LEARNING HOW TO MITIGATE REQUESTS THROUGHT AN EXPLICIT PRAGMATICS-BASED METHOD*

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It is widely agreed that the goal of language teaching is to develop learners' communicative competence (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006). Consequently, instructional practices should focus not just on the knowledge of the grammatical and lexical system of that target language, but also on the "secret rules" underlying it (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). These "secret rules" are related to one of the essential components of the construct of communicative competence, that is the pragmatic competence. Scholars in the research field of interlanguage pragmatics have reported the benefits of adopting an explicit teaching approach on developing pragmatics (Kasper and Roever, 2005) and, therefore, have highlighted the necessity to design new instructional approaches to explicitly teach learners a variety of pragmatic features (Rose, 2005). Thus, the objective of this paper is to contribute to this line of research by presenting a pragmatics-based explicit method designed to develop learners' pragmatic ability in the appropriate use of request mitigating devices.

Key words: *pragmatic competence, explicit teaching, speech acts, requests, mitigating devices*

Es comúnmente aceptado que el objetivo de enseñanza de lenguas es el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006). Por lo tanto, la práctica docente debe centrarse no sólo en la enseñanza del sistema lingüístico y gramatical de la

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lengua objeto de estudio, sino también en sus "reglas secretas" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Estas reglas están relacionas con uno de los componentes esenciales del constructo de competencia comunicativa, es decir, el componente pragmático. Investigadores en el campo de la pragmática del interlenguaje han mostrado los beneficios de adoptar métodos de enseñanza explícitos en el desarrollo de la pragmática (Kasper and Roever, 2005) y por lo tanto, han enfatizado la necesidad de diseñar nuevas formas de instrucción explícitas en la enseñanza de diferentes aspectos de la pragmática (Rose, 2005). Así pues, el objetivo del presente trabajo es contribuir a esta línea de investigación mediante la elaboración de un método de enseñanza explícito que permita desarrollar la habilidad pragmática de los aprendices en el uso apropiado de elementos de mitigación en peticiones.

Palabras claves: *competencia pragmática, instrucción explícita, actos de habla, peticiones, mecanismos de mitigación*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly assumed that the goal of language teaching is to enable learners to develop communicative competence, i.e. the ability to communicate appropriately in a given target language. Consequently, instructional practices should focus not just on the knowledge of the grammatical and lexical system of the target language but also on the "secret rules" underlying that target language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). These "secret rules" refer to those norms of interaction that are shared by members of a given speech community in order to establish and maintain successful communicative situations and, therefore, are related to one of the essential components of the construct of communicative competence, that is pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1995; Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006). Pragmatic competence refers to the learners' ability to employ different linguistic formulae in an appropriate way when interacting in a particular social and cultural

context. Thus, learners need to master two types of pragmatic knowledge: one dealing with pragmalinguistics and the other dealing with sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). On the one hand, pragmalinguistics refers to the grammatical side of pragmatics and addresses the resources for conveying particular communicative acts. In other words, depending on the meaning learners want to express, they can choose a particular form from among the wide range of linguistic realizations they may have available in the target language. On the other hand, sociopragmatics deals with learners' appropriate use of those linguistic forms according to the context where the particular linguistic form is produced, the specific roles the participants play within that contextual situation and the politeness variables of i) social distance i.e., the degree of familiarity between interlocutors; ii) power, i.e., the relative power of the speaker with reference to the speaker and iii) degree of imposition, i.e., the type of imposition the speaker is forcing upon someone (Brown and Levinson, 1978; 1987). These politeness factors and the way learners may use them to *save face* play a paramount role in successful communication (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

