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## “Can I ask you just to clarify for a minute?” Politeness strategies in IVE pre-service teacher training

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### ABSTRACT

Intercultural Virtual Exchange (IVE) provides several benefits including the integration of cultural and linguistic aspects in second language learning (Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018). The role of pragmatics in teacher-training in online environments has garnered attention as pre-service teacher training programmes aim to integrate IVEs into their curricula. However, communication breakdowns may occur due to differing levels of pragmatic awareness (Cheng, 2012). While speech acts such as requesting behaviour have been well-researched, there is less evidence of how language for politeness (Alonso-Marks & Bayonas, 2023) has been used to overcome issues in IVEs between second language learners. Therefore, an investigation from an IVE between 2 pre-service ELF teachers wherein politeness strategies were analysed to understand their efficacy. The findings outline which strategies were employed, their efficacy and how these can be integrated into teacher training programmes by exposing learners to linguistic markers of politeness prior to IVE collaborative tasks.

### ABSTRACT SECOND LANGUAGE

Les échanges virtuels interculturels (EIV) présentent plusieurs avantages, notamment l'intégration des aspects culturels et linguistiques dans l'apprentissage des langues secondes (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018). Le rôle de la pragmatique dans la formation des enseignants dans les environnements en ligne a attiré l'attention, car les programmes de formation des enseignants en formation initiale visent à intégrer les EIV dans leurs programmes. Toutefois, des ruptures de communication peuvent se produire en raison des différents niveaux de conscience pragmatique (Cheng, 2012). Alors que les actes de langage tels que le comportement de demande ont fait l'objet de recherches approfondies, il existe moins de preuves sur la manière dont le langage de politesse (Alonso-Marks & Bayonas, 2023) a été utilisé pour surmonter les problèmes dans les EIV entre apprenants d'une deuxième langue. C'est pourquoi une étude a été menée sur un EIV entre deux enseignants de FLE en formation initiale, dans lequel les stratégies de politesse ont été analysées pour comprendre leur efficacité. Les conclusions soulignent les stratégies employées, leur efficacité et la manière dont elles peuvent être intégrées dans les programmes de formation des enseignants en exposant les apprenants aux marqueurs linguistiques de la politesse avant les tâches de collaboration de l'EIV.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 What is pragmatics?

Kasper and Rose (2002) define pragmatics as the *words we use based on the person we are speaking with*. For example, asking a friend for a favour requires fewer words than asking your boss for time off from work.

According to Roever (2021, p. 8), pragmatics involves four areas:

- Speech acts (giving compliments, apologising) and politeness
- Implicature (what is meant, though not necessarily what is said)



- Routine formulae (expressions that can be used without changes, i.e., ‘here you are’)
- Interaction (understanding when to speak, listen and what responses are accepted in conversation)

Pragmatics can be categorised into two parts: the specific words that are chosen by the speaker (known as Pragmalinguistic competence) and what is deemed appropriate in social interactions (known as Sociopragmatic competence).

A challenge for second language users and sociopragmatics is its implicit nature, i.e., native language speakers know which language/words are appropriate for the person they are speaking to because they have grown up in that language community. This is not the case with second language users who have the added challenge of a limited language repertoire. Indeed, they may lack the knowledge of certain words or expressions to use in situations requiring in/formality.

Researchers’ investigations into learners’ pragmatic competence have shown a ‘significant difference’ between native speakers and second language learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001), with Rose (2005) reporting that second language learners do not notice pragmatic differences in interactions with native speakers. For this reason, the explicit teaching of pragmatics has been recommended (Rose, 2005; Schmidts, 1993). This call has never been clearer than with Roever (2021, p. 2) who describes the dire need for teaching pragmatics as it is, “... not systematically taught in most language courses, not systematically developed in most language textbooks, not included in most language tests, and quite scattered even in ... the CEFR”.

This case study focuses on teaching pragmatics to student-teachers in an Intercultural Virtual Exchange (IVE).

### **1.2 Intercultural Virtual Exchange (IVE)**

IVE is “the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes” (O’Dowd, 2018). While IVE has been cited to provide students with several benefits including boosting intercultural and linguistic awareness, researchers like Kinginger and Belz (2005) and Belz and Vyatkina (2005) have reported it can also make students aware of pramalinguistics - which are explored in the following section in more detail.

