

LINKING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATICS AND SYLLABUS DESIGN



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INTRODUCTION

- **Aim:** to provide an example of how interlanguage pragmatics research can facilitate syllabus design and foreign language instruction
- **Paper sections:** 1. describe the project and the findings that led to our syllabus design; 2. describe the features targeted for instruction; and 3. describe the instructional units through which we address the features in focus

Project description

Title of the project: The role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as foreign languages

Aims of the project: to investigate students' pragmatic competence and the role of explicit instruction in developing learners' pragmatic competence

Data characteristics

- **Subject:** complaints in the interlanguage of Macedonian learners of English
- **Data collection:** Discourse completion task (DCT), role plays and retrospective interview
- **Tasks:** 1. Unfair grade, 2. Noisy party, 3. Cut in line, 4. Late pick-up, and 5. Damaged car
- **Number of responses:** 233 responses made by American speakers (AS) and 211 responses made by Macedonian learners of English (MLE)

DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDINGS

- *Complaint strategies:* AS and MLE used the same complaint strategies, and distributed them in a similar way
- *Most used strategy:* disapproval/annoyance;
- *Second most used strategy:* accusation
- *The least used strategy:* hints

Differences in Late pick-up and Damaged car

- *Late pick-up* is a situation in which native speakers use colloquial expression that non-native speakers do not know or do not feel comfortable using. But it may also be due to cultural differences. Namely, unpunctuality is more tolerable in Macedonia than in western cultures.
- In the Damaged car task MLE showed more concern about the interlocutor.

Complaint frames

- **Assertive statements**

AS

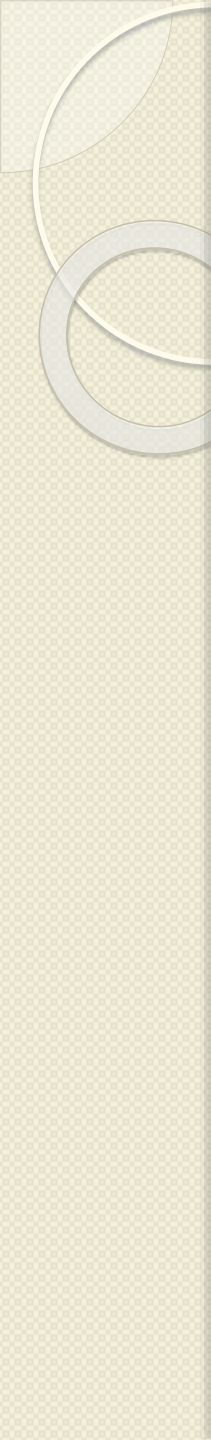
- used *think* and *don't think* (*I think there may have been a mistake on my grade; I don't think you graded me fairly*) as well as the formulaic *I don't think so*;
- *feel* and *don't feel* (*I feel I did well on this test; I don't feel right about it*);
- *don't understand* (*I don't understand why you gave me this grade*);
- *believe*, also emphasized with *do* (*I believe I did better; I do believe the end of the line is 2 miles away*);
- *guess* (*I guess there's not respect from you later*);
- and the adjective *sure* in negative constructions (*I am not sure why I got this grade*).

MLE

- *think* and *don't think* (*I think there is a mistake with my results; I don't think I've deserved this mark*);
- *sure* and *surely* (*I'm sure that I can do much better; I surely deserve a higher mark*).
- No examples with *feel* and *don't feel*, or with *guess*.
- There were only two examples with *don't think* and the strong adjectives were used only in positive constructions.
- No examples of the formulaic *I don't think so*.
- Two examples with *believe*, both preceded by *can't*: *I can't believe that you're late again; I can't believe, don't ask for my help any more*.

Requests

- both AS and MLE prefer conventionally indirect requests in comparison with direct requests.
- A large number of the conventionally indirect requests have the form of *yes/no* questions containing one of the modal auxiliaries *can/could* or *will/would*. The number of questions with *will/would*, however, is much smaller than the number of questions with *can/could* in both languages.
- It is also noticeable that MLE produced more hearer oriented requests than AS, 32% and 22% respectively.

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- The difference between the two groups becomes more significant as the requests become more direct. We could notice a higher percentage for *want/need* statements and imperatives for AS (20% vs. 12% for *want/need* statements, and 30% vs. 19% for imperatives) and for statements of obligation for MLE (24% vs. 8%).

- Table I shows that there was a big discrepancy in how the verbs *want*, *need* and *I'd like to* were distributed in the two groups.

AS			MLE		
want	need	I'd like to	want	need	I'd like
17%	66%	17%	52%	9%	39%

Embedding

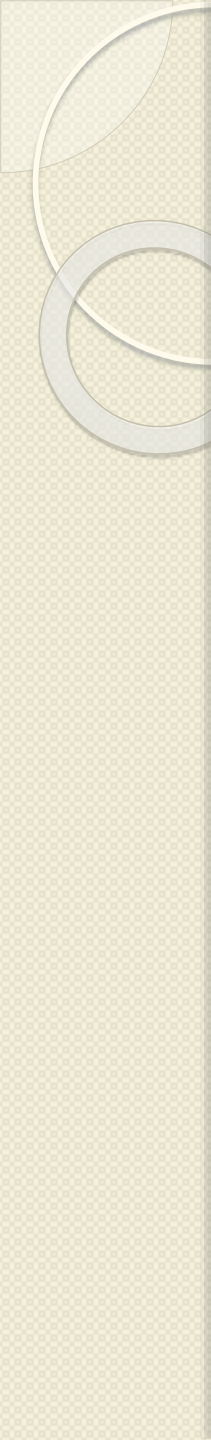
- AS: constructions with *I was wondering, I just wanted to ask if, do you think, is there any way, would you mind, and we better.*
- MLE also used *I was wondering* and *would you mind*, but not the others. On the other hand they used some constructions that we did not find in the AS's responses. Most often it was *I would like to ask you*, but also *I would kindly ask you, if you could, I want to know if, is there any chance that, and I will really appreciate if.*

Questions

- Most of the responses with questions were in the Late pick-up and Damaged car tasks.
- Some questions are like real information seeking questions.
- However, most often they are used on their own or come first in the sequence, formulated as accusations or blames: *Why didn't you tell me about the dent? blame (AS); What did you do with my car? I discover that there is a dent in the fender. You could told me that you do that. Next time I will think twice before I give you my car. (MLE)*

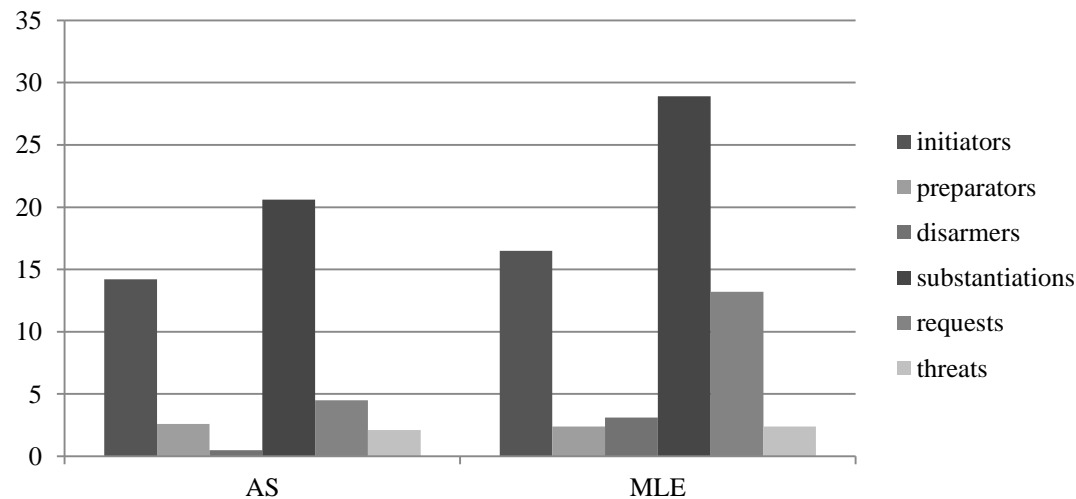
Internal modification

- The amount of internal modification in both groups was very small.
- Both groups used: *I think, just* and *a little (bit)*.
- Both groups used negative and hypothetical constructions
- Only AS used past tense and lexis that make utterances more tentative (*hope, try, guess*).
- Only AS also used the solidarity marker *guys*.

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- Most common intensifiers included *really*, *so*, *very* and *just*.
 - Commitment upgraders: both groups used *I know*.
 - Both groups mostly intensified their complaints with strong lexical items. MLE used *hard*, *mad*, *at least*, *disturbing*, *irresponsible*, *blind*, *impolite*. AS also used evaluative adjectives such as *unfair*, *unreliable*, and so on. But they also used many colloquial expressions such as *What the heck*, *the hell*, *dam*, and so on, as well as sarcasm (*Thanks for being on time*; *Nice of you to finally show up*).

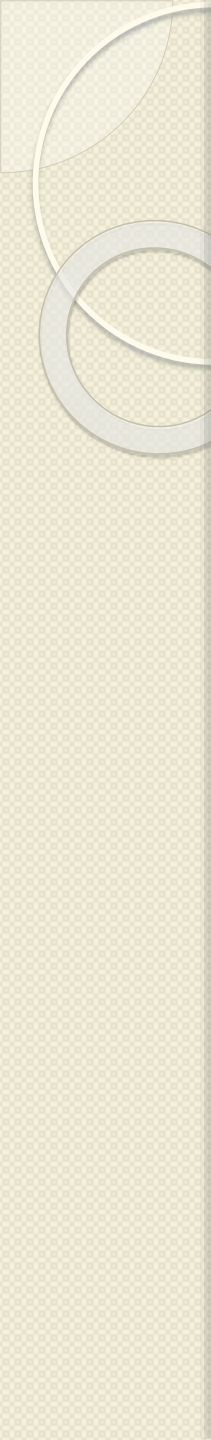
External modification

The preferred way of making complaints more convincing was by applying external modification, i.e. producing supportive moves. Figure 1 shows that in both groups most of the supportive moves were substantiations, followed by initiators and requests. In the responses of the MLE, we often found more than one substantiations. The percentage of preparators, disarmers and threats was very small.



ITEMS TARGETED FOR INSTRUCTION

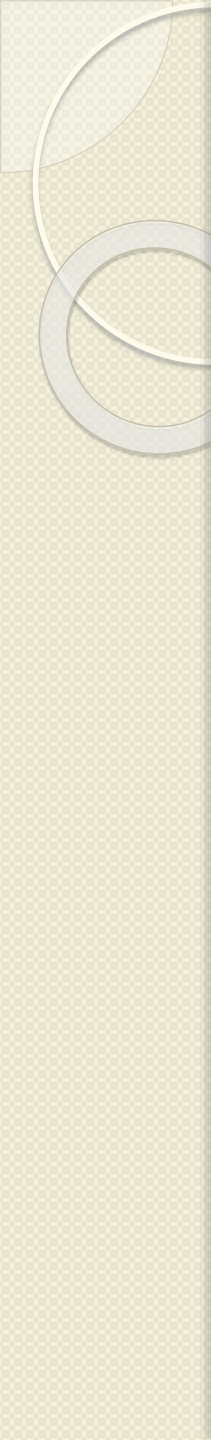
- On the basis of our analysis, we targeted the following items for instruction:
 1. **Cultural perception** - the syllabus should include discussions on how native speakers view different situations and put them in contrast with how these situations are viewed in the learners' culture. Having in mind the wide use of English as lingua franca, it may be necessary to discuss how certain situations are viewed not only by the members of the target culture, but also by other cultures.



2. Utterance length - In all tasks, MLE produced more strategies than AS, 2.7 moves and 1.4 moves, respectively. Most of the supportive moves, however, were reasons for the complaints. Although Macedonian learners use a larger number of strategies per response, this does not make them more efficient. On the contrary, their complaints become wordy and repetitive, look less efficient and more prone to argumentation, which often threatens the face of the hearer. Unlike them, native speakers tend to be specific, efficient and polite.

3. Complaint modification

- Avoidance of *you*-perspective: Some of the native speakers who checked our answers commented on this use of *can* and corrected it into *could*. And even then noted that those responses imply that the professor was wrong and would put him/her on the defensive. Their preferred responses were formulated with *can/could we*.
- Embedding with *I was wondering, I just wanted to ask if; do you think, is there any way, we better*.

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- Negative constructions: *I don't think you graded me fairly* vs. *I really think I deserve a higher mark*; *I'm not sure why I got this grade* vs. *I'm really sure that I deserve a higher grade*
 - Modal verbs: *use of want, need to, I'd like, should, must, can and could.*
 - The use of *I think*: *I don't think, Do you think, I thought, I think there may have been*
 - Vagueness against precision: *use of try, feel and guess*
 - Formulation of supportive moves - apologies



MATERIAL DESIGN

The information obtained through the research in the first phase of our project was further used for designing e-learning modules for addressing the deficiencies described in the first stage of the project.

The instruction consisted of self-study lessons.



The modules consist of two types of activities:

- activities for raising learners' awareness of the pragmatic meanings conveyed by specific linguistic means which native speakers use,
- hands-on activities that enable learners to apply the acquired knowledge.



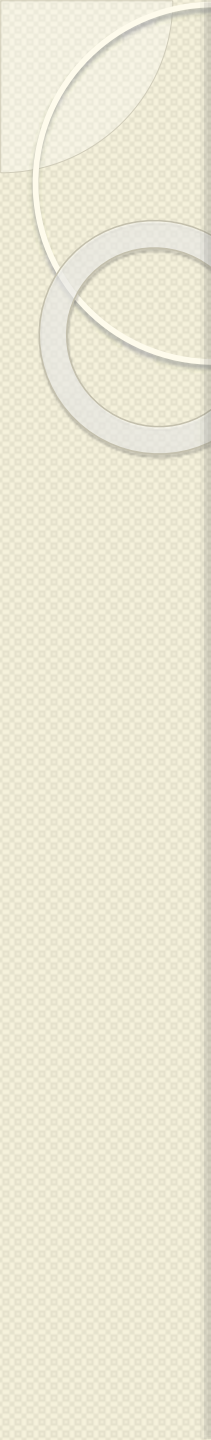
The instruction comprised the following components:

- **Awareness-raising** through note taking, video analysis, summary writing, discussions of concepts and situations, speech act analysis;
- **Metapragmatic explanations and quizzes** on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of making complaints as well as on utterance appropriateness;
- **Practice** exercises including substitutions, reformulations, fill-in exercises;
- **Production activities** such as responding in situations with different social parameters.



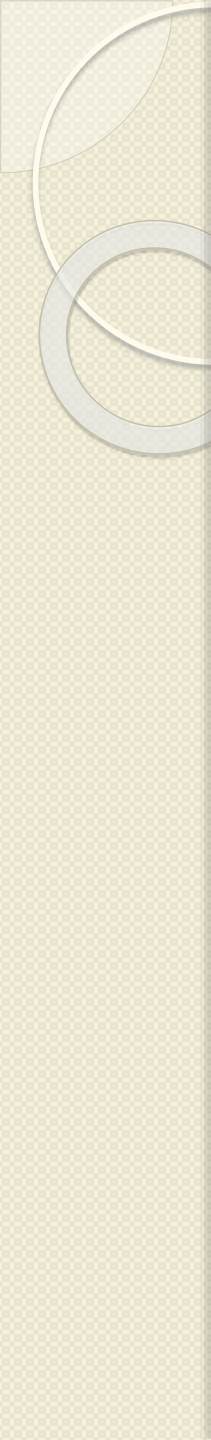
The following norms were mentioned:

- 1. each speech act, including the act of complaining, is realized in a situation that is specific for the culture of the target language; it depends how the society views the offence: in the USA, for example, cutting the line is very offensive; in Macedonia it happens on daily basis and people do not find it as offensive;
- 2. complaints vary according to the age, sex and social status of the hearer and speaker as well as their relationship; they also vary depending on how severe the offence is (if someone damaged your old computer that you were trying to get rid of anyway, or your new camera that you were very proud of); if not appropriate they can damage a relationship;

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3. complaints need to be specific and effective; speakers are usually relatively straightforward, not vague;
 4. the dominating negative politeness in English often requires complainers to **mitigate** their complaints; it also requires avoidance of the **you-perspective** which openly places the guilt on the hearer; however, if speakers find it necessary they can also make their complaints stronger;
 5. complaints should not be **over verbose**: the goal needs to be achieved with the right amount of speech, not more and not less than it is necessary; complaints shouldn't be formulated as long streams of words that can be trapped into criticism or evaluation of someone's behavior.

CONCLUSION

- A great part of foreign language teaching and learning today is directed towards preparing students for taking international examinations. More time is devoted to teaching and learning exam strategies than to learning communication strategies and social contents.
- This project is a modest attempt to expand the interests, contents and EFL methodology beyond this.



On the whole, much more work needs to be done to raise the awareness of the importance of introducing pragmatics in language teaching and learning. Not only is it important to enlarge the pool of studies and thus enlarge the knowledge of pragmatics but also to introduce the study of pragmatics in foreign language teachers' education. This is especially important for non-native teachers, who themselves may not be aware of the principles guiding the language behaviour in the culture whose language they teach.

**Thank you for showing interest in
this topic.**

**Any questions or suggestions are
welcome.**