

CHAPTER TWO

PRAGMATICS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL? A SURVEY OF ITALIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEIVED INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING GOALS

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Abstract

Research into L2 pragmatics has investigated various aspects of language use conducive to the mastery of interactional skills, but without fully exploring L2 learners' motivations, goals and awareness of their educational experience. This chapter considers students' awareness of received instruction in pragmatics and conscious learning goals in English for General Purposes (EGP) university education. An online survey was conducted with 109 undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Padua University. It examined the participants' perceived experience of and interest in nine commonly taught initiating speech acts and ten responding ones, plus nine commonly used teaching methods/materials. A majority of the respondents stated they had received instruction about most of the above-mentioned pragmatic topics, but more frequently about initiating speech acts than responding ones. They also stated that they wished they could receive more instruction about such face-threatening speech acts as complaints and apologies, while expressing less interest in face-sustaining ones like greetings and responses to offers. The students also reported that the most extensively used teaching method, in their views, was feedback on correctness, and that what they desired the

¹ Both authors designed and carried out the study, and together wrote Section 6. Additionally, the first author wrote Sections 1, 2, 3 and 4.2, while the second author wrote Sections 4.1, 4.3, 4.4 and 5.

most in teaching was a focus on feedback on the effects of their discourse. Follow-up interviews with five students stressed an interest in receiving feedback on their language performance, especially its appropriateness. Our findings suggest that students who are not exposed to pragmatics-focused instruction may be aware of the relevance of pragmatics to their learning experience and goals; this supports the view that pragmatics should play a prominent role in the design of EGP syllabi.

1. Introduction

Research in L2 pragmatics aims to account for how, and how well, communication participants express and interpret meanings and attitudes. It thus explores aspects of language learning and language use that are crucial to the mastery of interactional skills, such as speech acts and politeness, from various perspectives. These include: differences between L2 and L1 discourse (e.g. Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2008; Sampedro Mella, 2018); the influence of the L1 linguistic-cultural background on L2 discourse (e.g. Liu and Ren, 2016; Moskala-Gallaher, 2011); the development of L2 pragmatic proficiency (e.g. Farahian et al., 2012; Kaburise, 2014; Xiao et al., 2019); the assessment of pragmatic aspects of communication (e.g. Cohen, 2020; Roever, 2016); perception of L2 speakers' discourse (e.g. Alcón, 2015; Cheng, 2017); the relevance of pragmatics to the teaching/learning of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) (e.g. Kwan and Dunworth, 2016); and the relevance of neighbouring disciplines to instructional pragmatics (e.g. Taguchi and Kim, 2018). However, to our knowledge, less attention has been devoted to the starting conditions of L2 pragmatics instruction, namely L2 teachers' knowledge and resources (e.g. Cohen, 2018; Šegedin Borovina and Semrem, this volume) and L2 learners' motivations, goals and awareness of their educational experience (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Youn, 2018; Yuan et al., 2015).

L2 teachers' background in pragmatics instruction – i.e. what they come equipped with – includes at least three components:

1) teachers' competence, that is, their L1 and L2 pragmatic skills, as well as their L1 and L2 pragmatic, metapragmatic and cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge (Cohen, 2018, 11);

2) teachers' academic expertise, that is, what they have been taught about L2 pragmatics, and how they have been trained in the teaching of L2 pragmatics (Cohen, 2018, 105-106);

and 3) the practical options and constraints of their profession, which may be logistical (e.g. their access to “ready-made” teaching resources),

contextual (e.g. the focus of their L2 syllabus), or social (e.g. their accountability to such stakeholders as parents and school principals) (Cohen, 2018, 107-108).

Similar conditions apply to L2 learners, as their background in pragmatics instruction is equally multifaceted. This encompasses the following:

1) their interactional competence as social beings (i.e. their L1 pragmatic skills and knowledge as well as their exposure to and/or experience with L2 pragmatics in real life);

2) their pragmatics-oriented academic expertise (i.e. knowledge about L2 pragmatics possibly acquired in former educational contexts), if any (Cohen, 2018, 5);

and 3) their competence, options and challenges as learners (e.g. their breadth and depth of knowledge about the target language/culture, (un)conscious learning goals, interaction with their second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) environment, L1 interference, motivation; Cohen, 2018, chapter 2).

There may be two reasons for the limited research carried out on L2 learners' background in pragmatics instruction. One is specifically relevant to pragmatics, while the other applies to language education more broadly. That is, on the one hand, L2 pragmatic competence may be tacitly, but erroneously, assumed to be transferred non-problematically from the L1 language-culture, or to be picked up naturally through exposure and practice (Cohen, 2018, 5), or conversely, it may be considered too difficult to deal with. As a result, pragmatics rarely features high on the teaching agenda (Cohen, 2018, 106), and learners' background in this fails to become salient. On the other hand, the typical unwritten terms of a teaching-learning contract cast teachers in the role of leaders and learners in that of followers. Teachers, as experts, are assumed to know what students have to learn and how. They thus make decisions about teaching goals (e.g. addressing knowledge gaps, building/refining knowledge and skills) and about syllabus design (i.e. course content, sequencing, pace). Learners, as trainees, rely on their teachers for their educational development, and trust that the goals set for them, and the content and structure of the courses they attend, effectively match the skills and competences they need to build. However, if learners are not consulted on the motivations and goals of their learning, it is impossible to determine how salient socio-cultural, interactional and transactional aspects of communication may be to them, which is likely to reinforce a neglect of pragmatics in course syllabi.

Instead, for language instruction to succeed, it is useful to conduct analysis into the students' linguistic background and future needs, that is, to explore where L2 learners are coming from (i.e. what educational experience they have accumulated, what proficiency level they have reached), where they want or have to go (i.e. their personal, social and professional goals, opportunities, duties, constraints), and their attitude towards the role that the target language may play in their lives (i.e. how they see their use of language in context; cf. Yuan et al., 2015)². Indeed, learners' envisaged use of the target language in context is strongly driven by social expectations (e.g. reading literature/newspapers, travelling, working with colleagues in other countries, moving up the career ladder)³. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to gauge students' motivations for learning the Target Language (TL), namely to ascertain what students want to learn (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996, 32) and why, so as to be in a position to help them reach their goals.

The present study intends to make a small contribution to the under-researched line of investigation into L2 learners' motivation to receive pragmatics instruction in the TL. In Section 2 we set the context for our research by providing background information on research on language learning/teaching Needs Analysis (NA). In Section 3 we specify the focus of our research. In Section 4 we outline the mixed-methods approach to our investigation. We present our findings in Section 5, before drawing and discussing implications from them in Section 6.

2. Background: NA

In general terms, needs assessment is a process for identifying and addressing gaps between a present condition and a desired future condition. The needs are the discrepancies between the two conditions, typically goals to achieve or problems to overcome. Therefore, this assessment is a form of planning meant to improve or rectify a situation through the clarification of "wants" – in the etymological sense of 'lacks' – and the choice and implementation of some intervention (Kaufman, Rojas and Mayer, 1993).

² As one reviewer observes, similar issues emerge regarding learners' attitude towards English as a Lingua Franca, showing how a learner's goal may be to achieve successful intercultural communication rather than native-like performance.

³ This applies to (adult) learners who autonomously choose to study a given language, not to (young) learners who receive compulsory education, for whom a given SL/FL is part of a non-negotiable curriculum.

In education, the above process is generally referred to through the term *NA*⁴. *NA* is usually carried out by the teacher, but takes into consideration the perspectives of three stakeholders: the person or institution the learner will be accountable to in the future, the teacher him-/herself and the learner (e.g. Youn, 2018). That is, *NA* serves to: determine the necessities or requirements that learners will need to satisfy when their educational experience is over (e.g. on the job); establish their knowledge and skills, and their potential lacks in experience or proficiency (i.e. their starting background); and ascertain their wants (i.e. desires, preferences or expectations) (Anthony, 2018, 46-47, 65-67; see Edwards, 2000 for an example). Therefore, there can be said to be three complementary types of needs explored in *NA*:

1) target needs (i.e. external needs), usually intended as deficiencies to address (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, 53-63, quoted in Savage and Storer, 1992, 194);

2) learning needs, often interpreted as relevant to instructional logistics (e.g. course aims, instructional resources), that is, “what is considered good for” the learners (Holec, 1980, 27);

and 3) learners’ intrinsic needs, that is, their motivation, expectations and goals and wants⁵.

There appears to be a strong case for *NA*. First, it enables the teacher to identify needs that may not be salient to a learner’s consciousness or which the learner may be unable to explicitly acknowledge. Second, it motivates the learner to share responsibility for course content, which can lead to “a shift to self-directed learning and autonomy” (Holec, 1980, 32), and become an incentive to learn what will be used later on, for instance on the job (cf. Edwards, 2000, 292; Savage and Storer, 1992, 192). Third, *NA* aims at pedagogical effectiveness, that is, the design of syllabi accurately targeting learners’ knowledge gaps and stated goals, the preparation of teaching materials, assignments and tests in line with

⁴ Discussing the construct of *NA* in language education is beyond the scope of this paper (for a critical examination, see Long, 2005; for practical guidelines, see Brown, 2016).

