



Teaching GR/L2 Learners to Disagree: Pragmatic Competence and Behavior

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Abstract

The lack of sources and data from classroom-based research in the teaching of speech acts is particularly problematic in the field of Instructional Pragmatics (Ishihara, 2010; Kasper, 2001; Tateyama, 2019). In a similar vein, an equivalent research gap has been observed in Greek as a second language (GR/L2). In an attempt to address these shortcomings, the current study aims to contribute to the field by providing interlanguage data of the speech act of disagreement in GR/L2, as a result of an explicit instructional intervention (Kasper, 2001). More precisely, the study discusses the structured teaching conditions which were applied in the classroom with the aim to teach the speech act of disagreement to GR/L2 adult learners. It presents the pragmalinguistic patterns of the learners, assesses the appropriateness of their choices and discusses the sociopragmatic practices adopted by them. The pedagogical value of this study lies, in general terms, in examining the benefit of explicit instruction on learners' pragmatic development and providing interlanguage data of a scarcely explored speech act in GR/L2. Therefore, it aspires to bridge the field of research with the realm of teaching by providing new interlanguage research findings and consequent pedagogical implications.

1. Introduction

1.1. L2 Pragmatic competence

Both experts and non-experts would acknowledge that language—whether a first or a second/foreign language—is not merely vocabulary and grammar. Language also serves a social purpose: communication. The shift from Chomsky's (1957) notion of linguistic competence to Hymes' (1974) conception of the communicative role of language, which recognized the one-dimensional character of the original theory, marked a turning point in the way language is studied and taught.

According to revised theoretical frameworks (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980), the conception of communicative competence includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and, the focal interest of this study, pragmatic competence: the ability to use language to perform targeted social functions, with varying degrees of politeness and directness depending on the sociocultural environment and one's relationship with the interlocutor. Each aspect of communicative competence does not constitute a discrete entity but exists in a dialectical and complementary relationship with the others.

The notion of communicative competence and its components is particularly relevant in the field of second language teaching and learning, as it delineates the skills a learner must develop to communicate successfully in a second language (L2, henceforth). To clarify the concept of pragmatic competence, in particular, one must refer to the field of pragmatics, a branch of

second language acquisition (SLA, henceforth). Pragmatics is “the study of language in use” (Verschueren, 1999, p.1) and, according to Crystal’s functional definition (1997, p. 301), “the study of language from the perspective of its users, particularly their choices, the constraints they encounter in social interaction, and the consequences of their use for other participants during communication.” Thus, the development of pragmatic competence constitutes an integral part of L2 communicative competence.

Pragmatic competence consists of two components: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic. Pragmalinguistic competence refers to knowledge of the L2 linguistic structures (grammatical and lexical) used in communication. Sociopragmatic competence concerns the socioculturally appropriate use of these structures in each communicative context. The definitions of pragmatic competence, initially proposed by Thomas (1983) and later by Leech (1983), laid the groundwork for studying and teaching pragmatics with clearer and more explicit criteria.

Pragmatic competence involves multiple sub-skills. For an L2 learner to be considered pragmatically competent, they must not only know the available linguistic options but also possess the ability to choose the option that is socioculturally appropriate in each context, considering simultaneously multiple contextual variables.

Even the mere listing of the components of pragmatic competence reveals the considerable challenges faced by L2 learners, particularly since certain pragmatic features are not universal but determined by sociocultural norms. Moreover, taking into account the fluidity and variability of the parameters that govern each communicative context—many of which are shaped ad hoc—underscores the need for pragmatically oriented L2 instruction and highlights the importance of supporting learners in gaining mastery over their pragmatic behavior and shaping the functional knowledge of the L2 (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2017; Huang, 2017; Kasper, 2010; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2019).

1.2. L2 Instructional Pragmatics: pedagogical principles and frameworks

Ever since Kasper (1997) posed the constitutional question of whether pragmatic competence can be taught, a series of studies sparked and set the teaching of pragmatics as the focus of international research for decades. Interlanguage Pragmatics, a subfield of SLA, examines how pragmatic competence develops in adult non-native speakers learning a second language. Empirical studies of this field have shown that pragmatic competence can indeed be taught, furthermore developed through instruction and that teaching pragmatics in L2 is both necessary and beneficial (e.g., Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015b; Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). This growing body of research led to the establishment of Instructional Pragmatics (Ishihara, 2010), which focuses on teaching speech acts, by applying pedagogical principles and gradually integrating pragmatics into L2 instruction.

Longstanding research on speech acts, the pragmatic aspect which by priority L2 learners acquire, has concluded that explicit rather than implicit pedagogical approaches facilitate to a greater extent the pragmatic competence of L2 learners (Basturkmen & Nguyen, 2017; Taguchi, 2015c; Takahashi, 2010a; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019). It has also been made clear by research findings that specific pedagogical principles must be ensured in instruction under structured conditions: The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1993; 1995; 2010), combined with the deep processing of input (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Takimoto, 2009a, 2014), the cultivation of pragmatic awareness (Takahashi, 2010b, 2013), and the provision of (meta)pragmatic explanation (Eslami & Derakhshan, 2020; Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2004; Shirinbakhsh et al., 2016; Takimoto, 2006, 2012) have all been shown to facilitate the development of pragmatic competence in the target language. Drawing upon the common assertions established by research, a targeted instructional model for teaching L2 speech acts is, ideally, structured as follows:

1. The orientation phase (Roever, 2022, p. 111): In the literature, several synonymous terms are used for the introductory stage, the most common being presentation, familiarization,

awareness-raising, exploration, and warm-up. Here, we adopt the term orientation to the target speech act (Roever, 2022, p. 111). This stage constitutes the first step in explicitly presenting the target speech act to learners and marks the point at which its significance and role in L2 communication are highlighted. Despite its introductory character, instruction already begins at this stage: it is receptive in nature and prepares learners to engage with the rationale of the target speech act.