Although many have reported the benefits of teaching IVE, Dooly and Vinagre (2022) note that VE can be an adjustment for students initially. This is because VE holds learners at its centre placing the responsibility of completing tasks on the learners while the teacher takes on a facilitating role in the background. Due to this, they note students may feel anxious in a VE for several reasons including being unprepared for tasks (lack of technological know-how) and the amount of effort to complete tasks with their partner (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). These feelings can and have impacted IVEs in the past and therefore should be addressed prior to teachers implementing IVEs (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Ware, 2005). Vinagre and Corral (2018, p. 336) have noted unsuccessful IVEs can be the result of “differences in quality and quantity of work, clash of personalities, power struggles, and poor communication.”

To counterbalance these potential communication pitfalls, Gutierrez, et al. (2022) call for IVE teachers to decide if they will provide guidance before, during (best suited for synchronous meetings) or reflective mentoring after students meet their VE partner(s). In particular, they suggest



that teachers can help students by teaching “negotiation of meaning and non-verbal communication strategies” (Ibid, p. 152), however, there is little specific guidance in their VE mentoring handbook in relation to what this means for teachers.

This case study aims to provide this guidance in its recommendations concerning the teaching of pragmalinguistics.

### **1.3 Teaching pragmalinguistics explicitly: form-focused instruction**

A study by Bardovi-Harlig (2013) found that students have different levels of pragmalinguistic abilities/competence, i.e., intermediate learners used overly long/too short utterances when attempting politeness. Dooly and Vinagre (2022) note that most VE studies focus on the linguistic benefits students experience, and studies which involve form-focused instruction are needed. Several researchers have begun to demonstrate how form-focused VEs have been implemented (see Li, 2020 for more details).

Researchers have experimented with different teaching approaches when teaching pragmatics. In a more data-driven teaching approach, researchers have created VE corpora to teach routine formulae to second language learners (Kinginger & Belz, 2005). For example, Belz and Vyatkina (2008) focused on teaching German particles to American students over a six-week period wherein particle usage in chats and emails with their German exchange partners became the materials of 40-minute form-focused interventions by the researchers. They found that these interventions helped their students notice how particles were used by German native speakers.

Similar in instructional design to Belz and Vyatkina (2008), Martí and Fernández (2016, p. 9) organised an IVE with Danish and Spanish university students. The researchers employed explicit pragmatic instruction over two, 45-minute sessions which included an “introduction to pragmatics (how to recognise certain speech acts), an introduction to Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) work with politeness strategies and previous studies focusing on politeness in Spanish, cultural aspects of Spanish people (familiarity, closeness, solidarity)”. The materials of these explicit instruction sessions were used as a tool in post-meeting reflective sessions that included the teacher and small groups of Danish students. Transcripts of interactions with their Spanish VE partner were also used to assist in which speech acts to focus on in the reflective sessions. Sample questions to encourage pragmatic reflection included whether students had considered any relevant contextual factors to explain the politeness displayed by their Spanish VE partners, the rationale for their partners issuing an invitation to visit them in Spain, and if they were surprised by how their partner concluded a conversation.

In comparison, Nguyen et al. (2012) compared form-focused implicit versus explicit teaching of pragmalinguistic instruction with Vietnamese pre-service English teachers. Their focus was on speech acts in academic speaking, namely providing constructive criticism in peer feedback. Target pragmalinguistic forms included “internal modifiers: questions, using the past tense, modal verbs and adverbs, uncertainty phrases, hedges and understanders” (Ibid, p. 6). Their explicit form-focused instruction consisted of:

- raising learners’ pragmalinguistic awareness of the target forms (i.e., modals, hedges)
- providing meta-pragmatic instruction
- providing a handout with additional explanation
- discussions in class
- explicit correction by the teacher



Data analysis showed that while students who received explicit and implicit form-focused instruction in pragmalinguistics improved from their pre-test performance, the explicit form-focused instruction performed “significantly higher”(p. 12). One reason the researchers gave for this is the production activities (peer feedback) which followed the explicit instruction along with explicit teacher correction in class that committed them to their students’ memory.

