

Raising awareness of the importance of pragmatics in EFL classes: Professional development for Vietnamese high school teachers

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Introduction

My recent investigation into the pragmatic input in a national EFL textbook series for Vietnamese high school students reveals a paucity of explicit information on pragmatics, together with inadequate presentations of different pragmatic aspects (see Ton Nu, 2018; Ton Nu & Murray, 2020 for more information). These shortcomings of the textbooks regarding pragmatic content require teachers to play a more active role in integrating pragmatics into their lessons to facilitate the development of students' communicative abilities in English. This has motivated me to organize a one-day training workshop for high school Vietnamese EFL teachers in order to raise their awareness of pragmatics and its teaching for their potential incorporation of pragmatics into their English lesson to help improving students' communicative competence in the target language in the EFL contexts.

Summary of the workshop

This one-day training workshop sponsored by a small grants fund, which is a part of the Australian development project for Vietnam, was conducted by me and my supervisor in August 2019 with the participation of 51 high school Vietnamese EFL teachers. The content of this workshop consists of two main parts:

- 1) The researchers' presentations of basic concepts of pragmatics, major shortcomings of the textbooks in terms of pragmatic input, and some examples of supplementary activities to incorporate
- 2) Teachers' self-designed pragmatic activities contest
(see Appendix 1 for a detailed agenda of the workshop)

This professional development workshop was built on Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1993, 2001) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning (Johnson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). The assumption was two-fold. On one hand, teachers would acquire the basic knowledge of pragmatics and its teaching through the researchers' presentations of inputs which were

designed and presented in an easy-to-notice way. On the other, teachers would interact with each other as they design pragmatic activities to present to the researchers, and thereby be able to form a community sharing their knowledge and experience.

The workshop was delivered in both English and Vietnamese. As my supervisor does not speak Vietnamese, I presented my parts, and summarised her presentation in Vietnamese to maximize teachers' understanding. All presentation slides and handouts were written in English so that teachers could enhance their abilities of reading comprehension in English as well as their metapragmatic knowledge in English.

Participants

The workshops involved the participation of all high schools from both urban and rural areas of Da Nang, a province in the central area of Vietnam under the administration of Da Nang Department of Education and Training (DOET). Each school sent 1-6 teachers to participate in the workshop in accordance with Da Nang DOET's allocation. These participating teachers were asked to relay the content of the workshop to their colleagues at their high schools.

Outcomes of the workshop

Before and after the workshop, all participating teachers were asked to complete a pre-workshop and post-workshop survey so that the researchers could evaluate the effect of this training workshop (see Appendix 2 and 3 for the contents of these two surveys¹).

The analysis of all completed surveys ²shows a significant change in teachers' understanding of pragmatics. Therefore, it can be said that the workshop was effective in raising the participating teachers' awareness of the importance of pragmatics and its teaching in EFL contexts in general and in Vietnam in particular.

Before the workshop, there were around 40 % of participating teachers who did not know what pragmatics is in general. Among 16 teachers whose answers showed that they did not know about pragmatics, half of them simply put down "N/A" to express that they did not have any ideas about pragmatics. Some of these teachers added that "this is the first time I have heard the term "pragmatics".", or "I think it is very important but I don't know how.".

¹ In these surveys, teachers were also asked other questions for the research purposes of my PhD study. In the scope of this paper, I only report on the development of their awareness of the importance of pragmatics and its teaching.

² There were 51 participating teachers, but there were totally 43 completed surveys as there were some teachers who did not complete either the pre-workshop or the post-workshop survey.

The other half tried to explain that although they may not know what pragmatics is, they knew that it is important for students' communicative competence. For example, one teacher stated:

“I think it's necessary to study this aspect of learning a foreign language, especially in speaking skill. Maybe, while teaching students, I certainly use some structures or ways involving in pragmatics, but I don't know that I'm teaching students using pragmatics in communication.”

Likewise, some teachers referred to pragmatics as a way “to improve students' communicative skills in EFL contexts”, “to use practical language in student's life”, or “to use English in communication although they still put “N/A” as their answers to describe what they knew about pragmatics. Some tended to understand the role of pragmatics in language teaching although they may not have the correct descriptions of pragmatics yet. For example, one teacher wrote:

“It's good for me and my students to communicate easily and effectively. ... I understand pragmatics more when I attend this workshop. It's difficult to say something in detail but I think pragmatics can help me a lot in teaching English to make students use English appropriately in different contexts.”

