

SMALL LEARNERS, BIG MEANING

(Milica Savić, Anders Myrset and Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis, *Researching and Teaching Speech Acts with Young L2 Learners: Beneath the Linguistic Surface*, Multilingual Matters, Bristol, 2024)

Although second language (L2) pragmatics has received growing attention in recent years, the pragmatic development of young language learners (YLLs) is still not widely researched. Some possible reasons for this gap could be the challenges of working with children such as ethical concerns and the difficulty of designing data collection techniques that are both effective and age-appropriate (SCHAUER 2022: 138). *Researching and Teaching Speech Acts with Young L2 Learners: Beneath the Linguistic Surface* addresses this gap by turning attention to this underrepresented group of language learners, who in this book are defined as “learners aged between five and 12 or 13 learning a second language in a primary school context” (p. 4). The book represents a collaboration between three outstanding authors, Milica Savić, Anders Myrset, and Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis, whose combined experience includes teaching and research on L2 pragmatics across Norway, Serbia, Cyprus, and the UK. Their diverse professional backgrounds allowed them to approach the exploration of L2 pragmatics with children from multiple, well-informed perspectives.

The book offers a state-of-the-art overview of empirical research on L2 pragmatics with YLLs, discusses novel speech act data elicitation methods, and identifies areas in need of further research. Beyond that, the book also explores practical applications in the classroom and discusses how L2 pragmatics can be taught to YLLs through well-designed, age-appropriate materials and instruction grounded in real classroom experience. As such, the book reflects the authors’ belief that “learning, teaching and research are inextricably linked, and they can benefit enormously from each other” (p. 6). This integrated approach makes the book both a useful academic resource and a practical guide for those working with YLLs in various educational contexts.

At the beginning of the book, a list of abbreviations is provided to help readers follow and understand the terminology used throughout. The introductory chapter serves as a guide to the book as it explains its purpose, target audience, what makes it unique, and how it is organized. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of eight main chapters organized into three parts. Each chapter begins with a short overview of the key topics and concludes with a summary of the main ideas covered. At the beginning of each chapter there is a note to the audience, explaining how it might be useful for different readers – BA, MA and PhD students, pragmatics researchers, L2 teachers, teacher educators or language material developers.

Part 1: Setting the Scene: L2 Pragmatics, Speech Acts and Young L2 Learners encompasses the first three chapters. It provides an overview of key theoretical concepts and reviews existing studies involving YLLs. Therefore, even readers who do not have a background in linguistics can become familiar with the context needed to follow the ideas

explored in the rest of the book.

Chapter 1 starts by introducing the field of pragmatics, with a particular emphasis on L2 pragmatics. It also discusses three main approaches that have influenced both research and teaching in this area: interlanguage pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics, and sociocultural theory. This chapter further specifies the focus of the book, which is teaching pragmatics to YLL.

In *Chapter 2*, the authors highlight one of the book's central topics: speech acts. The chapter begins by explaining what speech acts are and providing an overview of the core ideas behind *Speech Act Theory* (AUSTIN 1962; SEARLE 1969, 1975). The discussion then focuses on some of the most frequently studied speech acts: requests, apologies, refusals, greetings, compliments, and compliment responses, as well as the various strategies used to express them. The chapter concludes by examining how these speech acts are represented in L2 textbooks designed for YLLs. Together, *Chapters 1* and *2* offer a clear theoretical orientation for those new to the field. They are especially useful for students and novice researchers looking for a basic understanding of pragmatics. These chapters also include helpful *Things to Remember* boxes, which allow readers to revisit key ideas as they move through the rest of the book.

Building on this foundation, *Chapter 3* introduces the book's research focus and presents the current state of knowledge when it comes to YLLs' pragmatic development. It starts with a brief overview of how children develop pragmatic competence in their first language, then shifts to a review of studies on speech act production and perception involving YLLs, primarily in English L2 contexts. The authors note that research on YLLs' pragmatic competence and development is still relatively limited (p. 71). By highlighting both what is known and where gaps remain, the chapter provides a crucial context for the methodological approaches explored in the following chapters.

Part 2: Eliciting Pragmatic Data with Young L2 Learners includes *Chapters 4, 5* and *6*. It examines various ways in which researchers can investigate how YLLs produce and perceive speech acts. *Chapter 4* takes a broader look at conducting research with children. It addresses key ethical and methodological issues in designing data elicitation methods such as managing power dynamics between adult researchers and children, creating a safe and supportive research environment, and finding effective ways to communicate with YLLs. The chapter also reviews some participant-centered data collection techniques that reflect these principles: task-based interviews, visual methods, drama and play, and the Mosaic approach. The chapter sets the stage for the more focused discussion and evaluation of specific data elicitation methods used in pragmatics research with YLLs presented in *Chapters 5* and *6*.

Chapter 5 is organized around two main sections: methods for examining speech act production – such as discourse completion tasks, role plays, and the collection of authentic data – and methods for investigating speech act perception, including multiple-choice tasks, scaled response questionnaires, verbal protocols, and metapragmatic interviews and discussions. Each method is described in terms of its general characteristics and its application in research with YLLs, supported by concrete examples from existing studies. While previous data elicitation methods reviews have largely centered on adult participants, this chapter makes an important contribution by concentrating on research

involving children and addressing the unique considerations necessary when working with young participants.

