

# Teaching L2 pragmatics to young learners

## A review study

Gila A. Schauer

Universität Erfurt

This paper reviews research on teaching pragmatics – and more specifically speech acts – to young L2 learners from two perspectives: (1) studies investigating young L2 learners’ pragmatic competence and (2) studies examining the potential of different materials with regard to pragmatics instruction. The review of L2 learners’ speech act competence addresses cross-sectional and longitudinal developmental studies, as well as studies that examined the effects of specific instructional approaches, learning contexts or materials on young L2 learners’ pragmatic competence. The review of studies examining materials addresses both studies focusing on designated L2 teaching materials produced for the explicit purpose of foreign language instruction of young learners, as well as studies examining speech acts included in children’s books. The paper concludes with a discussion of issues relevant to young learners and the teaching and researching of L2 pragmatics.

**Keywords:** young learners, TEYL, L2 pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatic development, instructed pragmatics, pragmatic input materials, children’s literature, speech acts

### 1. Introduction

Although interlanguage pragmatics can now look back on a research tradition of more than 40 years, the teaching of L2 pragmatics to young learners has received relatively little attention to date (Glaser, 2018). This is unfortunate because in many countries in the world foreign languages are now compulsory in primary schools (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014; Enever, 2016). While in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when interlanguage pragmatics began to establish itself as a discipline, foreign language education tended to start in secondary school in many countries – and therefore a focus on older learner populations within the L2 pragmatics research community was not surprising – times have changed.

However, before proceeding with the reasons for why L2 pragmatics researchers ought to consider joining the L2 pragmatics and young learners research community, it is necessary to address which age range is meant by *young learners* in this review, since the term has been used for different age groups by different scholars: 3–12-year-olds (Bland, 2015), 3–15-year-olds (Nunan, 2011) 5–12-year-olds (Cameron, 2001; Garton & Copland, 2018a), 5/6–11/12-year-olds (Enever, 2016). For the purposes of the present paper, young learners will be defined as children aged between 3 and 13 years.

As mentioned above, compared to L2 pragmatic investigations focusing on adult or teenaged learners, few studies have examined L2 pragmatic issues and young learners. There are several possible reasons for this, such as (1) compulsory foreign language education in state schools has been introduced relatively recently in many European and American countries (Cameron, 2001), (2) the “implementation of early English language learning can be flawed and [...] the evidence base for the early introduction to English is weak” (Garton & Copland, 2018b, p.1), (3) conducting research with children can be time-consuming and complicated for legal and child protection reasons, (4) data elicitation techniques need to be age appropriate, and (5) researchers may simply not be interested in working with this age group.

Given the number of reasons for not focusing on young learners in L2 research, why should the L2 pragmatics research community conduct research in this field? That question was answered by Enever in a debate titled “Teaching English to children in primary schools does more harm than good” at the 2014 IATEFL conference with regard to young L2 learners research in general:

She suggested that the point was moot as, in her words, ‘the horse had bolted’. Early English language learning, she said, had become so widespread that whatever strong arguments were made, they would have no effect on whether English was taught or not. Given this reality, she argued, we should concentrate instead on investigating the contexts of early language learning with a view to improving approaches so that children and their teachers have good language experiences, inside and outside the classroom. (Garton & Copland, 2018b, p.1)

I would like to add to that that if we, as L2 pragmatics research community, consider pragmatics to be a key component of (intercultural) communicative competence and an essential area of SLA and ELT (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022; Schauer, 2022), then we cannot ignore the early stages of L2 language learning and teaching. This is not only a matter of principle for a discipline but also a matter of child safety. In current textbooks for young learners much emphasis tends to be placed on fruit, vegetables, pets, and colours, as well as basic numbers. However – although useful in some respects – none of these vocabulary items are particularly

helpful for children when they find themselves in an emergency situation, such as having been separated from their parents on holiday or finding themselves in even worse situations as a result of having to flee their countries or being trafficked. While the latter circumstances are not frequently addressed in L2 pragmatics publications, they should be because basic speech acts that enable L2 learners to ask for help or to communicate with someone who is in need of help can and should be taught early on. This is one of the reasons why I introduced my concept of Survival English for young learners with regard to key speech acts in 2019 and why I hope that more researchers will join the relatively small number of L2 pragmatics working in this field.