60% of the participating teachers could articulate what they knew about pragmatics. In general, they referred to pragmatics as the study of language use in contexts, the study of speakers' meanings, the study of language in real life, or the study of communicative skills. A query into word frequency used in the teachers' answers to describe their understanding of pragmatics before attending the training workshop showed that the top most used words besides pragmatics included: use, language, different, students, and situations, occurring from 18-32 times in their answers. Their answers initially revealed their conceptions of pragmatics, noting as some of its crucial aspects, i.e., contexts, social settings, and language use.

After the workshop, all participating teachers could provide a brief definition of pragmatics and its components. Unlike in the pre-workshop questionnaire where various answers were obtained regarding the teachers' conceptions of pragmatics and its inclusion, in the post-workshop questionnaire, all participating teachers provided similar answers to this question. The below word frequency maps show the words that they used to answer this question.

Before the workshop	After the wokshop
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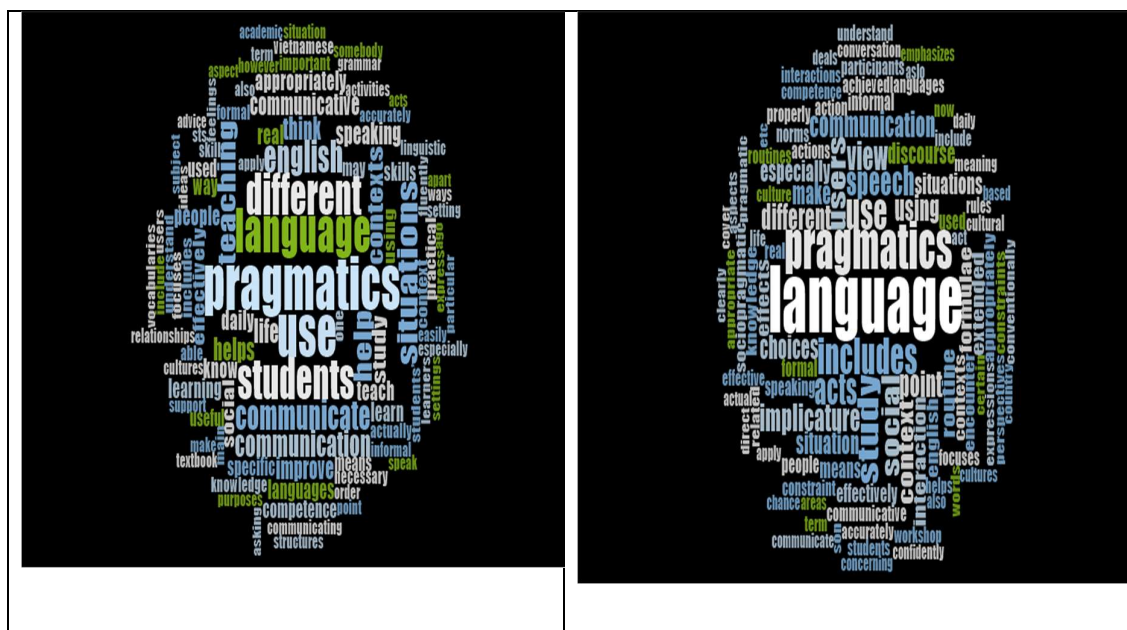


Figure 1. Words used to define pragmatics by participating teachers before and after the workshop

As can be seen in these two word frequency maps, all participating teachers obtained more knowledge of the meta-language of pragmatics after the workshop. After the workshop, such words as speech acts, communicative acts, implicature, discourse, social interaction, effects, pragmalinguistic knowledge, sociopragmatic knowledge, etc., were used in their expressions of their understanding of pragmatics and its components.

The analysis of the pre-workshop surveys reveals that 60% of teachers participating in the workshop reported teaching pragmatic knowledge in their classrooms to a minimal extent. The remaining 40% reported that they did not teach pragmatics at all in their classrooms. For those who did include pragmatics in their lessons, it can be seen in their answers that the frequency of their pragmatics teaching in the class ranges from 'sometimes' to 'rarely' or on an impromptu basis, that is, whenever they have pragmatics-related content in their lessons. The pragmatic topics covered in their lessons include formality, language use in some specific contexts, language use in accordance with different interlocutors, speech acts, cultural differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures, daily conversations, and language functions. It is notable that nearly all teachers who reported teaching pragmatics in their lessons mentioned speaking lessons only. There was only one teacher who mentioned that she also taught about pragmatics in her writing lessons when possible. In her words,

“I notify students of what to say / write in specific situations related to the lessons.”

