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CHAPTER 5

Learners' pragmatics: potential causes of divergence¹

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Introduction

When interacting with people who are not native speakers of our language, we may notice that their pragmatic behavior does not always follow expected patterns. This may be true even if they are relatively advanced-level learners. There could be a number of reasons for this phenomenon, and we will explore five of them in this chapter. Take, for example, the relatively sensitive interaction between an advisor, a fluent speaker of English, and a graduate student who is an L2 speaker of English new in the target culture. Imagine that the student is in her advisor's office and she doesn't agree with the advisor's suggestions regarding the line-up of the classes she should take in the upcoming semester. Refusing the advisor's recommendation could be a frightening proposition and in this face-threatening situation the advisee's pragmatic skills become crucial for her academic success and for maintaining good rapport with her advisor. Research has shown that the speech of even advanced L2 speakers is found to differ from native speakers in ways that could be misleading to an advisor.²

We may wonder if learners – especially those living in the L2 community – are able to take advantage of their exposure to authentic language. Even without explicit instruction in pragmatics in the classroom, they might

¹ The term, *divergence* or *to diverge*, in this book is descriptive in nature. No pejorative connotation is attached to this term (as in for example, Barron (2003); Beebe and Giles (1984); Beebe and Zuengler (1983)).

² Bardovi-Harlig (2001); Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005).

eventually improve their pragmatic ability. However, if no formal instruction is provided, it is said to generally take at least 10 years in a **second-language** context (as opposed to a foreign-language context) to be able to use the language in a pragmatically nativelike manner.³ Even if learners are immersed in the L2 environment, it is possible that they are not exposed to enough – or appropriate kind of – language exposure. For instance, advising sessions are usually kept private and even if the student in the example above happened to overhear the same advisor with another student on a similar issue, that conversation might not provide the best language model for her due to the differences in relationship. Learners may not receive constructive feedback about their pragmatic language use. In addition, they are not always required or expected to use the language in a native-like manner.⁴ Indeed, pragmatic ability is one of the most complex and challenging aspects of communicative competence.

It may seem surprising, but learners might not always be striving for native-like pragmatic use. Research indicates that learners' sense of identity is intertwined with how they use the language, and for this reason they sometimes choose not to behave in a native-like fashion.⁵ It is also interesting to note that nonnative-like language use is not always seen as negative; it can be considered innovative, creative, or even charming. This is especially true if natives are willing to "cut learners some slack," rather than coming down hard on them for not performing in the expected way. The issue of who our learners are – namely, their cultural and social identity – needs to be taken into account in our teaching of pragmatics (see Chapters 6, 8, 12, 15 for more discussion on this issue).

Even so, there are cases in which nonnative-like pragmatic use can be misinterpreted and lead to unwanted consequences that could be avoided, which is why it is important to focus on teaching pragmatics in the classroom. Language teachers can support learners when they attempt to produce pragmatically appropriate language and interpret meaning as intended by others in the L2 community. What keeps learners from understanding cultural norms as they are expressed in the L2? What prevents learners from using language exactly as they intend to communicate their meaning?

In this chapter we will look at five common causes of learners' divergence from native-like pragmatic language use. The first four reasons for pragmatic divergence can lead to *pragmatic failure* and are related primarily to cognitive

³ Cohen and Olshtain (1993); Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985); Wolfson (1989).

⁴ Barron (2003); Iino (1996); Kasper and Rose (2002); Siegal and Okamoto (2003).

⁵ For further reading about this topic, see for example, Ishihara (2006, 2008c); LoCastro (2003); and Siegal (1996).

functioning in language learning and use. Here you might notice that they can have some overlap with each other, as learners sometimes have difficulties in multiple areas. Also, it may be difficult to pinpoint exact source(s) of an instance of pragmatic divergence by just analyzing surface manifestations. The fifth category is distinctively different in that it concerns cases where learners are aware of the pragmatic norms and linguistically capable of producing native-like forms, but make a deliberate choice not to use them on a particular occasion.