The review of existing studies is divided into two parts: Part 1 focuses on studies that investigate young learners' L2 pragmatic competence and Part 2 focuses on L2 input materials young learners may encounter in instructed settings. The final section of this paper addresses critical insights and future directions. Due to space constraints the discussion will focus on speech acts.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1 Studies investigating young learners' L2 pragmatic competence

In the following, I review studies that explicitly focus on the pragmatic competence of young L2 learners up to the age of 13 years. This means that comparative analyses of different L2 learner age groups that also include young learners but do not exclusively concentrate on them (e.g., Lee, 2012; Barón, Ceyala, & Levkina, 2020) are not focused on here.

#### 2.1.1 *Longitudinal developmental studies in second language contexts*

In one of the earliest pragmatic studies on child L2 development, Ellis (1992) examined the use of requests by two boys – aged 10 and 11 at the beginning of the data collection period – in an initial instructional ESL unit in England over a period of 16 and 21 months respectively. Data were collected by noting down the requests that the learners produced in the classroom setting. Ellis found that “[t]he order of development of the main types of requests was much the same for both learners. Mood derivable requests were used first, closely followed by query preparatory requests (as formulas) with want statements appearing some time later” (1992, p. 12).

Also investigating requests, Achiba (2003) followed the pragmatic development of her seven-year-old daughter Yao while sojourning in Australia over a seventeen-month period. She found that at the beginning of her stay, Yao pre-

dominantly employed direct request strategies but that her repertoire of request strategies increased over time which resulted in her employing a higher number of conventionally indirect requests in situations involving requests for goods.

Thus, the results of the two longitudinal developmental studies indicate that with increasing proficiency level EFL learners use conventionally indirect requests more frequently, which tend to be preferred by English speakers and considered to be more polite than direct requests (see Leech, 2014).

### *2.1.2 Cross-sectional developmental studies in instructed primary school contexts*

Rose (2000) examined young EFL learners' production of requests, apologies, and compliment responses in a cross-sectional developmental study involving learners attending grades 2, 4, and 6 – corresponding to the ages 7, 9, and 11 – in a primary school in Hong Kong. Data were collected with a Cartoon Oral Production Task (COPT) containing 30 situations (10 each for requests, apologies, and compliment responses). The results revealed that the use of conventionally indirect request strategies increased considerably from grade 2 (35.4%) to grade 4 (85.7%) and again from grade 4 to grade 6 (96.8%), while the learners' employment of direct strategies and opt-outs decreased. Concerning apologies, learners in year grade 6 used considerably more repair strategies than learners in grade 4 or 2 (21.7%, 5.9%, 0% respectively), while the acknowledgment of responsibility strategy was used most frequently in year grade 6 (44.4%), but less frequently in grade 4 (8.8%) than in year 2 (12.6%). Regarding compliment responses, Rose (2000, p. 52) noted that “there was considerable uniformity across groups in terms of main compliment-response strategy”.

Focusing on the same grades in primary schools in Hong Kong, Lee (2010) investigated her learners' pragmatic comprehension of direct and indirect speech acts with a multiple-choice test and retrospective verbal protocols. The speech acts examined were requests, apologies, refusals, complaints, and compliments. She found significant differences in her groups' pragmatic comprehension between grades 2 (mean score 6.70) and 4 (mean score 8.03) and grades 2 and 6 (mean score 8.73) but not between grades 4 and 6. Regarding the individual speech acts she noted that:

the direct speech acts were generally handled well by the three groups of learners, but they all expressed some difficulty comprehending the indirect refusal, complaint and compliment. [...] [The] indirect refusal was the most difficult speech act for all three groups to comprehend, and the indirect complaint and compliment seemed to be rather challenging for the seven- and nine-year-old learners, who completed these questions with a less than 50% accuracy. (Lee, 2010, p. 355)

Examining the same grade levels 2, 4, and 6 but slightly different age groups (8/10/12 year-old children) in a Norwegian primary school, Savić (2015) also explored EFL learners' requests. The data were collected with two role play scenarios. Savić's results are similar to Rose's (2000) and Lee's (2010). Her grade 6 learners employed conventionally indirect requests most frequently (89.3%) followed by the year 4 learners (81.6%). The difference between the two higher years, 6 and 4, and year 2 is again considerable, since only 42.9% of the learners in grade 2 employed conventionally indirect requests. The majority of the learners in year 2, 54.7%, used their L1, pointed at or named the object of the request.

Focusing on slightly older learners and comparing different foreign language learning contexts, Savić, Economidou-Kogetsidis and Myrset (2021) examined requests produced by groups of 9-, 11- and 13-year-old EFL learners in Cyprus and Norway. While the EFL learners in Cyprus attended private English language institutes, the Norwegian EFL learners attended the 3rd, 5th and 7th grade in Norwegian primary schools. Data were elicited with a video-based oral discourse completion task (VODCT) containing 4 scenarios. In the data from Cyprus, Savić et al. (2021, p. 21) found

significant differences between the 9-year-old learners (group A) on the one hand, and the 11- and 13-year-olds on the other (groups B and C). Namely, the youngest group (Group A) resorted to direct strategies more frequently than the other two groups (39.8%, vs. 18% and 21.1% respectively), while the reverse was the case for C[onventionally] I[ndirect strategies].

