Pragmatics and the language classroom: The effect of instruction on advice-giving

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The value of deliberate focused pragmatic instruction for second language learners has long been recognized among researchers (e.g., Thomas, 1983; Rose and Kasper, 2001). Only recently, however, have there been signs of pragmatics becoming more widely appreciated among language teachers, with the publication of a detailed guide for teachers to introduce pragmatics into the language classroom (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010) and at least three edited collections of pragmatics-focused activities for the language classroom (Tatsuki and Houck, 2010; Houck and Tatsuki, 2011; Ronald, Rinnert, Fordyce and Knight, 2012).

One area still requiring attention is the pragmatics of the language actually used in foreign language classes. With the L2 increasingly used as the language of instruction, teachers and students do, for example, learn how to give instructions or ask for help. Learners do not, however, learn pragmatically appropriate ways of giving each other feedback, despite advice-giving being a face-threatening act. Following a review of the development of pragmatics and pedagogy, this paper reports a study focusing on L2 learner instruction for giving advice to peers on their presentations. This study was conducted with young adult Japanese learners of English: one group receiving instruction and practice in giving advice in English, and two groups not receiving instruction. Students in all three groups, over 100 in total, gave short written feedback on their classmates’ presentations. The group that received instruction and one of those that did not were instructed to give their advice in English, while the students in the third group were given the choice of giving advice in their L1 or in English. Data from the study, on students’ feedback slips, indicate significant effects of instruction on learners’ use of this speech act, as well as insights into the influence both of the learners’ L1 and of previously learned L2 advice-giving language.

Keywords: advising, pragmatics, speech acts.