Five common causes of learners' divergence from pragmatic norms⁶

Pragmatic divergence due to insufficient pragmatic ability:

- 1 negative transfer of pragmatic norms;
- 2 limited grammatical⁷ ability in the L2;
- 3 overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms;
- 4 effect of instruction or instructional materials.

Pragmatic divergence due to learner choice:

- 5 Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms.

Divergence due to insufficient pragmatic ability

Sometimes learners may simply not know what is typically said on certain occasions and as a result, inadvertently produce divergent language forms. Or, because their pragmatic awareness has gaps, they decide to take a guess according to what they think most speakers would say, which turns out to be not quite typical in that particular context. On other occasions, they may rely on the sociocultural norms and language behavior associated with another community with which they are familiar. Learners may also obtain material from the teacher or from language textbooks which mislead them, resulting in a cultural *faux pas* when they use it in authentic interaction. So, a partial lapse in pragmatic awareness, insensitivity to pragmatic norms

⁶ See the references in each individual section below.

⁷ Grammar refers broadly to formal linguistic knowledge that includes not only syntax and morphosyntax, but also lexis and phonology (Canale and Swain 1980; Kasper and Rose 2002).

of the L2, or insufficient linguistic ability may very often be the reason for learners' pragmatic failure.

In the following, we will look at each of these sub-categories in order to identify a potential cause or combination of causes of pragmatic divergence. This needs assessment will assist you in making an educated guess as to why students fail to communicate what they intend to convey, or why they deliberately diverge from the range of L2 norms. Knowing about the sources of pragmatic divergence is one of the first steps towards designing effective pragmatics instruction.

1 Negative transfer of pragmatic norms

When learners do not know pragmatic norms in the target language or when they assume that their own pragmatic norms apply in the given situation in the target culture, they may consciously or unconsciously depend on the norms that apply for that situation when using their first, dominant, or some other language. This influence of the learners' knowledge of other languages and cultures on their pragmatic use and development on the use of the L2 is referred to as *pragmatic transfer*.⁸ Although pragmatic transfer may produce positive results, when learners' pragmatic norms are similar and applicable to the L2 (referred to as *positive transfer*), our focus here on divergence will have us focus just on what has been referred to in the literature as *negative transfer*.⁹

Let us take the case of a Korean learner of Japanese who receives a compliment on her class presentation from her friend. Although she is not sure of what to say in response in Japanese, she depends on her first-language-based intuition and says an equivalent of "no, that's not true" in Japanese. This is likely to be perceived as an appropriately modest behavior in the target culture where the pragmatic norm is similar to that in the learner's L1.

In a community where the L2 norms are quite different, however, the transfer of behavior consistent with L1 norms may cause awkwardness, misunderstanding, or even a temporary communication breakdown. This is especially the case when the listener is not familiar with learners' language or culture. Let us suppose that the above-mentioned Korean learner, speaking English this time, responds to the same friend's compliment saying "no, that's not true" in English. This language behavior may make it sound as if she were flatly rejecting or questioning the peer's evaluation, and hence

⁸ Kasper (1992).

⁹ The term, *transfer*, in this book is descriptive in nature. It is equivalent to *L1 influence*, a phrase intended to be seen as non-pejorative.

create a somewhat awkward situation or even sound insulting. An ESL teacher with knowledge of Korean pragmatics would most likely understand the source of this response to the compliment, but other listeners may be mystified or offended.