These studies suggest a list of expressions would be a welcome resource to IVE teacher trainees and one currently not provided in VE mentoring handbooks to date (Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

## 2. Background research

### 2.1 Politeness strategies

Given the current study context is IVE, research in politeness strategies used by second language learners is highlighted as participants are meeting one another for the first time online and completing tasks together.

Three factors help students decide the level of politeness they will use with their partner (Cheng, 2012; Brown and Levinson, 1987):

- Power (namely, their status in society)
- Social distance (how well the speakers know one another)
- Imposition (the degree of difficulty in the request)

For this study, in terms of power, the participants were both students therefore there was no power imbalance, and the task they were given, as described in the following section, did not require the students to meet online for an extended period or at a financial cost to them. While the participants were strangers having not met before the IVE, implying a high degree of social distance, they shared similar studies, similar ages and were the same gender which lowers their social distance as ‘medium’ according to Roever (2021). Interestingly, Wolfson (1983) reports that conversations wherein speakers have a medium social distance display the highest levels of politeness as “their relationship is not very clearly defined” (in Roever, 2021, pp. 11-12).

Politeness strategies can be grouped into three types: positive politeness, actions that the student performs so that their partner may view them positively; negative politeness, actions that indicate disagreement; and off-record, implied or implicit hints of disagreement. Relevant strategies are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Positive, negative and off-record strategies (Cheng, 2012, p. 151, adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Off-record
Joke		Be ironic
Avoid disagreement	Apologise	Overstate
Be optimistic	Be pessimistic	Be vague
Presuppose/assert common	Impersonalise	Use contradictions



ground		
Include the speaker/hearer in the activity		Overgeneralise
Exaggerate interest/approval	Question/hedge	Give hints

In terms of pragmalinguistic language used by students to demonstrate these strategies, researchers such as Cheng (2012) and Brown and Levinson (1987) have noted that key linguistic tools that display positivity and are used by second language learners include hedges such as ‘just’, ‘only’, and so forth. While Roever (2021) found modals including ‘can’, ‘could’ and ‘may’ are also used to soften speech. Negative strategies include being hesitant and indirect, which Park (2008) suggests are the most common.

## 2.2 Facework: how students want to be perceived by their partner

Understanding pragmalinguistics in IVE was only part of the motivation for the case study. IVE enables teacher trainers to investigate students’ paralinguistic tools, in other words, their gestures, head/body movement, and gaze which support their speech.

Within pragmatics, particular attention is paid to speech acts as these cover the types of conversational turns that help researchers align users' physical movement with speech. Roever (2021, p. 10) outlines several examples of speech acts, such as:

- requesting, suggesting, greeting, apologising
- refusing, complaining, criticizing
- thanking, complimenting, congratulating

‘Face-threatening’ (Cheng, 2012) and ‘face-flattering’ (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005) acts are those that refer to moments in conversation where students may seek to protect their face - or that of their partner (Brown & Levinson, 1978 in Pétilat et al., 2021). Face-threatening speech acts are especially interesting to this study as these may be the reason why some IVEs result in communication breakdown due to ‘pragmatic failure’ (Thomas, 1983).

It is important to note that ‘face’ here refers to how they are viewed by their peers *socially*, and not their physical face. Students manage face-threatening acts by using the politeness strategies mentioned earlier. Along these lines, when students display a positive face, they want to be liked by their partner and maintain ‘group harmony’ (Roever, 2021, p. 11), while a negative face means they will try to avoid topics they may not want to talk about.

Next, how the data was collected and the participants in this case study are presented.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Participants

33 pre-service teachers from a Dutch (Utrecht University) and French university (Université Clermont Auvergne) participated in an IVE over six weeks in Autumn 2022. The aim of the IVE was to introduce IVE and IVE task design to students.