2. The pragmatic awareness raising phase: it refers to the systematic process of the pragmatic input so that it can be pedagogically clear and interpretable by the learners (Alcón Soler, 2005; Alcón Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Accordingly, instructional practices and activities are implemented that put into practice the theoretical principles of noticing and awareness (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012; Glaser, 2014; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010/2021; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010; Tomlinson, 2013). The instructional step is characterized by the systematic provision of metapragmatic interpretation, which facilitates learners' pragmatic awareness.

3. The meta-pragmatic awareness phase: In previous research interventions, and depending on the target speech act, this stage has often been integrated into the stage of pragmatic awareness (i.e., Kondo, 2010; Roever, 2022). At this point, the aim of instruction is the explicit linking of the target structures with their sociopragmatic interpretations and the provision of explanations that account for this connection. This particular orientation of the stage aligns with the processing capacities theoretically attributed to advanced learners and is differentiated from the previous stage in terms of its objectives. Finally, it provides the instructor with a more comprehensive picture of how learners perceive the notion of politeness and how they interpret and assess the degree of directness/indirectness of the speech act.

4. The production phase: Each instructional endeavor should create opportunities for practice and interaction with the target pragmatic feature (Kasper, 2001, p. 57; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010, p. 15; Timpe-Laughlin, 2016, p. 6). Input and production overlap and appear in each didactic step (Glaser, 2014, p. 221), since it facilitates learners' comprehension (Roever, 2022, p. 112). The design of production activities, whether implemented during instruction or assigned subsequently (e.g., as homework), is intended solely to guide learners toward experimenting with the input, familiarizing themselves with its functions, and practicing using it in meaningful ways.

5. The extension (transfer/expansion) phase: According to Cohen (2018, p. 149), the extension constitutes the fourth (and last) phase of learning a speech act, particularly when it comes to acquiring and performing specific strategies. This phase serves as an expansion of the learners' abilities, as it fosters their agency, deepens their L2 pragmatic awareness (Cohen, 2018; Taguchi, 2019) and, eventually, reinforces their autonomy (Chong & Reinders, 2020; Cohen, 1997; Zimmerman, 2002) and their self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002, 2008).

1.3. The speech act of Disagreement

In everyday life, disagreement is a highly frequent communicative phenomenon and a valuable practice that speakers employ to meet their expressive needs. It may at times be expected or even obligatory (Angouri & Locher, 2012, p. 1550; Bjørge, 2012, p. 2), while at other times it is prompted by specific situational factors (Georgakopoulou & Patrona, 2000, p. 325; Marra, 2012, p. 1588).

Within the framework of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66), it is regarded as a face-threatening act directed toward the interlocutor's public self-image. From the perspective of Conversation Analysis, disagreement constitutes a reflexive speech act and represents a dispreferred contribution (Pomerantz, 1984). The way in which disagreement is expressed depends on a wide range of factors, such as the relationship between interlocutors, the communicative context and the cultural norms that regulate acceptable behavior (cf.

Kakava, 2002; Sifianou, 2012). As a dispreferred speech act, it involves more “work” on behalf of learners, meaning that more careful and sensitive management of appropriate strategies is required.

Despite the apparent (linguistic and sociocultural) complexity of disagreement and its prominence in everyday communication, it has not been extensively examined in L2 contexts, and no particular emphasis has been placed on its function as a means of negotiating meaning, identity and social positioning within the framework of recent theoretical approaches (cf. Locher & Watts, 2005). Especially in the case of L2 learners, this would be an urgent instructional focus and guidance, as they are required not only to master the linguistic choices but also manage successfully the necessary strategies. Moreover, L2 learners should understand the sociocultural conventions when expressing disagreement in a given society, the issues of politeness linked to it as well as its position and value in the target community (cf. Zhu & Boxer, 2021; Zhu & Whang, 2022). At that point, we would agree with pioneer researchers’ assertions (Georgakopoulou, 2001; Sifianou, 2012; Tannen, 1998) that disagreement has indeed a multi-layered nature and its expression, or lack thereof, could be eventually conceived as a personal matter and choice.

1.4. The present study

A review of the literature relevant to Greek as a second language (GR/L2, henceforth) highlighted several issues: a) No comprehensive reference work exists for teaching pragmatics; instruction is often absent from language curricula (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017), b) There is a lack of connection between SLA theory and pragmatic instruction; the systematic integration of the latter would maximize the pedagogical benefit, c) Many speech acts are underrepresented in research and teaching, including “face-threatening acts” such as disagreement (Kasper, 2006) and d) In GR/L2, there is no standardized pedagogical model for teaching speech acts, nor does a definitive guide exist for developing pragmatically oriented materials or activities (Bella, 2009, 2019; Bella et al., 2015).