⁵ In Brown’s (2016, 13-16) terms, target needs combine the discrepancy and the diagnostic views of needs: gaps to fill (e.g. in knowledge, skills) and requirements to fill to prevent future harm; learning needs form the analytic view of needs: whatever logically comes next in the language learning process; and learners’ intrinsic needs represent the democratic view of needs.

learners' needs (Gaballo, 2014, 4388)⁶, and, more generally, the implementation of sensible (i.e. relevant and feasible) teaching strategies.

The scope of NA tends to be restricted to defining “the content of purpose-specific language programs” (Widdowson, 1983, 85-86, quoted in Savage and Storer, 1992, 195), because NA focuses on the needs of a specific group of learners, rather than those who study a language for no obvious reason or purpose (Brown, 2016, 4-5). Indeed, needs are typically intended as the specific tasks that learners will have to perform in their future profession or other clearly defined “working” context (i.e. external needs), once their training is over. These needs are addressed in LSP courses, in which (adult) learners are often trainee professionals (e.g. Anthony, 2018), including English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (e.g. Youn, 2018), a specific type of LSP. Their future, legitimate real-life communicative goals may be made relevant to the course and catered to through the choice of the materials and situations useful for “developing their ability to use the language” (Savage and Storer, 1992, 187). On the other hand, in Language for General Purposes (LGP) contexts, learning objectives are more varied, wider in scope and defined more loosely too (i.e. decontextualised features of the target language; e.g. pronunciation of affixes).

Yet, in all language learning contexts, learners' envisaged use of the TL is often motivated by social expectations (e.g. reading literature/newspapers, travelling, working with colleagues in other countries, moving up the career ladder; see footnote 3). Also, although learners may not know what they *need* to learn (i.e. learning objectives; e.g. rules of orthography), they may still have expectations about what they *desire* to learn (i.e. learning wants; e.g. reading) and be able to express the reasons why (i.e. learning motivations; e.g. appreciating literature in the original) (Brown, 2016, 13-15). It is only if teachers take cognizance of LGP learners' wants that they will be in a position to translate them into relevant needs, matching their teaching efforts to the learning goals. This suggests that NA is relevant to LGP contexts too.

Analysis of LGP needs may be carried out in relation to the components of language (e.g. phonology) and/or the dimensions of

⁶ This involves identifying learners' achievement expectations (i.e. course objectives), breaking them down into functional units (i.e. choosing topics and functions, e.g. speech acts; Holec, 1980, 27-28); selecting realisations of the functional units (e.g. lexico-grammatical, prosodic; see Edwards, 2000, 293), also considering their context (e.g. setting and roles; Keleve, 1995, 125) – an approach adopted by the Council of Europe in defining the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

language use (e.g. pronunciation). We think that a crucial area to investigate in LGP NA is pragmatic competence, the ability to communicate (i.e. convey and interpret meanings) by using linguistic resources in an efficient, appropriate, purposeful way so as to achieve goals in context (Sickinger and Schneider, 2014, 115). It is concrete, meaningful goals that motivate the use of language in real life, in which (unconscious) knowledge of formal elements of language combines with knowledge of relevant socio-cultural norms and values, and interpersonal skills (cf. Brindley, 2009, quoted in Nunan, 2014, 122). Because they impact interpersonal relationships and transactional success/failure, concrete interactional goals are communicative needs that students are likely to be aware of. Indeed, they could be considered the LGP equivalents of LSP tasks. However, since “pragmatic aspects of language use and competence are less rigidly governed by common norms, are generally more context-sensitive, and can be less validly treated as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, based on native speaker intuition” (Sickinger and Schneider, 2014, 118), such communicative needs are also harder to pin down.

Some research has been carried out on learners’ perception of L2 pragmatics instruction. It has focused on learners’ reactive attitude towards pragmatics instruction offered in focused teaching modules (e.g. Chen, 2009 on complaints; Kim, 2016 on compliments, apologies, requests and refusals; Liu, 2007 on requests). Studies have thus reported that learners have a positive attitude towards pragmatics instruction (e.g. Chen, 2009), whether delivered by a teacher or through a computer programme (e.g. Liu, 2007). The findings indicate that pragmatics instruction is seen as practical and essential (e.g. Liu, 2007): it facilitates communication skills, it enhances awareness of intercultural differences, and it instils confidence in TL interactions (Liu, 2007), even if it may prove challenging to lower-proficiency students (e.g. in its pragmalinguistic aspects; e.g. Liu, 2007). Overall, the results suggest that, if learners are made aware of this domain of proficiency, they may become more attuned to it, and eager to reveal what it is they want to be able to accomplish with the TL in the real-world interactional situations they experience (McLean, 2005, 1-2).

Such studies, however, focus on the end-point of pragmatics-focused instructional intervention, that is, the impact such instruction has on learners, or how learners assess it. This is instruction in which learners have been made aware of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic complexities and subtleties, richness and variety of language in use, and also of the reasons and outcome of more or less effective and appropriate

interactional behaviour⁷. By contrast, the outlook on pragmatics of L2 learners who have not been exposed to focused instruction is still largely unexplored.

We know of two papers that specifically address the issue of learners' perception of pragmatics, namely Yuan et al. (2015) and Youn (2018). The former reports a mixed-method investigation carried out among 237 Chinese EFL university students, who expressed their insights regarding pragmatics during their study of the English language. The findings showed that the participants manifested a strong desire to acquire pragmatic knowledge (i.e. knowledge of how to accurately interpret and express meanings in context) and to be pragmatically competent language users (i.e. to use the target language appropriately in context). In a questionnaire, a majority considered pragmatic knowledge as important as linguistic knowledge, stated that their goal was to learn how to communicate with people, and expressed a preference for communicative language teaching and for goal-oriented tasks involving the use of original English materials and/or requiring to work in groups. The interview data conducted on a subgroup of the participants confirmed the data collected through the questionnaire. The results showed that LGP needs analysis can successfully reveal learning wants, and suggested that these can be taken into consideration in LGP syllabus design.

Youn (2018) reports a mixed-method investigation into the pragmatics-related needs of stakeholders in an EAP course in North America. Semi-structured interviews conducted with a small sample of administrators, instructors and students revealed some shared concerns (e.g. writing emails, expressing disagreements, and using formulae appropriately) as well as group-specific ones (e.g. for administrators: awareness of cultural and institutional knowledge; for instructors: familiarity with curriculum's goals and pedagogical activities; for students: being familiar with appropriate communication methods with professors). Content coding of the interview findings led to the design of a multiple-choice questionnaire administered to 180 students, which explored their communication needs and their pragmatic awareness. Most of the questionnaire items were perceived as necessary by the students, especially those with lower proficiency, and those classified as the most needed had to do with interacting with a superior (e.g. refusing a professor's request politely, writing a job application cover letter).

⁷ This observation may apply to other realms of language teaching and learning, such as phonology or lexis: it is after studying a subject that one can appreciate how much one could, or had to, learn about it.

The above findings indicate that pragmatic needs can be detected in both LGP and EAP educational contexts, and that even those identified in the latter may be relevant to general, rather than specific, communicative situations. It is thus worthwhile to explore LGP L2 learners' sensitivity to, and motivation to take advantage of, explicit instruction in pragmatics (Cohen, 2018, 53). There are two main reasons for this. One is that, while there is a vast literature on NA in primary and secondary education, this is not the case in tertiary education (Gaballos, 2014, 4384). In particular, "there is little research into English language students' perceptions of pragmatics in College English learning" (Yuan et al., 2015, 2; Youn, 2018, 87) and, as far as we know, none on native speakers of Italian. Another reason is that pragmatic competence in an L2 is crucial to the prevention of miscommunication and cultural misunderstandings (Sickingler and Schneider, 2014, 115), and should thus be explored in the preparatory phase of syllabus design so as to determine what relevant input and feedback to provide learners with, which they hardly have the chance to receive elsewhere⁸. Therefore, L2 speakers are more likely than in the past to have the need not only to make themselves understood by their international interlocutors, but also to come across as agreeable to native speakers of the TL. Consequently, if learners' pragmatics learning wants are accurately detected, they can inform the choice of contents and teaching methods that learners themselves will perceive as relevant to their own social life.

3. Research focus and research questions

Having argued in Section 2 for the relevance of NA to LGP contexts, and in particular when applied to pragmatics, we believe that issues to examine in pragmatics NA include at least four dimensions: the areas of language use L2 learners consider relevant to them; learners' responsiveness to (i.e. ability to recognise) the pragmatic dimensions of communication in language instruction; their ability to notice the (possibly negative) influence of their L1 pragmatics on their use of the TL (i.e. pragmatic transfer); and their perception of the importance of receiving instruction in the use of the TL.