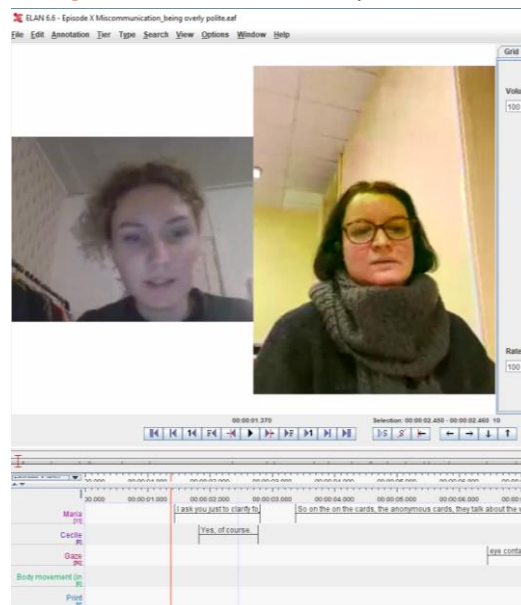
Although the data from four pairs were analysed, length constraints of the case study limit the analysis and recommendations to one pair: Maria and Cécile (pseudonyms).

### 3.2 Research design

Participants completed three tasks (a language biography, comparing the education system of their countries and giving feedback on an IVE task designed by their partner), of which the analysis is focused on the final task as it provided more of an opportunity for pragmatic/pragmalinguistic development. This task was recorded by students on BigBlueButton and then transcribed by the researcher and politeness strategies were identified. Pauses (+), rising (/) and falling (\) intonation were denoted in the transcripts. Colour was used to differentiate speakers (orange) and to highlight pragmalinguistic politeness strategies identified (blue).

To verify students' paralinguistic modes of communication, Multimodal (inter)action analysis (Norris, 2004) was employed wherein higher-level actions denote the main modes of communication while lower-level and frozen actions assist the main mode. Excerpts were selected that were illustrative of frequent higher-level actions and coded lower-level actions in ELAN as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Multimodal analysis in ELAN



To understand how the paralinguistic features of lower-level actions were utilised by participants in communication, modal configurations were built from excerpts of politeness strategies identified in the dataset and literature.

## 4. Results

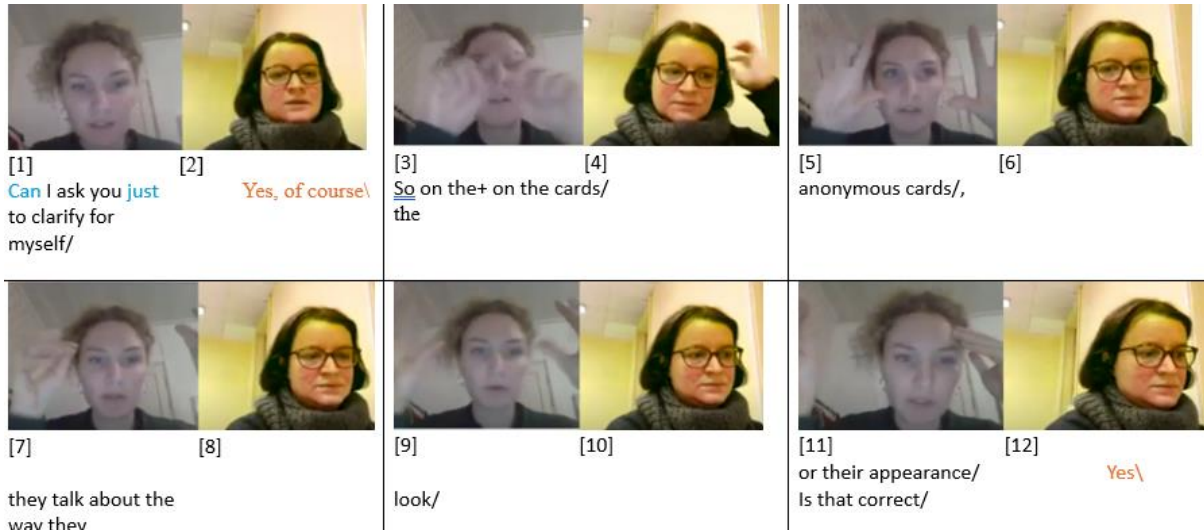
Two higher-level actions were identified in the transcripts: Asking for clarification (4.1) and Saving face (4.2).

### 4.1 Excerpt 1: HLA: Asking for clarification

In Figure 2, Maria asks her partner to clarify her designed task. She employs positive politeness strategies mentioned by Cheng (2012) such as modals ('can I ask you') and hedges ('just') when performing this higher-level action.

