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Investigating Metapragmatic Information in Language Teachers' Books: A Case of Top Notch

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Abstract

Pragmatic aspect of second language (L2) as a component of communicative competence has recently received more attention. Many research studies have investigated the gap between native and nonnative speakers' command of L2 pragmatics. However, development of L2 pragmatics has been the focus of few studies. In this study, how coursebooks can help both nonnative teachers and learners develop L2 pragmatics was investigated. It was suggested that teachers' books can act as a medium for developing both language teachers and learners' L2 pragmatic competence. Therefore, one of the popular English coursebook series, *Top Notch* (1st and 2nd eds.) teachers' books, were examined in order to find instances of metapragmatic information. The results showed that, both editions provided metapragmatic information for teachers and that *Top Notch* second edition teachers' books provided more metapragmatic information than the first edition. The implications of such findings are discussed at the end of this paper.

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1. Introduction

It has long been established in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that the purpose of language learning must be the development of communicative competence (CC). Different scholars have explored the concept of CC and have identified its components (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983). In all the interpretations and models of CC, pragmatic competence is a firmly established component referred to by varied names. However, traditionally it is the grammatical or organizational component of CC which has received the greatest emphasis in second and foreign language classrooms, sometimes to the exclusion of other components. With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) and the recognition of the fact that language learning is far more than merely learning the system, other important factors involved in successful L2 learning were given emphasis. One of these factors was the study of the influence of context on the meaning of utterances and how language functions are expressed differently in different contexts (pragmatics).

Although today most of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/ English as a Second Language (ESL) coursebooks claim to follow the principles of CLT, the extent to which they reflect a balanced view of the components of CC needs to be investigated. Concerning the topic of pragmatics, the focus of many content analyses of ELT coursebooks has been how specific speech acts (e.g., requesting) are taught and covered in students' books (e.g., Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Delen & Tavi, 2010; Treerat, 2001). However, teachers' books have rarely been investigated to see how they can help teachers teach pragmatic aspects of second language more effectively. Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap by investigating the teachers' books of one ESL/EFL coursebook series to shed some light on how they can help teachers in teaching L2 pragmatics.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Coursebooks and Language Teachers

In the field of SLA, the use of coursebooks has been contentious with some researchers

supporting and considering them as playing positive roles in English language teaching (ELT) classes, and some having a skeptical view of them, making lists of their disadvantages. Crawford (2002) discussed the two conflicting views toward coursebooks and pointed out that the textbook market was still growing rapidly despite all the criticism directed to commercially-prepared materials. She concluded that this is because such criticism is also applicable to teacher-made materials. Thus, for her the question is how to use textbooks more effectively rather than whether to use them.

Coursebooks can definitely benefit both learners and teachers, and play important roles in ELT classrooms. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argued that coursebooks can act as "a vehicle for teacher and learner training" (p. 323). This function of coursebooks is particularly of importance in EFL settings and for non-native teachers who may not be as proficient as their native colleagues. In their comparison between native and non-native language teachers, Arva and Medgyes (2000), using self-reports and interviews, found that non-native teachers' command of vocabulary, pronunciation, and language use (in the sense of matching form and function in specific situations, i.e., pragmatics) was lagging behind native teachers.

It seems that for the time being, ELT coursebooks and materials are to a large extent an integral part of second and foreign language teaching programs, much like the way Sheldon (1988) sees them as "the invisible heart of any ELT program" (p. 237). Therefore, at least one aspect of improvement in L2 teaching and learning (especially in EFL contexts) is related to improving ELT coursebooks and materials. This justifies content analyses of contemporary coursebooks in order to find their strengths and weaknesses and make the findings available to materials developers and publishers to consider them in their future publications and to teachers to make more informed choices regarding the coursebook they pick for their specific context.