In light of the aforementioned issues, the present exploratory study, situated within the field of Instructional Pragmatics, seeks to contribute by: a) Implementing a set of pedagogical principles for teaching L2 speech acts and designing a structured instructional framework (Alcón-Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 2017, 2020; Cohen & Ishihara, 2013; Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010; Nguyen & Canh, 2019; Taguchi, 2019; Timple-Laughlin, 2016), b) Connecting the teaching of speech acts to SLA-based theories, such as Schmidt’s (1993, 1995) Noticing Hypothesis and explicit instruction principles (Kasper, 2001) and c) Implementing the intervention to teach disagreement in GR/L2 at the low-intermediate proficiency level by adapting its content and its activities accordingly (Roever, 2022).

The value of the study lies in the following: a) The classroom-based research design in GR/L2, addressing a noticeable scarcity of empirical intervention data under structured conditions, b) The focus on disagreement as a target speech act in GR/L2, and c) The pedagogical principles designed to support curriculum development and the establishment of a culture of pragmatically oriented instruction in GR/L2.

This paper constitutes only a section of the researcher’s dissertation. For reasons of relevance and brevity, its content will be restricted to outlining the design, while the interlanguage data elicited by the current study will be discussed. On this basis, the study indicates that explicit instruction supports this developmental level of the learner’s pragmatic system. The intervention appears to facilitate pragmatic competence and suggests that learners’ L1 sociopragmatic orientations may interact with their L2 pragmatic choices, adding skills to their interlanguage system overall. It goes without saying that developing pragmatic skills in an L2, particularly when it comes to face-threatening speech acts, requires consistent effort by both language instructors and learners. We finally aspire to echo the demand for pragmatically orienting L2 teaching and adopting a pedagogical focus on teaching speech acts.

The paper is structured as follows: Having provided an overview of the theoretical grounds of the study (Sections 1.1., 1.2., 1.3.), Section 2 presents the instrumentation, the methodology and the design rationale along with the research questions in detail. Sections 3.1., 3.2. and 3.3. discuss the three research questions respectively, presenting the findings of the research. General directions which emerge are discussed in Section 4, Section 5 transparently delineates the limitations of the study, while Section 6 concludes with reflections about future instructional implications.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 47 subjects received instructional intervention and participated in the study. The subjects were all adult literate learners of GR/L2, living in Greece at the time of the study and were attending courses of an eight-, six- or three-month program provided by the Modern Greek Language Teaching Center of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The participants who attended the eight-month program had started from a total beginner level (cf. Common European Framework for Languages Learning, Teaching, Assessment–Companion Volume, 2020) and at the time of the intervention they had reached the low-intermediate (A2+–B1) level, whereas learners who attended the six-month and three-month programs belonged to the same level based on the placement test that they took right before the courses started. It is noteworthy that the placement test includes assessment of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and written production, but it does not assess their pragmatic competence. No student had received any pragmatically oriented instruction prior to the study.

2.2. Instrumentation

The data for the current study were collected using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT, henceforth) in an enriched version (Kasper, 2000, p. 293). Considering the criticism related to this specific method (for extensive discussion, see Ogiemann, 2018), it was decided that this instrument counted as an efficient method to collect the data of the present study, especially following the explicit instruction of the target-speech act (Kasper, 2000, p. 294; González-Lloret, 2020, p. 243). Therefore, in an attempt to address inherent limitations of the DCT, the scenarios presented were fully explained and described so that the written productions would be as relevant to the given occasion as possible.

2.3. Design Rationale

The intervention was designed to be carried out exclusively in a classroom environment as part of classroom research, excluding any electronic environment and/or distance learning. The research and the data collection began in November 2021 and was completed in July 2022. The researcher was also the teacher who conducted the survey in question. The participation of the subjects was anonymous, and the study did not examine the results of the intervention based on parameters such as gender, age, length of residence in the target community, or country of origin. In total, three three-hour meetings were required (approximately 9 teaching hours) at the low-intermediate level (A2+–B1) to complete the process.

Both during the design and the implementation of the teaching intervention, emphasis was placed on the specific level of the participants, insofar as this can be identified in pragmatic terms (i.e., Takahashi, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the teaching of the speech act of disagreement at the lower-intermediate level (A2+–B1) follows specific principles that align with the degree of grammatical competence of this level (Roever, 2022, p. 74; Xiao, 2018, p. 464). Moreover, it considers three fundamental elements: the input, the main instructional phase and the provision of opportunities for practice and production. These components are integrated into four teaching steps, in relation to the targeted pragmatic feature (Ishihara, 2010).

The instruction was input-oriented (Chen et al., 2020) for the target level, applying pedagogical interventions to make it accessible. We enhanced the input (i.e., authentic data

from TV, social media posts, fora), designing pragmatically oriented activities, following the practices cited in Sharwood Smith (1993) and Takahashi (2001). Our aim was to support the learning process. We sought to provide context to the pragmatic input and to the sociocultural variables that led to the formulation of disagreement in situ, so that learners would be able to observe how disagreement is realized. Emphasis was placed on how it varies within the same conversational environment and to what extent this variation is related to the medium of communication (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Sifianou, 2015), the participants (Sifianou, 2012), and the topic (Locher, 2004; Sifianou, 2012; Zhu & Boxer, 2012).