Scholars in the research field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) have demonstrated that instructional intervention may be facilitative for the acquisition of many aspects of pragmatics (Kasper and Roever, 2005). Although limited in scope, interventional studies on pragmatic development in a target language have focused on a variety of pragmatic features including interactional discourse markers (Yoshimi, 2001), interactional norms (Liddicoat and Crozet, 2001), socio-linguistic variation (Lyster, 1994), hedges in academic writing (Wishnoff, 2000) or a variety of speech acts such as requests (Takahashi, 2001), apologies (Tateyama, 2001), compliments (Rose and Ng Kwai-fun, 2001), refusals (Bacelar da Silva, 2003) or suggestions (Martínez-Flor, 2006), to mention but a few. On the whole, these studies have reported the benefits of adopting an explicit teaching approach on developing pragmatics in both second and foreign language settings. Therefore, considering that pragmatics is teachable, and that learners benefit from being engaged in an explicit training period on this particular competence, new techniques and different instructional approaches should be developed to explicitly teach learners a variety of pragmatic features in different educational

settings (Rose, 2005). Taking this assumption into account, it is the goal of this paper to contribute to this area of research by presenting an explicit methodological proposal designed to foster learners' pragmatic competence addressing English as the target language. Particularly, it will focus on request mitigating devices as the main pragmatic target feature addressed in the suggested approach. The rationale behind the selection of this speech act derives from the fact that, given the impositive nature that characterises it, learners need to possess considerable pragmatic expertise to be able to perform a request successfully. In relation to this pragmatic expertise, knowledge of how to mitigate it so that its impositive pragmatic force is minimised is essential (Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999). However, before describing our particular instructional approach, we will devote the next section to examining previous proposals that have been developed for teaching pragmatics in second and foreign language educational settings.

2. WAYS TO INTEGRATE PRAGMATICS IN SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

According to Kasper (2001), second language contexts offer more advantages than foreign language settings, since in a second language context learners have rich exposure to the target language outside the classroom and a lot of opportunities to use it for real-life purposes. This fact allows them to develop their pragmatic ability, since they may get involved in situations where they are required to interpret utterances in context or interact with a variety of participants in different environments. In contrast, learners in a foreign language setting lack all these opportunities to be engaged in communicative situations in which they need to use the target language. Moreover, the chances they have to directly observe native-speakers' interactions are also very scarce or even non-existent in this particular setting, so they do not have access to appropriate models to be followed.

For these reasons, it seems that creating the necessary conditions to foster learners' pragmatic competence would only be necessary in foreign language contexts, although it has also been highly recommended in second language settings. Indeed, in spite of all the advantages that these particular settings may offer for pragmatic

development, it has been claimed that even after a long period of contact with the target language, some pragmatic aspects still continue to be incomplete (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; 2001). In this sense, integrating pragmatics in both second and foreign language classrooms has been regarded as necessary, since through instruction learners can understand language use and be provided with knowledge of the different choices that may be employed depending on the situation they are involved in and whom they are talking to. Therefore, considering the benefits that learners in both types of settings may obtain after being engaged in an instructional period, several researchers have proposed different techniques and activities to teach pragmatic competence in these settings (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991; Rose, 1994, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Judd, 1999; Koester, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

Olshtain and Cohen (1991) were the first authors to propose a framework with different steps for teaching speech acts. According to these authors, learners first need to be exposed to the most typical realisation strategies of the particular speech act under study. After this presentation, they should be explained the factors that are involved in selecting one specific form rather than another, and finally they should be provided with opportunities to practice the use of the speech act. In order to be able to plan and implement these suggestions, Olshtain and Cohen (1991) elaborated five steps that included the three conditions for learning any aspect of the target language, namely those of input, output and feedback. The first step, *the diagnostic assessment*, was proposed with the aim of determining learners' level of awareness of speech acts in general and, more particularly, the specific speech act under study. By means of acceptability rating tests and oral/written tests, the teacher could establish learners' ability to both comprehend and produce the speech acts. *The model dialog*, the second step, consists of presenting learners with short natural examples of dialogues where they can observe the speech act in use. The purpose of this activity is to make learners guess whether the participants involved in the dialogues know each other and other aspects such as their age or status. In this way, learners become aware of the social and pragmatic factors that may affect speech acts. The third step, *the evaluation of a situation*, is regarded as a technique that reinforces learners' awareness of the factors that affect

the choice of an appropriate speech act strategy, since learners are asked to discuss and evaluate different situations. Then, learners are involved in various *role-play activities* that are suitable for practising the use of speech acts. An important aspect when preparing these activities is to give enough pertinent information regarding the situation and the participants intervening in it. Finally, learners should be provided with both *feedback* and *discussion* to make them realise whether any possible inappropriate expressions have been used during the role-plays. They should also be given the opportunity to express their perceptions and any differences they have noted between their mother tongue and the target language.