2.2. Interlanguage Pragmatics Studies

As discussed above, pragmatic competence as one aspect of CC has received more attention in recent years. The study of how L2 learners

acquire L2 pragmatics is referred to as Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP). In the area of ILP, as Kasper and Schmidt (1996) have pointed out, most of the studies have focused on the gap between nonnative speakers' and native speakers' knowledge of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (the product) and few studies have investigated how this knowledge is acquired (the process). An example of such studies is Trosborg's (1987) study of the comparison between Danish language learners and English native speakers in terms of using apology strategies. Using role plays, she elicited from the participants apologetic expressions in response to complaints. The results showed that nonnative English learners, in contrast to native English speakers, tended to acknowledge their responsibility for a problem much later in the conversation and that they attempted to do so only when they were explicitly faced with the evidence. Native speakers, however, acknowledged their responsibility early in the conversation by means of modality markers. In their review of studies in ILP, Kasper and Rose (1999) have also stated that although a great number of studies have been carried out in this area, most of them have addressed the issue of language use rather than development.

Recently, researchers have been attracted to the question of whether L2 pragmatics can be taught and if it is possible to teach L2 pragmatics, what the most effective way of doing it is. Schmidt (1990) extended his noticing theory to the learning of L2 pragmatics, contending that in order to learn L2 pragmatics, learners need to give conscious attention to the pragmatic features of language in the input. Kasper (1997) argued that, we cannot teach pragmatic competence because "competence" in essence is not teachable and that learners have to develop it. He continued to say that in fact, we do not need to teach pragmatics because, for the most part, L2 pragmatics can be developed through exposure and positive first language (L1) pragmatic transfer. However, Rose (2005), in his review of studies concerning the effect of L2 pragmatic instruction, discovered something else. The object of instruction in the studies that he reviewed included various aspects of L2 pragmatics, namely, speech acts, discourse markers, pragmatic routines, and pragmatic comprehension. Rose (2005) concluded that,

not only L2 pragmatics was teachable but also instruction resulted in better pragmatic performance than exposure alone.

Many studies have provided evidence of the usefulness of pragmatic instruction. For example, Martinez-Flor and Alcon (2007) found that, both implicit and explicit instruction had a positive effect on EFL learners' awareness of suggestions. Billmyer (1990) investigated the effect of instruction on EFL learners' realization strategies of complimenting and found evidence supporting the effect of L2 pragmatics instruction on more norm-appropriate communication with native speakers. Alcon and Pitarch (2010) examined the effect of instruction on learners' awareness of refusals strategies. Using interviews, the researchers put the participants in a situation in which they would refuse the requests made by the interviewer. Following the interview, the participants were asked to explain why they used such refusals strategies. Attention to refusals strategies was divided into linguistic, pragmalinguistic, and sociopragmatic aspects of language use. In the pre-test, the participants gave greatest attention to linguistic and then to sociopragmatic aspects. They were least attentive to the pragmalinguistic aspect of refusals. However, after instruction, they became much more sensitive to the pragmalinguistic aspect and gave greatest attention to the pragmalinguistic and then the sociopragmatic aspect of refusal strategies. Alcon and Pitarch (2010) concluded that instruction can draw learners' attention to pragmatic aspects of second language use. More recently, Nguyen, Pham, and Pham (2012) investigated the relative efficacy of explicit and implicit L2 pragmatic instruction in the speech act of constructive criticism. In their longitudinal study, they found that the participants in the explicit group outperformed those of the implicit group. However both of the experimental groups (implicit and explicit) scored significantly higher than the control group suggesting that instruction made a difference in their pragmatic competence.

Considering the important role of EFL/ESL coursebooks in L2 teaching and the recent attention to the development of learners' L2 pragmatics through instruction, briefly discussed above, it seems reasonable to expect coursebooks to cater for L2 pragmatic

development of learners along with the great emphasis they usually put on developing learners' linguistic competence. Therefore, a number of studies have investigated the amount and the quality of pragmatic information in ELT coursebooks to see to what extent they can help learners develop their L2 pragmatic competence. The following is a review of such content analysis studies of ELT coursebooks.

2.3. Review of Content Analysis Studies

As mentioned above, most of the content analysis studies of coursebooks deal with how different speech acts are presented in various coursebooks at different levels. Speech acts are traditionally considered as the main issue when talking about L2 pragmatics. For instance, Boxer and Pickering (1995), in their qualitative study, examined seven ELT coursebooks that were well-known for adopting functional syllabi in order to see how the speech act of complaint was presented in them. They found that most of the coursebooks examined focused on direct complaining strategies, whereas instances of indirect complaints (defined in their study as complaining about somebody or something not present, which has the potential for building or consolidating social relationships) were scarce. They suggested that this could be due to the coursebook writers' over-reliance on their intuition in writing dialogues and they proposed that more authentic data based on spontaneous speech be used.

