

# Teaching Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication Online

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*English in the Workplace (EWP) programs are increasingly surfacing across Canada to assist internationally educated professionals (IEPs) with the challenges of integrating into the Canadian workplace. One critical topic of these courses is targeted pragmatics (soft skills) instruction. By learning these skills, IEPs gain valuable tools for communicating effectively and appropriately with their Canadian-born colleagues and leaders. The workplace is also becoming increasingly culturally diverse, broadening the required skillsets of IEPs to include intercultural competence—the ability to adapt both cognitively and behaviourally across cultures to achieve communicative goals (Bennett, 1993). As an EWP instructor in a medium-sized institution in Alberta, I worked on the redesign of an EWP course with both pragmatics and intercultural components to be offered online. The course results showed learner development in both pragmatics and intercultural competence. In this article, I outline the theory that informed the course design, content, and assessment tools; discuss results of a sample of learners from four pilot offerings; and provide considerations for instructors and instructional designers tasked with the development of online courses of this nature.*

*De plus en plus de programmes d'anglais en milieu de travail (English in the Workplace) font surface partout au Canada pour aider les professionnels formés à l'étranger à faire face aux défis que pose leur intégration dans les milieux de travail canadiens. L'enseignement ciblé de la compétence pragmatique (une compétence « non technique ») est une des composantes importantes de ces cours. Quand les professionnels formés à l'étranger développent ces compétences, ils acquièrent des outils importants pour rendre efficace et appropriée la communication avec des collègues et des dirigeants nés au Canada. Les milieux de travail se diversifient sur le plan culturel, ajoutant aux habiletés exigées des professionnels formés à l'étranger celle de la compétence interculturelle, c'est à dire la capacité de s'adapter sur les plans cognitif et comportemental d'une culture à l'autre de sorte à atteindre ses objectifs de communication (Bennett, 1993). Chargée d'enseigner l'anglais en milieu de travail dans une institution de taille moyenne en Alberta, j'ai travaillé à la restructuration d'un cours d'anglais en milieu de travail dont les composantes pragmatiques et interculturelles étaient offertes en ligne. Les résultats ont révélé que les étudiants avaient acquis des connaissances dans les deux domaines. Dans cet article, je présente les grandes lignes de la théorie qui a guidé la conception, le contenu et le développement des outils d'évaluation du cours. Je discute également des résultats d'un échantillon d'apprenants de quatre cours pilotes et j'offre de la matière à réflexion pour les enseignants et les concepteurs de ce genre de cours en ligne.*

Unwritten guidelines abound about using language in any context for effective and appropriate communication. English as a second language (ESL) learners are curious about these cultural norms because understanding them and using them effectively leads to successful interactions in the target culture. Interculturalists call this *culture-specific knowledge* (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003), and second language acquisition (SLA) experts call this *pragmatic competence* (Bachman, 1990). In a multicultural society such as Canada, communication is more complex than simply applying a set of culture-specific rules when interacting in the classroom, at work, or in the community. An understanding of culture-general concepts such as individualism, collectivism, and high and low power distance can also prove beneficial for those who seek to develop intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993). This understanding provides individuals (Canadians and newcomers alike) with the ability to adapt behavior across cultures to achieve communicative goals (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012). Although increased intercultural competence can also facilitate second language acquisition (Byram, 1997), there seem to be very few articles investigating the effectiveness of a course on both pragmatic and intercultural competence. As a result, in 2012 I worked on a project team that adapted a face-to-face English in the Workplace (f2f EWP) course with learning objectives in these two key areas to an online delivery model. In this article, I will begin by briefly introducing the literature that most influenced the design of the course on the topics of both pragmatics pedagogy and the development of intercultural competence in the language classroom. I will then discuss the course design, assessment, participants, content, and results. Finally, I will list several tips for developing and teaching pragmatics and intercultural courses online.

## Teaching Pragmatics

Instruction in pragmatics, or “the secret rules of language” (Yates, 2004), is essential for learners to integrate into Canadian workplaces. Many language learners develop the basic communication strategies to navigate social interactions in the community, but the stakes can be higher at work (Waugh & Whitelaw, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that grammatical errors are more easily forgiven than pragmatic misses (Campbell & Roberts, 2007). In addition, learners may not necessarily develop the pragmatic skills they need without instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). Although some may develop pragmatic competence without explicit instruction, it can take many years in a naturalistic setting for learning to occur (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). In this course, we drew upon the work of Yates (2004), who offers an approach to teaching pragmatics, and Kondo (2010) and Martinez-Flor (2010), who provide example pragmatics lesson plans. In addition, we consulted recently published, teacher-friendly TESOL publications on the topic of pragmatics (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010). This literature influenced much

of the design, sequencing, and content of activities and tasks for the course under discussion. To determine the overall effectiveness of the course, the project team consulted the work of Ishihara and Cohen (2010), who outline the importance of assessment of classroom-based pragmatics instruction and research; they also provide many novel approaches that could be used by instructors to give feedback on pragmatics and by learners to both self-assess and assess each other.