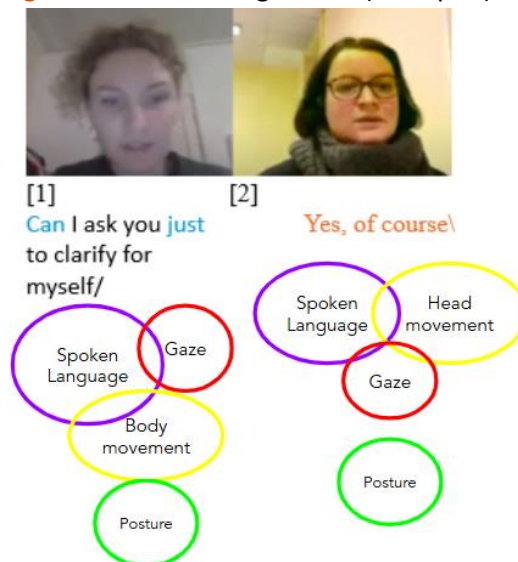
This can be recognised as a potentially face-threatening act requiring politeness because Maria wants to protect her partner’s face while simultaneously saying that she does not understand the description provided. Maria considers which linguistic tools are at her disposal (demonstrating her pragmalinguistic competence) and which are appropriate to use in this turn (demonstrating her sociopragmatic competence).

Figure 2: Transcript of excerpt 1



The efficacy of these strategies can be seen in frame 12, as Cécile looks for her task description to read aloud while responding to Maria that her understanding of the task was correct.

Figure 3: Modal configuration (excerpt 1)



In taking a closer look at the modal configuration of these politeness strategies in frame 1 of Figure 3, several lower-level actions can be seen which help Maria to communicate her request for more clarification. While using the spoken language mode, she is seen leaning towards the camera (body movement mode), her gaze is fixed on the screen and her body is positioned towards her partner (posture).



#### 4.2 Excerpt 2: HLA: Saving face

After asking for clarification, another higher-level action was identified: saving face. This is seen after Cécile re-explains/reads the task she designed to Maria.

However, the moments of hesitation (another positive politeness strategy) in Maria's response to Cécile's explanation, suggest that she may still not understand but wants to save her partner's face. This is most clearly seen in frames 15 and 17 (of Figure 4) when Maria uses modes like head movement, gaze and gesture which support the main spoken mode of communication.

Figure 4: Transcript of excerpt 2

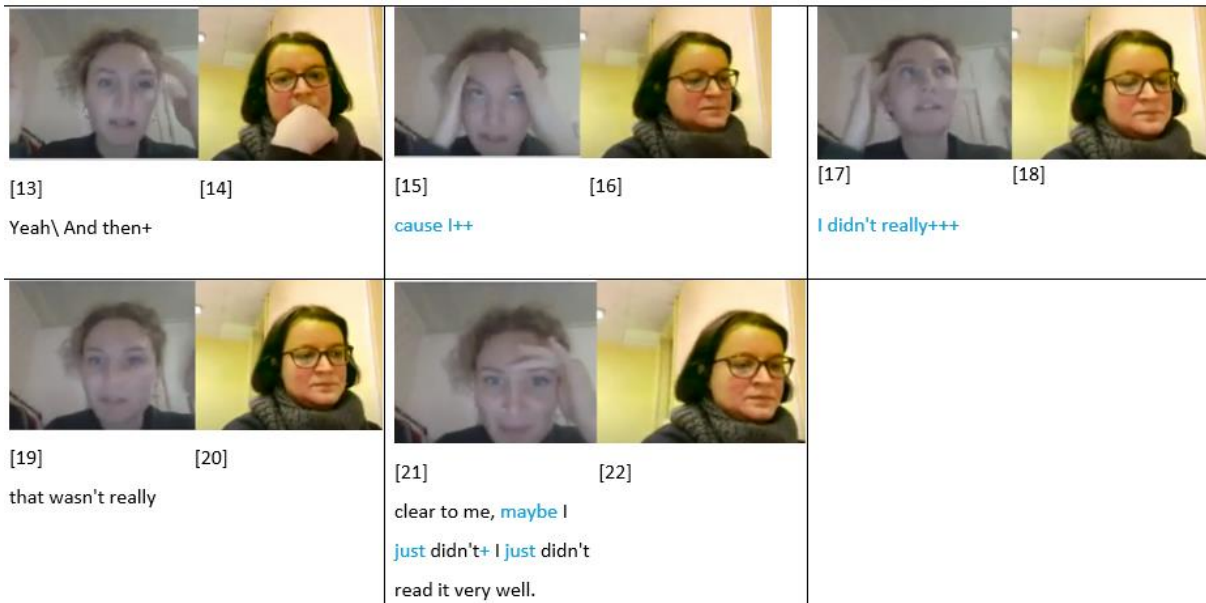
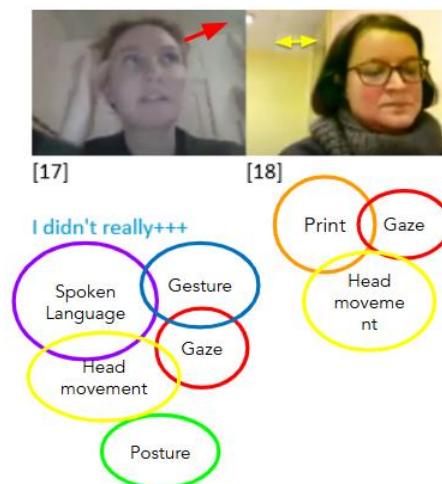