Recently, Ekin (2013) conducted a content analysis study of speech act of suggestion in ten coursebooks. He adapted the taxonomy of suggestion strategies from Martinez-Flor (2004) that included direct, conventionalized, and indirect realization strategies. The results showed that 70% of all the suggestion strategies in the coursebooks were conventionalized (e.g., using the modal 'should' in suggesting). Although there was some variety in realization strategies in the coursebooks examined, Ekin (2013) argued that this is not sufficient, since learners need metapragmatic information- information about the pragmatic aspects of language-as to when and where to use particular strategies for suggestion. Metapragmatic information, nevertheless, was missing from most of the

coursebooks examined. This was in line with the findings of Vellenga (2004) who found that there was a scarcity of metapragmatic information in most of ESL/EFL coursebooks she examined.

In a qualitative study, Treerat (2001) investigated the speech act of request in three ESL/EFL coursebooks at intermediate level. She had two research questions. First, whether the three coursebooks prepared learners linguistically to use a variety of forms to match the function of requesting. Second, whether lessons could raise learners' L2 pragmatic awareness. Regarding the first question, none of the coursebooks provided enough syntactic explanation as to the variety of forms that can be used to convey the function of requesting. As for the second question, only one of the coursebooks had a few activities that could help learners become more sociopragmatically aware. She concluded that, coursebooks alone could not be counted on as the sole source of pragmatic information. Teachers and learners must also take the responsibility for L2 pragmatic development. What teachers can do, she proposed, is to have discussions around L2 pragmatic norms.

Content analysis studies of ELT coursebooks have also been carried out on coursebooks for more specific purposes. One study was conducted by Campillo (2007) on coursebooks used for tourism courses at Spanish universities. She examined the use of mitigation expressions used in making requests in transcripts from five tourism coursebooks. The results showed that, the frequency and variety of mitigators used in requests were insufficient. She concluded that, such impoverished exposure to mitigation strategies used in requests may not lead to students' development of L2 pragmatic competence in this respect.

In sum, Treerat's (2001) suggestion, discussed above, is based on the assumption that teachers already have the necessary L2 pragmatic knowledge, which may well be the case for native English speaking teachers. However, in case of non-native teachers, their lower language proficiency (including L2 pragmatic competence), as suggested by research (e.g., Arva & Medgyes, 2000), may prevent them from teaching L2 pragmatics

effectively. Therefore a case can be made here for providing teachers (particularly non-native teachers) with explicit L2 metapragmatic information. The researchers suggest that, one convenient way that teachers can receive this metapragmatic information is through the teachers' edition of ELT coursebooks. This is also in line with Hutchinson and Torres's (1994) suggestion of using coursebooks for teacher training purposes. Therefore, this study is an attempt to find out whether teachers' books of one of the well-known ELT coursebooks, *Top Notch* series, already provide such metapragmatic information and if they do, what is the quantity of such information. This coursebook series was chosen because of its popularity in foreign language learning contexts, and that it has been praised for many of its characteristics one of which being culturally-driven. Thus, the research questions investigated in this study are:

1. Do *Top Notch* teachers' books (1st and 2nd edition) provide any metapragmatic information for teachers?
2. If they do, is there any difference between the first edition and the second edition in terms of the number of instances of metapragmatic information they provide?

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials

The first and the second edition of *Top Notch* series were the focus of this study. *Top Notch* series is a popular coursebook series in language institutes and especially in the context of Iran (Akbari Kelishadi & Sharifzadeh, 2013). The first edition was published in 2006 and the second in 2011. The authors of both editions are Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher. Each edition consists of four books (*Top Notch* Fundamentals, *Top Notch* 1, 2, 3). *Top Notch* Fundamentals, which is for

beginners and is claimed to cover the competencies within A1 level described in Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), consists of 14 units as well as two review sections, one after the first seven units and one after unit 14. *Top Notch* 1, 2, and 3 each has 10 units of work. *Top Notch* 1 covers competencies of A1 and A2 levels of CEFR. *Top Notch* 2 deals with competencies of A2 level and introduces competencies of B1 level. Finally, *Top Notch* 3 covers competencies from B1 level of CEFR.

