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Intercultural competence and pragmatic failure: compliments and disagreements in EFL

Competencia intercultural y fallo pragmático: el caso de los cumplidos y los desacuerdos en inglés como lengua extranjera

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ABSTRACT: Mastering a foreign language involves more than having a good linguistic competence. In fact, one of the most difficult aspects is acquiring the necessary pragmatic competence (Hymes, 1972) to perform a specific speech act suitably according to context and the interlocutors' expectations and beliefs (Yates, 2010; Piller, 2017). In the L1, such pragmatic knowledge is both learnt and acquired throughout the individual's 'acculturation process' (cf. Schumann, 1986). However, it might be a source of misunderstandings and stereotype reinforcement when using L2, especially in the case of intercultural situations, where interlocutors may bring different 'pragmatic expectations' to the encounter and where pragmatic failure is more likely to take place. In this paper, I shall focus on the notion of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983) and the related concept of dissonance (Zamborlin, 2007) and how they might play a crucial role in intercultural communication. More specifically, two speech acts will be analyzed: compliments (and their responses) and disagreements. The reason for selecting these two acts is that they might be regarded as extremes in terms of the interlocutors' positive face. Thus, compliments might be employed as a way to build up positive face whilst disagreement inflicts a clear threat to the interlocutors' positive face. Precisely because of their "extreme" character, both speech acts may lead to pragmatic failure in intercultural encounters. As language teachers, one of our crucial roles is hence help our students to develop both their pragmatic competence in L2 but, even more importantly, to raise their meta-pragmatic awareness.

KEY WORDS: pragmatic failure, communicative dissonance, TEFL, speech acts, intercultural competence.

RESUMEN: Dominar un idioma extranjero implica más que tener una buena competencia lingüística. De hecho, una de las competencias más difíciles de adquirir es la pragmática (Hymes, 1972) o la habilidad de realizar actos de habla acordes con el contexto y las expectativas de nuestros interlocutores (Yates, 2010; Piller, 2017). En la lengua materna, estos conocimientos pragmáticos se adquieren durante el

proceso de aculturación del individuo (cf. Schumann, 1986). Sin embargo, pueden dar lugar a numerosos malentendidos cuando se trata de una lengua extranjera, especialmente en el caso de contextos interculturales donde las expectativas pragmáticas de los interlocutores pueden ser muy diferentes. En consecuencia, se pueden producir más fallos pragmáticos. En este artículo, nos centraremos en las nociones de fallo pragmático (Thomas, 1983) y disonancia (Zamborlin, 2007) y en como ambas pueden jugar un papel crucial en la comunicación intercultural. De forma más concreta, nos centraremos en dos actos de habla: los cumplidos y los desacuerdos. Los motivos que nos han llevado a elegir estos actos de habla son que ambos pueden verse como extremos respecto a la imagen positiva de nuestro interlocutor. Así, los cumplidos pueden emplearse para reforzar la imagen positiva del interlocutor mientras que los desacuerdos suponen una clara amenaza para la misma. Puesto que ambos son extremos, estos actos de habla pueden dar lugar a fallos pragmáticos en encuentros interculturales. Como profesores de lengua extranjera, uno de nuestros roles principales es desarrollar tanto la competencia pragmática de nuestros alumnos en la L2 como despertar su consciencia meta-pragmática.

PALABRAS CLAVE: fallo pragmático, disonancia comunicativa, TEFL, actos de habla.

Introduction

The development of learners' communicative competence in a second or foreign language has long been one of the main concerns of language teaching research (cf. Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006; Taguchi, 2007; Su, 2010; Alcón Soler, 2015; Taguchi & Roever, 2017, among many others). Likewise, it has long been accepted that communicative competence in another language involves not only grammatical or strategic knowledge in the target language but also pragmatic competence or the ability to employ different linguistic resources in an appropriate way for a given context (Kasper, 1997; 2006) as well as intercultural competence "as a basic component to foster L2 learners' full communicative competence"

(Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2006, p. 52).

Traditionally defined by Hymes (1972) as the knowledge of a language and the ability to use it effectively, the concept was refined by Canale & Swain (1980) to include four different but closely intertwined elements:

1. Linguistic competence, which involves the knowledge of the language code (e.g. spelling, grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.);
2. Sociolinguistic competence, or the mastery of the socio-cultural code of language use; that is, the appropriate application of vocabulary, register, politeness, and style in a given context;
3. Discourse competence, which consists in the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohe-

sive and coherent texts or genres (e.g. email, academic essay, job interview);

4. Strategic competence, or the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which can enable us to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur and enhance the efficiency of communication.

Following a similar line, Bachman (1990) and Bachman & Palmer (1982, 1996) further divide linguistic competence (which they name "language competence") into two sub-competences: organizational and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes both grammatical and textual competence, the latter being closely related –if not equivalent – to Swain & Canale's (ibid.) "discourse competence". Pragmatic competence, on the other hand, includes functional competence or the ability to perform illocutionary functions (-i.e. "speech acts") appropriately according to context together with sociolinguistic competence – e.g. the ability to adjust to different dialects, varieties, register, cultural references, etc. This latter distinction has traditionally also been known as the pragmalinguistic-sociopragmatic sides of pragmatics (cf. Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

Despite there being slightly different theoretical approaches, pragmatic competence is thus commonly regarded as a fundamental aspect of the more general concept of communicative competence. Pragmatic competence is defined as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas, 1983, p. 92). More recently, Barron (2003, p. 10)

offers a more expansive definition, understanding pragmatic competence as

> the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources.

In the L1, such pragmatic knowledge is both learnt and acquired throughout the individual's 'acculturation process' (cf. Schumann, 1986). However, it might be a source of misunderstandings and stereotype reinforcement when using L2, especially in the case of intercultural situations, where interlocutors may bring different 'pragmatic expectations' to the encounter (Kecskes, 2014) and/or transfer their L1 pragmatics into the L2 (Su, 2010). As a consequence, where pragmatic failure and/or dissonance are more likely to take place in intercultural interactions than in those involving just native speakers of a language. In this study, pragmatic failure is understood as the communicative breakdown that takes place

> when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1, to L2 (Thomas, 1983, p. 89).

In the following real example (Teacher to student: "come and see me in my office,

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if you like"), the addressee misunderstood the illocutionary force of the speaker's speech act –i.e. a request, and wrongly interpreted it as an invitation. When the student failed to attend the teacher's office, this triggered the teacher's offence, even if the foreign student never intended to be rude. Thomas (1983) further distinguishes between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. Pragmalinguistic failures, as defined by Thomas (1983, p. 91), occur when a non-native speaker inappropriately transfers from their L1 into the L2, or produces an utterance with a force different from that typically assigned by native speakers. Thomas relies on Leech's (1983, pp. 10-11) definition of sociopragmatic failure as one produced "from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior" (Thomas, 1983, p. 92).

However, this dichotomy between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures can limit us to two disparate categories, when often an overlapping of sociolinguistic, sociopragmatic, or encyclopaedic failures are at play (Zamborlin, 2007, p. 23). For example, in the following real intercultural exchange by a British and a Spanish speaker, the latter responds to a previous compliment ("you look great in that suit") by transferring a typical response in peninsular Spanish amongst female speakers ("*qué va*"), which she translates as "no way". The British speaker, however, finds it shocking as this is not the response she expected, which according to classic studies like Holmes (1988) or Herbert (1989) might have been either accepting the compliment (e.g. by thanking the speaker) or evading it (e.g. by giving information about where she got the suit).

Furthermore, pragmatic failure may not be present but communication can still be dissatisfactory. For example, let us consider the following real story. Some years ago, after giving a presentation at a conference, a Japanese participant approached me and told me she had liked my presentation very much. I thanked her sincerely. Just after that, she pointed to my hand, actually touched it and said "that's a really lovely ring". Her behaviour left me at a loss for words, since I did not expect it from another conference participant, especially she being Japanese.

In contrast to the case above, this anecdote depicts a difference situation, as there was no misinterpretation that both utterances were intended as compliments by the speaker. However, the exchange became awkward for both interlocutors, and it was only later on, when we both could talk, that the Japanese colleague explained to me that she was following what she had seen other Spanish speakers doing. In fact, she was trying to be interculturally competent by adapting to the pragmatic "rules" of my L1, even if inaccurately – i.e. it is odd to compliment strangers on personal belongings. What followed was a fascinating conversation on how to compliment and respond to compliments in our respective "cultures" but, had not we decided to 'talk about it', the remaining feeling would have been of frustration, awkwardness and maybe even prejudice. This phenomenon goes further than pragmatic failure and can be even more harmful in intercultural exchanges since it may easily lead to a variety of

outcomes ranging from humour to stereotyping and prejudice.