(Group A: 55.9%, Group B: 74.4%, Group C: 72.6%)

Interestingly, the percentage figures differ in the two learning contexts. While 55.9% of the requests produced by the 9-year-old EFL learners in Cyprus were conventionally indirect, their age peers in Norway used conventionally indirect strategies in 75% their requests. Also, the 11- year-old learners in Norway employed the highest number of conventionally indirect requests of the three Norwegian groups with 83.2%, while the 13-year-old learners used this strategy with the same frequency as the 9-year-old learners, 75%.

In two further studies investigating 9-, 11- and 13-year-old EFL learners attending 3rd, 5th and 7th grade in Norwegian primary schools, Savić (in press) and Savić and Myrset (2022) examined their metapragmatic understanding regarding speech acts in group discussions. Savić (in press) analyzed the learner-initiated issues raised in the discussions by the learners on the topic of requests and assigned the issues raised by them to 5 main themes: language features, contextual features, intonation, politeness and non-verbal behaviour. She found that learners in grades 3 and 7 addressed all five themes, whereas learners in grade 5 did not address non-verbal behaviour. The most frequently featured themes in all

grades were language features (e.g., the use of please) and politeness. The findings from her study indicate that 9-year-old L2 learners are aware of a variety of factors that can make a request “nicer”, such as using the politeness marker please and smiling. Savić and Myrset (2022) provided qualitative analyses of the group discussions. Summarizing their observations of the discussions in the different year groups, the authors noted that

regarding the sophistication of the metapragmatic discussions in this data set, 5th and 7th graders drew on national stereotypes, often “mak[ing] simplistic associations between norms and national essences,” which characterizes “a superficial level [of] metapragmatic awareness” (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016, p. 27). On the other hand, the youngest group exclusively invoked their lived experiences, their observation of interactions in their immediate surroundings, their own feelings, and the feelings of others when making sense of greetings. While not engaging reflexively with the cultural assumptions underlying their observations and emotional reactions, they did not display essentialist and ethnocentric views either. (Savić & Myrset, 2022, p. 55)

The findings thus suggest that it is possible to engage with young L2 learners in metapragmatic discussions about speech acts that may address the same themes across the age groups investigated. However, while similar issues may be discussed, the discussion itself may vary with regard to the level of abstraction involved.

The findings of cross-sectional developmental studies in instructed primary school contexts therefore show that – similar to longitudinal developmental studies – young EFL learners tend to move from direct to conventionally indirect request strategies with increasing proficiency level, while also increasing their ability to understand indirect speech acts and moving beyond focusing on their own lived experience when discussing speech acts with increasing proficiency level.

### 2.1.3 *Studies examining different teaching approaches*

Alemi and Haeri (2017, 2020) compared the effect of game-based versus robot-assisted language learning on young learners aged 3 to 6 in a preschool EFL setting in Iran. They focused on the speech acts of greetings, requests, and expressions of gratitude. Children were either instructed with the help of a robot or with games. The robot used was a

child-sized humanoid programmable robot called NAO [...] [which was] programmed [...] using the Choregraphe program [...], a user-friendly application which allows users to create actions and behaviors and test them in advance. The text-to-speech engine of this software converts text into speech, which corre-

sponds to the related actions. In addition, the program has the ability to regulate the pitch of the voice and produce either a child or adult voice. For this study the voice pitch was designed to be a 7-year-old boy with a medium pace so its speech would be understandable for the children. (Alemi & Haeri, 2020, p.90)

The statistical results of the pre-test and post-test speech act scores showed that the young learners who received instruction with the robot performed significantly better than the group who had been taught with games.