3.2. Data Collection and Procedure

The teachers' books of each edition of *Top Notch* series were examined carefully by the two researchers in order to find instances of metapragmatic information. Metapragmatic information in this study is operationalized in terms of any kind of information that explains and caters for pragmalinguistic (the relationship between form and function) and sociopragmatic (the relationship between form and social considerations of language use) aspects of language use. The number of instances of metapragmatic information was recorded separately for each unit in each book of the two editions so that a more detailed comparison between the two editions is possible. This is particularly helpful since the units in the corresponding books of the two editions match to a large extent in terms of their topics and content.

4. Results

The results are presented in four tables for the four *Top Notch* coursebooks (both editions). As already mentioned, the number of instances of metapragmatic information for each unit is given separately. Table 1, shows the results from *Top Notch Fundamentals*. Tables 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate the results from *Top Notch* 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Table 1*Top Notch Fundamentals Teachers' Book Frequency Count of Instances of Metapragmatic Information*

Unit	First edition	Second edition
1	1	6
2	1	2
3	1	2
4	4	5
5	2	4
6	1	2
7	1	4
8	3	2
9	1	1
10	0	3
11	1	1
12	1	4
13	1	2
14	3	0
Total	21	38

Table 2*Top Notch 1 Teachers' Book Frequency Count of Instances of Metapragmatic Information*

Unit	First edition	Second edition
1	4	5
2	2	3
3	2	5
4	5	7
5	3	7
6	4	6
7	2	6
8	4	6
9	4	4
10	3	4
Total	33	53

Table 3*Top Notch 2 Teachers' Book Frequency Count of Instances of Metapragmatic Information*

Unit	First edition	Second edition
1	14	12
2	13	26
3	9	11
4	7	13
5	9	8
6	7	8
7	10	10
8	9	9
9	8	8
10	7	7
Total	93	112

Table 4*Top Notch 3 Teachers' Book Frequency Count of Instances of Metapragmatic Information*

Unit	First edition	Second edition
1	6	8
2	4	10
3	5	9
4	2	6
5	4	9
6	7	5
7	5	4
8	8	7
9	8	9
10	5	6
Total	58	73

5. Discussion

Evidently, all teachers' books of both editions of *Top Notch* coursebooks provide metapragmatic information for teachers. Therefore, the answer to the first research question is positive. The metapragmatic information provided in *Top Notch* teachers' books (both editions) is, in fact, of great variety. It covers pragmalinguistic aspects of language use, for example, explaining the function of the expression *I would, but* "as an excuse to politely turn down a request" (*Top Notch 3*, 2nd ed., p. T29). Sociopragmatic aspects of language use are also represented in the teachers' books. An example is using the expression *I'll pass* "as an indirect way to decline an offer" which is "more polite than being direct and saying *I don't want any*" (*Top Notch 2*, 2nd ed., p. T66). In some cases, the metapragmatic information pertains to subtle nuances of pragmatic meaning. For example, in *Top Notch Fundamentals* (2nd ed.), the use of the exclamation *oh* to show that you have understood something is explained after its use in a conversation model. On the whole, the metapragmatic information given in *Top Notch* teachers' books in both editions is contextualized. It seems as if the authors of *Top Notch* have taken an incidental approach to providing metapragmatic information whenever need arises, rather than providing metapragmatic information as a preplanned separate part irrelevant to the content of activities with which students are involved.