At this level, a primary aim of instruction is to expand the range of pragmatic options available to learners. In our approach, this is specifically achieved through the teaching of grammar as a pragmatic resource, following the rationale outlined by Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen (2012), Koike (2008) and Song (2020). Taking into consideration the nature of the explicit intervention, the instructional stages were organized as previously mentioned (see Section 1.2. of the present article), with the exception that the metapragmatic discussion step was not designed for the learners of this specific proficiency level. For reasons of relevance, phase 2 will be briefly outlined and the data elicited from phase 3 will be discussed.

In the pragmatic awareness raising phase, explicit instruction is provided in pragmatic markers which, beyond their conventional meanings, when combined with simple linguistic forms in varied contexts, enable the expression of disagreement. Representative instances include the adverbs *τόρα* (“now”) and *καθόλου* (“not at all”), which intensify disagreement; *καλά* (“well”) και *εντάξει* (“okay”), which may signal delay, mitigation, or partial agreement; propositional adverbs such as *ειλικρινά* (“honestly”) and *πραγματικά* (“really”); the explanatory particle *δηλαδή* (“that is”), which can function as a marker of delay and/or mitigation; and conventional politeness formulae (e.g., *συγγνώμη* – “sorry”), which soften disagreement.

Learners are further encouraged to notice the role of interrogatives, with attention to negative questions (e.g., *και δεν θα πάει στο μπαλέτο*; – “and won’t she go to the ballet?”), elliptical interrogatives (e.g., *σοβαρά τώρα*; – “seriously now?”), and the use of personal pronouns (e.g., *εγώ πιστεύω ότι* – “I believe that,” *εμένα με ενοχλεί* – “it bothers me”) in order to formulate disagreement. At this proficiency level, pedagogical emphasis is placed on strategies for mitigating disagreement, realized through grammatical resources that learners have already acquired. This approach capitalizes on existing grammatical knowledge without increasing the cognitive load, while highlighting the multifunctionality of pragmatic structures in communication. Attention is also directed to the role of sequential context in interaction as a factor in supporting learners’ pragmatic awareness.

At the production phase, learners were asked to perform their disagreement in the following communicative occasions (see Table 1) which include various social parameters of interaction.

Table 1. Social parameters of disagreement (adapted from Glaser, 2019, p.16)

Scenario & Title	Topic	Context of disagreement & Rank of Stakes (R.S.)	Channel of interaction
Scenario #1: Tuesday the 13th	An employee challenges her manager’s decision to skip a business meeting due to superstition	The learner is expected to express disagreement in a formal setting with a superior. R.S.: high	Face-to-face interaction
Scenario #2: The photographer’s Muse	A user in an online forum argues that her partner does not love her because he refuses to take photos of her.	The learner is expected to express disagreement in an informal context with the forum user (Scenario #2a - R.S.: medium) and in a personal context with a friend (Scenario #2b - R.S.: high).	Online/digital interaction

Scenario & Title	Topic	Context of disagreement & Rank of Stakes (R.S.)	Channel of interaction
Scenario #3: The wrong hashtag	A Twitter user disputes a journalist's justification for a mistake made	The learner first mitigates an intensified disagreement (Scenario #3a - R.S.: medium) and then expresses disagreement in a formal setting (Scenario #3b - R.S.: high).	Online/digital interaction

The social parameter of disagreement, which requires careful management, is the *Rank of Stakes* (Glaser, 2014; Ishihara, 2016; Kreutel, 2007; Rees-Miller, 2000). This refers to the risk undertaken by the speaker who disagrees, the possible consequences, and what is at stake during the interaction. The Rank of Stakes is a relevant factor, to the point that it can influence whether and how the speaker will choose to disagree. This implies that the choices of strategies employed—whether mitigation, intensification, avoidance, or delay—are best interpreted in relation to what the speaker perceives as being at stake in a given situation.

What is also notable is the representation of communicative situations and interlocutor roles, along with explanation regarding the social parameters of disagreement. This is consistent with the pedagogical principle of providing relevant input (Kasper, 1997), and the principle of representativeness: learners observe how speakers modify their pragmatic patterns depending on the situation, forming an image of the target language (Taguchi, 2011; 2015c; Taguchi & Roever, 2017). This supports their options for expressing disagreement according to their communicative choices (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, 2017).

At this instructional step, the expected practice was for them to make use of structures previously introduced. The first disagreement scenario (Scenario #1) was presented in the form of a multiple-turn DCT. Learners first identified the relationship of the participants in a dialogue who disagreed and then were asked to voice their response to their office manager on the same topic.

In the second Scenario, we first ask (see Scenario #2a) learners to respond within an online discussion community (forum), so as to observe whether they align with the conventions of the digital medium, such as brevity, low formality, and the use of address forms (cf. Angouri & Tseliga, 2010). Subsequently, the same topic is maintained, but this time the interlocutor is a close friend of the disagreeing speaker (Scenario #2b).

The final scenario (Scenario #3) is composed of two parts. Here, learners must employ the mitigation markers that they encountered in the earlier stages of the intervention to produce the desired pragmatic effect. For Scenario #3a they are asked to express disagreement in a friendly tone, whereas for Scenario #3b they are asked to provide a typical tone of disagreement. From a pedagogical standpoint, the production stage reinforces what was introduced in the awareness phase.