In a study conducted in 2017 by Alemi, Tajeddin, and Davoodizadeh that was reported on in Tajeddin and Alemi (2020), the researchers compared the effect of game-based instruction and non-game-based instruction in EFL primary school classrooms in Iran. The participants in this study were 10–12 years old EFL learners who completed a written discourse completion task (WDCT) prior to the pragmatics focused instruction, as well as immediately after the 6th session on the topic and then again two weeks later (delayed post-test). Learners in both groups received pragmatic instruction on requests and were provided with examples over a period of six 30-minute sessions. However, only the learners in the game-based group played the following pragmatics-focused games in the six sessions: Requesting Food (S1), Restaurant Game (S2), Polite and Impolite Brothers (S3), Polite and Impolite Brothers + Restaurant Game (S4), Cabin Crew + Favors Contest (S5), Cabin Crew (S6). Tajeddin and Alemi (2020, p.194) noted that

the results illustrated the effectiveness of both instructional methods, i.e., game-based and non-game-based instruction, over time as the participants' knowledge of requests generally improved after the instruction. However, as the mean scores showed, the game-based group had a better performance in both immediate and delayed post-tests, differences which proved to be significant.

Thus, the results of the studies showed that pragmatic instruction increased the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners examined in these studies. The findings also showed that the more innovative approach in each setting led to better results. This suggests that both young learners in the very early stages of their L2 language learning journey as well as those young learners who are at the end of their early L2 years benefit from encountering new instructional approaches.

#### **2.1.1.4** *Studies comparing different teaching contexts in one country*

Schauer (2019) examined young learners' speech act production and comprehension in two educational settings in Germany: a state primary school in which young learners received compulsory EFL lessons and an international school in which English was the official language. The learners had an average age of 9 years and attended grade 4. Learners in the state primary school had started learning English in grade 3. Learners in both settings completed a variety of tests focusing

on several aspects of their communicative competence which also included various interactive tasks with the researcher, e.g., greetings, responding to requests for information and goods, expressions of gratitude, and leave-takings. The results showed that learners in both contexts could reply to greetings in interactions with the researcher, although two learners in the state primary employed the non-standard “I’m happy” as a response to the researchers’ “How are you” question. Most of the state primary learners replied with an English leave-taking expression to the researcher bidding them farewell but a small number employed German or Italian leave-takes. Distinct differences in L2 learners’ pragmatic competence were observed in the case of requests:

While all of the private immersion school learners were able to produce standardized conventionally indirect requests [...], the learners in the state school struggled with multiple aspects of formulating requests. [...] [Although] the majority of young learners in each group was able to begin a request with a standard expression, e.g. *Can I* (permission strategy) or *Can you* (ability strategy), [...] in many cases the rest of the utterance then contained some kind of problem, e.g., incorrect pronouns, missing articles, missing verbs, etc. (Schauer, 2019, p.257)

Thus, while most of the learners in both settings could respond to basic speech acts, such as greetings and leave-takings in interactions with the researchers, some learners in the state primary school struggled with producing comprehensible requests and some learners in the state primary were also unable to react to requests with the required responses or actions.

### 2.1.5 *Studies examining the effect of specific instructional materials*

This section links Part 1 and Part 2 of the present review because it focuses on the impact of specific teaching materials used to teach pragmatics to young learners. Ishihara (2013) and Ishihara and Chiba (2014) conducted small-scale studies that explored how learners’ pragmatic competence was affected by pragmatic instruction with children’s books. Both studies focused on young Japanese learners of English. Ishihara (2013) examined 3 9-year-old boys in Japan while Ishihara and Chiba (2014) studied 3 Japanese girls (aged 12 and 7) and 2 boys (aged 9) in Hong Kong. The children differed with regard to previous English instruction they had received: two of the boys in Japan had attended English lessons from the age of 1, while the third one only attended school lessons; one of the 12-year-old girls in Hong Kong had only received English lessons for 6 months, while the 7-year-old girl had studied English for 2 years. Thus, the participant groups were not homogenous. In Japan, the three boys received instruction over six sessions resulting in a total of 120 minutes, while the children in Hong Kong received three ses-



sions resulting in a total of 180 minutes of instruction. The instruction was based on three children's books accompanied by tasks and additional materials.

The impact the instruction had on the two groups differed considerably. Ishihara (2013, p.143) noted that while the three boys were able to use "please in appropriate contexts [they] were unable to recall more complex and newly learned requests (e.g., Could I have...? Could you pass me...?)." In contrast, Ishihara & Chiba found that "[s]uccessful pragmatic production of the target English requests was demonstrated at the conclusion of the instruction by all learners in the classroom discourse as well as in 17 out of 20 written DCT responses and four out of four [student generated visual] DCT-elicited requests" (2014, p.100). Although only reporting the results of small-scale studies, these findings suggest that the impact of instructional materials on young L2 learners' pragmatic competence is likely to depend on a variety of factors, such as learning environment, time allocated to instruction, teacher's teaching approach, as well as learners' individual differences.