Chapter 6 is especially valuable for its methodological contributions, as the authors describe the process of designing innovative data elicitation methods for their own studies on YLLs' production and perception of requests (ECONOMIDOU-KOGETSIDIS et al. forthcoming, MYRSET 2021, MYRSET & SAVIĆ 2021, SAVIĆ & MYRSET 2022a, SAVIĆ & MYRSET 2022b, SAVIĆ et al. 2021, SAVIĆ et al. 2022). The chapter introduces four specific methods: the Oral Discourse Completion Task, Readers Theatre, the Emoticon Task, and the Ranking Circle. The authors explain the overarching goals that guided the design of these methods and elaborate on how each method was constructed. This includes aspects such as prompt design, input design, procedures, strategies for creating a safe research environment, and expected learner outcomes. Apart from describing the methods, the authors aim to inspire more innovative, participant-centered approaches to researching and teaching speech acts. Furthermore, they encourage readers "to critically examine these methods and adapt them to their specific teaching and research contexts" (p. 185). Therefore, this chapter represents a key resource for researchers and teachers interested in creating engaging tools for investigating and teaching speech acts.

While *Part 2* focuses on research methodology, *Part 3: Teaching Speech Acts in the YLL Classroom* shifts the focus to the L2 classroom. It consists of the final two chapters. Drawing on the theory introduced in *Chapter 1*, *Chapter 7* explores three perspectives to teaching pragmatics in the classroom: cognitive, socially-oriented and intercultural. Each framework is supported by example studies involving teenage or adult learners to illustrate how these theories have been applied in practice and how they can shape pragmatics instruction in meaningful ways. The chapter further explores several studies dealing with teaching pragmatics to YLLs, which suggest that pragmatics instruction can be effectively introduced at early stages of language learning and across different age groups and proficiency levels. At the end of this chapter, the authors invite readers to reflect on how the instructional approaches described in the reviewed studies might be adapted to suit their own YLL classrooms (p. 221).

Chapter 8 has particular value for L2 teachers and material developers, as it presents one instructional study focused on teaching requests, carried out by Myrset in a Norwegian primary school (2021). It demonstrates how theory, pedagogical principles, educational policy, and learner needs must align in instructional design and materials development (p. 222). The chapter first introduces the instructional design, grounded in sociocultural theory. The authors further discuss the materials created for the study with examples throughout the chapter. Special attention is paid to how the materials were created to address the main aims of the instruction, which were to introduce the pragmalinguistic dimension, raise awareness of the sociopragmatic dimension and raise awareness of individual differences in perceptions of appropriateness (p. 229). A further strength of this chapter is its practical orientation as readers are encouraged to use or adapt the given materials for their own teaching or research contexts. The chapter also includes feedback from both the learners and their English teacher on their perceptions of the instruction, thus further highlighting the authors' commitment to a participant-centered approach.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the preceding chapters and extends the dis-

cussion by highlighting potential directions for future research in L2 pragmatics with YLLs, which include, but are not limited to, exploring “speech acts in light of supplementary materials for L2 teachers”, research of “different speech acts and with YLLs from diverse L1 backgrounds” (p. 255) and investigating “how children perform L2 speech acts in environments outside the confined spaces of a classroom or a controlled research setting” as well as some other areas of pragmatics such as “YLLs’ understanding of humor, small talk and various ways of expressing and interpreting non-literal meanings in their L2” (p. 256). It further considers ways in which materials for teaching pragmatics can be developed. Additionally, in this chapter the authors encourage teachers to actively incorporate L2 pragmatics into their classroom practice.

Overall, *Researching and Teaching Speech Acts with Young L2 Learners: Beneath the Linguistic Surface* is an informative and timely contribution to the field of L2 pragmatics. What makes it stand out is its focus on YLLs, an area that has often been overlooked in L2 pragmatics research, as well as its strong emphasis on participant-centered approaches in both speech act research and teaching. In that way, it helps to fill a gap in the L2 pragmatics literature, which has traditionally focused more on adult learners. While the majority of studies and examples presented in the book are situated in English L2 contexts, the authors point out that the learners come from a variety of first language backgrounds. Still, there is a need for more research across different languages and educational contexts to get a better understanding of how YLLs develop pragmatic competence.

The book is organized in a reader-friendly manner where each chapter builds logically on the previous one. It guides readers through pragmatics theoretical frameworks, research methods and approaches, and applications in the classroom. The book includes examples of instructional designs and materials, visual aids like speech act illustrations as well as reflective discussion questions which invite readers to think critically and adapt ideas to their own context. All of this makes the book especially suitable for students interested in applied linguistics, TESOL/TEFL, language education or related fields, novice researchers, teacher educators, as well as pre-service and in-service teachers. At the same time, its detailed look at both well-established and innovative data elicitation methods for studying speech act production and perception makes it useful for experienced researchers as well. All in all, this book stands out as a significant resource that successfully bridges theory, research, and practice, which makes it a valuable reference for anyone interested in researching and teaching L2 pragmatics with YLLs.

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