By means of a careful planned implementation of these techniques, Olshtain and Cohen (1991) pointed out that learners would have opportunities to interpret different speech acts and react in a more appropriate way when faced with them. In addition, they could also be provided with chances to practise the speech acts in real communicative situations and to discuss the possible factors that affect their use in those conversations. Some of their suggested pedagogical practices involving exposure to pertinent input through the presentation of natural dialogues, opportunities to produce output by performing role-plays, and feedback on their performance have also been addressed by Judd (1999).

As Judd (1999) points out, his proposed model for teaching speech acts has to be adapted to the specific conditions of each classroom. In this sense, it has to be taken into account whether it is a second or a foreign language classroom, whether the teacher is a native speaker or a non-native speaker of the language, the learners' needs to learn the target language and the materials available for use. After considering all these aspects, the author proposes a framework that, like Olhstain and Cohen's (1991) model, also involves five steps. First, a *teacher analysis of the speech act* is suggested in order to relate the content of what is to be taught with learners' actual needs. Second, the development of learners' *cognitive awareness skills* is also important so that learners have exposure to the speech act being taught in order to make them understand the appropriate linguistic realisations that can be employed to express that particular speech act. Third, *receptive/integrative skills* are necessary to make learners recognise the

speech pattern within actual language use, that is, as part of a discourse excerpt rather than as isolated forms out of context. Then, *controlled productive skills* enable learners to put into practice the speech act that has already been recognised and incorporated into their pragmatic knowledge. Finally, students engage in *free integrated practice* that makes them produce not only the particular speech act studied, but also other forms of language in a natural conversation. According to Judd (1999), this last step would be considered as the real test of learning, since at this point learners should be able to employ the speech acts appropriately not just in isolation but while engaged in actual communicative interaction.

Apart from these specific frameworks that present a series of steps to be implemented in the classroom, several techniques in the form of specific tasks have also been proposed for the teaching of speech acts. These include the use of transcripts of naturally occurring conversations as awareness-raising activities (Koester, 2002) or what Bardovi-Harlig (1996) has termed *the culture puzzle* and *the classroom guest* also designed to increase pragmatic awareness. In performing *the culture puzzle*, learners are first encouraged to think about how a particular speech act functions in their own language and culture. Then, they are made aware of the differences between the pragmatic rules that distinguish their mother tongue speech community from that of the target language they are learning. *The classroom guest* activity allows the incorporation of natural language samples in the classroom by preparing an interruption to the class. During this interruption, the teacher and the guest hold a conversation that includes the speech act under study and learners' attention is directed towards this conversation. At the same time, the teacher is recording the whole conversation so that learners have the chance to listen to the exchange again. After a discussion about this exchange, two students are to prepare a role-play based on the same situation and, then, the two recorded conversations are compared and discussed. Rose (1994, 1999) has also suggested techniques for developing consciousness-raising activities, including the use of video and the design of what he calls *the pragmatic consciousness-raising* technique. This technique is based on an inductive approach in which learners first collect data in their mother tongue and, after becoming familiarised with the strategies employed for the specific speech act, a comparison with the target language is made.