Exploring whether teaching scientific concepts aids L2 learners metapragmatic understanding, Myrset (2021) provided 240 minutes of instruction over 4 weeks to 13-year-old Norwegian learners of English attending grade 7. He found that the

scientific concepts provided the learners with tools for elevating their discussions to an abstract sense [and that the] explicit input of concepts enabled the learners to explore phenomena related to requests, that is, choices, communicative intent, and comparisons between the L1 and the target language, in a more generalised sense.  
(Myrset, 2021, p. 207)

### 2.1.6 *Critical summary*

As mentioned at the beginning, the number of studies that have explored young L2 learners' pragmatic competence is still relatively small. The review has also shown that research tends to concentrate on certain L1s (e.g., Cantonese, Farsi, Japanese, German, Greek and Norwegian), specific speech acts (e.g., requests, apologies) and certain geographical regions. More research is needed to provide insights into more diverse learner groups, a wider range of different L1-L2 combinations and learning contexts. In addition, studies exploring different instructional approaches and/or the use of different instructional materials would be helpful.

## 2.2 Studies investigating input materials for L2 pragmatic instruction

In this section, I review studies that focus on materials for young learners aged 3–13. Thus, studies that compare teaching materials for all years of secondary school, including materials for learners aged 10–13 but not specifically concentrating on them (e.g., Barron, 2016; Limberg, 2015; Ogiermann, 2010), will not be reviewed here.

### 2.2.1 *Studies examining teaching materials by textbook publishers*

To date, the number of studies investigating L2 pragmatics materials studies for young learners is rather small. This shows that studies examining pragmatic content in L2 teaching materials are very much needed, as we simply do not know enough about the content of these materials yet.

In one of the earliest studies that addressed primary school teaching materials and L2 pragmatics, Vollmuth (2004) examined seven EFL teacher's books for grade 3, the first year of formal English instruction. The materials were published between 1991 and 1999 and included the following titles: *Bumblebee 3* published by Schroedel in 1999, *Conrad and Company* published by Longman in 1994, *English – What fun!* published by Cornelsen in 1991, *Fun and Action 3 New* published by Klett in 1999, *Here we go* published by Klett in 1998, *Keystones 1* published by Diesterweg in 1999, and *Kooky 1* published by Cornelsen in 1993. It needs to be noted that Vollmuth's monograph does not follow a typical speech act approach but examines what she refers to as *language functions*. Her language function categories do not always provide a good match to speech acts and I will therefore limit my review here to those functions that correspond well to speech acts.

Vollmuth found that while expressions of gratitude were included in all of the books she analysed, leave taking expressions were only featured in four of the seven books. Although all books featured expressions of gratitude, Vollmuth noted that they often occurred in service encounters as part of a “here you are – thank you” sequence. Expressions of gratitude that would have been necessary in other interactions, such as asking someone for the time and being provided with this information, were frequently missing. In addition, responses to expressions of gratitude, such as “you are welcome,” were not included in any of the materials. Vollmuth (2004, p.148) warns that the absence of responses to expressions of gratitude can easily result in negative transfer with young learners resorting to “please” instead of “you are welcome.”

Also focusing on primary school materials published for the German EFL market, Schauer's (2019) monograph examined ten speech acts (requests – responses to requests, greetings, leave-takings, expressions of gratitude – responses to expressions of gratitude, apologies, suggestions – responses to suggestions, expressions of

physical and mental states) in four textbook series for grades 3 and 4 of primary school published between 2013 and 2017. The textbook series were *Bumblebee* published by Schroedel in 2013 and 2017, *Ginger* published by Cornelsen in 2013 and 2014, *Playway* published by Klett in 2013 and *Sunshine* published by Cornelsen in 2015 and 2016. The results showed that only three of the textbooks (*Bumblebee* 3, *Playway* 3 and 4) included the ten speech acts which had been selected based on the primary school foreign language curriculum for the German state of Thuringia. While *Ginger* 3 included eight of the speech acts examined and *Sunshine* 3 and 4 featured nine, *Bumblebee* 4 notably only included three (greetings, requests, and responses to requests).

In addition, the total number of speech acts included in the textbooks tended to differ considerably. While *Playway* 3 contained 505 instances of the speech acts investigated, *Ginger* 3 included only 150. Also, the top three speech acts across the materials made up 92% of all speech act occurrences (requests 74%, responses to requests 11%, greetings 7%), which means that the remaining seven speech acts amounted to only 8% of the speech act instances included. This meant that some speech acts were only featured once in a book, e.g., one apology in *Ginger* 4 or one response to a suggestion in *Bumblebee* 3. Moreover, the results showed that the most frequently presented request strategy was the direct imperative, which corresponded to 76% of all requests included in the textbooks. The study also confirmed Vollmuth's (2004) earlier findings that expressions of gratitude were frequently not followed up by a response to an expression of gratitude, since the books contained a total of 50 expressions of gratitude but only ten responses to expressions of gratitude.

Glaser (2020) examined the speech act of greetings in two instructional materials series for primary school grades 3 and 4: *Come in* published by Klett in 2018 and 2019 consisting of an activity book and a teacher's book and *Discovery* published by Westermann in 2013 and 2014 consisting of a pupil's book and activity book. She found that although greetings were included in the materials for year 3 and 4, the total number of instances decreased from the materials for year 3 to year 4 (from 26 to 16 for *Come in* and 29 to 20 for *Discovery*). Also, while greets such as "hello" or "hi" were featured in materials for both years and in both series, the same was not the case for "how are you" questions and responses, as the latter were absent in *Come in* 4. In addition, Glaser noted that the few "how are you" sequences that were featured in the materials were often problematic as the highly frequent "I'm fine" was rarely included. Instead, "how are you" questions were used as a basis for exercises involving describing emotions and using adjectives such as "grumpy," "scared" and "sad," thus obscuring the conventionalized nature of the "how are you question" as part of greetings.

Schauer (2020) examined two different instructional material sets for year 5, the first year of secondary school, for EFL learners with special educational needs published in 2017 and 2018. The material sets were *Klick! Englisch 1* by Cornelsen, consisting of a pupil's book, workbook, and audio CDs published in 2017, and *Stark in... Englisch* published by Westermann, consisting of textbook and audio CD published in 2018. The study examined six speech acts (greetings, expressions of gratitude, responses to expressions of gratitude, requests, responses to requests and leave-takings) and thus covered basic communicative functions included in the curriculum for this school type in the German state of North Rhine Westphalia. Similar to Schauer's (2019) investigation, the results showed that the teaching materials differed regarding the number of speech act instances included in them. While the *Klick!* materials featured 852 speech act instances, *Stark in... Englisch* only included 515. As in Schauer (2019), the top speech acts were requests, responses to requests and greetings corresponding to 97% (*Klick!*) and 98% (*Stark in... Englisch*) of the speech act instances, respectively. Also, as in Schauer (2019), the vast majority of requests included in the materials were direct requests, thus providing learners with comparatively little exposure to indirect requests. Similar to Vollmuth's (2004) study, no responses to expressions of gratitude were found in the materials.

Jakupčević and Portolan (2021) examined 18 textbooks that are used in grades 4 to 6 in Croatian primary schools attended by EFL learners aged 9 to 12 years old. The textbooks were published by two Croatian and three international publishing houses between 2013 and 2019. The Croatian textbooks investigated were *New building blocks 4* (2014), *New building bridges 6* (2014) and *Hello, world* (2019) published by Profil Klett and *Dip in 4* (2014), *Dip in 5* (2019), *Dip in 6* (2019), *Footsteps 1* (2019) published by Školska knjiga. The international textbooks examined were: *Spark 2* (2013), *Right on! 1* (2018), *Right on! 2* (2019) by Express Publishing; *Wider World 1* (2017), *Wider World 2* (2017) by Pearson Education; *Project 1* (2013), *Project 3* (2013), *English Plus 1* (2017), *English Plus 2* (2017), *Project Explore 1* (2019), *Project Explore 2* (2019) published by Oxford University Press. Jakupčević and Portolan (2021, p.15) noted that:

The analysed textbooks contained activities which explicitly focused on a total of 24 speech acts, ten of which were only covered in one textbook each (...). With the exception of greetings, covered in two out of the three analysed Year 4 textbooks, there was no direct focus on any other speech act in Year 4 textbooks. Furthermore, less than half of both Year 5 and Year 6 textbooks contained an explicit focus on any given speech act, except for making suggestions (covered in 6/8 Year 6 textbooks), asking for/expressing opinions (covered in 4/7 Year 5 textbooks) and inviting/accepting/refusing (covered in 4/8 Year 6 textbooks). Overall, Year 6 textbooks contained the greatest range of speech acts with an explicit focus (22);

however, only one speech act, making suggestions, appeared in the majority of the Year 6 textbooks (6/8).

When summarizing their results, Jakupčević and Portolan (2021, p.21) observed that “our results point to the fact that although all Croatian young learners are taught on the basis of the same curriculum, the EFL materials they are exposed to differ greatly in the quantity of pragmatic content”. This is in-line with the findings of previous investigations by Vollmuth (2004), Schauer (2019, 2020), and Glaser (2020) and indicates that the variability of speech act content in teaching materials for young learners may be a widespread problem that is not solely restricted to materials available for the German EFL market.