The following are some more examples of negative transfer of L1 pragmatic norms in spoken interactions with members of the L2 community:

- An American hitchhiking in Israel feels the need to entertain the driver by talking non-stop after being given a ride, whereas, depending on the driver, it may be preferable for the hitchhikers to remain completely silent unless asked a question.
- An American asks an Arab married man in Gaza to say how many children he has and to describe each one. The Arab may feel it is a jinx on his family if he provides that information.
- When invited to a birthday party of a friend in Mexico, an American says precisely why he cannot make it, rather than saying he will make an effort to be there, which is a typical refusal in Mexico.¹⁰

If the reason for learners' pragmatic failure is transfer from another language, you may wish to incorporate some awareness-raising tasks in your pragmatics instruction. Your message to students in such tasks would be that what is appropriate in one culture may or may not be so in the second. For example, in teaching ESL learners how to give and respond to compliments, learners' knowledge of their L1 can be used:

What do people say in your country when they give and receive compliments on a nice-looking possession or a presentation that is well done? Provide a literal translation of some examples.¹¹

This activity is likely to help make similarities and differences across the learners' cultures more apparent, effectively demonstrating the risk involved in inadvertently transferring L1 pragmatic norms into the second. An Arabic-speaking student commented; "Even if I know it [how to give compliments] in my native language, if I translate it, it won't work."¹² It is this awareness of pragmatic norms that would most likely prevent negative pragmatic transfer.

¹⁰ This example comes from Félix-Brasdefer (2003).

¹¹ Adapted from Ishihara (2003a).

¹² Ishihara (2004: 54).

2 Limited L2 grammatical ability

Learners' grammatical control and pragmatic ability are not necessarily on a par with each other. Learners who can understand and produce highly accurate language forms from a grammatical point of view are not necessarily able to use language in a pragmatically appropriate manner. Even if they have flawless control of grammar, they may fail to understand the listener's intended meaning. Conversely, learners who demonstrate very little grammatical accuracy may still be able to interpret messages as intended and produce pragmatically appropriate utterances.¹³

Nonetheless, learners' grammatical ability may well have an impact on their L2 pragmatic competence. They may be able to comprehend others' messages better when these messages use the grammar that they best understand. Likewise, they are most likely to produce structures that are within their grammatical control. For example, learners whose grammatical ability is limited to simple sentences may understand single-clause requests such as *Could I use your pen for a second?* But if they are yet to master compound sentences, they may not be able to comprehend accurately or produce bi-clausal requests (e.g. *Would you mind if . . . or I was wondering if . . .*).¹⁴

So, if learners' underdeveloped grammatical ability is a cause of pragmatic failure, teachers might decide to include some grammar-focused activities. In teaching bi-clausal requests, for example, it would be important to direct learners' attention to the **form** through either learner discovery or more directive teaching. The subjunctive use of the verb and modal in the *if*-clause, for instance,

Would you mind if I borrowed your notes? or

I was wondering if you could possibly lend me your car for a few minutes.

would need to be explicitly addressed. At the same time, it is important to link learners' knowledge of the **meaning** of these constructions, as well as the **use** (when and why they are used). This form–meaning–use approach is advocated in a well-known grammar reference.¹⁵

Form: subjunctive form in the *if*-clause.

Meaning: the meaning of the verbs *mind* and *wonder*, the intended request these formulaic structures convey.

¹³ For an example of such a learner, see Schmidt (1983).

¹⁴ See Bardovi-Harlig (1999, 2003), and Takahashi (2001, 2005), for further discussion.

¹⁵ Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999).

Use: the level of politeness, formality, and directness of these expressions; the reason why these expressions were used in terms of the speaker–listener relationship and other situational context.

In this teachers' resource book, we suggest sample grammar-focused activities that have bearings on pragmatics for a variety of grammatical structures.

3 Overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms

When L2 speakers develop a hypothesis about L2 grammar, they are known to *overgeneralize* a certain rule to other language situations where the rule does not apply.¹⁶ For instance, the general rule of forming past tense verbs by adding *-ed* is often incorrectly applied to irregular verbs (e.g., *eated*, *taked*, and *telled*) due to the function of overgeneralization.

We can draw a parallel here in the area of L2 pragmatics. When learners have only a rudimentary understanding of the target culture and the nature of its pragmatic norms, they may depend on their preconceived notions about L2 norms and wrongly apply them to different contexts. Pragmatic failure may occur as a result. In such a case, the cause of the pragmatic failure stems from *overgeneralization* of pragmatic norms of the L2, which may draw on preconceived cultural stereotypes as well. Learners could be neglecting the social, geographical, and situational variability in the L2. For example, apologizing by simply saying *I'm sorry* or *Excuse me* works in some situations but not in others, depending on the listener and magnitude of the offense. Learners may induce from their own intercultural experiences that, for instance, Asian language speakers tend to be more indirect in their use of language compared to English speakers, and may apply this stereotypical notion inappropriately to another situation in which Asian language speakers would indeed speak rather directly.

Misconceptions can occur at a more linguistic level as well. Learners may inappropriately associate linguistic forms with a given level of politeness or formality. For example, they might look at a range of request expressions and generate a hypothesis that the longer an expression is, the more polite or formal the expression must be. So, since the expression, *May I . . . ?*, is relatively short, they inappropriately associate the structure with extreme informality, when it actually implies greater formality.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Selinker (1972).

¹⁷ This example comes from Matsuura (1998).

One way to support learners in avoiding such overgeneralizations would be to present a general pragmatic norm and then a few counter-examples. Here is an example of an exercise on refusals in Japanese from the web-based materials.¹⁸

Situation: Your roommate is a good friend of yours, but she sometimes asks you to loan her some money and does not necessarily pay it back promptly. Today again, she asks you to lend her 3,000 yen. Because she has not yet paid you back from the last few times you loaned her money, you want to decline her request this time. Besides that, you don't really have extra money you can give her at this point.

Here is a sample dialogue between two female friends as it was presented to learners in the web-based unit. This dialogue was elicited through a role-play and reflects authentic language use. By attending to the refusal strategies in **bold** below, you may notice how indirect and polite B's responses are in general. Given that learners are likely to have generalized that refusals in Japanese are more indirect than in English, this example would be consistent with that generalization.

A: ねえ、みか、ちょっとお金貸してもらえないかな、今日。"Hey, Mika, can you lend me some money today?"

B: えー、いくら？ "Um, how much?"

A: あの、3000円なんだけど。"Well, 3,000 yen."

B: うーん、今月はね、私もちょっと厳しいの。"Well, my budget is a little tight this month, too."

A: うーん、そこをなんとかならないかな。"Well, can you help me at all somehow?"

¹⁸ Ishihara and Cohen (2004: available online). The entire exercise, as well as audio files and transcripts for both dialogues, is available at: <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/japanese/Refusals/Ex2.html>. See also Chapter 11 for more about this curriculum.

B: えー、でも先月の2000円もまだ返してきてないじゃない。"Well, but you haven't paid the 2,000 yen back from last month yet either."

A: うん、そうだったね。来週、ほら、あの、お給料入るから、全部一緒に払えるから。だめかな。"You are right. Well, I'll get paid next week, so I can pay everything back at that time."

B: うーん、ともこさんには聞いてみた？ "Well, have you asked Tomoko?"

A: あー、そうだね、聞いてみるよ。"Ah, that's right. I'll ask her."

B: うん、その方が嬉しいな。"Yeah, I'd be happier that way."

A: うん、わかった。じゃあ。"All right. See you, then."

B: ごめんね。"I'm sorry,"

A: いいよ、いいよ、気にしないで。"That's OK. Never mind."

The exercise goes on to present another sample dialogue, this time with two male speakers. Again, this example was obtained through a role-play but the exchange reflects authentic language use. Note how the refusals are presented in a direct fashion (in **bold**).

A: あ、けんじ、ちょっと頼みがあるんだけどさ。"Oh, Kenji, I have a favor."

B: えー、何、何？ "Oh, what is it?"

A: あの、3000円貸してくれない？ "Um, can you lend me 3,000 yen?"

B: え、また？ だってさ、この間貸したけどさ、返ってきてないよ。"What, again? I lent you some the other day, but you haven't paid me back yet."

A: うん、返すからさ、月末には。"Yeah, I'll pay you back at the end of the month."

B: いやー、そんなこと言っておまえ、いつも返してくれないじゃん。"No way, you say that, but you never pay me back."

A: いやー、返すよ、ほらこの間返したじゃん、一回。"Oh, no, I will pay you back. See, I paid you back the other day."

B: いや、うそ、うそ。ちょっとだめだよ。だって全然返してくれないんだもん。
 “No, way, you liar! [lit. that is a lie.] I can't. You never pay it back.”

A: いやー、困ってるんだよ。頼むからさ、今回だけ。“Well, I'm in trouble. Please. Just this time.”

B: だめ、だめ、もう黙になるからね。だめ、だめ。“No, no. You'd always say that. No, no!”

You may have noticed that speaker B even characterizes his friend's utterance as a lie (although doing so has less of a shock value in Japanese than in English)! This particular sample could work as a counter-example to the learners' generalization that Japanese speakers tend to be indirect. Learners can be asked to compare these two dialogues and consider what factors have led to the pragmatic differences. They may notice the impact of gender and perhaps also personal speech styles. So, showing contrastive examples such as these helps to illustrate the variability found in authentic discourse and why learners' dependence on generalizations may be a bit risky, however convenient it is to be able to simplify speech patterns.

4 Effect of instruction or instructional materials¹⁹

Learners' pragmatic divergence can sometimes be attributed to the effect of the instruction or the instructional materials, rather than being a result of insufficient pragmatic awareness or incomplete pragmatic control on the learners' part. So what distinguishes this category from the three previous ones is that the responsibility for the divergence actually lies with the instruction, not with the learner. It is as if divergence is simply “waiting to happen.”

For example, classroom instruction may put an emphasis on having learners produce complete sentences. However, sometimes when learners apply this pattern to real-life conversations, the communication is viewed as inefficient, irritating, or lacking tact. It in fact violates the *principle of economy* where repetitive information tends to be omitted in natural conversation.²⁰ For example, when asked, “Have you already had a chance to go canoeing on the beautiful Lake of the Isles this summer?” a learner replies,

¹⁹ Selinker (1972) referred to teacher- or materials-induced errors as *transfer of training*.

²⁰ Thomas (1983).

“Yes. I have already had a chance to go canoeing on the beautiful Lake of the Isles this summer.” This response would show up as too lengthy and redundant in the spoken discourse.

Similarly, generalizations found in instructional materials may be misleading. For instance, a cultural note in a language textbook that says that Americans tend to speak directly may induce learners' overgeneralization of this tendency. Learners may assume that there are few (or no) indirect expressions in English.²¹ Such a misconception neglects the complexity of pragmatic norms in a language, and disregards how much language can vary across situations. So a learner who remembers this misleading piece of information could possibly ask too direct a question in the situation of getting to know a colleague at work. For example, if that learner turns to this colleague and asks, “What is your religion?” the American listener's interpretation might be that the learner is being too direct and personal.

One way for teachers to avoid negative consequences of instruction itself would be to check just how well what is taught reflects the reality found in different situations. While the instructional materials may not be “wrong,” they might be purposefully simplified to accommodate learners' levels of proficiency. You may wish to make sure that the information presented is not misleading. If it is, you may choose to avoid or adapt it accordingly. It may also be beneficial to point out to your students how textbook exercises may use language in a way that is not consistent with the pragmatic norms of the target community.

In the above example, we discussed a case of learners instructed to produce complete sentences for the sake of structural practice. For pragmatics-focused instruction, teachers might use transcripts of formal and informal exchanges and have learners analyze how frequently complete and incomplete responses are chosen. The class could also discuss what pragmatic effects both types of sentences have in the particular contexts. Depending on the context, complete sentences could be interpreted as anywhere from appropriately formal/well-articulated to inefficient, repetitive, tactless, or even rude or sarcastic. Similarly, incomplete sentences may sound appropriately informal/efficient, uncooperative in conversation, or overly informal. Learners can be encouraged to consider these pragmatic effects in interpreting and using complete and incomplete utterances. This awareness-raising task would help guard against the inappropriate use of instructional content by allowing learners to grasp pragmatic meaning more accurately and make a more informed decision as to how they choose to express themselves.

²¹ Ishihara (2009).

Pragmatic divergence due to the learners' choice

Thus far we have looked at causes of pragmatic failure or nonnative-like pragmatic behavior that are the result of gaps in basic language proficiency or in knowledge about L2 pragmatics. What the instances of divergence that we have looked at so far have in common is that they are *unintended*. But what about instances where learners deliberately choose to resist pragmatic norms for the community? Let us now take a look at this type of learner behavior.

5 Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms

As discussed above, another possible cause for learners' pragmatic divergence may be their sense of resistance, or their intentional divergence from the perceived range of pragmatic norms of the L2. As you may well imagine, learners are not a blank slate free from preconceptions of the world. Rather, they are social beings replete with their own cultural values, beliefs, and worldview. Their subjective disposition – social identity, attitudes, personal beliefs, and principles – is likely to influence how they present themselves in their L2 pragmatic behavior. On the one hand, they may adjust to L2 norms so as to communicate effectively or attain social approval in the community. On the other, they may deliberately diverge from L2 norms to accentuate their linguistic differences.²² They may even elect to isolate themselves from the L2 group and to maintain their subjectivity (e.g., their cultural identity, personal principles, sense of value, and integrity that were in conflict with a perceived L2 norm). Learners may refuse to learn certain language forms that conflict with their own subjective position (in which case, the cause of their pragmatic divergence would be insufficient pragmatic ability). However, on other occasions learners may choose – as a way of asserting their subjectivity – not to use the forms that they have control over linguistically and are capable of producing (see Chapter 6 for more theoretical discussion of this pragmatic choice).²³

This issue of learner resistance has important pedagogical implications for language teaching. First of all, we need to make sure that teachers do not impose the adoption of L2 norms on learners. This could be interpreted as cultural imposition or exercise of power.²⁴ It is the prerogative of the learners

²² See the Speech Accommodation Theory (Beebe and Giles 1984).

²³ Examples of such learner behavior can be found in LoCastro (1998); Ishihara (2008c), (in press, *b*); Ishihara and Tarone (2009); and Siegal (1996), among others.

²⁴ Kasper and Rose (2002).

to decide when they will accommodate to the perceived range of pragmatic norms and to what extent they will do so under each set of circumstances. So rather than attempting to eliminate learners' resistance, teachers could use culturally sensitive instructional strategies.

For example, a learner of Japanese in a research study chose to use the higher level of *keigo* (exalted and humble forms of honorifics) in casually conversing with a much younger employee, when he knew that he was not expected to use it at all. His rationale was that he believed in equality among all human beings and that he did not want to seem discourteous to anyone by using a less respectful speech style.²⁵ Thus, his personal beliefs and principles conflicted with what he knew as the pragmatic norm of behavior in the L2. This personal conflict caused him to deliberately diverge from the perceived norm. While our view would be that this learner's pragmatic choice deserves to be respected, we would then need to ensure that learners have *receptive* pragmatic skills so that they are able to recognize common interpretations of L2 pragmatic norms in the target community. With this particular learner, teachers could use the following discussion prompts for pragmatic awareness-raising:

What positive, negative, or neutral impression might your employee have of you and your speech style? How might s/he define his/her relationship with you as a result? What are some consequences – potential pros and cons of your developing this type of relationship with him/her?

In order to ensure that learners are able to *produce* the appropriate honorific forms in the Japanese language classroom, teachers could do so by asking learners:

What would most people in Japan say in this situation?

²⁵ Ishihara and Tarone (2009).

rather than:

What would you say in Japanese in this situation?

While the difference may strike you as subtle, in this way teachers could evade the issue of how learners personally choose to express themselves, while teaching the language-focused side of pragmatics (pragmalinguistics) – in this case, honorific forms. Similarly, learners' pragmatic choice would be evaluated in light of their *intention*, rather than how native-like it is. We will take a more in-depth look at the assessment issues in Chapters 14 and 15.

In any case, teachers can play an important role in helping learners to interpret the L2 as intended and express themselves as they please. Whether learners choose to conform to perceived native-speaker norms or diverge from them, it is important for language teachers to ensure that learners recognize the shared interpretation of their utterances in the community and potential *consequences* of their pragmatic behavior.²⁶ In the above example, most Japanese speakers do not use a higher level of *keigo* honorifics addressing a much younger employee in an informal setting. So the shared understanding of deliberately using them would be that the employer is being overly polite and perhaps a bit alienating, or sarcastic and playful. Or, if the employer is perceived as an L2 speaker not fully competent in the target language, the relationship may not be affected at all, or he may be seen as trying to be respectful in his own way. While accommodation to L2 norms may open doors to cultural integration, resisting L2 norms in a given situation may lead to alienation from the community (a negative repercussion), or freer expression of learners' cultural identity and negotiation of the community norms (positive consequences).²⁷

Discussion

In this chapter, we have explored potential causes of learners' pragmatic behavior that is different from L2 norms. When we encounter such behavior in the classroom, teachers of L2 pragmatics might first wish to differentiate between what is likely to be problematic and what is not. "Unproblematic"

²⁶ Siegal and Okamoto (2003).

²⁷ See further examples and interpretations in Ishihara (2006, 2008c).

behavior may not exactly correspond to what most target language speakers say, but is likely to communicate learners' intentions. So perhaps it is safe to leave this type of learners' pragmatic use alone. For example, although "I am Ken" on the phone is not exactly native-like, it is unlikely to cause offense for the listener especially if the speaker is viewed as a beginning language learner. On the other hand, potentially "problematic" language behavior is another type that tends to cause misunderstanding on the listeners' part, and thus, most likely warrants instruction. If the same learner on the phone goes on to say, "who are you?" in a rather sharp tone of voice, the likelihood that this sounds unpleasant to the listener increases. This may be when a teacher decides to intervene to teach a more pragmatically appropriate behavior.

Learners' potential pragmatic failure that is unintended can stem from their limited pragmatic and/or grammatical ability and can be attributed to several factors:

- inappropriate transfer of norms from another language;
- limited grammatical ability which precludes their understanding or producing native-like forms;
- their misapplication of what they think is a target pragmatic norm to a wrong context; and
- their obtaining misleading information from the teacher or the instructional materials about the pragmatic norms of the L2.

These factors are not mutually exclusive and can occur sometimes in combination. The causes of pragmatic divergence are not always crystal clear, and the teacher may need to observe learners further or ask them why they said what they said. In another case of pragmatic *choice*, even knowing pragmatic norms in the L2 community, learners may intentionally resist such perceived norms to assert their identity.

In any case, teachers conducting needs assessment – analyzing and identifying a potential reason or a combination of sources for learners' pragmatic divergence – may have a head start in effectively teaching and assessing learners' development of pragmatic skills. For instance, when the cause of a pragmatic error is learners' limited grammatical control, reinforcement of necessary structures would meet learners' needs more efficiently than revising pragmatic awareness that learners already have demonstrated. Teachers sensitive to learners' pragmatic choice might make their assessments based on how well learners' intended meaning is expressed rather than how native-like they sound (see Chapters 14 and 15 for more information). The following activity will show authentic examples of pragmatic divergence.