Regarding the second research question, by referring to the total number of instances of metapragmatic information in the four

preceding tables, it becomes clear that the second edition of *Top Notch* teachers' books provides more metapragmatic information for teachers than the first edition does. Therefore, the answer to the second research question is also positive. However, there is not a great difference between the two editions of *Top Notch* in terms of the amount of metapragmatic information they provide. Statistically speaking, *Top Notch 3* second edition has only 15 more instances of metapragmatic information than *Top Notch 3* first edition. The same small difference can also be seen between the first and second edition of *Top Notch 1* and *2*. The only exception is *Top Notch Fundamentals*, whose second edition contains almost twice the number of instances of metapragmatic information found in its first edition. In fact, the two editions share a great number of instances of metapragmatic information that are given under different headings. In the first edition teachers' books, most of the metapragmatic information is provided in sections called "culture note", "language note", and "corpus notes". In the second edition, metapragmatic information can be found under the "language and culture" headings. The main difference between the two editions is the existence of a part in the second edition teachers' books that explains the conversation strategies used in some of the dialogues. Although the explanations are very short, some of them provide good information about the specific functions of conversational gambits and other conventionalized expressions. For example, in *Top Notch 3* (2nd ed.) teachers' book, this conversation strategy is explained: "Indicate regret for a mistake by beginning an

explanation with 'I'm ashamed to say...'" (p. T90). As another example, in *Top Notch 2* (2nd ed.) teachers' book, a strategy for opening a conversation with a salesperson is given: "Use 'Excuse me' to initiate a conversation with a salesperson" (p. T53).

Another interesting characteristic of the instances of metapragmatic information given in *Top Notch* teachers' books is that some of them are repeated not only in the same book within different units, but also in teachers' books of other levels. For example, different functions of the adverb *actually* are explained whenever it happens in dialogues. In *Top Notch Fundamentals* (2nd ed.), Unit 6, it is explained that "actually is used to emphasize an opinion or give new information" (p. T46). In the same book, unit 8, another function of *actually* is explained: "Use actually to introduce an opinion that might surprise" (p. T69). The same function of *actually* is also explained in *Top Notch 1* (2nd ed.). In *Top Notch 3* (2nd ed.) another use of *actually* is introduced which is "to show appreciation for someone's interest in a topic" (p. T41). Multiple occurrences of metapragmatic information relating to a particular linguistic form can also be found in *Top Notch* first edition teachers' books. This repetition, especially for those teachers who teach all the *Top Notch* books for different levels, makes it more likely that both teachers and learners learn the pragmatic point. In addition, teachers and learners are exposed to different pragmatic functions of a linguistic form and consequently become more pragmalinguistically aware.

As was mentioned before, the findings of previous studies on EFL integrated skills textbooks (e.g., Vellenga, 2004) have shown that there is little metapragmatic information given in students' books. However, the findings of the present study, which indicates that teachers' books of one specific coursebook series provide a variety of metapragmatic information for teachers, indicate that metapragmatic information does not necessarily have to be provided in students' books. Although many of the coursebooks in the market can be used for self-study, they are usually used in language institutes as the basis of a second language course taught by a language teacher. Therefore, providing teachers with

metapragmatic information through teachers' books, which in turn can be transmitted to learners, is a viable option particularly considering that students of lower language proficiency may not be able to understand such information by themselves. Such an approach to the teaching of L2 pragmatics not only makes EFL teachers more pragmatically competent, but also makes students more sensitive to pragmatic aspects of L2. Of course this requires that teachers explain the metapragmatic information in teachers' books for their learners in a way that is understandable by them.

This study aimed at investigating the existence of metapragmatic information in teachers' books of *Top Notch* series and comparing the first and the second edition of this coursebook series in terms of the amount of metapragmatic information each one contains. The findings showed that *Top Notch* teachers' books contain a variety of metapragmatic information that can be used by teachers to explain pragmatic aspects of second language use to learners more effectively. It was also revealed that the second edition of *Top Notch* series contains more metapragmatic information in its teachers' books than the first edition. Although there was only a subtle difference between the two editions, it represented a systematic attempt to give teachers more metapragmatic information particularly concerning the strategies used in conversations. A limitation of the present study is that it did not attempt to examine the usefulness of the metapragmatic information given in teachers' books from the perspective of teachers who have actually taught English using *Top Notch* coursebooks. Therefore, future studies may investigate language teachers' attitude toward such metapragmatic information and whether they find it useful in explaining pragmatic aspects of language use. Future studies may also investigate teachers' books of other coursebook series in search for metapragmatic information since few studies to date have focused on teachers' books and most of them have been concerned with students' books.

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