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Developing Pragmatic Competence in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom: An Experimental Study with Hungarian Secondary School Students

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1 Introduction

Research has repeatedly proven that even proficient speakers of English may lack the pragmatic competence that would match their high grammatical competence (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). These speakers are not aware of the social, cultural and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations. My professional experience both in the EFL and the ESL context has reflected these observations. These students, advanced as they may be, often commit pragmatic errors and fail to recognize their seriousness. This problem is especially crucial in the foreign language context, as EFL students tend to evaluate pragmatic violations less serious than grammatical errors (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). It is therefore essential that students be made aware of pragmatic violations and the dangers of appearing rude or insulting in interactions.

One of the most thought-provoking questions of interlanguage pragmatics literature has been the teachability of pragmatic competence, or more specifically, whether pedagogical intervention in pragmatics results in better awareness and performance than simple exposure to the target language and how the appropriate usage of speech acts can explicitly or implicitly be taught to students. All studies carried out in this area conclude that learners who received instruction in an area of pragmatics outperformed those who did not (e.g., Kasper, 2001; Rose, 2005; Takahashi, 2005).

The aim of my dissertation is to explore the teachability of pragmatic competence in the Hungarian EFL context, focusing on how to open and close conversations. First, in order to provide a background to pragmatics instruction in the Hungarian EFL classroom, I examine how two EFL coursebook series present openings and closings. Second, the main line of investigation focuses on the effects of a five-week pragmatic treatment program on students' pragmatic awareness and speech act production. Third, I investigate the relationship between pragmatic competence and foreign language proficiency, namely the effect students' proficiency has on their production of openings and closings, as well as how this situation changes after the pragmatic treatment program. Fourth, I conducted a follow-up study in order to look into students' and teachers' attitudes to the treatment and pragmatic competence in general.

Openings and closings were chosen for the investigation for two main reasons. First of all, research concludes that openings and closings have a significant role in conversations. Furthermore, they are built on subtle rules and therefore are very delicate matter even for native speakers (Levinson, 1983; Richards & Schmidt, 1983). Secondly, because of the differences

between English and Hungarian, these speech acts often pose problems for Hungarian EFL students. Therefore, awareness-raising activities and explicit training in this area are essential and beneficial in the classroom. However, there has been no study to date that investigates these two speech acts in the EFL, or more specifically, in the Hungarian context. I have conducted my research in an attempt to fill this gap.

2 The structure of the study

The first two chapters of my dissertation provide a literature review into several areas related to pragmatic competence. Chapter 1 focuses on speech act theory and the definition of pragmatic competence. Chapter 2 comprises the literature review of seven major areas in interlanguage pragmatics: the goals of interlanguage pragmatics research, setting the model for instruction in pragmatics, the relationship between pragmatic competence and second or foreign language proficiency, pragmalinguistic transfer, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure, pragmatics instruction in the ESL and EFL classroom, and data collection techniques in interlanguage pragmatics research.

I present a study of two coursebook series in Chapter 3. My goal was to examine how openings and closings are presented in two coursebook series used in the Hungarian EFL context, *Headway* and *Criss Cross*. I outline the structure of the experimental study in Chapter 4. This chapter contains the research questions and hypotheses for the project. In the *Method* section I present the participating teachers and students, the procedures, the seven data collection instruments and the treatment tasks that were used in the training.

The following two chapters present the analysis of the data from two perspectives. Chapter 5 contains the quantitative analysis, investigating the relationship between pragmatic competence and foreign language proficiency and discussing the effects of explicit teaching on students' pragmatic competence. In Chapter 6 I provide a qualitative analysis of the data. This comprises an account of students' production of openings and closings before the treatment as well as a description of the effect the pragmatic training had on students' speech act production.

I present the findings of the follow-up study in Chapter 7. I discuss the implementation of the treatment tasks in the schools, the participants' feedback on the treatment, and students' and teachers' views on pragmatic instruction. I also present general classroom issues raised during the observation, student questionnaires, and teacher interviews. Finally, I summarize the conclusions of the dissertation in Chapter 8. This includes an account of the answers gained to

the research questions in both the quantitative and the qualitative analyses. I also discuss the implications for teaching, the limitations of the project and suggest areas for further research.