⁸ Considering divergence from one's own pragmatic norms as a personal deficit in the learner generally precludes corrections of unexpected communicative behaviour, since corrections of this kind would be highly face-threatening and will, therefore, be avoided by the majority of interactants" (Sickingler and Schneider, 2014, 117).

In this contribution, we set out to outline a profile of students' attitude towards and sensitivity to the teaching and learning of pragmatic aspects of English. To this end, we considered the following dimensions:

1) how aware students are of the instruction they may have received on given pragmatic topics and their awareness of the methods their teachers may have used to teach them;

2) how students perceive the extent to which they may have been instructed about these topics during their career as language learners;

and 3) how strongly they desire to receive instruction about such topics, where by instruction we mean any type of explicit/implicit teaching about English language use which the students may experience in their academic career in language classes.

Therefore, our focus was on linguistic, and more specifically pragmatic, features that learners are likely to have to use in the TL, as well as their preferences with regard to teaching practices (cf. Brown, 2016, 21-23).

Our research questions (RQs) were the following:

RQ1) What coverage of specific topics in English pragmatics do EFL learners state they have received in the university language classroom?

RQ2) What coverage of specific topics in English pragmatics do they state they wish to receive in the university language classroom?

RQ3) Does their perceived and desired coverage of topics in English pragmatics reflect similar or different degrees of interest and sensitivity to the handling of face wants?

RQ4) What do they state their preferred teaching strategies are in English pragmatics?

To provide answers to RQ1 and RQ2, we focussed on speech acts. There are five reasons for this choice. First, speech acts are a key manifestation of pragmatic skills, that is, the ability to convey and interpret intended meanings in context. Second, they are part of people's everyday communicative experience, and thus meaningful to any speaker. Third, they are likely to be exemplified in EFL textbooks in conversational scripts and other texts relevant to interpersonal/social and service/business encounters; therefore, they are probably familiar to EFL learners. Fourth, we drew on Cohen's (2018) study on the *teaching* of pragmatics by native and non-native language teachers, which was also in large part focused on speech acts⁹. Fifth, although pragmatic ability encompasses more than the use and recognition of speech acts (e.g. deixis, politeness, inferences), we

⁹ Youn (2018) also drew on relevant L2 pragmatics literature to develop interview questions and questionnaire items, similarly exploring the need to master common speech acts.

did not include those topics in our questionnaire because we did not want our data collection procedure to be too demanding or time-consuming a task for our study participants.

To explore learners' awareness of instruction received, as well as their desire for instruction, on patterns and practices in English language in use, we considered the addresser's and addressee's perspectives in communication. Therefore, we chose to consider nine initiating speech acts among those most frequently dealt with in the literature on SL/FL pragmatic skills (i.e. greetings, invitations, requests, offers, thanking, apologies, compliments, complaints and giving advice), the nine corresponding responding speech acts (i.e. replies to greetings, invitations, requests, offers, thanking, apologies, compliments, complaints and giving advice), as well as the responding speech acts of rejecting-refusing, considered together. The reason for this choice is that pragmatic skills are required of interactants who take turns playing the roles of addresser and addressee. Long ago, Geis (1995) observed how speech act discourse can be accurately accounted for from a conversation analytic perspective, showing how participants produce initiating and responding moves – sometimes over several turns – to achieve their interactional goals. More recently, Sickinger and Schneider (2014, 115) similarly remarked how pragmatic competence involves being an engaging pro-active and an engaged reactive participant, that is, how it includes the ability to perform speech acts, to react to them, to combine them into sequences, to open and close a conversation, to take turns, and to introduce, maintain and terminate topics. Also, more and more scholars are devoting their attention to reacting speech acts (e.g. Bella, 2016; Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Golato, 2005; Rauniomaa and Keisanen, 2012). Yet, precisely because of its less prominent visibility in interaction, reactive discursive participation is infrequently the focus of instructional attention, and it is thus not surprising that learners may be remarkably deficient in producing pragmatically appropriate responding moves (House, 1996, 240). We wanted to check whether learners were aware of the equal importance of the proactive and reactive dimensions of communication.

To address RQ3, we considered the relevance of speech acts to interactants' face wants. Speech acts have to do with the handling of interpersonal relationships, that is, they are a manifestation of high-stakes language use, through which interactants earn social credits, incur social debts or balance them out. Given their relevance to the social goal of establishing or maintaining comity, their functions may be convivial (when the illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal; e.g. inviting, congratulating), collaborative (when the illocutionary goal is indifferent to

the social goal; e.g. asserting, announcing), competitive (when the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal; e.g. begging, ordering) or conflictive (when the social goal conflicts with the social goal; e.g. accusing, threatening) (Leech, 1983, 104). We imagined that students might have different views on, or expectations about, the performance of acts aligned with, or at least not obstructing, the social goal of comity compared with those acts competing or conflicting with it. Therefore, we decided to include questionnaire items about face-sustaining and face-threatening speech acts.

However, it is not possible to classify speech acts as univocally face-sustaining or face-threatening, because they may relate differently both to interlocutors' positive and negative face wants, and especially to their complementary interactional roles – and consequent social-interpersonal rights and duties – as sender vs addressee. For example, offers sustain the sender's positive face, since they highlight his/her laudable aim at conviviality and social harmony; they also sustain the addressee's positive face, since they are oriented towards the delivery of benefits that are meant to make him/her feel cared about. However, they also threaten the sender's negative face, since they place constraints on their future actions; finally, they partly constrain and partly sustain the addressee's negative face, because, on the one hand, they are meant to direct the addressee's behaviour, but at the same time leave him/her a choice on his/her future course of action.

In our investigation, we explored face needs mainly as relevant to the addressee's perspective. Therefore, we regarded greetings, offers, thanks, compliments and invitations as speech acts that sustain the addressee's positive face, because motivated by a desire to make the other party feel good. Instead, complaints were classified as speech acts that threaten the addressee's positive face, as they negatively assess the addressee's behaviour. We also regarded requests and rejections/refusals as speech acts that threaten the addressee's negative face because focused on the sender's preferences for future actions. Two other speech acts were more complex to describe in terms of face wants. We interpreted apologies mainly as speech acts which threaten the sender's positive face, as they are a manifestation of self-accusation; however, since they are produced so as to make things up to the addressee, they also serve to indirectly sustain the addressee's positive face. Finally, the speech act of giving advice may be subject to complementary interpretations: it threatens the addressee's negative face, since it is meant to direct their future actions, and it may either sustain or threaten the addressee's positive face, depending on whether the sender's suggested course of action is in line with the

addressee's or their own preferences, and also depending on whether advice is solicited or not. Our general goal was to determine whether students revealed any preference towards and/or deeper awareness of language use fostering or undermining the addressee's social, interactional ease.

To address RQ4, we investigated the students' perceived and desired use of teaching strategies (i.e. methods and resources) that, on the basis of our teaching experience, are possibly employed by teachers in English language classes, namely: coursebooks, texts from everyday life, literary texts and videos/films; setting up role-plays, telling anecdotes, providing feedback on the correctness/appropriateness of learner production, providing feedback on the effects of learners' performance, and providing information about the target culture. Our choice was motivated by the following considerations: coursebooks are lecturers' default teaching resources; texts from everyday life, literary texts and videos/films are those "realia" that language teachers are likely to be familiar with; role-plays are a frequently used teaching method in foreign/second language classrooms (e.g. Ishihara, 2010); anecdotes encapsulate real-life experiences that language teachers may be willing to share to exemplify typical situations; information about the target culture is a domain that second/foreign language teachers are expected to be knowledgeable about; finally, providing feedback about student performance is one of language teachers' duties, and feedback focused on the effects discursive/interactional choices may have on the addressee or the situation at large has recently attracted scholarly attention (e.g. Alcón, 2015).

4. Method and participants

In order to collect our data about students' educational experience in English language use, we combined a quantitative and a qualitative data-collection procedure (cf. Youn, 2018). That is, we administered an online survey – comprising closed-response and open-response items – to a large group of students at the University of Padua and had a follow-up interview with a small sub-set of them. The survey elicited judgemental ratings, through closed-response items, and opinions, through open-response items, about their learning experience. The closed-response items were meant to make it easy for students to provide answers, and to encourage a high response rate. The open-response items were meant to be exploratory, and thus to reveal concepts not restricted to preordained categories (Brown, 2016, 78-79). The survey, the follow-up interview and the participants in this study are described below.

4.1 The survey

To explore students' perceptions of their exposure to pragmatics instruction, their desire to receive pragmatics instruction and their ideas about English language use more generally, we adopted a mixed-method, i.e. quantitative and qualitative, approach. The quantitative approach was implemented with the design and administration of closed-response items (i.e. multiple-choice questions); the qualitative approach involved the use of open-response items (i.e. open-ended questions). These were distributed across the two sections of the online survey, as explained below.