### 2.2.2 *Studies examining children’s books used in EFL classrooms*

Focusing on the same ten speech acts as in the EFL textbooks for 3rd and 4th grade of primary school discussed above, Schauer (2019) also examined 22 picturebooks (e.g., *Azzi in between*, *The Gruffalo*) published between 1963 and 2014 that either were used in EFL classrooms or were associated with teacher training programmes. The results showed that none of the picture books investigated included all ten speech acts. *Azzi in Between* featured the highest number of speech act categories (6), followed by *The Gruffalo* (5) and *Something Else* (4) and *Froggy Gets Dressed* (4). In addition:

the top three speech acts with regard to total number of instances with which they occur in the children’s books are *requests*, *responses to requests* and *greetings*. This matches the top three speech act categories identified in the textbooks. Thus, L2 learners will be predominantly exposed to the same speech act categories in the textbooks and children’s books investigated. (Schauer, 2019, p.165)

Consequently, the picturebooks examined will not be able to fill speech act gaps left by many of the primary textbooks investigated. Exploring the potential of children’s literature for teaching young learners speech acts further, Schauer (2021a) examined speech acts in five picturebooks published between 2016 and 2021 to investigate if recently published picturebooks offered richer pragmatic input opportunities. The study focused on 15 different speech act categories and found that the books included between nine (*The Prince and the Pee*), eight (*Charley and Emma*), seven (*The Suitcase*), six (*The Airport Book*) and four (*Weirdo*) different speech act categories. The top three speech acts were similar to the 2019 study: requests, followed by request responses and greetings. Moving on to a different type of children’s literature, Schauer (2021b) examined three graphic novels suitable for young learners (*Owly*, *Fish and Sun*, *The Thank You Book*) focusing on the same ten speech acts investigated in her 2019 study. The results showed that two

of the three graphic novels featured more speech act categories than the 22 picturebooks (*Owly*: eight, *Fish and Sun*: seven) thus providing more varied speech act input.

### 2.2.3 *Critical summary of studies examining input materials*

The studies examining input materials for young learners have shown that instructional materials specifically designed for young learners frequently do not contain a large variety of speech acts. They also often do not represent authentic interactions because reactive speech acts, such as responses to expressions of gratitude, were frequently missing, greetings were reduced to the bare minimum, and leave-takings were also frequently absent. The studies by Vollmuth (2004); Schauer (2019) and Glaser (2020), who investigated EFL instructional materials for German primary schools published from 1991 to 2019, show that key pragmatic speech acts are still not represented well in the most recent textbooks.

This is problematic because it denies young learners the opportunity to encounter essential speech acts on a regular basis that L2 learners may need in polite conversations and/or emergency situations. Textbooks and other input materials could play a major role in fostering young learners' pragmatic competence if textbook writers and publishing houses were prepared to ensure that their materials regularly exposed learners to complete conversations that equipped them with the basic pragmatic formulae and strategies that they need.

Regarding the potential of children's literature for pragmatic teaching, Schauer's (2019) investigation of picturebooks that were already used in educational institutions suggested that some of these books may only be of limited use for pragmatic instruction. However, the analysis of more recently published picturebooks and graphic novels (Schauer, 2021a; Schauer, 2021b), featuring books that teachers and educators may not yet be aware, suggests that teachers and educators may need to look to more recent publications when intending to use children's literature for pragmatic instruction. In order to assist teachers and teacher educators with this endeavour, more studies are needed from researchers in pragmatics that explore the potential of children's literature for L2 pragmatic instruction.

Researchers in pragmatics should consider conducting research in L2 input materials for young learners because this group of L2 learners may be taught by teachers who (1) never studied L2 they are teaching (Doerr, 2018; Schauer, 2019), (2) did not receive training in teaching young learners (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014) or (3) did not encounter pragmatics during their studies (Savvidou & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2019). These teachers are likely to rely on official teaching materials or recommended picturebooks when teaching the L2 and would benefit from accessible research that describes which books could be used for

teaching which speech acts. Of course, teachers already familiar with pragmatics would also benefit from research outlining the pragmatic potential of individual books.