All these techniques, namely those of using transcripts of authentic conversations, arranging pre-planned conversations, employing video scenes or implementing the pragmatic consciousness-raising technique, are aimed at developing learners' pragmatic awareness about the particular speech act under study (see also all the activities proposed by Eslami-Rasekh, 2006, to achieve this aim). In fact, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) claim that one of the main goals of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic consciousness in an attempt to help them become familiar with the different pragmatic features and practices in the target language. The authors present a compilation of teaching activities developed by various authors that can be employed with learners from different proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. These proposals also involve productive activities apart from tasks dealing with pragmatic awareness. As seen above in the models proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1991) and Judd (1999), it is important to implement not only awareness-raising activities but also tasks that allow opportunities for communicative practice. Among the tasks designed to practice different pragmatic abilities, namely those of role-play, simulation and drama, role-play has been the activity that has been most frequently recommended for use (Rose, 1994; Trosborg, 1995; Kasper, 1997; Koester, 2002; among many others). As can be observed from this review of instructional frameworks and techniques suggested by different scholars in the field of ILP, a range of activities can be adopted in our teaching practices and adapted for the teaching of a particular pragmatic issue.

3. A PRAGMATICS-BASED EXPLICIT METHOD FOR TEACHING REQUEST MITIGATING DEVICES

Considering i) the benefits that ILP empirical studies have demonstrated of adopting an explicit approach for developing pragmatics in educational settings (see section 1); and ii) the variety of techniques and tasks that can be adapted for teaching a particular pragmatic feature (see section 2), we have designed a pragmatics-based explicit method to specifically teach learners request mitigating devices and, subsequently, aid them in overcoming difficulties when making requests in communicative situations. The four stages that make up our suggested method are explained in what follows:

3.1 Teacher's presentation

In this first stage, learners are taught the speech act of requesting in its entirety, that is, they are given explicit information about: i) what making a request implies (i.e. an attempt to get someone to perform an action for the benefit of the speaker), ii) the types of strategies that can be used when requesting, and iii) the softening devices that accompany requests. Following Trosborg (1995), the typology of request strategies presented to learners fall into the three main categories of direct, conventionally indirect and indirect linguistic realisations. Direct forms for requests include performatives, imperatives and expressions implying obligation; conventionally indirect forms are those routinised expressions denoting polite behaviour which may be either speaker or hearer-oriented; and, finally, indirect forms or hints imply opaque language use (see Table 1 for the complete typology of request realisation strategies with examples).

Table 1.

REQUEST REALISATION STRATEGIES		
Indirect:		
	-Hints:	*Statement*
Conventionally indirect (hearer-based):		
	-Ability:	*Could you ...? / Can you ....?*
	-Willingness:	*Would you ...?*
	-Permission:	*May I ...?*
	-Suggestory formulae:	*How about ...?*
Conventionally indirect (speaker-based):		
	-Wishes:	*I would like ...*
	-Desires/needs:	*I want/need you to ...*
	-Obligation:	*You must ... / You have to ...*
Direct:		
	-Performatives:	*I ask you to ...*
	-Imperatives:	*Lend me your car*
	-Elliptical phrase:	*Your car*

Request realisation strategies (Source: Trosborg, 1995)

Following Alcón, Safont and Martínez-Flor (2005), the typology of softening devices that accompany request are classified into two groups, namely *internal*, that is, items that appear within the same request head act and *external*, that is, items that occur in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act. Each group, in turn, is further classified into different subtypes. As regards internal

modifiers, four main subtypes of devices are identified in this taxonomy, namely *openers* (i.e. to seek the addressee's cooperation), *softeners* (i.e. to soften the impositive force of the request), *intensifiers* (i.e. to aggravate the impact of the request), and *fillers* (i.e. to fill in gaps in the interaction). Concerning external modifiers, six main subtypes of devices are identified, namely *preparators* (i.e. to prepare the addressee for the request), *grounders* (i.e. to justify the request), *disarmers* (i.e. to avoid a refusal), *expanders* (i.e. to indicate tentativeness), *promise of reward* (i.e. to offer a reward upon fulfilment of the request), and the word '*please*', to signal politeness, among other functions and please (i.e. to signal politeness, among other functions (see Table 2 for a useful typology of request mitigating devices with examples).

Table 2.