On that basis, the main research questions which guided the present study are the following:

RQ1: Did the students express disagreement where it was required by the communication scenarios?

RQ2: Which pragmatic patterns did the students adopt and utilize following the explicit instruction of the target structures and their contexts of use?

RQ3: How pragmatically appropriate were the students' productions in relation to the communication situations?

3. Results

This section presents the main findings of the intervention with respect to the research questions posed in the study (see Section 2.3).

3.1. Research question 1 (RQ1): Did the students express disagreement where it was required by the communication scenarios?

Prior to presenting the interlanguage data, the process of clearing the sample will be mentioned with respect to RQ1, following previous studies on L2 disagreement (Glaser, 2009, 2014; Kreutel, 2007). One of the main concerns of the study was to investigate how learners pragmatically behave when they face a context that prompts disagreement. For this reason, criteria such as the non-completion of the activity, non-grammatical responses which did not address the task, the expression of agreement, and message abandonment or opt-out counted as invalid responses. The realization of disagreement, whether explicit, implicit, indirect, or other speech acts carrying the illocutionary force of disagreement, counted as valid ones. Table 2 summarizes the aforementioned data.

Table 2. Valid-invalid responses (n=47)

	Scenario #1	Scenario #2a	Scenario #2b	Scenario #3a	Scenario #3b
Invalid responses	13 (27.7%)	5 (10.6%)	3 (6.4%)	10 (21.3%)	2 (4.3%)
Valid responses	34 (72.3%)	42 (89.4%)	44 (93.6%)	37 (78.7%)	45 (95.7%)

From the lower-intermediate level data, it emerged that some learners did not perform the target speech act where expected, suggesting the influence of various parameters. Among these, Rights and Obligations (Thomas, 1995, p. 131), as well as the Rank of Stakes (see Section 2.3) in each communicative situation, appeared to relate to whether learners chose to disagree; at a secondary level, these parameters also correlated with their pragmalinguistic choices. The proportion of invalid responses, including instances of expressed agreement or another speech act (with the illocutionary force of agreement), was noticeable across the five scenarios. While this affected the final quantitative sample, it provides insights into the learners' choices to opt out from performing disagreement in the L2.

In response to RQ1, the findings show that while a substantial majority of students did express disagreement across most scenarios (ranging from 72.3% to 95.7%), a notable portion opted out or provided invalid responses, particularly in Scenario #1 (27.7%) and Scenario #3a (21.3%). This indicates that the production of disagreement was not uniform and was potentially influenced by situational variables such as the Rank of Stakes and conversational rights.

3.2. Research Question 2 (RQ2): Which pragmatic patterns did the students adopt and utilize following the explicit instruction of the target structures and their contexts of use?

In relation to the strategies employed by the learners to perform disagreement, Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of pragmalinguistic choices learners did.

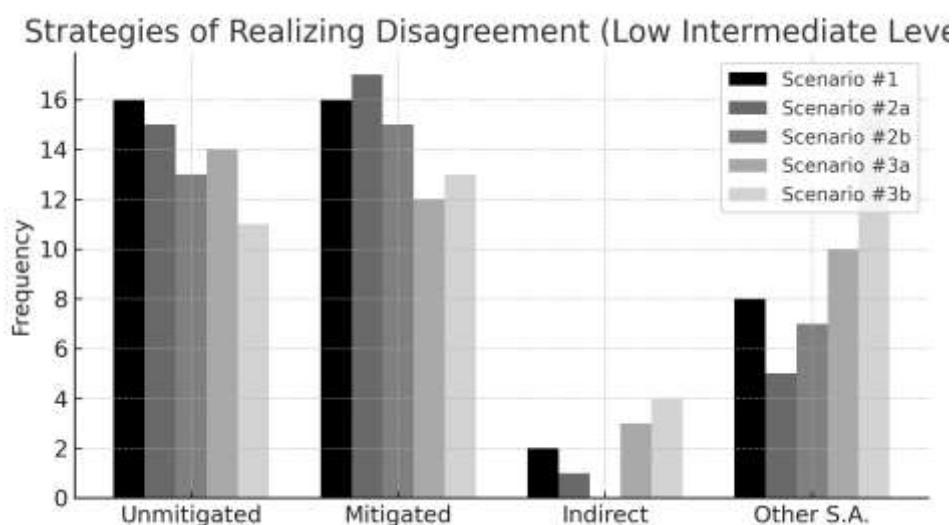


Figure 1. Strategies of disagreement across Scenarios.

The descriptive data show that learners at the lower-intermediate level employed strategies of explicit disagreement, mitigated disagreement, and other speech acts (advice/suggestion, order). This variation may function in a compensatory manner, due to developmental gaps at this level, such as the modality structures to which they did not yet have full access. Further qualitative analysis was employed (see Table 3 below) to classify the pragmalinguistic strategies identified in the data.

Table 3. Pragmalinguistic patterns of disagreement

Category	Strategies	Examples
Explicit / Unmitigated disagreement	Performative verbs & variations	I disagree, (no), I don't agree, that's not the case, you're wrong, you're not right, I disagree with you.
	Direct / outright denial	No! That's not correct!
	Semantic strategy – negative evaluation & criticism	You're too superstitious, you're unprofessional, he's the one who's right, you're taking this way too personally, that's wrong, that's not a big deal!
	Imperatives	Calm down, fix this.
Implicit / Mitigated disagreement	Exclamations / Exclamatory structures	Come on!, Oh no!, What can I say!, Oh, please!
	Pragmatic / discourse markers	Well, okay, sure, let me tell you, just, so, but, I mean.
	Sentential adverbs	Obviously, then, anyway, on the contrary.
	Partial/token agreement	Yes, but ..., I agree, but ..., I can understand your partner, but ..., okay, but ..., I get it, but
	Epistemic stance markers	I think that ..., I believe ..., I feel ..., I'm thinking that ..., I don't think so ..., in my opinion
	Apologies before disagreement	Sorry, but
	Modals	Maybe ..., perhaps...
	Rhetorical questions	Do you really believe that?, Are you serious?, What are you saying, ma'am?, Isn't that funny?, Is it really that simple?
	Advice	You should wait, I think you should ask.
Other Speech Acts	Orders/Commands	End it (the relationship), fix it, explain.

Note: The English translation of learners' responses, initially stated in Greek, is provided. The most characteristic responses are included.

In terms of language proficiency level, the pragmatic production of lower-intermediate learners reflects constraints in the control over mitigating devices and internal modifications. Some employed strategies of explicit disagreement that were less compatible with the context, relying on structures that may have been assimilated due to their morphological simplicity. They did not employ a wide range of mitigating moves, nor did they fully mitigate their disagreement in contexts where it was expected. Some also appeared to face difficulties utilizing the newly introduced explicit input, resorting instead to another speech act (order, advice/suggestion) as an alternative strategy. Similar findings are mentioned by Kreutel (2007), whose study indicated that suggestions sometimes substituted for the speech act of disagreement, whereas Glaser (2009) notes that advice can function as a proactive strategy when facing disagreement contexts. Furthermore, participants showed variation in adapting their disagreement to familiar or formal registers.

This suggests that the connection between the newly introduced target structures and their communicative functions requires time to mature, as observed in the management of pragmatic input (Kasper & Rose, 2002, pp. 26–27). In addition, the reliance on familiar structures (i.e., structures expressing orders or advice) is consistent with the pragmatic behavior recorded in Bella's (2012a, 2012b, 2014b) studies of requests and refusals in GR/L2. The preference for

directness in those studies was connected to the limited availability of pragmalinguistic tools to mitigate utterances appropriately.

Regarding RQ2, the findings show that learners relied heavily on explicit/unmitigated strategies and alternative speech acts (such as advice or commands) rather than utilizing the full range of mitigated pragmatic markers introduced during instruction. This suggests that while explicit input was available, learners frequently reverted to morphologically simpler or highly salient structures to express oppositional talk.

3.3. Research Question 3 (RQ3): How pragmatically appropriate were the students' productions in relation to the communication situations?

Examining the data, we identified specific types of pragmatic variations at both the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic levels. The pragmalinguistic variations concern (a) the forms of address chosen by the learners to refer to the recipient of disagreement and (b) the asymmetrical use of second person singular and plural verb forms within the same utterance.

The sociopragmatic variations include utterances in which disagreement was performed through other speech acts (e.g., commands, threats, suggestions), as well as the formulation of disagreement through explicit semantic modifications that could be perceived as overly confrontational for a hierarchically superior recipient. Table 4 illustrates these variations in the data, categorized according to the Rank of Stakes (RS) that each scenario entailed.

Table 4. Pragmatic variations and violations

Scenarios	Learners' data	Pragmatic Variation / Violation
Scenario #1 (High RS) Expected: Mitigated disagreement & conventional politeness	S#1_13: Sorry, now or never!	Threat / Confrontational tone
	S#1_27: You are very superstitious.	Direct negative evaluation
	S#1_35: I don't care. You must come, it's work.	Rejection & command
Scenario #3b (High RS) Expected: Formal register, mitigated disagreement	S#3b_20: That's your problem. I don't believe you.	Explicit opposition & rejection
	S#3b_30: You are very unprofessional.	Direct negative evaluation
Scenario #2a (Medium RS) Expected: Informal/familiar tone, mitigated disagreement	S#2a_26: Dear Madam, I think you should be calmer, because your partner is tired and maybe he doesn't like this profession. Sincerely, Galini.	Incongruent formality & style for a digital forum
	S#2a_37: You take it far too personally.	Direct negative evaluation
	S#2a_43: He doesn't make a living taking photos of you.	Explicit opposition with confrontational tone
Scenario #3a (Medium RS) Expected: Informal/familiar tone, mitigated disagreement	S#3a_23: Check the hashtag again. Maybe you make mistakes or explain your choice.	Direct command / Order
	S#3a_26: My love, it's very important to write correctly. You must read a second time each time you post.	Incongruent address form & mixed verb inflections

Note: The English translation of learners' responses is provided, initially stated in Greek. Original data coding (e.g., S#1_13) is maintained. Due to space limitations, the most characteristic responses are included in the Table.

The variations identified suggest the role of several factors, including:

a) The developing sociopragmatic competence of learners at this level regarding dispreferred speech acts (cf. Bella, 2012a, p. 14; 2014b, p. 1944). b) Limited access to a diverse pragmatic repertoire that would allow for flexible output management (cf. Glaser, 2019, p. 24).

c) The possibility that the new target structures require further internalization before being consistently reflected in production (cf. Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004, p. 218).