The survey started with an introductory part meant to collect demographic data from the respondents (see Section 4.2). It then continued with two sections for the collection of data relevant to pragmatics: Section A and Section B. Section A explored the students' familiarity with 9 common speech acts (greetings, invitations, requests, offers, thanks, apologies, compliments, complaints, giving advice) and their corresponding responding speech acts, as well as the responding speech acts of rejecting and refusing combined together as one questionnaire item. Students' familiarity with each of these speech acts was ascertained by means of pairs of questions, one asking them to indicate the amount of instruction they had received, or had been receiving, on them, and the other asking them to indicate the amount they would like, or would have liked to receive on the same (see RQ1 and RQ2).

By way of illustration, here are the first two questions in Section A:

A 01/20 Greeting people (e.g. "Hello") and taking leave from them (e.g. "Take care")

a) In your experience, to what extent do/did your teachers explain this topic in class?

Extensive coverage Fair amount of coverage A little coverage

No coverage Not know

b) In your opinion, to what extent should your teachers explain, or should they have explained, this topic in class?

Extensive coverage Fair amount of coverage A little coverage

No coverage Not know

A 02/20 Responding/reacting to other people **greeting** us (e.g. “Hi”) and taking our leave from them (e.g. “Bye”)

a) In your experience, to what extent do/did your teachers explain this topic in class?

Extensive coverage Fair amount of coverage A little coverage

No coverage Not know

b) In your opinion, to what extent should your teachers explain, or should they have explained, this topic in class?

Extensive coverage Fair amount of coverage A little coverage

No coverage Not know

Throughout the survey, we did not use the term *speech act* to refer to the type of discursive behaviour we were interested in. Rather, we always made reference to specific speech acts with labels used in common parlance to define everyday communicative actions (e.g. greeting, apology; cf. Youn, 2018, 89). As the above examples illustrate, to make sure our respondents understood what we had in mind, we added short examples illustrating each speech act. Similarly, we did not explicitly use the term face in our survey items. However, we used the data collected through these questionnaire items to also address RQ3.

The three final questions in Section A asked the students to mention other possible topics in English language use that they could think of, to specify to what extent their teachers had covered (or had been covering) them, and to what extent they would have liked to receive instruction on them.

Section B was composed of nine pairs of questions that asked the respondents to report on the extent to which their teachers used given methods and materials during their lessons, and the extent to which they would have liked those methods and materials to be used. Specifically, the students were to focus on the use of coursebooks, texts from everyday life, literary texts, videos/films, role-plays and anecdotes, as well as on teacher feedback about correctness/appropriateness, teacher feedback about the effects of one’s linguistic production, and information about the target culture (see RQ4).

The following example contains the two questions asked about role-plays:

B 05/10 Doing role-play activities

a) In your experience, to what extent do/did your teachers use this teaching method/material in class?

Extensive use Fair amount of use A little use No use

Not know

b) In your opinion, to what extent should your teachers use, or should they have used, this teaching method/material in class?

Extensive use Fair amount of use A little use No use
Not know

These 18 questions were followed by two questions which asked respondents to mention additional possible teaching methods and materials, and to specify for these the extent to which their teachers had used (or had been using) them, and the extent to which they would have liked their teachers to use them.

The multiple-choice questions were presented in the form of 4-point Likert scales, where the lowest value represented *No coverage* or *No use*, and the highest value stood for *Extensive coverage* or *Extensive use* (cf. Youn, 2018, 89). We decided to use four-point scales to avoid a middle category (Dörnyei, 2003, 36-37), and thus prevent the respondents from providing non-committal responses. We also decided to add the *Not know* option to enable the students to opt out of question, if they so chose. Including the *Not know* option aimed to reveal whether the omission of an answer was a student's conscious decision not to express an opinion and not an oversight that made them skip that question (Dörnyei, 2003, 43).

We administered the survey¹⁰ online through the tool LimeSurvey (<https://www.limesurvey.org/>), from 25 February 2020 to 12 May 2020. Following Dörnyei (2003, 36), after collecting our data, we converted the points on the Likert scales into successive numbers, as follows:

Extensive coverage/use - 3 points
Fair amount of coverage/use - 2 points
A little coverage/use - 1 point
No coverage/use - 0 points
Not know – excluded from the count

We did so with a view to simplifying the computer elaboration of the data (Dörnyei, 2003, 36), and make it possible to subsequently compare the results more easily. We used SPSS Statistics (<https://www.ibm.com/it-it/products/spss-statistics>) to obtain descriptive statistics and graphs. The software excluded the responses from the participants that opted for *Not know* from the computing of the data.

¹⁰ The survey instrument is available from us upon request.

4.2 The follow-up interviews

Through the interviews, we wanted to further probe into the students' views on the teaching and learning of language in use in a way that would allow them to express their thoughts more freely and at length. More specifically, we aimed to explore students' awareness of speech acts; their views on the use of non-ready-made teaching materials in the classroom; their sensitivity to the social consequences of discourse; and their interest in aspects of language use.

Considering the goals and scope of the survey, and to keep the interview to a reasonable duration, we decided to inquire about the following issues:

- 1) whether, before completing the survey, the respondents had ever thought about language learning in terms of specific communicative functions, so as to find out how salient speech acts were to students' consciousness;
- 2) whether they could think of the pros and cons of classroom-based use of materials from everyday life like newspapers, films or videos from the perspective of teachers and/or learners;
- 3) which teaching method/material they considered the most effective and enjoyable from among role plays, anecdotes from real-life experiences and explanations of aspects of the target culture;
- 4) whether they considered it more useful to receive feedback on their language performance with a focus on formal correctness (i.e. correct use of language) or on communicative appropriateness (i.e. context-suitable use of language), and why;
- 5) whether they ever thought about the effects on the addressee of what they express, and how they express it, when communicating in English; this would allow us to explore whether they ever reflected on their discourse as socially consequential – and not merely as a conduit for information – and if so, if they felt the need to be alerted to its interpersonal, contextual value;
- 6) which of the following four domains of competence they would like to learn the most about with regard to English and why: knowledge of the language, knowledge about language use, knowledge of culture and communication skills; that is, we wanted to know whether they were sensitive to and curious about aspects of language use more than the “workings” of the target language;
- 7) whether they had anything else they wanted to express about possible issues in English language use that we had not thought of or which we had left out of the scope of the survey.

We conducted the interviews over the Zoom platform, videorecording our interactions, after obtaining the students' consent. To make things easy on the participants, we emailed the students our interview template¹¹ a day in advance, and then we interacted in Italian during the interviews. The first author formally conducted the interviews, while the second author took notes and occasionally asked clarification questions. The first author then transcribed the video-recordings, and the second author compared the transcripts with his notes.

4.3 The participants

The participants were 109 second-year students of the first-cycle (Bachelor) degree in Languages, Cultures and Cultural Mediation (Italian: *Lingue, Culture e Mediazione Culturale*) at the University of Padua, Italy, in the 2019/2020 academic year. At the time they took the survey, most of them were attending second-year course modules on general listening and writing skills, oral skills and ESP writing and translation. They had previously attended a first-year general English module, an introduction-to-academic-skills module and a second-year module on the English verb phrase. According to the official course syllabi, they had neither been specifically trained in English pragmatics nor explicitly introduced to the topics we surveyed.

We decided to collect data from the above group of students because we thought that, as second-year students, they should have reached at least an intermediate level of English proficiency (i.e. B2) as well as have developed awareness of the importance of contextualised language use. We also thought that having another year before graduation would give them time and opportunities to set further learning goals and pursue them.

The second author sent an email message via the Padua University learning platform (Moodle) to his own students, inviting them to complete the survey. The invitation message presented the data collection instrument and its rationale, and it explained that the responses were only to be used and analysed for research purposes and not considered part of the coursework. The students completed the survey from home at their own pace. The students who chose to participate were given extra course credit, as is allowed at our university.

The respondents comprised 102 students aged 18-22, three 23-27, three aged 28-32 and only one aged 33 or older. A vast majority, namely 101

¹¹ This is available from **the authors** upon request.

students, were females, while only eight were males. This gender imbalance is the norm in our degree course. In the survey, we also asked the students to evaluate their general linguistic competences in the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing by choosing one of the following: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and native-like levels. Table 1 shows that the majority of the students evaluated their receptive skills as higher than their productive skills, and that they perceived themselves as more advanced in writing than in speaking.

TABLE 1. Self-assessment of linguistic competence in the four skills

SKILLS	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Native-like
reading	0.0%	29.4%	68.8%	1.8%
listening	0.0%	51.4%	47.7%	0.9%
speaking	0.9%	61.5%	36.7%	0.9%
writing	0.0%	57.8%	42.2%	0.0%

We selected students for the follow-up interview after looking at the survey data. We sent an email invitation to all those who had completed all the questionnaire items, including the optional open-ended *Any other comments*. Only five of them replied, namely three women and two men, and we set up individual appointments with each of them at a time convenient to them and to us.

