussions with the full group.

**Sample Questions:**

• Describe your observations.

• Why did you choose this situation?

• What struck you the most about this situation?

• What were some significant variables you observed?

• What differences in communication did you notice between the two situations you observed?
• What role did nonverbal communication play?
• What have you learned from this activity?

Optional: Show video clips of any situations you observed with the full group.

G. On the Spot (15–20 minutes)

Communicative interactions are shaped in the cultural context in which they occur. Face and facework are especially apparent in Asian cultures. Unfamiliarity with the concept of and importance attached to facework and with its impact on discourse patterns frequently leads to miscommunication.

Purpose: To experience how we impose constraints on ourselves to save face

Procedure:

1. Read the following list of tasks. Rank each task in the order you would be willing to undertake each one (with 1 as least willing and 10 as most willing).

   — 1. Asking teachers how much money they earn.
   — 2. Singing “Jingle Bells” in front of this class.
   — 3. Asking someone you have just met what his or her political views are.
   — 4. Cheering loudly at a sporting event you are attending with your family.
   — 5. Cheering loudly at a sporting event you are attending with colleagues.
   — 6. Talking nonstop during class.
   — 7. Asking for directions after getting lost.
   — 8. Describing your most embarrassing moment to the rest of this class.
9. Sharing personal feelings with members of the opposite sex.

10. Kissing a person's cheek as a form of greeting.

2. Tally the rankings on the board.

3. As a full group, discuss what factors influenced your ranking decisions.

Sample Questions:

- Was it easy to rank these tasks? Why or why not?
- How did different variables (e.g., age, gender, and status) influence your choices?
- Which cultural influences played a role in your decisions?
- How does your ranking differ from those of the other members of the class? Do the rankings of the different members of the class fall into any discernible patterns of influence (e.g., by cultural background, gender, or any other variable)?

To adapt for the language classroom,

Follow-up:

- Write an anecdote describing your most embarrassing moment. Include an explanation of why the incident was so embarrassing to you, a description of how you felt, and what you wish you had done differently.

IV. Further Readings

Articles


This article provides readers with a provocative examination of pragmatics and language learning within the context of content-based language learning courses.
The authors take the position that the development of communities within different language learning contexts forces learners to negotiate meaning, thereby promoting their pragmatic competence. The authors' discussion of various aspects of communicative behavior in language classrooms skillfully illustrates their contention that pragmatic knowledge must be gained through authentic, rather than simulated, interactions.


In this article, the authors offer varied examples of misunderstandings that occur when exchanging compliments in different cultural contexts; furthermore, they analyze these misunderstandings as examples of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. They include exercises designed to help learners develop the ability to recognize compliments and to use them properly.


The author of this article provides a review of data-based research on pragmatic learning in second and foreign language classrooms. The questions addressed in this review include what we know about classroom learning of pragmatics and what research approaches and techniques have been used in studying pragmatics in the language classroom. Readers interested in what classroom-based research has been done and what it has shown us in learning about the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating pragmatic teaching into the classroom will find this article a worthwhile read.


By observing a range of aspects of communication that can vary from culture to culture, the authors of this article illustrate contrasts in modes of and expectations in how speakers signal conversational intent. This is a useful article for readers seeking additional information on the interplay among variables such as context, power, distance, and politeness.


This article offers a thoroughly practical discussion of how to incorporate pragmatics into language teaching through the use of television. The author discusses how to choose appropriate shows, supplies guidelines for developing activities based on the language found in a show, and provides specific examples to help teachers develop their own classroom activities.
Books


The author of this book takes readers on a fascinating exploration of the relationship between language and culture. The book is written with the layperson in mind and requires no background. It is a good introduction to the relationship between culture and language. Agar’s perceptive observations and anecdotes expose how strongly language and culture are linked, illustrate people’s understanding of sense of self (self-identity), and reveal the effects of these factors on communicative behavior.


For those interested in learning more on the different aspects of talk in different social contexts, this is an excellent introductory work. The author reviews current research in various domains, including talk in familial, educational, and religious contexts. Boxer also addresses methodological issues of conducting research and discusses how various types of research will address different research questions. This text is easily accessible to anyone with little or no background in sociolinguistics but with a genuine interest in how people use language.


The authors of this book present an expansive overview of the varied approaches to the study of discourse. Using a descriptive linguistics approach, they show how forms of language are used in communication. Their primary interest is in examining how language is used to communicate for a purpose in a context. A wide variety of discourse types are discussed, to enable students to apply these to any language context they encounter.


This edited volume deals with three areas of speech-act research: methodological issues, speech-act realization in different languages, and applications of research to teaching. The contributors include Andrew Cohen, on the production of what he terms “speech act sets”; M. Geis and L. Harlow, on politeness strategies; Diana Boxer, on using ethnographic interviewing; and Graham, on negotiation. This book offers many different articles, all well written and easily accessible to readers without any linguistic background.


This edited volume is a compilation of substantial essays on the impact of culture on pragmatics and language learning. The emphasis throughout the book is on the relationship between language and communication. It offers an introduction to research from a variety of disciplines, describes different aspects of culture that
influence both second language learners and teachers, and strikes a balance between research and classroom applications. Language teachers should find this text of great benefit.


This book serves as a practical introductory guide to the main concepts and problems of intercultural communication and is presented within the framework of interactive sociolinguistics. The authors highlight the discourses of Westerners and Asians, men and women, and corporations and professional organizations, as well as intergenerational discourse.


This book offers readers an excellent compilation of essays. Notable authors in the field, including J. House, G. Kasper, and E. Gudykunst, here examine fundamental issues, concepts, and methodological approaches in the study of pragmatics. Also included are several empirical studies investigating cross-cultural communication.