These preliminary considerations suggest that the pragmatic choices of the learners may have functioned in a compensatory manner with respect to constraints that characterize this proficiency level (e.g., control over subjunctive mood structures or lexical nuances). We do not rule out a different pragmatic profile of disagreement if learners had access to other linguistic mechanisms that were not examined at this developmental stage.

In response to RQ3, the findings reveal that many productions contained pragmatic variations or violations of situational appropriateness. In high-stakes contexts (Scenarios #1 and #3b), learners frequently used unmitigated negative evaluations or commands, which failed to reflect the expected social asymmetry, while in medium-stakes digital contexts, they occasionally displayed stylistic mismatches (such as over-formality or overly familiar address forms).

4. Discussion

The central aim of this study was to design a structured instructional framework for the teaching of pragmatics in GR/L2. Particular emphasis was placed on the pedagogical treatment of the pragmatic input (the speech act of disagreement), designed for classroom implementation by applying organizational principles that have been shown to support the development of pragmatic awareness. In this respect, the study offers exploratory insights by providing interlanguage learner data collected following an instructional intervention. Based on the findings, three pedagogical directions emerge which connect with the original design: the nature of the speech act, the learners' developmental stage, and the instructional framework itself.

A pedagogical principle to consider in the teaching of speech acts involving sensitive communicative functions is the role of individual learner choices and identity. Adult learners benefit from developing an awareness of their communicative choices and the potential consequences when interacting in the L2. For instance, opting out or using silence as a way to manage disagreement may reflect a natural disposition or a conscious choice rather than pragmatic inefficiency, especially given that explicit teaching was provided. What can be inferred from our sample is that some learners may have exercised their agency (Ishihara, 2019a, p. 162; Taguchi & Roever, 2017, p. 171), choosing not to engage in the expected sociopragmatic behavior to adopt a different role in the interaction (Locher, 2008, p. 514). Conscious opt-out can be viewed as an aspect of the learner's pragmatic behavior, influenced by task interpretation, personal choice, or L1 cultural practices, which warrant consideration when designing disagreement instruction.

The overall performance of learners at the low-intermediate level suggested constraints in specific areas, such as mitigation mechanisms, and variable sociopragmatic awareness regarding the structures employed in demanding scenarios. The low-intermediate level (A2+–B1) represents a stage where grammatical competence is undergoing restructuring and requires time for structures to be systematized. Such systematization presupposes the processing of pragmatic features over time to support pragmatic development. The findings at this level are consistent with the view that grammatical competence at this stage can constrain pragmatic production (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 28).

Additionally, some learners adopted an unmitigated stance toward the addressee, and, based on their available resources (cf. Glaser, 2019, p. 18; Rees-Miller, 2000, p. 1097), produced more direct structures, as evidenced by the proportion of pragmatic variations. On the other hand, difficulties in coordinating mitigated disagreement led a portion of them to formulate their responses as advice. This observation aligns with the view that learners may not always fully utilize the available pragmatic input in production, which is a common feature in interlanguage development (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996, p. 153; Rose & Kasper, 2001, p. 6).

At the level of pedagogical implementation, the explicit instructional approach (cf. Kasper, 2001, p. 515) was balanced with implicit elements. This classroom research suggests that explicit and implicit approaches are not necessarily a strict practical dichotomy but can be conceived as a continuum within the teaching context (Taguchi, 2015c, p. 22; Takahashi, 2010a, p. 135). The instructional process was guided by the teacher during the introductory stages to prepare appropriate conditions (Malamed, 2010, p. 209), but learners influenced its development based on their responsiveness and individual learning rates (cf. Ishihara, 2010, p. 187). At certain stages, repeated clarifications were utilized to make the input accessible. The provision of targeted guidance appeared to support learners in noticing the target structures within their contexts of use and establishing connections with their communicative functions. Finally, the structuring of the intervention into stages highlighted the fluid nature of these instructional transitions (cf. Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012; Kondo, 2008, 2010), showing that various paths can support the teaching of the pragmatic dimensions of language (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 39).

5. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this exploratory study should be interpreted in light of several limitations inherent to its research design and methodology, namely:

a) The Sample and Setting: The study relied on a relatively small sample size (n=47) situated within a single educational context (the Modern Greek Language Teaching Center of the University of Athens). Consequently, the results may not be generalizable to other learning environments or diverse populations of GR/L2 learners.

b) The Instructional Period: The instructional intervention was restricted to a brief period of approximately 9 teaching hours. This short timeframe may not be sufficient to observe long-term internalization or stable restructuring of the learners' pragmatic systems.

c) Research Design Constraints: The study lacked a control group and did not include a pre-test/post-test design. Without these components, it is not possible to definitively attribute the observed pragmatic patterns solely to the effects of the instruction, as opposed to prior knowledge or natural language development.

d) The Instrumentation: Data collection depended on written, hypothetical Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs). While efficient, written DCTs measure offline pragmatic knowledge and may not accurately reflect spontaneous, face-to-face spoken interactions.

e) The Researcher-Teacher Influence: The dual role of the researcher as the classroom instructor introduces potential bias, as participants' responses may have been influenced by teacher expectations or classroom dynamics.

f) The Coding and Classification: The taxonomy used to classify disagreement strategies was tentatively adapted from international literature due to the absence of prior empirical baselines for disagreement in GR/L2. This framework may not capture all the socio-stylistic nuances unique to the Greek language.