5. Data analysis

In this Section, we present the findings of our survey and of the follow-up interviews.

5.1 RQ1

Columns 2 and 3 in Table 2 provide the mean scores and the standard deviations for the ratings of each initiating and responding speech act in descending order of mean scores. Columns 4 and 5 show the percentages of respondents who ticked *No coverage* and *Not know*, respectively. Table 2 also reports the mean scores and the standard deviations of the sums of the nine initiating speech acts (*TOT initiating acts*) and of the nine responding ones (*TOT responding acts*) respectively, except for the responding speech acts of rejecting/refusing, which were not associated

with any specific initiating speech acts. It also displays the grand total of the reported received instruction (*Grand total – received*).

Table 2 outlines the breadth and depth of the coverage of specific areas of language use in the students' experience. The detailed mean scores in Column 2 show that giving advice, making requests, offers and invitations were regarded as the most widely taught pragmatic aspects. The corresponding responding speech acts were reported as having been the object of less extensive instruction; yet, they still rank high on the list. By contrast, responses to apologies and compliments were declared not to have been taught extensively. Furthermore, a comparison of the average score for the total of initiating speech acts ($M = 13.36$, $SD = 5.77$) to that of the sum of the responding ones ($M = 12.77$, $SD = 6.10$) reveals that the former were perceived as more frequently taught than the responding ones. Column 4 sheds light on how often and in what aspects of pragmatics students stated they had not received any instruction. This appeared to be relevant to a limited set of speech acts: responses to complaints (26.6% of the students), responses to apologies (23.90%), responses to greetings (22.00%), greetings (19.30%), and making complaints (18.30%).

Column 5 shows that only a few students opted out, choosing *Not know* as an answer. More specifically, 2.8% of them decided not to evaluate the instruction they had received or were receiving about making complaints and compliments, while 1.8% of them refrained from quantifying the instruction received on responses to compliments. Finally, the items about invitations, apologies, responses to invitations, rejecting/refusing, responses to complaints, and responses to thanks were not rated by one student each (0.9%). We speculate that some of the students who chose to opt out may have found it difficult to understand the specific communicative functions (e.g. apologies) that we listed or may have been unfamiliar with these terms. Anecdotal evidence in support of this comes from a comment made by one of the interviewees. After reporting that she had often been involved in role-plays in her first year, we asked her whether on those occasions she had had a chance to perform specific communicative functions like those listed in the questionnaire. She flatly denied that. When we pointed out that the role-play activity did in fact involve a specific communicative function, namely a request, her comment was that the activity was more focused on the situation than on specific communicative functions. Maybe the student's teacher never used the term *request* in association with that activity, and as a result *request* did not "register" in the student's mind as relevant to the activity. Anyway, the fact that most students, instead, answered these questions suggests that

in most likelihood they were aware of these pragmatic aspects of language use.

TABLE 2. Perception of received pragmatic instruction

INITIATING ACTS	M	SD	% No coverage	% Not know
advice	1.92 (max 3)	0.80	4.60	0.00
requests	1.84 (max 3)	0.83	3.70	0.00
offers	1.68 (max 3)	0.82	6.40	0.00
invitations	1.56 (max 3)	0.84	9.20	0.90
greetings	1.38 (max 3)	0.91	19.30	0.00
thanking	1.29 (max 3)	0.84	13.80	0.00
complaints	1.25 (max 3)	0.84	18.30	2.80
apologies	1.22 (max 3)	0.85	17.40	0.90
compliments	1.21 (max 3)	0.78	17.40	2.80
TOT initiating acts	13.36 (max 27)	5.77		
RESPONDING ACTS				
resp. to offers	1.65 (max 3)	0.89	8.30	0.00
resp. to advice	1.61 (max 3)	0.78	5.50	0.00
resp. to requests	1.58 (max 3)	0.81	7.30	0.00
resp. to invitations	1.45 (max 3)	0.84	10.10	0.90
resp. to greetings	1.33 (max 3)	0.93	22.00	0.00
resp. to complaints	1.25 (max 3)	0.81	17.40	0.90
resp. to thanking	1.25 (max 3)	0.86	16.50	0.90
resp. to apologies	1.16 (max 3)	0.88	23.90	0.00
resp. to compliments	0.98 (max 3)	0.77	26.60	1.80
TOT responding acts	12.27 (max 27)	6.10		
rejecting/refusing	1.25 (max 3)	0.80	16.50	0.90
Grand total – received	26.86 (max 57)	12.27		

M: Mean Score; SD: Standard Deviation; % No coverage: percentage of students who responded “no coverage” (their responses were assigned the value “0”); % Not know: percentage of students who responded “Not know” (and whose answers were excluded from the count)

In the *Any other comments* section of the survey, students expressed mixed views about the instruction received in this area of pragmatic instruction. For example, one student affirmed that she was overall satisfied with the teaching of everyday and academic English she had that far received at university, and wrote:

I found the first and second year English courses interesting and useful for both my everyday life and the academic use of the language.

Another one stated that studying pragmatic aspects of communication would be important, but that unfortunately they had not been dealt with during the courses she attended:

I answered many questions which were about greeting, thanking etc.; during these two years we have never talked about these things and in my opinion this is a shame because, even if they might be taken for granted, they are really important in a conversation.

Similarly, during a follow-up interview another student criticized the absence of explicit treatment of these aspects:

Even during the practical language proficiency classes with our native-speaker lecturers, stimuli concerning the use of language in context and pragmatics are always provided implicitly (our translation and slight adaptation).

To sum up, both the quantitative data and some of the qualitative data point to the fact that our participants were aware of having been taught about the selection of speech acts presented in the survey. Also, according to the ratings they gave, initiating acts were perceived to have been taught more extensively than responding ones and among the former, giving advice, making requests, offers and invitations were those their classes focused on more.

5.2 RQ2

Table 3 displays quantitative data addressing RQ3 about the specific areas of pragmatics which the students expressed more interest in. The speech acts are listed in descending order of mean score, and their standard deviations and the number of respondents are indicated next to the mean values. This time, all the 109 students expressed their opinion on all the pragmatic topics listed, as no one opted for *Not know* (see Column 5). According to the figures in Columns 2 and 3, the students are more

interested in receiving instruction on initiating speech acts ($M = 17.44$, $SD = 4.47$) rather than on responding ones ($M = 15.99$, $SD = 4.99$). Similarly to the evaluation they gave to received instruction, the speech acts they

TABLE 3. Desired pragmatic instruction

INITIATING ACTS	M	SD	% No coverage	% Not know
advice	2.28 (max 3)	0.67	0.00	0.00
requests	2.27 (max 3)	0.59	0.90	0.00
offers	2.09 (max 3)	0.67	0.90	0.00
complaints	1.95 (max 3)	0.70	1.80	0.00
invitations	1.90 (max 3)	0.69	1.80	0.00
apologies	1.89 (max 3)	0.76	2.80	0.00
thanking	1.72 (max 3)	0.76	3.70	0.00
compliments	1.70 (max 3)	0.71	5.50	0.00
greetings	1.63 (max 3)	0.79	6.40	0.00
TOT initiating acts	17.44 (max 27)	4.47		
RESPONDING ACTS				
resp. to advice	2.00 (max 3)	0.68	0.90	0.00
resp. to requests	1.99 (max 3)	0.65	0.90	0.00
resp. to complaints	1.90 (max 3)	0.73	1.80	0.00
resp. to invitations	1.87 (max 3)	0.72	2.80	0.00
resp. to offers	1.80 (max 3)	0.83	5.50	0.00
resp. to apologies	1.70 (max 3)	0.82	6.40	0.00
resp. to compliments	1.64 (max 3)	0.69	6.40	0.00
resp. to greetings	1.56 (max 3)	0.81	7.30	0.00
resp. to thanking	1.53 (max 3)	0.81	7.30	0.00
TOT responding acts	15.99 (max 27)	4.99		0.00
rejecting/refusing	1.92 (max 3)	0.68	1.80	0.00
Grand total – desired	35.34 (max 57)	9.74		

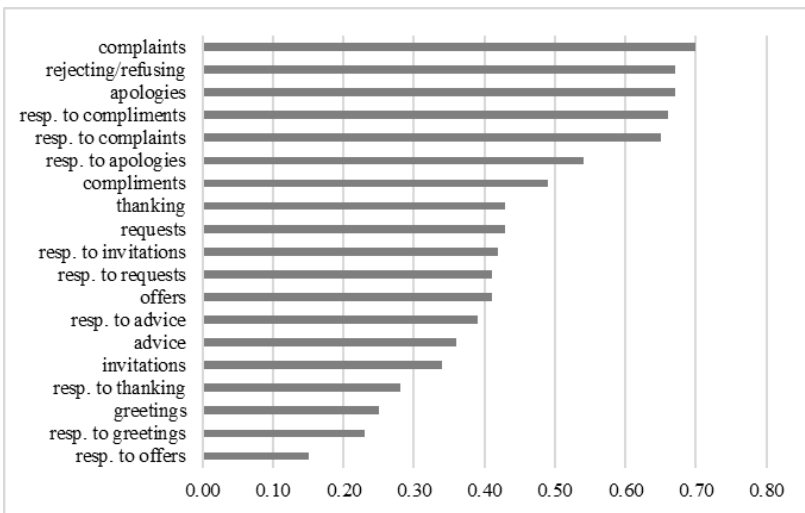
M: Mean Score; SD: Standard Deviation; % No coverage: percentage of students who responded “no coverage” (their responses were assigned the value “0”); % Not know: percentage of students who responded “Not know” (and whose answers were excluded from the count)

stated they would like to be taught more about are giving advice, and making requests and offers, which are followed by responses to advice, responses to requests and responses to complaints. The acts which rank lower on the list are making compliments, greetings and responses to greetings and thanking.