Figure 5: Modal configuration (excerpt 2a)



In frame 17 of Figure 5, the hesitation politeness strategy is seen along with several modes as Maria says she didn't really [understand](spoken language mode), she moves her hand to the side of her head (gesture mode), looks away and tilts her head from the camera as if to choose her next words



(gaze and head movement modes) while maintaining her body position towards the camera (posture mode).

Figure 6: Modal configuration (excerpt 2b)



In frame 21 of Figure 6, again, several modes are employed by Maria to save her partner's face to the extent that she is willing to blame herself for not understanding the task the first time she read it. In this frame, there are several pragmalinguistic politeness strategies evident, for example, hedges 'just' and 'maybe' in the spoken mode, covering her left eye (gaze mode) with her hand (gesture mode) to likely read the task description again (print mode).

## 5. Discussion & Recommendations

The findings indicate that when student-teachers are demonstrating politeness strategies, they are doing this with several modes to support their communication. The higher-modal configurations noted in frames 1 and 21 by Maria demonstrate that the spoken mode alone cannot contain her execution of politeness strategies. It may be worth noting that many of the participants in the IVE, similar to the pair presented here, were female students. Herring and Martinson (2004) have reported that women in online communication "frequently use hedges...[in] polite language" (in Belz, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, an investigation into male/mixed groups of pre-service teachers could be a welcome comparison to the study findings.

It is important to remember that students in the present study did not receive pragmatic or pragmalinguistic explicit instruction before the IVE began. This study aimed to identify which politeness strategies were currently being used by student-teachers and to develop routine formulae to supplement the existing strategies identified. As Roever (2021, p. 18) states, in learning such expressions, chunks or routine formulae, students can "exceed their general competence because learners acquire routine formulae as unanalyzed chunks, which they can store in memory



and retrieve when required”.

It is important to note that Roever (2021) questions the validity of teaching pragmatics to students in a second language environment where they lack the opportunity for practice and reinforcement. It can be argued that IVE that is embedded into second language curricula will provide opportunities for practice and reinforcement needed for students to develop pragmatic and pragmalinguistic awareness.

### **5.1 Applications of the findings**

Based on the findings, two tips for teachers to apply in their classrooms are proposed.

#### *5.1.1 Tip 1: Record existing routines and incorporate these into classroom materials*

Without knowing which routine formulae were already a part of student-teachers’ repertoire, the first step was to record and see which expressions students were currently familiar with. This helps to eliminate expressions that may be unnecessary to teach and newer pragmatic expressions to concentrate on.

There are several ways that teachers can record their students’ routine formulae/expressions. Belz and Vyatkina (2008) built a corpus of their students’ interactions, however, that may be more technical than some teachers are comfortable with. Another simpler method could be for teachers to keep a running Excel sheet of the routine expressions they hear their students use in class.