## **Teaching for the Development of Intercultural Competence**

Given the multicultural nature of the workplace, language learners studying pragmatics may also benefit from developing intercultural competence so they can work more effectively across cultures. It goes without saying that this type of training would also be useful for Canadian-born workers in multicultural organizations; however, a discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this article. In developing the intercultural components for this course, the project team drew from the ideas of Bennett et al. (2003), who suggest that language teachers use a theoretical model that is culture-general and serves as a tool for the development of objectives, tasks, activities, and assignments. One such model is Bennett's (1993) Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS outlines five stages: Denial, Polarization, Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation. Because the pilot cohorts who took this online course were represented most strongly at Polarization and Minimization, I will explain these here (for a detailed description of all five stages, see Bennett, 1993). At Polarization, learners take on the worldview of "us" and "them." Many are critical of the host culture, while others are critical of their first culture. The challenge at Polarization is to focus on what is similar and shared with the host culture or what values are common to those found in the first culture, to remove the negative value judgments of right or wrong, good or bad. At Minimization there tends to be an overemphasis on what is similar and shared, which can be perceived by some as "minimizing" important cultural value differences. The developmental strategy at Minimization is to use culture-general frameworks to build a deeper understanding of cultural values. We designed the course based on the central idea that if learners can develop some fluency in using culture-general knowledge to understand more deeply their own and other cultures, the process of integrating into a new culture like Canada's and navigating the challenges to their identities as they begin work on multicultural teams can become much more manageable (Berardo & Dearthoff, 2012). Let us now turn to a more expanded discussion of the design of this online course.

## Course Design

In response to growing industry trends demanding more flexible workplace training, the project team redesigned a f2f EWP course for online delivery. Four pilots of the course were offered over a year. Each 30-hour course had 10 units, with specific learning outcomes for both pragmatics and intercultural communication skills development. The pragmatics component of each unit focused on a particular speech act (e.g., interruptions, requests, apologies) which, if performed inappropriately, has the potential to be detrimental to workplace relationships. For example, interrupting a meeting without both a knock at the door (nonverbal communication) and a statement of apology (verbal communication) may have negative implications on the interrupter's relationships with colleagues attending the meeting. The intercultural communication component of the course focused on culture-general frameworks (e.g., individualism and collectivism, high and low power distance) as well as cultural differences in nonverbal communication and cultures of learning. The asynchronous content focused on common conversational gambits used by native speakers to perform a particular speech act (e.g., for a request, one might begin with the chunks "I was wondering if ..." or "Would you mind if ..."). The synchronous component of the course served as an interactive space to practice pragmatic forms, discuss the asynchronous content and assessments, and prepare learners for the next unit. Each unit contained an assessment component (usually a recorded response to a discourse completion task [DCT]), a reflection on cultural differences and similarities at work or in the community, and questions for discussion with a workplace coach. Intercultural competence was assessed using a pre- and post-Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer, 1999). For pragmatic competence, a pre-and post-assessment consisting of learners' oral and written DCT responses was administered.

## Assessment: Discourse Completion Tasks and the Intercultural Development Inventory

DCTs are designed to elicit responses from learners to scenarios in which pragmatic errors could potentially cause communication breakdowns, workplace safety issues, misunderstandings between colleagues, and, in some cases, conflict. Learners were asked to respond orally and in written form to three different workplace scenarios. Oral recordings were collected in a f2f precourse orientation session and again during a f2f postassessment class. Written responses were submitted online during the first and last synchronous classes. We separated the oral and written assessments to ensure that learners would not simply read their written responses for the oral task. Learners completed a pre- and post-IDI during the orientation and final assessment sessions. The IDI is a 50-item questionnaire, validated in 15

languages, that uses the DMIS as the underlying theoretical model and provides an individual or a group profile of behavioural and cognitive flexibility across cultures (Hammer, 1999). The instructor and primary designer of the course is a certified IDI administrator. Group profiles were used for each of the four pilots to determine appropriate intercultural content for the course. Those whose first language was not available on the IDI website were asked to complete the IDI in English. These learners, however, are not reported in the results section in this article.