REQUEST MITIGATIG DEVICES

TYPE	SUB-TYPE		EXAMPLE
Internal Modification			
	Openers		-*Do you think* you could open the window? -*Would you mind* opening the window?
	Softeners	Understatement	-Could you open the window *for a moment*?
		Downtoner	-Could you *possibly* open the window?
		Hedge	-Could you *kind of* open the window?
	Fillers	Hesitators	-I *er, erm, er – I wonder* if you could open the window
		Cajolers	-*You know, you see, I mean*
		Appealers	-*OK?, Right?, yeah*
		Attention-getters	-*Excuse me…; Hello…; Look…; Tom …; Mr. Edwards…; father… …*
External Modification			
	Preparators		-*May I ask you a favour? …* Could you open the window?
	Grounders		-*It seems it is quite hot here.* Could you open the window?
	Disarmers		-*I hate bothering you but* could you open the window?
	Expanders		-Would you mind opening the window? *… Once again, could you open the window?*
	Promise of reward		-Could you open the window? *If you open it, I promise to bring you to the cinema.*
	Please		-Would you mind opening the window, *please*?

Typology of request mitigating devices (Source: adapted from Alcón, Safont and Martínez-Flor, 2005)

Apart from presenting learners with these pragmalinguistic formulae, the teacher also explains the sociopragmatic factors that affect the appropriateness of choosing one particular form over another. In such a presentation, examples from film scenes can be used as a rich source of pragmatic input that shows learners a variety of request mitigating devices in different contextualized situations (see Martínez-Flor, 2007 for contextualized samples of all possible request mitigating devices in film scenes). Moreover, the potential of using film excerpts is that it allows learners to observe aspects from the characters' non-verbal behavior that play an important role in the successful completion of the request (e.g. tone of the voice, body language, attitudinal behavior, facial expressions, and so on). With a careful and appropriate choice of this material, this first stage can gain learners' interest in the activities that follow.

3.2 Learners' recognition

For this second stage, learners are provided with practice in recognising both the pragmalinguistic forms and the sociopragmatic factors that influence the appropriateness of request mitigating devices. Such a practice is aimed at making learners aware of: i) cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences between their native language and the target language, and ii) the crucial role pragmatic issues play in communicative situations (Usó-Juan, 2007).

In order to make learners aware of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences between their native language and the target language, learners are asked to think of naturally occurring requests they perform daily in their mother tongue. This comparison may contribute to increase not only their awareness of the target language and culture, but also their interlanguage pragmatic ability when acquiring it (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). For this activity, learners are provided with some awareness-raising questions that involve both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic issues to help them analyse their own samples. On the one hand, pragmalinguistic questions can include: "How many request head acts and mitigating devices can you think of?" "Can you arrange them on a directness scale?" On the other hand, sociopragmatic questions can ask learners: "Which different

request head acts and mitigating devices can you find depending on the social variables of power, distance and imposition?" "Are contextual factors important when selecting a particular request head act and mitigating devices?" Once they have worked on those questions, they compare their own samples with those request head acts and mitigating devices of the target language presented by the teacher in the first stage. This activity not only helps learners understand that the way in which request head acts and their mitigating devices are realised may vary across languages, but also the fact that language is inseparable from culture (Judd, 1999; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

In order to make learners aware of the crucial role pragmatic issues play in communicative situations, a variety of activities can be implemented. In an attempt to widen the scope of the request mitigating devices presented in textbooks (see Usó-Juan, 2007 for the limited range forms presented in this types of materials) learners could be presented with a language situation that involves a request with three different softeners for a particular response to that situation, and asked to rank them from the most (3) to the least (1) appropriate for the given context applying the principles discussed in the first stage. The requests can be presented on a directness scale and mitigated in a variety of ways, for example: i) internally (e.g. *Do you mind* opening the door?), ii) externally (e.g. *It seems it is quite hot here.* Could you open the door?), and iii) doubly modified, internally and externally (e.g. *I hate bothering you but* could you *just* open the door?).