Two of the studies mentioned earlier, Martí and Fernández (2016) and Belz and Vyatkina (2008), shared a common method for teaching pragmatics explicitly: recording their students’ interactions and using these as the basis for building materials that taught students what to say in certain social situations (their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competencies). In incorporating students’ own words as teaching materials, students saw the connection between the pragmatic awareness-raising instruction and the production activities, also suggested by Ngyuen et al. (2012) with teaching pragmalinguistics.

Martí & Fernández (2016) found reflective questions with the teacher and peers to be an effective way for students to develop their pragmatic competence, while Ngyuen et al. (2012) provided pragmalinguistic structures for students to use when giving feedback such as using modals when expressing suggestions for improving their essays.

#### *5.1.2 Tip 2: Teaching politeness strategies to counterbalance miscommunication*

In the dataset, Maria utilises several politeness strategies, verbally such as hedges and non-verbally, like hesitations, to soften telling her partner that she did not understand the IVE task she designed. Maria’s post-task reflection states that she did not understand her partner’s task, despite suggesting she did as seen in the transcript of excerpt two above. This tells us that Maria was not comfortable with telling her partner openly about her remaining doubts.



Therefore it is suggested that in advance of implementing IVE, akin to O'Dowd et al.'s (2020) 'pre-mentoring', teachers review Cheng's (2012) politeness strategies and pragmalinguistic expressions so that students can communicate honestly with their IVE partners. As Roever (2021) has highlighted the lack of pragmatics in teacher training, there is a need to provide this to students, giving them tools for developing their pragmatic competence. Instruction materials could provide prompts for consideration before the first meeting takes place, such as:

Before meeting with your IVE partner, consider ways that they might express being polite to you. This may include:

[Politeness strategies]

- Is my partner making jokes/trying to make me laugh?
- Are they trying to/do they mostly agree with what I say?
- Are they including me as a part of a group, i.e., we're both students/parents

[Negative politeness strategies]

- Are they using a lot of hedges?
- Are they pausing to search for words or are these pauses suggesting a difficult topic?
- Do they apologise (often) for things they've said?

[Off-record strategies]

- Is my partner being vague about information?
- Are they expressing a lot of irony?
- Are they speaking indirectly or implying things that aren't being said?

Although perhaps somewhat rudimentary, the aim of the materials (above) is to encourage students to think more pragmatically about their IVE interactions. This handout could also be adapted to generate reflective discussion after IVE meetings similar to Martí and Fernández (2016). It could be used to inspire whole class discussion about politeness and pragmatics.

## 6. Conclusion

This case study has delved into an integral research area: teaching pragmatics/pragmalinguistics to future IVE teachers and students. Studies have been reviewed and combined with relevant research concerning politeness strategies and facework with methods for explicit teaching of pragmalinguistics as a means of tackling potential communication breakdowns in IVE. Specifically, the analysis shows that student-teachers use linguistic tools such as modals, hedges, and hesitations along with paralinguistic ones including gestures, gaze, and body movement when expressing politeness with their IVE partners. It is recommended that future IVE students can benefit from pragmalinguistic routine formulae and it is called for this to be incorporated into IVE mentoring handbooks.

Want to know more about IVE and pragmatics? Check out these studies:

- Cunningham, J. (2016). Request Modification in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: The Role of Focused Instruction. *The Modern Language Journal*. 100 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12332>.
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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS



1. What kind of training have you received in pragmatics?
2. What kind of training have you received in pragmalinguistics?
3. How do people in your country demonstrate their politeness with international people?
4. Do you think it could be difficult for people not from your country to understand some politeness norms in your country?
5. Can you think of another country that has different social norms from yours?
6. What benefits do you think your students could receive in a meeting with students from another country whose politeness norms are different than your own?
7. What activities could you design that explicitly teach students to communicate more pragmatically with others?

### FURTHER READING

This case study was adapted from the scientific presentation:

Bennett, C., and Wigham, C.R. (2024, July 17). “Can I ask you just to clarify for a minute?” Teaching pragmatics in IVE pre-service teacher training. IVACS2024. Conference Presentation. University of Cambridge.

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