Among the 40% of teachers who reported not including pragmatics in their teaching, there were some teachers who explained the reasons for this neglect. One teacher stated:

“I hardly teach pragmatics because:

- Need to follow syllabus / school curriculum
- In tests, pragmatics is not the main point
- Students’ English level (some of them are not good enough)
- Time limitation”

Similarly, another teacher said: “I don’t always point out to students about the specific uses of certain expressions since the main points of the lesson are not about pragmatics.”

The reason listed could also be due to the students’ demands as one teacher said: “No. My students often concentrate on grammar.”

However, in the post-workshop survey, when participating teachers were asked to rate the most enjoyable part among the three sections of the researchers’ presentations (i.e., 1. the presentation on pragmatics and pragmatics in English Language Teaching, 2. the report on the major shortcomings of the in-use textbooks in terms of pragmatic input, and 3. the presentation and demonstration of supplementary activities to incorporate pragmatics into some teaching units of the textbooks), the third section of the workshop was rated as the most enjoyable part of all by most participating teachers. They also commented that this section helped them know how to integrate pragmatics into their English lessons, and showed their eagerness to apply similar activities in their classes. Below are some examples of the teachers’ comments.

1. “The third section provided teachers interesting and useful activities to teach pragmatics in class.”
2. “The third section helps us to have some useful ways of teaching pragmatics in classroom.”
3. “ I think I can apply them in teaching English flexibly.”
4. “It helps me know how to incorporate pragmatics into some teaching units of the textbooks.”
5. “We know the use of pragmatics in real lessons.”
6. “It is useful and I can apply it in my teaching.”

7. “I can see different ways that people incorporate pragmatics in teaching.”
8. “The presentation and demonstration of supplement activities to incorporate pragmatic into some teaching units of the books help me have a lot of knowledge of using pragmatics in teaching our students.”

Conclusion

The findings from this workshop has shown some good signals of the positive effects of this teacher professional development activity. After the workshop, the participating teachers began to know more about pragmatics and how to integrate it into their own English lessons. However, this is only a starting point in a long process of making pragmatics teaching an integral part of English language teaching in Vietnam. For this process to be successful, I believe that Vietnamese teacher education universities need to include instructional pragmatics in their current teacher training programs so that preservice teachers are well-trained in this area. In addition, in-service teachers need to be retrained about pragmatics and its teaching so that they could do their jobs well and benefit their students in their efforts of communicating appropriately in the target language.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. WORKSHOP AGENDA



Workshop Agenda

Registration and Morning Tea	8:30 – 8:55 am
Morning Session <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Welcome remarks 2) Research Information Session 3) Pre-workshop Survey 4) Pragmatics and Pragmatics in English Language Teaching 5) Major Shortcoming of the Textbooks in terms of Pragmatic Input 6) Some Supplementary Activities to Incorporate Pragmatics into some Teaching Units of the Textbooks 	9:00 am – 12:00 pm
Lunch Break	12:05 – 13:25 pm
Afternoon Session <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Q&A 2) Teachers' self-designed pragmatic activities contest: preparation and presentation 	13:30 – 15:55 pm
Afternoon Tea	16:00 – 16:30 pm
Post-workshop Survey	16:35 – 16:55 pm
Best self-designed pragmatic activities announcement	16:55 – 17:05 pm
Awarding and Closing Remarks	17:05 – 17:30 pm

APPENDIX 2. PRE-WORKSHOP SURVEY

PRE-WORKSHOP SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING THE

INCORPORATING OF PRAGMATICS INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING



Instructions: Before participating in the workshop, we would like to know your view on the following issues. Please take your time to complete this survey questionnaire, which can take you around 10-15 minutes to complete. Please be informed that this is not a test and there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We are interested in your personal opinion. Your sincere answers will be of great value to us as they can ensure the accuracy of the data. The information provided by you will be confidentially secured and used only for the purposes of the workshop and (if you agree to let us use it) for the intended research. Thank you very much in advance for your co-operation and assistance.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Your name:

Your high school:

(Notes: The name and the school are for administration purposes so that the participation of you and your school is recognized. The name is also for research purpose; therefore, if you agree to allow us to use your answers, please write the same name on all surveys that are given to you in this workshop. However, you can still use a pseudonym if you like, and please remember to use the same pseudonym in all of your completed surveys in this workshop.)