Overall, the students' total desired pragmatic instruction ($M = 35.30$, $SD = 9.74$) largely outperforms their reported received instruction ($M = 26.86$; $S = 12.27$), which indicates their desire to become more knowledgeable about and/or proficient in pragmatic issues.

A rough indication of the disparity between the desired and the received instruction can be obtained by subtracting the mean score for the desired instruction on a given speech act (i.e. those in Table 3) from the respective mean score for the instruction received on the same speech act (i.e. those in Table 2). The longer the bar, the larger the gap between the desired instruction on a given speech act and the perceived received instruction on it. As can be seen from Figure 1, the five largest differences concern complaints, rejecting/refusing, apologies, responses to compliments and responses to complaints. By contrast, the five smallest differences regard responses to offers, responses to greetings, greetings, responses to thanking and invitations.

FIGURE 1. Differences between desired and received pragmatic instruction



Some reflections from the *Any other comments* section of the Survey shed light on these results and provide some background against which we can interpret them better. For example, one student wrote that greetings are basic language, which university students should already master and do not need much more instruction about. Her comment (reproduced below) is in line with the quantitative results previously described, as she stressed that, in her view, the speech act of greeting does not need much instruction, or rather, not much more than the amount she had already received:

I think that until now I have been taught English properly. In my opinion basic things like greetings and expressing my thanks should be only rapidly revised, as everyone that studies English at university level should already know basic English speech.

The situation is different with regard to other speech acts. During a follow-up interview with the two authors, another student recalled her inability to refuse an invitation when she was spending some time with an Irish family and was offered some food she did not wish to have. The student remarked her desire to know more about how to appropriately decline an invitation, especially when the interlocutor is a native speaker. On the one hand, this comment parallels the desire expressed by many students to receive instruction on rejecting/refusing. On the other hand, it runs counter to their low interest in being taught about how to respond to offers. This is only a seeming mismatch, though, which in fact stresses, once again, that the students think they need to hone their skills to reject offers.

More generally, the students expressed their desire to become better at communicating during everyday interactive situations and at producing pragmatically appropriate speech and writing, as can be seen from this extract from an open comment:

It would be useful if the study of the English language was somehow more concrete and interactive. An example of concrete English could be writing texts that students could deal with in everyday situation, such as formal emails or reservations.

Some of them observed that the English language university courses they had attended revolved around academic and literary English rather than everyday English. In their opinion, colloquial and idiomatic English should also be covered more extensively, so as to enable them to communicate with English native speakers. The following comments illustrate this:

I'd personally like to talk more of everyday topics and learn how a native speaker would respond/idiomatic expressions to add the everyday language to the literary and formal language we actually learn, which increases our writing and reading level leaving behind our speaking and listening skills.

I think that we should be thought how to use English correctly also in a colloquial context, not only in the academic field or in a formal context.

Other students volunteered viable solutions to the “logistical-situational” restrictions of the EFL classroom. For example, one student expressed his/her awareness of the “status” of one’s interlocutor in a conversation, i.e. either native speakers or speakers of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and of the differences that this might involve. S/he also expressed the wish to be involved in more interactions with speakers of both varieties:

I'd like to have lessons with international students because in a class of Italian students it may be difficult to speak and think in English. If there aren't so many Erasmus students I'll enjoy to have a lessons through Skype or Facetime with another University not only in England.

5.3 RQ3

Table 4 shows the extent to which students stated they had received and wished to receive instruction on face-sustaining and face-threatening speech acts. The data in that table are based on the combined answers to the questionnaire items discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2. To make a balanced comparison between the two categories of speech acts, we considered the same number of speech acts for each, namely 4. Thus, we included in one set the initiating face-sustaining acts of greetings, offers, compliments and invitations, and we left out thanks, which, unlike the others, are typically used to conclude rather than open a conversational exchange. Instead, we included in the other set the initiating face-threatening acts of complaints, requests and apologies as well as rejections/refusals. We left out giving advice, which can be considered both face-sustaining and face-threatening (see Section 3).

The responses of four students (3.70%) were excluded by SPSS from the count of those relevant to the instruction received on both face-sustaining and face-threatening acts, due to their opting out of the evaluation of specific speech acts (see Table 2 above). It may be that they had difficulties in understanding the questions and/or remembering about previous instruction on some speech acts, i.e. compliments, invitations, apologies, complaints and rejecting/refusing. The elaboration of the data

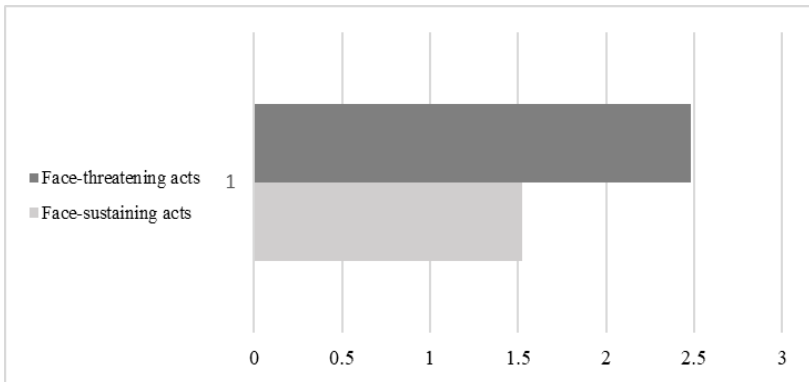
suggests, on the one hand, that the students had received more instruction on the speech acts we classified as face-sustaining than on those we classified face-threatening ones ($M = 5.80, SD = 2.67$ vs. $M = 5.54, SD = 2.64$), and, on the other hand, that they would like to receive more instruction about the latter rather than about the former ones ($M = 8.02, SD = 2.07$ vs. $M = 7.32, SD = 2.21$). This preference for face-threatening acts is represented in Figure 2, which shows the gaps between desired and received instruction on face-threatening vs. face-sustaining acts:

TABLE 4. Received and desired instruction on face

RECEIVED	M	SD	% Excluded
Face-sustaining acts	5.80 (max 12)	2.67	3.70
Face-threatening acts	5.54 (max 12)	2.64	3.70
DESIRED			
Face-sustaining acts	7.32 (max 12)	2.21	0.00
Face-threatening acts	8.02 (max 12)	2.07	0.00

M: Mean Score; SD: Standard Deviation; % No coverage: percentage of students who responded “no coverage” (their responses were assigned “0”); % *Excluded*: percentage of students who were excluded from the count; Face-sustaining acts: greetings, offers, compliments, and invitations; Face-threatening acts: complaints, requests, apologies, and rejections/refusals

FIGURE 2. Gaps between desired and received instruction on face



This result further suggests that most of the students expressed the need for more instruction/training on the correct performance of face-

threatening speech acts. They appear to be aware of the difficulty of appropriately performing them.

5.4 RQ4

Information about the students' preferred teaching strategies (methods and materials) in pragmatics was gathered through 20 questions found in section B. The percentages displayed in Column 5 of Table 5 show that only a few students opted out of the evaluation of some of the methods/materials in the list. As regards the perceived use of methods/materials, a minority of students did not evaluate telling anecdotes from real-life experiences (2.80%), role plays (1.80%), information on the target culture (0.90%), and the effects of what we say/write (0.90%). As for the desired use of methods, a few students opted out of the rating of the use of literary texts (2.80%), telling anecdotes (1.80%) and of feedback on the effects of learner language (0.90%). The reasons for their opting out may be varied, and this hints at their difficulty in identifying and gauging these methods and materials. As can be seen from Column 4, 14.70% of the students stated that their teachers had not used role plays, another 14.70% that they had not received feedback on the effects of their linguistic production, and 12.80% that they had not experienced anecdote telling. What especially struck us of these findings is that a high percentage of students stated that they had not taken part in any role play, while we expected that almost all of them would have declared they had. The reason is that in their second year, their oral skills practice includes engaging in conversation.