## Course Participants

Making up the four pilot cohorts participating in the online EWP course were 98 learners (48 women and 50 men) from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Learners were recruited from local multicultural organizations and immigrant service providers. Two criteria were necessary for course participation: a Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) level of 7 (CCLB, 2012) and a workplace coach. Workplace coaches were defined as native or near-native speakers of English. Throughout the course, coaches discussed their own cultural perspectives on the intercultural content and insights into various aspects of pragmatics (e.g., strategies for softening a request, interrupting a meeting, apologizing for making a project error). Learners were placed in either a preworkplace or workplace cohort to accommodate those who were seeking employment in their professional fields or already working in their trained professions. Participants came from 20 different language backgrounds, varied in age from 22 to 60 years, and reported living in Canada for between 3 months and 10 years.

## Course Content

The pragmatics component of the course was taught in a variety of ways, satisfying learning preferences for inductive and deductive learning. Learners were asked to listen to or read transcripts of native speakers' interactions and to notice the language forms used by these speakers to perform the speech act. At other times, learners were given common strategies to perform a particular speech act and asked to reproduce those strategies in an assignment. For example, the speech act of "apologies" has six distinct strategies that speakers use in different contexts: "expression of regret, offer of apology, request for forgiveness, acknowledgement of the responsibility, offer of repair, promise of forbearance" (Kondo, 2010, pp. 146–147). During the online synchronous session, one paired work activity was to role-play three different apologies, each with different sociopragmatic content (e.g., speaking to a boss vs. coworker, a close friend vs. a stranger, and bumping into someone in the hall vs. spilling a coffee on someone's computer during a meeting). Learners would then compare their first language (L1) and first culture (C1) norms with L2 and C2 norms. Based on the IDI profile of the group, the instructor

would then focus more intentionally on either cultural similarities (common to the developmental stage of Polarization) or differences (common to the developmental stage of Minimization). As previously mentioned, all of the pilot cohorts' IDI group profiles were at Polarization or Minimization. At the end of the synchronous session and leading into the following unit, learners were asked to pay close attention to speakers using apology strategies at work and in the community, and to document the perceived social distance and status of the people involved in the interactions and the degree of imposition for the context. An example of this type of assignment was described in one unit as follows:

This week, while you are working or out in the community, pay close attention to people who apologize. Keep a journal or use your smart phone to take notes about the status and the social distance of the people you observe. How severe was the imposition? Was there enough repair in the apology? What other apology strategies were used? Report back to the class on the discussion board.

Intercultural content focused on culture-general frameworks. Each unit had a central framework accompanied by definitions and case studies that served as exemplars. During the synchronous sessions, the class watched a video clip of a multicultural team meeting, noticing and then discussing cultural themes. For example, in the unit that compared how various cultures value time, learners pointed out and discussed examples in the video of similarities and differences in punctuality, turn-taking, and adherence to the meeting agenda. With a pilot cohort at Polarization, the homework assignment would then be to find similarities in the ways Canadians orient to time and to report these on the shared discussion board. At Minimization, the homework was to find significant differences across cultures at work or in the community, share these on the discussion board, and comment on at least two other students' postings providing insights into the observed behaviours. The instructor also participated in these activities, as is demonstrated in the following example:

I saw a picture in the newspaper today of a voting line-up in India. It looked like a giant snake, weaving in and out of cars, shops, and a public park. I wondered how anyone could tell who had arrived first! Maybe that was the point of the picture, but it made me wonder about cultural differences in turn-taking between India and Canada when, later this afternoon, I was standing in a perfectly straight line of about 35 people at Tim Horton's. Thoughts?

## Course Results

As previously indicated, the online course under discussion had both pragmatics and intercultural pre-post assessments. Final analysis of the pragmat-

ics assessments included the recruitment of seven expert ESL instructors who were trained to use a customized rubric and asked to rate both oral and written DCT responses. The rubric was designed to measure Canadian content, organization of message, directness, politeness and formality, and word choice on a 6-band scale. These pragmatic features were adapted from the many suggestions for assessment provided by Ishihara and Cohen (2010). The rubric was first designed and then given to a pragmatics expert for review. Recommendations included narrowing the scale from 9 to 6 bands to reduce redundant measures, and improving wording for increased clarity and conciseness. The rubric was then piloted by two expert ESL instructors before being used in the final analysis.