Please check the (✓) the relevant box and provide your answers to the asked questions:

1. What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

2. How long have you been teaching English to high school students?

☐ Less than 5 years

☐ 5-10 years

☐ More than 10-15 years

☐ More than 15 years

3. What is the highest degree you have?

☐ Bachelor

☐ Master

☐ Master of Research/Master of Philosophy

☐ Ph.D.

4. Did you study for your degree(s) overseas or have you had any overseas English learning experience?

☐ Yes. Which country / countries? And how long?

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☐ No.

5. Did you study pragmatics as part of your degree(s)?

☐ No.

☐ Yes.

If yes, what aspects of pragmatics did you study?

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6. Do you feel the need to learn about pragmatics? If yes, why? If no, why not?

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THE QUESTIONNAIRE

These questions ask about your teaching of English to develop students' pragmatic competence in the English language. By "pragmatic competence", we are referring to students' ability to comprehend and use English appropriately as a listener/reader and as a speaker/writer with regard to context, people, and level of formality and politeness. Please read the questions carefully and answer in as much detail as possible. **You can write in either English or Vietnamese. For questions that you cannot answer at the moment, please write down N/A.**

1. What do you understand by *pragmatics*, the subject that focuses on the use of language in social settings? What does it mean? What does it include?

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2. Do you teach English pragmatic knowledge to your students? (In other words, do you teach your students how to use English appropriately to different people in different communicative

situations?) If yes, what kinds of pragmatic knowledge do you teach? If no, please state the reasons for your answer.

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3. How well do the textbooks and the available teaching materials at your school help you in teaching pragmatics?

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4. What kinds of pragmatic knowledge do you think will be important in EFL contexts? In other words, what areas of pragmatic knowledge seem most important for EFL learners?

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-THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION-

APPENDIX 3. POST-WORKSHOP SURVEY

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING THE WORKSHOP ON

INCORPORATING PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHING ENGLISH – A KEY TO IMPROVE VIETNAMESE STUDENTS’ ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE



Instructions: As part of this workshop project, we would like to know your view on the following issues. Please take your time to complete this survey questionnaire about what you have achieved from this workshop and your current needs and future expectation. (It can take you around 15-20 minutes to complete this questionnaire.) Please be informed that this is not a test and there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. We are interested in your personal opinion. Your sincere answers will be of great value to us as they can ensure the accuracy of the data. The information provided by you will be confidentially secured and used only for the purposes of the workshop and (if you agree to allow us to use it) for the intended research. Thank you very much in advance for your co-operation and assistance.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Your name: Your high school:

(Notes: The name and the school are for administration purposes so that the participation of you and your school is recognized. The name is also for research purpose; therefore, if you agree to allow us to use your answers, please write the same name on all surveys that are given to you in this workshop. However, you can still use a pseudonym if you like, and please remember to use the same pseudonym in all of your completed surveys in this workshop.)

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read the questions carefully and answer in as much detail as possible. You can write in either English or Vietnamese.

1. After this workshop, what do you now understand by *pragmatics*? What does it mean? What does it include?

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2. In this sense, how well do the textbooks and the available teaching materials at your school help you in teaching pragmatics?

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3. Currently, what would you need in order to successfully incorporate pragmatic knowledge into your English lessons to help develop your students' communicative abilities in English?

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4. What do you expect to have or to change in order for you to teach English and English pragmatic knowledge more effectively?

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5. What part(s) of the workshop did you enjoy the most? (If you would like to tick all, please put them in the order of your most preference from 1 to 3 - 1 is the most enjoyable.)

- ☐ The presentation on pragmatics and pragmatics in English Language Teaching
- ☐ The report on the major shortcomings of the in-use textbooks in terms of pragmatic input
- ☐ The presentation and demonstration of supplementary activities to incorporate pragmatics into some teaching units of the textbooks

Please state the reasons for your first most preference.

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6. What are the 3 most important pieces of knowledge that you think you gained from the workshop?

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7. What are the 3 most important things in terms of teaching skills that you think you gained from the workshop?

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8. Is there anything else you gained from the workshop?

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-THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION-