

Pragmatics: Teaching Natural Conversation

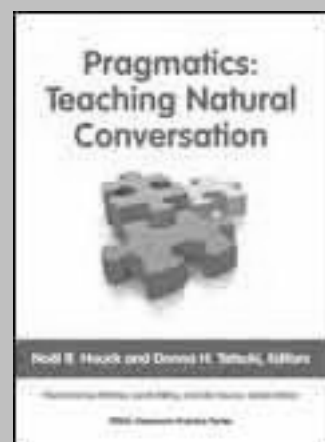
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Pragmatics: Teaching Natural Conversation

Author: Noël R. Houck & Donna H. Tatsuki (Eds.) (2011)

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This book is part of the TESOL Practice Classroom Series, and it is a companion to *Pragmatics: Teaching Speech Acts*. It is written for both ESL and EFL teachers of students at various ages, levels, and locations. Its goal is to provide teachers with ready-to-use practical activities, games, and projects to help students master some functional aspects of English language learning that are largely ignored in classroom textbooks as topics of explicit instruction.

Houck and Tatsuki have brought together the works of nine different authors to create twelve distinct chapters (not including the introduction), each dealing with a specific aspect of teaching authentic English conversation skills. Each chapter contains a "Context" section that addresses the theory underlying the learning objectives and activities for the uninitiated. Following that is a "Curriculum, Tasks, Materials" section which outlines the activities devised to teach the given conversation element. When handouts or worksheets are required, an "Appendix" is provided, which contains the student and teacher materials, including answer keys where appropriate. In addition, a web address is provided for supplementary audio and print materials. The "Reflections" section of each chapter outlines applicability, sometimes leading to ideas for further development/use of the activities as well as any limitations of the materials.

The first chapter is an introduction from the editors, and it is followed by a chapter outlining methods of assessment when it comes to students' pragmatic conversation abilities. Topics covered in this volume include authentic expressions of gratitude and other conventional expressions, apologies, compliments, turn-taking, openings and closings in telephone conversations, continuers, and responders. The final chapter is an explanation of an extended language awareness research project geared toward students' observing themselves and other speakers of English in action.

For teachers who are focused on meeting the day-to-day objectives and incorporating more authentic conversation techniques into their classroom practice, many elements of this book make it noteworthy. Even the "Context" sections that preface the learning materials are useful for those of us who, as working teachers, do not dwell long in daily life on theoretical knowledge and so may find ourselves unfamiliar with things like IFIDs (illocutionary force indicating devices). Teachers who have long lamented the fact that textbooks "don't tell it like it is" will be delighted with the realism (and Conversation Analysis) displayed in the activities of this volume. The authors provide, as they often see it, missing chunks of ESOL curriculum, and these chunks more properly teach authentic English conversation.

Worth noting in particular are the two chapters by Donald Carroll. While these chapters lack the extended appendices of many of the others, they in fact are some of the easiest chapters to follow, relate to, and implement in the classroom. For example, in his chapter on taking turns in conversations, Carroll details how a simple jump rope, a ball, index cards and human bodies can be used to help students grasp when to jump into a conversation and start talking (sans awkward gaps that can be misconstrued). What Carroll draws attention to is just how strange and even impolite the short, robotic responses are which we generally teach our English language learners. Things like presequences (the preface to an offer, a request, or an announcement) get lost in ESL textbooks. We teach students to answer questions with short, often one-word answers; however, in a real conversation questions like, *Do you like to hike?* are just starters for more conversation, meant to open up space to ask, invite, announce, etc. Carroll's second chapter deals with preference (including how to say "no" without saying "no"), presequences, and responses to assessments (such as comments on the weather). His activities in this chapter have students doing things like talking around circles and tapping a short beat to slow their rate of response and "speak volumes" to their listeners through silence. What is especially impressive about Carroll's chapters is that he takes complicated practical conversation problems and makes awareness-raising and production work happen through games rather than worksheets or drills.

The book ends on a strong note with Maria Dantas-Whitney's explanation of her Language Research Project. Her approach to pragmatics in the English language

classroom is to have students observe the language in action and process it via discussions, two-way audio journals (between students and teachers), and a culminating report. Dantas-Whitney taps into the anxiety-producing act of conversing in English with a non-threatening yet highly revealing research process. I especially like this tie-in to the sociocultural work of Norton which means that, in Dantas-Whitney's words, her project allows English language students to "engage with their own realities from a position of strength" (p. 195).

As this book was published only recently, I found myself disappointed by the chapter on telephone openings because, by the author's (Jean Wong) own admission, the data used to mine authentic telephone openings was collected before the time of caller ID. Today's students typically take caller ID for granted and are accustomed to having it for every call. It does, no doubt, change the way telephone conversations start, and this fact greatly detracted from my ability to see the chapter as culturally relevant. Furthermore, the following chapter, also by Wong, includes the language of TESOL professionals in the student materials. It is a task even for teachers to remember what labels like *Pre Sol* (preclosing with concern/solicitude) and *Ter* (final closing) refer to when analyzing parts of a conversation; I have to believe there is a simpler way to teach students, rather than having them use labels that have no authentic value in real English interactions.

Because each chapter ended with a list of activities or games for students to meet the learning objectives, I feel certain this will be a book I keep handy on my shelf and pull out to help my English language learners move beyond superficial conversation to a more authentic way of speaking. It is teacher-friendly in that it provides ready-to-use activities which lend themselves to adaptation and expansion to suit the needs of each group of students. This book provides what our classrooms might be lacking; the authors draw attention to aspects of English conversation that seem very self-evident (and thus may not be taught) but in fact require explicit instruction both to raise students' awareness and give them the skills to produce the speech acts on their own. Further, the book highlights the need for authentic data in classroom materials rather than the stilted, unrealistic conversation samples we often find in textbooks. It provides relatively easy methods of instruction and assessment. It will spur discussion and spark creativity. For practicing teachers, the mix of ready-made activities and solid theoretical underpinnings make this book a valuable resource.

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