Columns 2 and 3 show that the method/material that the students stated their teachers used the most and also that the students wished to have received more was feedback on the correctness and appropriateness of their spoken and written texts. By contrast, the respondents did not report experiencing much telling of anecdotes, nor did they seem to wish to have much more of it. While the students indicated that their instructors had used literary texts rather extensively, they expressed the wish that literary texts be used less frequently in language teaching. Finally, while on average the respondents declared that they had not received much feedback on the effects of their language production, they wished they could receive more such feedback.

TABLE 5. Reported and desired use of methods and materials

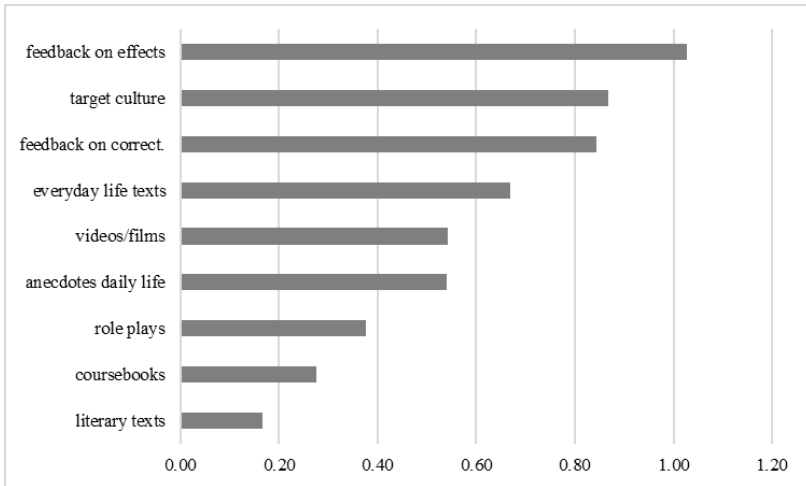
USED	M	SD	% No use	% Not know
feedback on correctness	1.89 (max 3)	0.80	2.80	0.00
videos/films	1.77 (max 3)	0.78	4.60	0.00
everyday life texts	1.74 (max 3)	0.82	5.50	0.00
Coursebooks	1.69 (max 3)	0.74	3.70	0.00
literary texts	1.52 (max 3)	0.80	9.20	0.00
role plays	1.44 (max 3)	0.89	14.70	1.80
target culture	1.35 (max 3)	0.73	11.00	0.90
feedback on effects	1.31 (max 3)	0.87	14.70	0.90
anecdotes about daily life	1.28 (max 3)	0.75	12.80	2.80
TOT used methods/materials	13.99 (max 27)	3.75		
DESIRED				
feedback on correctness	2.73 (max 3)	0.50	0.00	0.00
everyday life texts	2.41 (max 3)	0.61	0.90	0.00
feedback on effects	2.34 (max 3)	0.76	2.80	0.90
videos/films	2.31 (max 3)	0.66	0.90	0.00
target culture	2.22 (max 3)	0.61	0.00	0.90
Coursebooks	1.96 (max 3)	0.71	0.90	0.00
anecdotes about daily life	1.82 (max 3)	0.80	4.60	1.80
role plays	1.82 (max 3)	0.87	6.40	0.00
literary texts	1.69 (max 3)	0.67	4.60	2.80
TOT desired methods/materials	19.26 (max 27)	2.61		

M: Mean Score; SD: Standard Deviation; % No use: percentage of students who responded “no use” (their responses were assigned “0”); % not know: percentage of students who responded “Not know” (their answers were excluded from the count)

The graph in Figure 3 plots the gaps between the quantification of the desired use of methods/materials and the actual use of these methods/materials. The largest gap concerns teachers’ feedback on effects, which indicates that the respondents had until then perceived to have received scanty such feedback, and that they would have liked to receive more of it. The gap between the desired and the actual provision of

information about the target culture ranks second, and is followed by the gaps for feedback on correctness and by that for the use of everyday-life texts. The smallest difference regards the use of literary texts, which confirms the marginal importance that the students attribute to this method/material.

FIGURE 3. Gaps between desired and perceived use of methods/materials



The students' responses to the open *Any other comment* question enabled us to make more sense of the quantitative data. A large number of students addressed the issue of the feedback received from their teachers and that of the use of authentic materials in language teaching.

As for teachers' feedback, some students reflected that it had been mainly about the correctness of their texts rather than on their effects, as the following extracts show:

Receiving feedback from the teachers is the most effective way to correct one's mistakes. When I attended the [name of the course], the teachers used to collect printed-out Moodle activities from those students who wanted their work to be checked. The teachers corrected any mistakes, and the week after they gave the corrected activity back to each student. This really helped me correct some mistakes that I had been making for a long time and never noticed by myself.

What I hope will be improved is the feedback that is given to the students by the teacher [...] when the teacher gives many exercises to the student

for his own good and to encourage his learning, the teacher, in turn, should try as hard as possible to verify if the exercises are correct or viceversa. If the teacher does not have enough time to do it, he should provide the solutions of the exercises, so that the student can learn from his errors. It would also be highly appreciated if the professor corrected the student when he/she speaks, even when he/she is asking a question.

Besides feedback from the teacher, some learners also discussed peer-feedback, and made reference to the potential benefits it might bring, such as the following one:

In addition an important thing that is part of our language teaching is the teamwork. It helps a lot to have always a feedback which is not only given by teachers, but also from our colleagues. In this way we can have the opportunity to help each other directly to improve our skills.

During a follow-up interview one student talked about his experience with an American pen-friend and said:

I've realized that I often express a concept in a way which works in my own cultural environment, but that can be perceived as an offense, in a certain sense, by a person from another culture. If, on the other hand, I rephrase it in a different way, it is perceived as intended [...] I've realized that we often risk to fall into traps due to the ambiguity of what we say (our translation and slight adaptation).

He thus elaborated on his experience of being misunderstood by his American pen-friend, and the need to think of the effects of what one says/writes.

As regards the importance of using teaching materials pertaining to everyday situations, in the survey's open question, some students mentioned in particular input materials containing slang, idiomatic expressions and cultural references:

In order to reach English proficiency, studying on books plays a remarkable but little role. What makes improve the learning process is getting into the culture, learning the slangs, idiomatic expressions, speaking the language, exchanging ideas. I am of the opinion that a practical approach is more efficient for the achievement of confidence in speaking and good communication skills.

I think our professors should teach us or give us examples belonging to the daily life or everyday situations in order to develop specific cultural expressions (such as slangs, proverbs or mottos). In this way, could be easier for us to speak with native people without difficulties.

Other comments stressed the importance of combining various methods/materials, including videos, role plays, and “outside-of-the-box” activities:

Personally, I am pretty happy and content with the language teaching at university. As far as I see things, activities like watching videos, role-playing games and using texts from everyday life are some of the best means to allow students to embrace a culture while learning the language. This is why I believe these activities should be increased in order to give students a wider and deeper knowledge and awareness of the cultural background of a language and the language itself.

I think that in addition to traditional methods, such as following textbooks, reading and doing exercises on books, are also very important innovative and different activities. Group work, conversation with classmates and activities outside the schemes, such as learning songs, watching live videos and so on.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This chapter has explored the data collected from a group of Padua university students through an online survey questionnaire and some follow-up interviews about their awareness of receiving L2 teaching in pragmatics and through what methods. The chapter has also investigated the coverage the students wished to receive about those specific topics and the extent to which they thought their teachers should employ those materials/methods. It has reported on the main results of an LGP NA partly along the lines of Yuan et al. (2015) and Youn (2018), and partly with reference to Brown (2016).

The large majority of our survey respondents appeared to be aware of having been taught about pragmatic topics (RQ1), with only a small percentage opting for *Not know*. A reason for this may be that those students had difficulties understanding what the labels for given speech acts actually denoted (see Section 5.1). Their uncertainty was particularly evident in the case of expressing complaints, compliments, responses to compliments, apologies, and rejecting/refusing.

The students mainly reported receiving the most extensive instruction on pairs of speech acts forming complementary sequences, namely offers and responses to offers, requests and responses to requests, advice and responses to advice, and invitations and responses to invitations. The only exception appeared to be responses to greetings, which were also mentioned, but not matched by reference to their first-pair part, initiating greetings.

On the other hand, the speech acts they wished they could learn more about were complaints, rejecting/refusing, apologies, responses to compliments and responses to complaints. By contrast, the acts in which they expressed the lowest interest were responses to offers, greetings, responses to greetings, responses to thanking and invitations (RQ2). In particular, the students seemed to think that they did not need much more instruction on the correct performance of greetings, which might be due to the fact that they conceived of greetings and responses to them as communicative tasks that are already mastered at the beginner level.

Overall, the informants perceived initiating speech acts as more frequently taught than responding ones. If this perception is accurate, the reasons may be that responding speech acts indeed did not figure prominently in teachers' activities or in textbooks, but also that they were less salient to students' consciousness, even when they were the focus of instruction.