Another simple activity is to give learners the whole context of a situation and a request, which can be mitigated or not, for response to it and then ask them to rate which they believe is the level of suitability on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, as well as give the reason why they provide that particular rating. Additionally, film excerpts can also be of great help in increasingly raising learners' pragmatic awareness (Rose, 1999). As a way of example, learners can be invited to watch two scenes of a film in which characters are interacting in two contrasting situations depicting a suitable context for a request. After watching the two scenes, learners are asked to conduct an analysis of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of the two scenarios by responding to some questions to help them in thinking about the request realisation forms that are likely to take part between the

interlocutors. These questions have to do with politeness issues (i.e. Brown and Levinson's (1987) distance-power-imposition parameters), as well as aspects related to the characters' non-verbal behaviour (i.e. tone of the voice, body language, facial expressions, and so on). Since a key aspect of this activity is to allow learners time for pragmatic reflection, the two scenes should be viewed as many times as needed. On the whole, it can be stated that the main pedagogic purpose of these two first stages is to draw learners' attention to the connections between request pragmalinguistic patterns and sociopragmatic information. Once an understanding of this relationship is achieved, learners are ready to engage in communicative practice (Kasper, 1997), which is the aim of the third stage.

3.3 Learners' production

In this third stage, learners are provided with written and oral opportunities to use request head acts and their mitigating devices in simulated communicative contexts. With regard to written activities, the activity of writing emails is strongly encouraged. As noted by Judd (1999), it is of paramount importance to provide learners with contrasting scenarios, that is with scenarios that differ in sociopragmatic features. Therefore, learners could be required to write an email to a friend borrowing a video game (i.e. low imposition) and/or borrowing a lot of money (i.e. high imposition); and also to send an email to a professor asking for an appointment to talk about a topic for the term paper (i.e. low imposition) and/or asking for the favor of postponing the exam date (i.e. high imposition). This activity can work even better if learners are taken to the computer lab to send authentic emails to addressees created on purpose for this activity.

With regard to oral activities, role-play activities are particularly suitable. Learners could be required to watch a video scene in which two persons (for example a receptionist and the hotel manager) are interacting and one of them is about to elicit a request. At this point, the video scene is stopped by the teacher and learners are asked to think about the social distance between the characters, the speaker's power over the hearer, the imposition involved in the request, as well as non-verbal behaviour aspects like the tone of voice, gestures or

attitudinal behaviour. Having reflected on all these aspects, learners are asked to work in pairs and act out in a role-play fashion how the situation is likely to follow. Finally, learners should watch the whole scene and compare it with the one they have produced. Additionally, an interesting follow-up activity requires learners to perform the same role-plays again but this time the interactional and contextual variables are diametrically opposed to the ones already watched in the film and acted out. As learners become more aware of how these situational variables affect the choice of the pragmalinguistic form, the teacher's guidance in those aspects should be avoided to allow them to experience in free written and spoken activities (Judd, 1999).

3.4. Teacher's feedback

In this fourth and final stage, learners are provided with teacher's feedback about their performance in the communicative practice activities in terms of the pragmalinguistic forms selected to express their request head acts and their mitigating devices, as well as the sociopragmatic factors considered for an appropriate requestive performance in the given situations (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991). Such a feedback and further discussion about the whole method is an essential task for the teacher in order to help learners acquire an appropriate requestive behaviour.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the need of integrating pragmatics in instructed language settings. To that end, a pragmatics-based explicit method has been elaborated with the aim of enabling learners to know how to mitigate requests in English as the target language and, consequently, how to build an appropriate requestive behaviour that helps them to overcome communicative difficulties. This teaching approach, divided into four stages, involves both awareness-raising and production activities in order to provide learners with the three necessary conditions for the acquisition of their pragmatic ability, namely i) exposure to appropriate and rich input (i.e. stages 1 and 2 of the approach); ii) opportunities for communicative practice (stage 3);

and iii) teacher's feedback (stage 4). Through the elaboration of such an explicit approach, it has been our intention to contribute to the increasing area of ILP research that is devoted to examining which techniques and instructional treatments may help learners to develop their pragmatic competence in particular educational settings. In so doing, we believe that the suggested method presented in this paper could be considered as another proposal that may help teachers in the complex task of integrating pragmatics in their curricula and, therefore, provide learners with opportunities to appropriately communicate in a given target language.

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