3 Theoretical background

Every model of communicative competence includes a component that corresponds to pragmatic competence. For the purposes of my dissertation, pragmatic competence was defined as "the knowledge of social, cultural and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations" (Edwards & Csizér, 2001, p. 56). Pragmatic competence is an organic part of communicative competence, and not a piece of additional knowledge to the learners' grammatical knowledge. Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan and Reynolds (1991, p. 4.) highlight the importance of pragmatic competence by pointing to the consequences of the lack of this competence.

> Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing unco-operative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence.

Openings and closings have been recognized for having significant roles as formulas in human interaction. Richards and Schmidt (1983) consider openings and closings organized and orderly accomplishments by conversationalists. Both serve as "softeners" of social relationships, employed to maintain the positive face wants of the participants. Laver (1981, p. 292.) proposes that it is at the beginning and the end of conversations that the participants conduct their "social negotiations about respective status and role partly by means of their choices of formulaic phrase, address term and type of phatic communion." Greetings and partings are highly conventionalized, can be considered rituals, and tend to be culture-specific.

Research has underlined the challenges of the acquisition and the production of openings and closings. Richards and Schmidt (1983) point out that these two speech acts are problematic even for native speakers. The challenge is not simply entering or getting out of a conversation, but all states from non-talk to talk (or vice versa) require engineered solutions. Another problem in the analysis of openings and closings is defining the limits of the conversation (Francis & Hunston, 1996).

Foreign language contexts provide fewer opportunities for developing pragmatic competence than second language environments (Tateyama et al., 1997). Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) show that EFL students and teachers lack the resources to identify

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grammatically correct but pragmatically incorrect discourse as incorrect. Their results prove that pragmatic competence will not develop automatically as a "side effect" in the FL context. The authors therefore highlight the importance of raising pragmatic awareness in the EFL classroom. Bardovi-Harlig (1992) also claims that it is essential to raise teachers' pragmatic awareness as part of teacher education and in-service trainings.

4 Openings and closings in EFL materials: a study of two coursebook series

A number of studies have explored how English language coursebooks present speech acts and language functions (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Gilmore, 2004, Vellenga, 2004). All the authors conclude that speech acts and language functions are not adequately represented and the input in coursebooks is different from authentic interactions. My dissertation presents a research project investigating how two coursebook series present openings and closings. *Headway* was selected because it was the most widely used EFL coursebook in Hungarian secondary education at the time (Nikolov, 1999). *Criss Cross* was chosen because of its focus on the Eastern European language learning and teaching context.

The main areas of investigation are how coursebook dialogues present openings and closings, the stylistic variation in these two speech acts, as well as the differences between the approaches of the two coursebook series. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How many dialogues and conversations are there in the two coursebook series? What ratio of these dialogues contain openings and closings?
2. How can these openings and closings be characterized (complete vs. partial, as well as stylistic variations)?
3. Do the two series include explicit pragmatic instruction for openings and closings?
4. What are the differences between the two coursebook series, *Headway* and *Criss Cross*, concerning conversational models?

Based on the above questions, the research hypotheses were the following:

1. The higher the level is, the fewer conversational models there are for openings and closings in the coursebooks.
2. Most conversations are incomplete (with no or partial opening and/or closing) and the vocabulary of introductory and terminal exchanges is restrictive.
3. There are differences between the two coursebooks in their teaching of pragmatic competence, as they were written for different audiences. *Criss Cross* with the

cross-cultural syllabus will put more emphasis on the teaching of openings and closings in different cultural settings.

The results indicate that most dialogues in the coursebooks were incomplete. The majority of openings and closings were partial and one-way, lacking post-openings, shutting down the topic, and preclosings. The findings echo the conclusion of Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991, p. 8.): "The purpose of dialogues is generally to introduce a new grammatical structure and not to provide a source for realistic conversational input." Most differences between the two series were discovered in the number of dialogues and the explicit teaching of pragmatic competence. The statistical analysis, however, showed no significant difference between the number of dialogues, openings, and closings in the two series. The teaching implications of the research are of high importance. It is the teachers' responsibility to use the materials in a way that they contribute to the pragmatic development of students. The coursebooks serve as a good basis to be utilized by the teacher and complemented by several excellent resources on speech acts and functions.

5 An experimental study on developing pragmatic competence in the EFL classroom: research questions and methodology

Examining textbooks is only a starting point in the process of learning about how pragmatic competence is taught in the classroom. The main research project presented in my dissertation is an experimental study that was carried out with 92 Hungarian secondary-school EFL students. The main goal was to find out how the explicit teaching of some aspects of pragmatic competence affects students' performance. The study has a quasi-experimental design, as it involves intact EFL learner groups and contains a treatment and a control group. The treatment group received a five-week training aiming to raise their pragmatic competence, namely how to open and close conversations. The control group followed their regular curriculum and only participated in the pre- and post-test, without being aware of taking part in an experiment.

The study has two main areas of investigation. First, the goal is to find out what effect participants' proficiency levels have on their speech act production as well as their perception of pragmatic violations. The second aim is to discover how the pragmatic training program affects students' speech act production on a post-test and how their awareness toward pragmatic violations changes on a discourse rating task. For this reason, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How does Hungarian secondary-school students' L2 proficiency correlate with their pragmatic competence, more specifically their appropriate use of openings and closings and their perception of pragmatic and grammatical violations?
2. How will the explicit teaching of how to open and close a conversation influence students' speech act production and awareness toward pragmatic violations?

Based on the above questions, the hypotheses were the following:

1. Students' L2 proficiency will positively correlate with their pragmatic competence, more specifically their appropriate use of openings and closings and their perception of pragmatic violations.
2. As a result of the training, students will use more appropriate opening and closing elements in the post-tests and will display an increased awareness toward pragmatic violations.

5.1 Participants

The participants of the investigation were 92 secondary-school students in years 9, 10 and 11, between the ages of 15 and 17. We attempted to control for the following variables as much as possible: students' age, language level, school type, group size, and type of coursebooks used in their EFL classes. All students were at intermediate or higher levels. However, as one of the variables was L2 proficiency, it was ensured that there was no significant difference in proficiency level between the treatment and the control groups. All three schools involved in the study were secondary schools (*gimnázium*) situated in three different localities near Budapest. Four classes were in the treatment group (N=66), the other three classes were control groups (N=26), receiving no treatment and continuing with their regular instruction. This sample size (N=92) allowed us to draw statistically meaningful conclusions.

5.2 Data collection instruments

In the project a multi-method approach was used in order to increase validity (see Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Foreign language proficiency was measured by a C-test. The main body of data was collected through role-plays, which served as pre- and post-tests in the project. Discourse rating tasks (DRT) were used after the treatment in order to investigate students' perception of grammatical and pragmatic violations. During the treatment, classes were visited by the researchers, so as to gain insight about how the treatment tasks were

implemented, as well as to investigate general classroom issues. Observation of authentic speech was employed in order to complement the other, more restricted, data collection instruments. Finally, as a follow-up to the treatment program, the students were given questionnaires and all five teachers were interviewed, so we could receive feedback about the treatment and explore the participants' views on pragmatic competence and general classroom issues, placing pragmatic competence in the larger context of EFL instruction.

5.3 The treatment tasks

The activities were designed specifically for the purposes of this study with the aim to provide students with explicit input concerning openings and closings. We wanted to give students first-hand experience in issues of pragmatic competence and to deepen their understanding by letting them discover the rules themselves (cf. Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Rose, 2000). Bachman and Palmer's (1996) definition of pragmatic knowledge was taken into account at this stage, as the activities contained elements with the purpose of enhancing students' lexical, functional, and sociocultural knowledge as well. Each activity provided room not only for the explicit teaching of openings and closings in various real-life situations, but also for student-centered interaction (see Kasper, 1997a). They also contained group discussions about the pragmatic information and any problems that came up while completing the activities.

5.4 Procedures

Before the treatment we asked a teacher who was not participating in the project to pilot the activities. Based on her suggestions some modifications were made and one of the original activities was omitted, as she considered it too complicated both for teachers and students. After the pilot phase, each treatment group teacher received a package of the activities; containing detailed instructions, the discussion questions, and the photocopied worksheets for the students. Individually, we walked them through the activities and answered their questions. They were asked to set apart a 35-45-minute block in their regular lessons each week to dedicate to implementing the training materials. Teachers were given a five-week period to cover all four activities. The extra week was provided in order to ensure that all classes could finish the treatment in due time. The control group teachers received their package after the experiment, so that they could also utilize the activities in their classrooms if they wished.

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5.4 Statistical analyses

After the pre- and post-test data were transcribed and checked against the tape, the frequencies of opening and closing elements were tallied and computer coded using SPSS for Windows. The scores on the C-test were also entered. Differences were calculated using one-way ANOVA and independent sample t-test to compare the results of the various groups, and the non-parametric versions of these methods were applied where necessary. The scores of the discourse rating task were also recorded and I carried out an item analysis in order to examine students' performance on the various items. A Pearson correlation coefficient test was conducted among the C-test and the discourse rating task variables, aiming to gain insight into the relationship among the various variables. As the sample size is not particularly large, the significance level used throughout the statistical analysis is 5%.

6 Results and discussion: a quantitative analysis

6.1 Pragmatic competence and foreign language proficiency

This section aims to gain insight into the relationship between pragmatic competence and L2 proficiency by correlating the variables of the DRT with one another and the C-test scores. Treatment and control group scores are not analyzed separately, as the goal at this point is to explore the relationships among the variables regardless of the group distinction. I examine the relationships with the help of the Pearson correlation coefficient test. *Table 1* presents the correlation grid for all the DRT variables and the C-test. Significant correlations are highlighted in italics and marked with an asterisk. Although the correlation between two given variables is present twice due to the grid structure, for the sake of simplicity I highlighted the significant relationships only once.

Table 1. *Pearson correlation coefficients among the variables of the discourse rating task and the C-test scores*

Item type	C-test	Pragmatics sum	Grammar	No mistake	General pragmatic	Opening Closing
C-test	N/a	*r = 0.39* *p = 0.00**	r = -0.06 p = 0.61	r = 0.19 p = 0.09	*r = 0.49* *p = 0.00**	r = 0.10 p = 0.35
Pragmatics sum	R = 0.39 p = 0.00	n/a	*r = 0.32* *p = 0.00**	*r = 0.44* *p = 0.00**	*r = 0.66* *p = 0.00**	*r = 0.42* *p = 0.00**
Grammar	r = -0.06 p = 0.61	r = 0.32 p = 0.00	n/a	*r = - 0.33* *p = 0.00**	*r = - 0.23* *p = 0.03**	r = - 0.07 p = 0.51
No mistake	r = 0.19 p = 0.09	r = 0.44 p = 0.00	r = - 0.33 p = 0.00	n/a	*r = 0.32* *p = 0.00**	r = - 0.08 p = 0.49
General pragmatic	r = 0.49 p = 0.00	r = 0.66 p = 0.00	r = - 0.23 p = 0.03	r = 0.32 p = 0.00	n/a	r = 0.12 p = 0.28
Opening Closing	r = 0.10 p = 0.35	r = 0.42 p = 0.00	r = - 0.07 p = 0.51	r = - 0.08 p = 0.49	r = 0.12 p = 0.28	n/a

As *Table 1* shows, the statistical analysis revealed significant correlations in nine cases. Here I analyze the results that concern the first research question. First, there is a significant positive correlation both between the C-test scores and all pragmatic items and the C-test and general pragmatic items. This points out that there is a positive relationship between students' overall L2 proficiency and their pragmatic competence, verifying the first hypothesis. The findings are also in accordance with the results of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), who concluded that high proficiency EFL students notice more pragmatic mistakes than their less proficient peers. However, they also pointed out that advanced students recognize more grammatical mistakes than pragmatic ones. This observation is not reflected in our analysis, as there is no correlation between the C-test scores and the items with a grammatical problem. This may be due to several factors, such as the difference in sample size and proficiency measures in the two projects. Interestingly enough, the C-test variable does not correlate significantly with opening and closing items, suggesting no positive relationship between L2 proficiency and the appropriate usage of these two speech acts.

As for the relationship between students' grammatical and pragmatic competence, the grid shows that there is a significant positive correlation between items pertaining to pragmatic competence (*Pragmatics sum*) and grammatical items. This suggests a significant positive relationship between students' grammatical and pragmatic competence. However, there is a negative significant correlation between grammar and general pragmatic items (i.e. *Pragmatics sum* without *Opening-Closing* items). It seems, therefore, that the inclusion of opening-closing items into this equation creates a significant change. The correlation between opening-closing and grammar items is negative, although not significant. These results

concerning pragmatic and grammatical competence are somewhat controversial and I am unable to reconcile them by this single correlation test.

Not surprisingly, there is a significant positive correlation among the variables of pragmatic competence in the DRT. As *Pragmatics sum* is the compilation of general pragmatic items and the opening-closing category, a positive correlation was expected among these three variables. As the grid shows, there is indeed a significant positive relationship between pragmatic sum and general pragmatic items, and pragmatic sum and opening-closing items. This suggests that there is a connection between students' general pragmatic awareness and their appropriate use of openings and closings.

6.2 Foreign language proficiency and speech act production

Students are divided into three distinct groups according to their L2 proficiency, with each group containing approximately a third of all students in the sample. One-way ANOVA is used to detect any possible differences between the groups.

Table 2. *Spearman rank order correlations between the elements of opening and closing and language proficiency in the treatment and control group*

Elements of opening and closing (pre-test results)	Language proficiency
Post-openings	.25*
Shutting down the topic	.18
Pre-closings	.17

*p < .05

Greetings and leave-takings are not analyzed as the great majority of students used them both in the pre- and post-test role-plays. The use of post-openings shows significant variation across the groups, that is, students with higher L2 proficiency used more post-openings. This indicates that using post-opening elements is more difficult for lower L2 proficiency students. In the case of the other variables, shutting down the topic and pre-closings, no difference was detected in relation to foreign language proficiency. In order to see whether the treatment changed the above-presented picture, the treatment group scores are analyzed separately. *Table 3* shows the correlation between L2 proficiency and opening and closing elements in the treatment group.

Table 3. *Spearman rank order correlations between the elements of opening and closing and language proficiency in the treatment group*

	Language proficiency	
Elements of opening and closing	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**
Treatment group		
Number of post-openings	.32*	.36*
Shutting down the topic	.14	.24
Pre-closings	.22	.08

*p < .05

The scores of the treatment group in the pre- and post-test (*Table 3*) are similar to those displayed in *Table 2*. That is, the use of post-opening elements remained challenging for students with lower L2 proficiency after the treatment. This indicates that the treatment was not intensive and long enough to provide sufficient input and time for these learners to develop their knowledge of post-openings.

6.3 Effects of explicit teaching on students' awareness to pragmatic violations

In order to answer the question to what extent the treatment was effective in raising students' awareness to pragmatic violations, the DRT scores of the treatment and the control group are separated and compared statistically using a t-test. *Table 4* shows the mean and standard deviation for each item type in the treatment and control group, as well as the t-test results with the significant results highlighted.

Table 4. *T-test values for discourse rating task variables in the treatment and control group*

Item type	Treatment group		Control group		t-value
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	
Pragmatics sum	6.84	1.55	6.21	1.32	1.76
Grammar	5.38	3.38	6.94	2.77	*- 2.02**
No mistake	3.87	3.78	2.29	3.61	1.76
General pragmatic	7.37	2.97	5.97	2.78	*1.99**
Opening - Closing	7.47	2.06	6.25	2.27	*2.40**

*p < .05

The figures in *Table 4* show that the difference between the performance of the treatment and control group is significant in three cases. The highest significance is observed in the case of opening and closing items: the treatment group outperformed the control group significantly, suggesting that the treatment indeed had an effect on the students regarding these two speech acts. This verifies the second hypothesis.

Treatment group participants also performed significantly better on items with general pragmatic violations. This suggests that the treatment was successful in raising participants' awareness to pragmatic issues such as politeness, appropriateness, and stylistic differences. I consider this a very important result. Although the main focus of the treatment was the speech acts of openings and closings, the overall goal was to raise students' awareness to pragmatic issues, and not just to provide information on specific speech acts. The only surprising result in this case is why the t-test did not uncover a significant difference in the category of *Pragmatics sum*, which is the compilation of general pragmatic items and the opening-closing category.

Oddly, the t-value is negative in the case of grammar mistake items, meaning that the control group performed significantly better in this category, identifying the grammatical violations more successfully than the treatment group. The reason for this may be that because of the five-week instruction in pragmatic issues, treatment group students were prone to searching for pragmatic violations even in cases where their task was to identify an incorrect past tense. The control group students, who had not received training in pragmatics prior to filling in the discourse rating task, must have been more attuned to discovering grammatical violations in the dialogues.

6.4 The effect of the treatment on students' speech act production

Table 5 presents the statistical analysis of the results concerning the differences between pre- and post-treatment performance.

Table 5. *Pre- and post-test performance in the treatment and control group*

Elements of opening and closings	The difference between pre- and post-test[1]	
	t-value	Significance
Treatment group		
Greeting	0.00	1.00
Post-openings	2.82	0.00*
Shutting down the topic	1.66	0.10
Pre-closings	2.54	0.01*
Leave-taking	0.00	1.00
Control group		
Greeting	1.45	0.16
Post-openings	2.77	0.09
Shutting down the topic	-2.32	0.03*
Pre-closings	1.42	0.17
Leave-taking	0.00	1.00

[1]Apart from the category of post-openings, i.e. for the dummy-variables, t-test for paired sample was used. In the case of post-openings Friedman non-parametric test was applied.
$p < .05$

As for the treatment group, students used significantly more post-opening and pre-closing elements after the treatment period. These results indicate that the treatment was indeed effective in this respect. The lack of significant differences concerning shutting down the topic might be accountable to the fact that during the treatment phase the teaching of shutting down the topic had not received as much emphasis as the teaching of pre-closing elements. In hindsight, we became aware that relatively few instances were created when the topic itself had to be shut down.

Regarding the control group, no changes were expected, as students in this group did not undergo the treatment. However, concerning the shutting down of the topic, the difference was significant. As *Table 5* shows, students' performance was actually worse on the post-test than on the pre-test. This might indicate that when teaching lacks awareness-raising activities, performance may become inconsistent. On some occasions students might even perform better. However, this performance cannot be transferred to other situations, which underlines the importance of instruction in pragmatics.

7 Qualitative analysis of students' speech act production

7.1 Students' production of openings and closings in the pre-test

Opening exchanges are present in all the dialogues and there are no cases of opting out. Most students used the informal variation *Hi!* or *Hello!*, which is an appropriate choice considering the rock concert situation. One surprising result is that the greetings and post-openings did not include colloquial phrases, such as *Hey (there)!* or *How is it going?*, which are frequently used in the US corpus. I had expected the occurrence of these phrases because students mentioned in the follow-up study how they are engaged in activities such as talking to foreigners or watching subtitled movies.

There are some dialogues where the opening adjacency pair is considered pragmatically incorrect. These utterances contain greetings that are incorrect for the situation. They are stylistically inappropriate, such as saying *Good evening!* or *Good morning!*, as these phrases are regarded too formal for the informal encounter presented in the situation. The latter one (*Good morning!*) also poses temporal problems, as we assume that rock concerts rarely happen in the morning.

The pre-test role-plays offer few cases of complete openings. Post-openings posed considerable difficulty for the participants. In several dialogues, the post-openings are missing completely. In other instances, one of the participants initiates a post-opening exchange, but does not receive a response from the partner. In a few cases where the post-openings are pragmatically inappropriate, the opening sequence of the dialogue is very abrupt and would certainly be considered rude in real-life settings, such as in this example:

> Bogi: Hi! *Who are you?*
> Kati: Hello! I'm English festival designer and I … and I'm [pause] and I'm
> searching for a Hungarian rock group and I could pay much money for a good group.

The majority of students used a terminal pair at the end of their conversations and this last part of the closing sequence did not present difficulty for them. There are few cases of opting out. In all but seven cases the terminal exchanges contain the phrases *Bye* or *Goodbye*. In a few instances, participants closed the conversation with more varied choices of terminal exchanges, such as *See you (soon)!* or *See you later!* Closings that were overwhelmingly present in my US corpus, such as *Have a nice day!* or *Nice talking to you* were non-existent

in the student sample. As in the case of openings, I was surprised that the pre-closings and closings did not include colloquial phrases, such as *Cheers* or *Cheerio*. There are two instances where the terminal exchanges produced by students are considered pragmatically inappropriate because a student closes the conversation with *Hello*, which is an example of negative transfer and a common problem for Hungarian EFL learners.

Most students shut down the topic by exchanging phone numbers and arranging meetings. Pre-closings typically contain the phrases *OK*, *Thanks*, or *Thank you* and are present in many conversations. Pre-closings are the most problematic element for the participants. In several cases students had considerable trouble getting out of the conversation without sounding rude (cf. Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991), as signified by long pauses, hesitation, and at times chaotic closing exchanges, as in the next example:

> Orsi: And, it'd great and eh … eh … [pause] Have you got a telephone number?
> Móni: Yes, I have. 456234.
> Orsi: *Oh. Thank you. And I'm very happy. I ... eh ... eh ...* [pause] *Okay ... eh ... so eh ... goodbye.*
> Móni: Goodbye.

The participants successfully shut down the topic when Orsi asks for Móni's phone number. They are both ready to terminate the exchange, but because of their insufficient knowledge of pre-closings, Orsi's closing utterance becomes rather long and awkward and Móni is unable to come to her rescue. Móni's readiness to close the conversation is evident when she eagerly responds to Orsi's adjacency pair initiation and terminates the exchange.

7.3 The effect of pragmatic training on students' speech act production

Post-test dialogues showed considerable improvement compared to their pre-test counterparts. I observed fewer instances of communication breakdown and usage of the mother tongue in order to ask for help. Participants improved in responding to initiations as well. They were also more relaxed during the recordings, creating more lengthy utterances and using more humor than in the pre-test. I attribute these improvements to the fact that participants were more familiar with the nature of the task. Treatment group participants, however, showed greater improvement in their production of the two speech acts than their control group peers. Their openings and closings in the post-test were more complete and they displayed more variety.

As for greeting exchanges, I did not uncover a noteworthy difference in stylistic variation between the pre- and post-test. Most participants opened conversations using *Hello* and *Hi*. This result is not surprising after concluding that students' usage of greeting exchanges was satisfactory in the pre-test. Also, due to the assumption that students are familiar with greeting exchanges, the treatment tasks concentrated more on producing complete openings, learning post-openings, and responding appropriately to opening initiations.

My analysis shows that treatment group students' usage of post-openings is more developed in the post-test interactions than in the pre-test. This improvement was both in quantity and quality. I observed more conversations with complete openings and there were very few instances of inappropriate post-openings, providing for more polite and less abrupt opening sequences, as in this dialogue:

> Péter: Hello. Nice to meet you. My name is Peter.
> Attila: Hello. I am Attila. How are you?
> Péter: Fine, thanks, and you?
> Attila: Eh, fine.

As for terminal exchanges, I did not uncover any considerable difference in stylistic variation between the pre- and post-test. In all but four cases participants closed the conversation with *Bye* or *Goodbye*. The welcome exceptions are identical to the pre-test ones, such as *See you (soon)!* or *See you later!* These results suggest that participants were already aware of the necessity of these exchanges and the treatment did not alter this picture significantly. Also, the treatment tasks may not have devoted enough attention to teaching more varied terminal pairs. As for students' shutting down the topic in the interactions, I did not discover any major improvement in the post-test. A possible reason for this is that the treatment did not place as much emphasis on the teaching of shutting down the topic as on the teaching of pre-closing elements.

My analysis of the post-test role-plays indicates that students' performance regarding pre-closings underwent tremendous improvement. This is a welcome result and points to the success of the treatment in this respect. On the one hand, pre-closings increased in number, which resulted in smoother and less abrupt closing exchanges. While complete closings were scarce in the pre-test sample, they were present in many treatment group students' dialogues in the post-test. On the other hand, there was a much greater variety in pre-closings. Whereas in the pre-test they were restricted to *OK*, *Thanks*, or *Thank you*, I observed the occurrence of

several other phrases in the post-test, which students derived from the treatment. Consider these exchanges:

> Adrienn: Oh, thank you very much. Eh, *sorry, I'd love to continue this conversation but I will be late.*
> Réka: OK, no problem.
> Adrienn: Bye.
> Réka: Bye.

> Kata: So, thank you very much.
> Zsuzsa: *It was nice talking to you.*
> Kata: I will give you a ring too.
> Zsuzsa: Goodbye.
> Kata: Goodbye.

Similarly to House (1996), I noticed that responding to the communication partner's initiation still remained problematic in many cases even after the explicit training. Consider the next dialogue, in which Ákos initiates two pre-closings, but Márton is unable to respond to these utterances appropriately.

> Ákos: OK. It was nice to meet you.
> Márton: *Yeah.*
> Ákos: I'd better not take up any more of your time.
> Márton: *Oh. Me too.*
> Ákos: Eh ... goodbye.
> Márton: Goodbye.

8 Follow-up study on pragmatics instruction in the EFL classroom

The follow-up study revealed some issues that could not have been otherwise detected. The classroom observations showed that teachers facilitated the treatment tasks to the best of their knowledge, striving to convey the necessary pragmatic information. The student questionnaires and the teacher interviews revealed that participants had positive attitudes to the treatment and they considered the tasks relevant and useful. The instances where respondents brought up criticism about the tasks or the role-plays were valuable sources of feedback for the researchers, as they highlighted some shortcomings of task design. Responses concerning pragmatics instruction underlined the importance of this area and revealed teachers' commitment to facilitate the development of students' communicative and pragmatic competence.

I can also conclude that students' attitude towards learning English is positive. Several of them made comments about how they consider English useful and take pleasure in learning it. Most of them are motivated to reach a high level of L2 proficiency and they take an active role in selecting the activities outside the classroom that assist them in reaching this goal. Many students do not treat English as a subject, but something that is useful and needed for their future and their teachers are striving to equip them to reach their goals.

9 Summary of findings

The aim of my dissertation was to research the teachability of pragmatic competence in the Hungarian EFL context, focusing on how to open and close conversations. First, I examined the conversational input in two EFL coursebook series regarding openings and closings. The results indicated that most conversations in the coursebooks were incomplete, suggesting that the main purpose of the dialogues is not to provide realistic conversational input but to present new grammar. The majority of openings and closings were partial and one-way, lacking post-openings, shutting down the topic, and pre-closings. Most differences between the two series were discovered concerning the number of dialogues and the explicit teaching of pragmatic competence. The statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between the number of dialogues, openings, and closings in the two series. The coursebook study pointed out the importance of complementing coursebooks with additional materials as well as providing more explicit pragmatic input for the students.

Second, the main line of investigation centered around a five-week pragmatic treatment program, focusing on the effect of the treatment on students' pragmatic awareness and speech act production. The correlation analysis revealed that students used significantly more post-opening and pre-closing elements after the treatment period. The analysis of the DRT confirmed that students' awareness of pragmatic violations increased due to the treatment. The qualitative analysis concluded that the pragmatic training program had beneficial effects on students' production of openings and closings, indicating that the treatment was successful in improving students' production of post-openings and pre-closings, both in quantity and quality. These results verified the hypothesis proposing that as a result of the training, students will use more appropriate opening and closing elements in the post-tests and will display an increased awareness toward pragmatic violations. Greeting exchanges, shutting down the topic, and terminal pairs showed no significant improvement after the training, possibly due to two reasons: that students already possessed sufficient

knowledge of them before the intervention and that the training did not devote enough attention to these issues.

Third, I examined the relationship between pragmatic competence and foreign language proficiency, namely the effect L2 proficiency has on students' production of openings and closings. The correlation analysis showed a significant relationship between students' overall L2 proficiency and their pragmatic competence. This finding verifies the hypothesis which claims that students' L2 proficiency will positively correlate with their pragmatic competence, more specifically their appropriate use of openings and closings and their perception of pragmatic violations. The data also indicate that the use of post-opening elements remained challenging for students with lower L2 proficiency after the treatment, possibly due to the fact that the treatment was not effective enough to provide sufficient input and time for these learners to practice post-openings.

Fourth, I conducted a follow-up study aiming to find out how the treatment tasks were implemented in the schools and to explore teachers' and students' views about the treatment and pragmatic competence as well as gaining insight into general classroom issues. The study revealed that participants had positive attitudes to the treatment and they considered the tasks relevant and useful.

This study has its limitations. As the project was designed as a quasi-experiment, there were some variables that I could not completely control. I attempted to select similar schools, teachers, and students, yet there may be some differences I am unaware of. Furthermore, there may have been more variation in teaching methods and the implementation of the treatment tasks that the classroom observations did not reveal. I am also conscious of the fact that having used different role-plays in the pre- and post-test might have had an effect on the results. Furthermore, participating in the pre-test may have influenced students' performance on the second occasion.

Few research projects have been carried out in the area of pragmatics in the Hungarian EFL context. Although my dissertation attempted to fill this gap, there is still a significant area to cover in this field. Studies need to be conducted examining students' production of various speech acts. As my results pointed out, students may have varying degrees of difficulty with different aspects of pragmatic competence. Elicited speech production and needs analyses can help to uncover these areas. Finally, more thorough and long-term intervention would be needed to produce even more positive and possibly longer-lasting results.

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