The students also expressed a preference for learning more about some potentially face-threatening acts (i.e. requests, apologies, complaints, rejecting and refusing) rather than face-sustaining ones (i.e. greetings, offers, compliments, invitations) (RQ3). This suggests that, in language teaching, priority may often be given to face-sustaining acts, while students would also like to be instructed on face-threatening ones. As declared by some students, they would like to become better at interacting with both native and ELF interlocutors and at appropriately managing socially difficult and possibly threatening situations, such as those involving the refusal of an offer.

The students showed awareness of having received feedback on the correctness/appropriateness of their speech/writing, and expressed the wish to receive more of it. They also stated that they had received less feedback on the effects of what they said, and that they would like to receive more such feedback. Furthermore, they said that they would like their teachers to refer to the target culture, and to use everyday-life texts and videos/films more often. By contrast, they did not show a great interest in a more extensive use of literary texts and textbooks (RQ4). In the follow-up interviews, all the students expressed an interest in receiving more feedback on the appropriateness rather than the correctness of their discourse. Maybe their stated preference was due to their having already reached an intermediate level of proficiency, which made them feel confident about their level of accuracy.

Some students rated the use of some methods/materials by choosing *No coverage*. In our view, this may either indicate their teachers' actual non-use of them or the students' misinterpretation of what those

materials/methods in fact denote. This is especially the case of the evaluation of the past use of role-plays, which we know for a fact students are involved in in their language classes. Interestingly, however, this is in line with the findings of Yuan et al.'s (2015) study, which showed that Chinese college English students rated role-plays as the least used activity in the classroom, and that only a small percentage of them indicated them as their preferred task.

On a more general level, we noticed that in the *Any other comment* section as well as during the interviews, the informants expressed either broader or more detailed learning desires than those captured by the mere list of speech acts we surveyed. A reason for this may be that at our university students are introduced to the CEFR, and to the levels and grids it contains, already from the first year. That is, Padua students are used to self-assessing and to receiving feedback on their competences in various skills and sub-skills in the form of “can-do statements” rather than with regard to lists of speech acts.

Our study shows that the EFL learners perceived pragmatic topics to be relevant to their educational experience, even if they had not been specifically primed for them with focused instruction. It also indicates that the learners perceived the value of feedback on language use, including on the effects of their discourse, as crucial to the improvement of their communicative skills (e.g. to avoid misunderstandings and mishaps).

We argue that pragmatics should be more systematically factored into syllabus design, as it would thus meet students' perceived learning goals (Youn, 2018, 95-96). Given that it is not an end in itself, NA should be a first step towards the design of syllabi (see Section 2). Brown (2016, 48-50) lists twelve types of syllabi, which mainly apply to ESP courses. Two are particularly relevant to our discussion in EGP: a functional syllabus, “organized around the things we do with the language” (p. 49), and a pragmatic one, organized around speech act categories. Interestingly, they are highly comparable, since both are about actions carried out mostly or exclusively through language (e.g. greetings, seeking information, refusals, apologies). If a functional-pragmatic syllabus can be implemented in an ESP course, where priority could be given to other, more specific dimensions of future language use (e.g. topics, tasks, skills, lexis), we can consider it all the more relevant to an EGP course, where more domain-specific objectives cannot be identified. Speech acts are the things we do with language on a daily basis, exchanging information and aiming at broad interactional-transactional goals (e.g. requiring or offering services, causing damage or providing benefits). Indeed, they are the main rationale driving the social use of language. As such, they are likely to be strongly

motivating and applicable to a variety of contexts (see, e.g., Youn's (2018, 96), who recommends engaging students at all levels with email tasks).

If an EGP functional-pragmatic syllabus should be implemented also with reference to the results of this study, we think that it should be geared towards those speech acts that exhibit one or more of these properties: speech acts that are likely to have negative consequences if not properly handled (e.g. requests, complaints); those that are formulaic and routinised in their encoding (pragmalinguistic dimension) so that they may be relatively easy to teach and learn (e.g. replies to thanks); and those that are frequently used, so that the effort invested in their teaching-learning is perceived as worth it (e.g. apologies, greetings).

Even when implementing a fully functional-pragmatic syllabus is not feasible, the pragmatic dimension of language use can be brought to bear on the implementation of language pedagogy. In the very practice of language teaching and learning, speech acts are regularly used between teachers and students, and among students (e.g. greetings and leave-taking formulae at the beginning and end of lessons; requests for clarifications and favours; offers of help and options; apologies for mistakes, faux pas or misunderstandings). These offer an opportunity to teach/learn how to do things with language, and to reflect on how their content, form and strategies adapt to contextual variables like power, distance or degree of imposition. Classroom work in this area may contribute to shedding light on additional "sensitive" discursive events, such as the use of address term or active listenership. Finally, we think that Cohen (2020, 25) makes an interesting suggestion when he writes:

An effective means to determine those areas of pragmatics that are deemed relevant to language learners is by asking the learners themselves. Teachers could ask, for example, how comfortable learners are with speech acts of various kinds. [...] Furthermore, as suggested some years ago (McLean 2005), students could be asked to write their own personal DCT [Discourse Completion Task] situations. The rationale for this would be that learners know what situations they tend to be uncomfortable in. If teachers were to ask them, then they would have an opportunity to let teachers know the things that they really want to learn how to say in the L2 – for example, in job interviews, at the doctor's office, or with the landlord.

Putting the above into practice may be challenging to overworked teachers. But some options are available. For instance, attention could be drawn to the co-variation between the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions of language use in materials that teachers already use in class for their routine work, such as the conversational scripts – or other forms

of two-party interaction – reproduced in textbooks, or excerpts from films or TV series. This would sensitize students to the different ways in which the “same” type of action may be effective and appropriate in different contexts. This type of teaching-learning practice, however, would place the burden of planning, material selection and analysis, and task preparation entirely on the teacher.

An alternative option would consist in using ready-made activities with enough in-built flexibility and adaptable to varying teaching contexts. Teachers at the tertiary level can easily look for such resources in the scientific literature in their field, typically article-length publications focused on one type of speech act, which present in-depth analyses of limited data. An example is Gesuato (2021), which shows how from the transcript of one conversation it is possible to design scripts for role-playing offering exchanges with different types of outcomes. More breadth of coverage can be found in book-length publications like Trubnikova and Garofolin (2020), who provide suggestions on how to include pragmatics in the classroom through easy-to-implement tasks of increasing complexity, suitable for language learners of various ages. These activities involve noticing and reflecting on variable, context-dependent linguistic behaviour both in real life and in texts, and predicting and practicing that behaviour under the teacher’s guidance, for instance by developing-completing conversational scripts. They also prompt the free production of that behaviour with discourse completion tasks.

Finally, for those with the “luxury” of devoting time to pragmatics, the scientific literature also provides extensive teaching material. For example, articles have been published reporting on the design, implementation and assessment of the teaching of specific speech acts like requests (Ishihara 2009) and apologies (Ishihara, 2010). More generally, detailed teaching units on various speech acts and discursive events (e.g. invitations, advice, complaints, refusals, misunderstandings) can be found in Tatsuki and Houck (2010).

Our study suffers from at least two main limitations. One is that, in collecting our data, we aimed at practicality, that is, we gathered information through a procedure that was fairly easy to administer, and which would provide us with relatively abundant data. However, more insights might have been gained through a less practical, but more time-consuming approach, namely, by conducting more numerous interviews. Additionally, we did not carry out a content analysis of our transcribed interviews, which would have required devising a systematic set of coding criteria for our data.

We cannot suggest that the dataset collected represents the situation of all Padua university students of modern languages, let alone that of all Italian university students. However, we hope that our findings can be a starting point for a larger and more comprehensive investigation into the relevance of teaching L2 pragmatics at a local and also national level. Based on our findings, future research might also specifically explore how to best develop an assessment grid of the communicative appropriateness and adequacy of EFL oral/written discourse, so as to meet the need some students expressed to receive more extensive and better feedback on the effects of the language they produce. Research might also examine the use of role plays in the teaching of pragmatics and ascertain whether and why students may express a mild preference for this teaching method. Furthermore, following Cohen (2018), other areas of pragmatics might be investigated, including politeness/impoliteness, discourse markers, conversational implicatures (implied meaning), humour, sarcasm, teasing, cursing, conversational style (turn-taking, appropriate listener responses), and deixis. Finally, in line with Youn (2018, 88), future NA investigations might give voice to other stakeholders as well (e.g. teachers and administrative staff), which may provide a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic learning needs.

More generally, one cannot take it for granted that teachers know what students need without doing NA, and since needs vary from person to person, students' opinions are worth exploring (cf. Brown, 2016, 202-203). This is because “*no single truth exists in any language-teaching situation*. Instead, views will differ considerably from person to person and even from moment to moment” (p. 203; original emphasis).

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