Zamborlin's (2007) work expands on cases like this when she suggests the use of the inclusive term "dissonance" as an alternative term to describe communication breakdown, which occurs when speakers "deliberately or not, organize the linguistic action in such a way that hearers perceive it as conflicting with the harmonious flow of conversation" (2007, p. 22). Thus, Zamborlin identifies dissonance as "a consequence of the speaker's inadequate linguistic, sociolinguistic, or pragmatic competence" (ibid.). Non-native speakers can further engender failures and dissonances by continuing to interpret communicative acts through ethnocentric norms when communicating in a different language.

To recapitulate, it might be less important to determine whether we are dealing with dissonance or pragmatic failure. However, what is important is to prepare our students so that they can avoid this kind of situations and take part successfully in intercultural encounters either with other native speakers of English or with non-native ones where English is used as a lingua franca.

What to teach then?

The first question that rises is whether, as EFL teachers, we should teach our students the pragmatic rules of English to help them avoid pragmatic failure and/or dissonance. Initially, and since pragmatic failure leads to miscommunication, it seems a good strategy to teach our students about the pragmatic 'rules' of English. However, this triggers another question: if so, what English variety should teachers focus on?

Research has shown that speakers of different varieties of English might, for example, perform the same speech act differently in a similar context. Thus, whilst British speakers mostly seem to prefer mitigated disagreement, Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig (2001) report the use of more direct, stronger disagreement strategies among American speakers. Similarly, Flöck's (2016) study on requests in American and British English reveals slight differences in parallel contexts, with American speakers opting for more direct requests than British ones, even if her results are not statistically significant.

Additionally, it is important to take into account that most encounters nowadays take place among non-native speakers, in intercultural communicative contexts where English is used as a lingua franca by non-native speakers. In such contexts, and because of their different cultural backgrounds, interlocutors may bring with them their own pragmatic expectations. Thus, they may share English as a common language but may have different "preferred ways of saying things" (Kecskes, 2007, p. 192). Since there are no common pragmatic rules, speakers may tacitly agree on using a common set of rules. For example, in Maíz-Arévalo's (2014a) study of disagreement among a group of intercultural students, it was observed that some of the participants opted for following "the common rules of the native variety they all shared: Standard British English" (p. 220) to express disagreement with their peers. However, others did not and reported discomfort in the satisfaction questionnaires after the task was over. This shows that intercultural pragmatics often needs to be

co-constructed and negotiated "ad hoc" (Këcskes, 2014), often by means of explicit meta-pragmatic strategies.
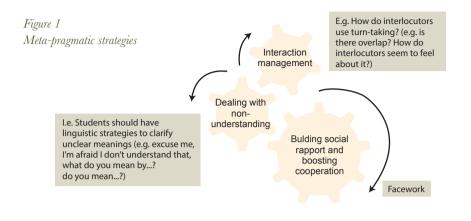
Thus, as teachers, it seems necessary to develop in our students, not only pragmatic awareness and pragmatic competence of the L2 but also meta-pragmatic awareness and strategies to be able to become effective intercultural speakers in an increasingly globalized world. In fact, the unstoppable use of English as a lingua franca (ELF henceforth) in intercultural contexts might lead to a re-definition of our priorities as teachers of pragmatics in the L2. As pointed out by Taguchi and Roever (2017, p. 273),

> The emergence of ELF as a global phenomenon has called for a reconsideration of established concepts and assumptions, particularly those related to norms, community, and language competence. English in today's world belongs to the global community of non-native speakers who use the language for intercultural communication. This international status of English has affirmed that communicative competence [and hence pragmatic competence] can no longer be described in relation to the norms of particular native-speaker communities. Rather, competence is determined based on how skillfully speakers can navigate the communicative demands by using a variety of strategies of accommodation and linguistic convergence.

In sum, while it is crucial to teach our students the pragmatics of the L2 and its (standard) varieties, it might be even more fruitful for them to be equipped with meta-pragmatic awareness and strategies to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts where English is used as a lingua franca. The development of such strategies may be considered part and parcel of what Canale and Swain (1980) name *strategic competence*, or the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which can enable us to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur and enhance the efficiency of communication. For example, students could be made aware of how interaction is managed (e.g. by paying attention to the use of turn-taking), be taught tactics to negotiate non-understanding (e.g. linguistic forms used to clarify meaning such as "do you mean…?"), as well as strategies to encourage cooperation and social rapport (e.g. politeness strategies to mitigate face-threat) –which will in turn help to smooth interaction. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the three.

Furthermore, in terms of curriculum planning, teaching meta-pragmatic strategies might not be as limited by low-linguistic proficiency as teaching students specific ways to carry out speech acts, which might need to be put off to higher levels of linguistic competence. As already pointed out, full communicative competence in L2 can also largely benefit from developing students' intercultural competence. As such, there seems to be an undeniable relationship between pragmatic competence, intercultural competence and communicative competence (cf. Cohen et al., 2005). In the words of Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006, p. 56):

Figure 1
Meta-pragmatic strategies

E.g. How do interlocutors use turn-taking? (e.g. is there overlap? How do interlocutors seem to feel about it?)

Interaction management

Dealing with non-understanding

I.e. Students should have linguistic strategies to clarify unclear meanings (e.g. excuse me, I'm afraid I don't understand that, what do you mean by...? do you mean...?)

Bulding social rapport and boosting cooperation

Facework

Learners [who] have the opportunity to interact with learners from other cultural communities […] develop their intercultural competence as an important element that will foster their full communicative competence.

Precisely, one of the tenets of pragmatic competence is the speaker's ability to adapt their language according to context. The ability to adapt or adjust to culturally different interlocutors is also a core aspect of intercultural competence (cf. Byram, 1997; Deardoff, 2006; Fantini, 2009), which can be defined as "the skill in facilitating successful intercultural communication outcomes in terms of satisfaction and other positive assessments of the interaction and the interaction partner" (Jandt, 2013, p. 35). In his seminal paper on intercultural competence, Chen (1990) specifically includes adaptability to context and psychological "adjustment" (i.e. adaptability) as two of the key components of intercultural competence, as illustrated by figure 2.

Figure 2
Components of Intercultural Competence (adapted from Chen (1990)

Personality strength
- Self-concept (how we view the self)
- Self-disclosure (how much we reveal about ourselves in interaction)
- Self-monitoring (how much we use contextual info to modify our self-presentation and expressive behaviour)
- Social relaxation (ability to remain at ease and avoid axiety in communication)

Communication skills
- Being aware of both linguistic and non-verbal behaviour
- Adaptability to context (i.e. register, politeness "rules", etc.)

Psychological adjustment
- Ability to adjust to new environments (however different)
- Ability to handle "culture shock" and its effects (e.g. frustration, stress, anxiety, etc.)

Cultural awareness
- Affective or intercultural sensitivity (skill to respect cultural differences)
- Cognitive or intercultural awareness (self-awareness of one's own culture and understanding than cultures vary, avoiding ethnocentrism)

In other words, to become an intercultural competent interlocutor, it is essential to be aware of pragmatics and vice versa, since intercultural competence seems to help interlocutors be better at pragmatics in the L2. In other words, as meta-pragmatic awareness tends to be enhanced in intercultural contexts, such contexts may help to foster (meta)-pragmatic competence in L2.

How to teach L2 pragmatics and raise (meta)-pragmatic awareness

Back in the 80s, Holmes and Brown (1987, pp. 523-4) put forward three approaches to teaching pragmatic competence:

(1) It is "absorbed unconsciously in the process of learning"; that is, as learners of a second language, learners will implicitly learn pragmatic competence. Hence, no special action is required from teachers, as students will eventually acquire pragmatic competence throughout the learning process.

(2) It develops "naturally, provided the classroom environment is properly structured". Although the authors do not delve into what makes a properly structured classroom, they seem to imply that fostering classroom real interaction in the L2 might implicitly teach learners pragmatic competence in the L2. As pointed out by LoCastro (2012, p. 307),

> For second or foreign language learners, the task is even more complex, as transfer from the L1 and sociocultural factors play greater roles. An additional burden is the issue regarding how and when to learn how to use pragmatically appropriate speech. The most

obvious environment is in classrooms or other instructional environments. Yet, limitations seem to loom large for teachers and learners. Exposure to naturalistic environments would appear to be the answer.

(3) "Learners should be made aware of the ways native speakers use language to understand not only the forms, but also the appropriate situations in which to use them" Holmes and Brown (1987, p. 524). In other words, explicit instruction by the teacher should be carried out so as to ensure learners know when and how to use certain forms.

Much more recently, Taguchi and Rover (2017) advocate for combining an explicit and implicit approach to teaching, with a greater weight given to explicit teaching. In their own words (p. 221):

> While we appreciate that implicit teaching follows the Focus-on-Form mandate of maintaining an overriding focus on communication, the greater efficiency of explicit teaching for most learners in most settings means that some degree of metapragmatic explanation is generally helpful in teaching L2 pragmatics.

In my own experience, the combination of explicit instruction and the possibility for learners' to access real communicative situations where they can (implicitly) put into practice their pragmatic knowledge tends to be rather effective. In fact, after explicitly teaching a group of intercultural students how to perform the speech act of disagreement, they showed an increase meta-prag-

matic awareness, which in turn led to more satisfactory interaction in collaborative online tasks (i.e. an e-forum) and reduced both pragmatic failure and dissonances (Maíz-Arévalo, 2014a; 2014b). These results are in line with other studies where awareness raising and explicit instruction also led to an increase in pragmatic competence. For example, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006) report an improvement in request realization after carrying out their 6Rs methodology, which also combines implicit and explicit instruction; Eslami et al. (2004) had similar results when explicitly teaching the speech acts of apology, complaint, and request. Moreover, Eslami et al. (2004, p. 5) found out that linguistic competence did not ensure pragmatic awareness since

> The results of the pretest showed that even advanced learners of English did not have pragmatic awareness of speech acts in the absence of any pertinent instruction. This implies that some form of metapragmatic instruction –deductive, inductive, implicit, or explicit– is necessary.

This takes us to the third block of my paper, where I will present two case studies of "action-research" or research where "the actors (i.e. learners of English) will be assisted to improve and/or refine their actions" (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). Section 3.1. will focus on teaching the speech act of compliments to Spanish students of EFL while section 3.2. deals with teaching the speech act of disagreement to a multicultural group where English was used as the lingua franca.

Teaching compliments and their responses to EFL Spanish students

After doing cross-cultural and intercultural research on compliments in different varieties of English and Peninsular Spanish, it was found that compliments shared a great deal of similarities regarding their linguistic realization. Thus, it is possible to establish a system of compliments, as illustrated in figure 3 (adapted from Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez, 2013, p. 751)

However, and despite similarities, research also showed that complimenting was a speech act liable to generate communicative failure and dissonance among
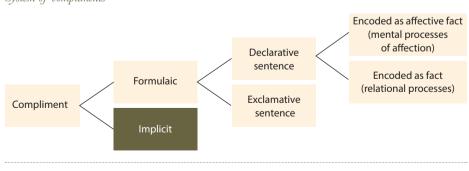
Figure 3
System of compliments

Spanish students (Maíz-Arévalo, 2010). For the sake of space, I will focus on the two most common negative transfers Spanish students might make when complimenting in English.

On the one hand, a major difference regards linguistic patterns, where there are differences in frequency of use, as illustrated by figure 4:
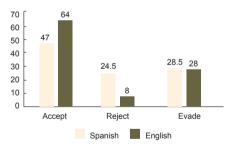
Figure 4
Compliments in English and Spanish: linguistic patterns

As can be observed, Spaniards opt for a much higher use of the exclamative sentence (as an outburst of emotion) as opposed to English speakers, who prefer declarative sentences encoding the compliment as a fact, with the focus on the addressee, such as "You look/are really lovely" (53.6%) and "that's a really nice coat" (14.9%) or Declarative sentence (encoding affection as an affective fact, with the focus on the speaker): "I simply love that skirt" (16.1%). As a result, no pragmatic failure is likely to take place but there might be dissonance. Since the exclamative pattern is a minor one in English, these "outbursts of emotion" might contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes, with Spaniards appearing as too emotional, exaggerated and maybe even insincere when complimenting English interlocutors.

On the other hand, a second important difference regards the way to respond to compliments. Responding to a compliment can be a very difficult issue since there is a clash between two politeness maxims (Leech, 1983) "modesty" vs. "agreement". As in the case of linguistic patterns, the strategies to respond to compliments are the same: a complimentee can either accept, evade or reject a compliment. However, there are important differences regarding frequency of use, especially with regard to the second major strategy: reject, which may be perceived as highly impolite by English speakers. Figure 5 sums up the three main strategies and their frequency of use by the two groups of speakers:

Figure 5
Responding to compliments in English and Spanish

As already seen in a previous example, it is quite customary for Spanish speakers (especially female speakers interacting with other female speakers) to reject a compliment with the formulaic expression "qué va", which gets mistranslated as "no way", hence producing a high degree of discomfort in the addressee, who sees her compli-

ment disagreed with in an extremely rude way, even if unaware of it. As Holmes and Brown (1987, p. 535) point out:

> Unless learners pay conscious attention to the relevant social factors in a particular context, they are likely to lapse automatically into the norms of their nature language and culture and may thereby cause unintended offense.

As a teacher, I thus decided to devote some time to teaching my students about this speech act. The participants were 45 Spanish students of English as a foreign language, with a pre-advanced level (B2.2 according to the CEFR). For one week (a total of 4 hours since we have 2 hour classes a week), we worked both implicitly and explicitly on the speech act of complimenting. More specifically, my students worked on five tasks, ranging from more controlled linguistic input to much freer activities, without practically no linguistic support. In the following paragraphs, I will present the different tasks together with their instructions, just as they were actually used in class.

Figure 6
Task 1.Raising meta-pragmatic awareness
In small groups, students were given the following list of utterances:

1. You look very nice
2. That's a good essay
3. I really like your hair
4. He seems pretty unreliable
5. I really love your garden
6. You were so kind
7. That's a very nice cake you made
8. You're very rich
9. Your parents are extremely old
10. That skirt is splendig

Students were asked to work in groups in order:

- To decide whether these are compliments or not, based on their linguistic realization and the topic (that is, what is being complimented)
- To think of a context where these could appear: (participants, situation, etc.)
- To say if these compliments would be expressed the same in Spanish. If not, how would they be expressed?

In the second activity, students had to work collaboratively on identifying linguistic patterns and idiomatic collocations, with typical adjectives that have been found to appear repeatedly in compliments, with the help of the following table:

Figure 7
Task 2

	Nice	Good	Beautiful	Pretty	Great	Lovely	Wonderful	Kind
Very								
Really								
Just								
Absolutely								
Pretty								
So								

For example, they had to be explained that "quite" changes its meaning with scalable and non-scalable adjectives. In other words, they observed that "quite perfect" intensifies perfect (positive collocation) while "quite good" attenuates its meaning (negative collocation).

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After these two activities, students were asked to find videos (e.g. sit coms, films, etc.) where compliments were actually used by interlocutors and to share their own examples on the Moodle platform linked to the class. They were also motivated to vote on the video they liked the most, and which was then fully analysed in the following class. Since students were increasingly more aware of compliments' pragmalinguistic behaviour in English, they moved on to their sociopragmatic component. In order to raise their meta-pragmatic awareness, they were presented with three different contexts that they had to role-play, so as to be aware of the role played by aspects such as the relationship between interlocutors, the situational and social context, what the complimented token could be (or not) and so on:

- **Situation 1**: Male teacher to 13-year-old female student in the classroom.
- **Situation 2**: 30-year-0ld woman to male acquaintance she has meet in a shopping centre.
- **Situation 3**: Elderly male shop assistant to unfamiliar middle-age female customer.

To finish, the last activity to practice compliments was carried out in a freer way. This activity is called the "compliment wheel". Students were disposed in two rings (an external and internal one) so that each of them should be facing another classmate. The students of the inner circle were told they had to think sincerely about something they liked of their partners and of the most appropriate way to compliment them. The students of the out-er circle had to respond (using one of the strategies we had seen as they thought was more appropriate). Then, the circles should move one space so that a new partner is faced and complimented. After everybody in the inner ring has complimented everybody, turns are exchanged. By the end of the week, students reported that they felt much more confident and more aware of when and how to use compliments in English. Not only that, they realised that interacting involves much more than using language and the need to be pragmatically competent.

Teaching disagreement to a multicultural class
The second case study also deals with research-action but in a different context, since it involved a multicultural class of 10 M.A. students who came from 8 very different cultural backgrounds (e.g. South Korean, Russian, Egyptian, Iranian, Spanish) and who used English as a lingua franca to communicate, being all very proficient in this language.

As part of their assignment, students were requested to carry out a collaborative assignment where they had to analyse a set of texts but they were asked to carry out their discussion online via an e-forum created in Moodle. Three groups were randomly created by Moodle itself. After the assignment took place, students were asked to fill in a survey expressing their satisfaction with the experience. Action research was considered necessary after two of the groups complained that some of the classmates were a bit too rude when making their point in the e-forums and expressing their disagreement. The data was analysed, paying special attention to the speech act

of disagreement. As pointed out by Locher (2004, p. 94), the problem of disagreement is that expressing disagreement among peers in particularly challenging since one wishes to "get one's point across without seeming self-righteous or being injurious".

An additional problem in this group was that they came from very different cultural backgrounds and each of the students brought their own pragmatic expectations, without there being a 'common ground' (Këcskes, 2014). In fact, after carrying out the analysis, it was observed that the only group who was wholly satisfied with the experience (as they expressed in the survey), had tacitly adopted the pragmatics of British English regarding disagreement as a common ground, hence their disagreements were mitigated and they consistently used what Kreutel (2007) defines as the "sandwich structure". However, in the other groups, members seemed to express disagreement by transferring the pragmatics of their L1, which led to dissonance and discomfort among the other participants, as illustrated by the following examples from the corpus (see Maíz-Arévalo, 2014a; 2014b):

Example 1
Very interesting analysis, NAME! Thank you for posting it! **J**
My ideas concerning Task 3 are basically the same, except for the third pair of images. I think the 1985 image rather than complementary/enhancing is contradictory . . . I don't see any sign of the Prince and Snow White being happy in that image; it's rather a gloomy image in my opinion. I agree with your reading of the Palace as a symbol of wealthiness and power.

Example 2
I am so sorry but I don't see any Cinderella kissing the prince, do you mean Snow White? In this case, I think that the prince is the actor. She is not an actor because he is kissing her but not the other way around.
do you mean that???

In this case, instruction took place during 3 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. Each session focused on different objectives, namely:

1. The first section focused on raising awareness about key notions such as pragmatic and intercultural competence, intercultural pragmatics, the Goffmanian notion of face, failure and dissonance. The main objective of these sessions was to make them aware that they all brought their own pragmatic expectations and these could impact their exchanges.
2. Students were then provided with ten real examples of conversational intercultural exchanges in ELF where miscommunication had taken place due to different pragmatic expectations. Students were also told how disagreement is highly face-threatening and can lead to conflict, especially since it can be expressed differently in different cultures.
3. In the third session, we focused on the acts of agreement and disagreement. Students were asked to complete a DCT in their own language and their utterances were analysed by the whole group, so that they became aware of possible cultural and pragmatic differences. Then, they were explicitly

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taught some ways to mitigate disagreement so as to make it less face-threatening as well as the use of strategies such as Kreutel's (2007) sandwich model.

Quite satisfactorily, students tried these strategies in their next e-forum, co-constructing and negotiating meaning and the survey questionnaires at the end of the project showed that they not only had learnt but that they were highly satisfied and had also become more competent from the intercultural point of view. They also reported having "connected" more with their classmates, even with those they initially thought would not connect, which shows that raising their pragmatic awareness also helped them build rapport, which in turn, helped them become more interculturally competent.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the importance for language teachers to teach not only pragmatic competence but also to raise their students' meta-pragmatic awareness. Both skills will help them become better communicators not only when interacting with native speakers of English (regardless of the variety), but also to adjust and accommodate their discourse accordingly in intercultural encounters where English is used as a lingua franca. To teach these skills, it is suggested teachers may adopt a more explicit approach to pragmatic phenomena, in combination with implicit teaching, as illustrated by the two case studies presented, where the two speech acts of compliments and disagreement were taught to different groups of students. In both cases, a description of the activities used in the classroom has been included for the sake of clarity.

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