A random sample of 10 learners was drawn from the 50 pilot participants who completed the course for assessment. Given that the expert panel were volunteers with full teaching loads, it was unreasonable to ask that they assess the 600 oral and written recordings of all 50 learners who completed course requirements.<sup>1</sup> Experts were therefore asked to rate oral responses for 10 learners and written responses for 5 learners. Results for the course showed that all of the participants improved on their oral assessments. On average, learners advanced by close to half (0.35) of a band level on the 6-band scale. There was more improvement (0.65 of a band level) in the written assessments. Based on pragmatics outcomes statements for speaking (CCLB, 2012), learners began at a CLB 7 and progressed toward a CLB 8 or 9 by the end of the course.

Results from the IDI questionnaires for the 10 randomly selected learners indicated that 12% shifted, from pre- to post-assessments, from the Polarization stage to the Minimization stage on the DMIS. This means that learners were more adept at finding and discussing cultural similarities, without using stereotypes, than they were at the outset of the course. Although the overall intercultural gains for the course still indicate much room for improvement, some learner responses in the follow-up focus groups point to an increased capacity to notice similarities rather than to focus on differences, one of the essential developmental strategies at Polarization. One learner had this to say:

Focus in the course was looking for similarities. This was good it was an acknowledgement that we are part of the culture. To focus on similarities it is a way we can understand each other. Focus on positive things rather than negative things. You can understand another point of view if you focus on similarities. We will only be successful if we try to understand other's point of view. In workplace, when work in a team there are the motivations to understand similarities—asking for requests, writing e-mails—these are things that as professionals, we need these things.

## Implications for Teaching and Instructional Design

The results of this course provide insights into the efficacy of teaching pragmatics and intercultural communication online. For instructors and instructional designers who wish to develop courses on these topics, there are a number of important considerations:

- Consider the importance of cultural learning style differences that occur in a multicultural classroom (see Edmundson, 2007, and Visser, 2007, for an expanded discussion of the topic of cultures of learning).
- Test online courses over a number of pilot offerings (3-pilot model recommended).
- Use online tools such as blogs, wikis, or a learning management system (LMS) as a space for learners and instructors to share DCT responses in both audio and written formats, case studies as exemplars of culture-general frameworks, readings, news articles, podcasts, or theory on the topic of intercultural communication and/or pragmatics.
- Use online audio recording applications and have learners transcribe their DCT responses, comment on what they did well and would do differently the next time, and post these to a common wiki or blog for feedback from their classmates, instructor, colleagues, or workplace coaches.
- Have learners respond to common workplace scenarios (e.g., DCTs) in written form, through e-mail to the instructor or classmates, through the chat function in a LMS, or via an online application with a chat function.
- Collect learner anecdotes about times they have faced challenges finding appropriate language in interactions at work or in the community and customize these into DCTs that require the use of pragmatic features, critical thought, reflection, and sharing with classmates or an online community of learners.
- Participate actively in storytelling about cultural interactions. This demonstrates to learners that you are part of the group and are also continuously learning about the complexities that culture presents in communication.
- Encourage learners to start a meet-up group online on the topic of pragmatics and/or intercultural communication, to share their experiences and learnings beyond the course start and end dates.
- Develop a collaborative community of practice with other instructors in your area to share teaching and ideas.
- Join an online teaching community, participate in webinars, and stay connected with the research on pragmatics and the development of intercultural competence.



## Conclusion

Pragmatics and intercultural communication are critical for IEPs' workplace success and social integration. These skills, however, are not easily acquired without instruction. This online course addressed these themes and proved to have some efficacy; however, more research is needed to generalize the findings across larger groups of learners. Critical to the success of this course were very practical pedagogical strategies and approaches for teaching pragmatics and intercultural communication that were found in the vast literature on these topics. The project team felt that it was essential to build on current research in these areas for effective course development. In future research, we hope to expand language, intercultural training, and peer mentoring programs in multicultural organizations to help bridge some of the cultural distance that exists between Canadian-born employees and internationally educated professionals. With both sides participating actively in the learning process, it is hoped that this will lead to a more comprehensive demystifying of the "secret rules of language."

## Note

<sup>1</sup> These participants completed all of the course requirements including assignments, discussion board postings, 80% attendance in Elluminate Live (online virtual classroom) sessions, and pre and post pragmatics and intercultural sensitivity assessments. Those who completed only 75% of the course requirements missed one of the two post-assessments and more than two module assignments. Many from this group were able to complete their Elluminate Live requirements by listening to the session later from a recorded link sent to them by the instructor.

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Erin Waugh delivers intercultural and language training across Canada where multicultural workplaces present unique challenges for transformative learning. He co-authored a chapter in the CLB Support Kit on incorporating pragmatics into a CLB-based program. Erin continues to be inspired by the exploration of the interface between language and culture.

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