Future research would benefit from incorporating longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and comparative control groups. Additionally, combining written tasks with oral production data or authentic classroom interactions would provide a more robust understanding of how GR/L2 learners develop the capacity to disagree.

6. Conclusions

This exploratory study discussed an instructional framework for teaching the speech act of disagreement to low-intermediate adult learners of GR/L2. The findings suggest that while explicit pedagogical steps can raise learners' pragmatic awareness, translating this knowledge into contextually appropriate production involves developmental challenges. Low-intermediate learners often rely on direct strategies or alternative speech acts (such as advice) due to constraints in their grammatical and lexical repertoires.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights the value of incorporating metapragmatic discussion into L2 instruction to help learners understand the communicative repercussions of their linguistic choices. Familiarizing learners with diverse strategies remains a relevant goal for supporting conversational skills in oppositional talk (Ishihara, 2016; Ishihara & Paller, 2016, p. 9). However, developing sociopragmatic appropriateness requires consistent exposure and sustained instructional support over time (Ellis, 2005, p. 34). This partial contribution offers preliminary insights and interlanguage data, responding to the ongoing interest in classroom-based research on dispreferred speech acts.

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Appendix A

Disagreement Scenarios under examination (translated from the Originally Greek DCTs)

Scenario #1 – Tuesday the 13th

Read the following short dialogues and observe how the speakers express disagreement depending on the situation and the relationship between them, where this can be inferred. Then, express your own disagreement according to the instructions in the activities.

Dialogue

S1: Are you ready for the meeting? Have you finished? We need to go!

S2: I don't think I'll come. Today is not a good day!

S1: Why? What's wrong with the day? It's Tuesday.

S2: Yes, but it's Tuesday the 13th!

S1: Oh, come on, don't be superstitious! Ante*, Let's go, they're waiting for us! *ante (άντε) = *untranslatable item which shows encouragement in this context*.

Based on the last line, what do you think is the relationship between the two speakers?

A. Colleagues at work with a formal relationship.

B. Colleagues at work with no good relationship at all.

C. Colleagues at work with a rather friendly relationship.

How would S1 respond if S2 were the manager?

Scenario #2 – The Photographer's Muse

You are participating in a forum with questions, answers, and advice about relationships. One reader posts the following problem:

Reader A: "Hello everyone! I've been in a relationship for 6 months with a wonderful person, and we are very much in love. My partner is a photographer, very successful, he loves his work, and he is respected by his colleagues and his social circle. [...] But he never takes a single picture of me, you guys! Not even during our holidays, just for us, to keep as memories. [...] I feel like I don't inspire him and that I am not his Muse."

Below are some readers' responses. Identify which responses express disagreement, and among those, which disagreements are mild and which are strong.

Responses

R1: Talk to him! It might be something really simple!

R2: I disagree completely and absolutely.

R3 (to R1): No way! What should she ask? "Why don't you take photos of me?"

R4: I think six months is far too short a time for him to consider you his "Muse."

R5: Why on earth should he have to take photos of you? First of all, he's not obliged to. Second, this is his profession, and it means he earns his living from it. [...] Maybe you should relax a little?

R6: Professional photographer here talking... I don't take photos of anyone outside work. I shoot portraits, theatre, actors, fashion. I mainly work with concepts. It depends on how each

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person feels. Psychologically I just can't; it's exhausting, because people always ask me to take photos on holidays, nights out, everywhere.

R7: What you're feeling is normal. One possible explanation is that he is a professional and not an amateur who does photography as a hobby. Maybe that's why he didn't take photos even on holiday, because, for him, that's work. And you take a break from work during holidays. But why shouldn't you be able to ask him? What could be more natural than expressing a wish of yours?

Scenario #2a: You, as a user of the forum, disagree with A's opinion and write your disagreement: _____

Scenario #2b: A friend of yours believes exactly the same thing about her partner. You disagree with her and you say: _____

Scenario #3 – The Wrong #Hashtag

A journalist apologizes for using the wrong hashtag in a Twitter post, which resulted in unfairly accusing the opposition party. She explains that it was not intentional but rather an accident. T2 disagrees with T1's explanation and responds. T1 does not reply to T2's comment.

T1: "I apologize and I would like to tell you with certainty that it wasn't on purpose, it happened by mistake, because the hashtag automatically changed when someone presses enter." (*simplified version*)

T2: "What are you saying, madam? Don't you re-read something before posting it officially on a news agency's account, to make sure nothing slipped through, such as a spelling mistake? Seriously now? Are you kidding us?"

Based on T2's reply, which of the following applies?

A. She knows T1 very well and is giving her a piece of advice.

B. She is a fellow journalist who disagrees with T1.

C. She does not know T1 and expresses her strong disagreement as a reader.

Scenario #3a: Reformulate T2's disagreement as a reply on Twitter, but in a more familiar/friendly tone: _____

Scenario #3b: Reformulate T2's disagreement as a reply on Twitter, but in a more formal tone: _____

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