### 3. Conclusion and future directions

The results of the studies reviewed here have shown that young learners in ESL and EFL settings typically increase their pragmatic competence with increasing proficiency in the target language. The findings further revealed that children aged about 9 years can produce conventionally indirect requests in their L2. The issue here is, however, whether they are able to produce complete and comprehensible utterances. If some young learners struggle with this, as indicated by the results of Ishihara (2013) and Schauer (2019) when they only receive a limited amount of instruction, then we need to consider how we can help learners increase their pragmatic competence in that respect. As mentioned above, textbooks could play an important role, but as the review has shown, the materials investigated tended to frequently focus on direct requests and not on indirect ones and did not tend to cover other speech acts extensively

This is problematic because it means that if learners cannot receive sufficient exposure to certain speech acts in their instructional materials, then the onus is on their teachers. In theory, L2 teachers could provide rich pragmatic input in their classrooms by using conventionally indirect requests for classroom management and other speech acts during personal interactions with groups and individual learners in group work or individual work times. However, as Glaser (2018) has argued, non-native L2 teachers may not use appropriate utterances when teaching young learners. Commenting on classroom observations, she wrote:

We frequently observe many of our teacher candidates to be insecure in this respect, displaying a tendency towards rather blunt and unmitigated language. *No, that's wrong* as a reaction to an incorrect student response or *Be quiet!* as the very first attempt at quietening the class down are cases in point. Apart from creating a rather harsh tone in the interaction with young children, it models communication patterns that deviate from target like classroom language, where the teacher would, in all likelihood, express these intentions more indirectly (e.g. *Uhm, good guess, but not quite right.* or *Everybody, please stop talking.*)

(Glaser, 2018, p.126)

Glaser's observations in a way support the results of Ryan and Sercu's (2005) international study that found that foreign language teachers may not have the necessary cultural knowledge to teach aspects related to intercultural competence.

This may also explain the findings of Cohen's (2018) study concerning non-native L2 teachers' reluctance to teach a wide variety of speech acts.

The question is: where to do we go from here? One possible solution would be to argue that L2 instruction in the early years should be left to native speakers or highly proficient L2 speakers, since they should have the required pragmatic competence to notice the lack of pragmatic input in the teaching materials and could make up for it by modelling the L2 pragmatic norms in the classroom. However, this is not a practical solution and also disregards the efforts made by teacher training programs worldwide that prepare pre-service teachers for careers in the area of young learner education. So, what can we do instead? I recommend the following:

1. Conduct more studies on existing teaching materials for young learners and curricula

At present, we simply do not have a large number of pragmatics-focused studies of young learners' instructional materials. In addition, the majority of textbook studies that have been done have focused on materials intended for the German speaking market. We need more studies that examine national as well as international materials to obtain a better understanding of whether the problems highlighted in the present paper are indeed widespread or not. If we have more empirical evidence pointing towards a relatively poor provision of pragmatic content in teaching materials in a number of different countries, we are in a better position to argue for change. However, for pragmatics to achieve the visibility it deserves in commercial teaching materials, we also need to focus more on the link between curricula and instructional materials. At least in the German context, the link between pragmatic competence and (intercultural) communicative competence is not always clear. This is something that also needs to be addressed by conducting research on curricula in order to see how pragmatic content is handled there (see Glaser, 2020). If the pragmatics community would like to advocate for change with regard to instructional materials and/or curricula, we need the empirical evidence to do so.

2. Include pragmatic content in undergraduate and teacher training degrees and conduct research on teachers' beliefs and views concerning pragmatics

Although not all individuals tasked with providing L2 instruction to young learners will have a degree in the respective modern foreign language and/or L2 teaching, we need to ensure that those of us who are teaching at universities frequently refer to pragmatics in our own teaching, equip our students with technical terms, keywords and the names of scholars, as well as journal titles and other resources that enable them to find pragmatic con-



tent in the future if they would like to or need to do so. Also, those of us involved in pre-service or in-service teacher training should provide teachers with information on helpful resources that assist them with appropriate classroom management language, such as *English for Primary Teachers* by Slattery and Willis (2001), to ensure that L2 learners are exposed to pragmatically appropriate input. In addition, more research should be conducted that examines pre- and in-service teachers' beliefs and views on pragmatics (e.g., Savvidou & Economidou-Koetsidis, 2019), as this will help target and tailor pragmatics instruction at universities and other teacher training institutions.

3. Conduct studies on young learners and formulaic sequences

Previous studies have shown that formulaic sequences or chunks can be helpful for pragmatic teaching and learning purposes (Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, & Vellenga, 2015). Studies should be conducted that explore young learners' ability to acquire simple formulaic sequences based on instructional materials or different teaching approaches.

4. Explore the potential of non-textbook materials for pragmatic instruction

As mentioned above, in order to assist L2 teachers, researchers in pragmatics should examine the potential of materials not specifically developed for L2 teaching purposes to explore their potential for pragmatic instruction.

5. Conduct more instructional studies

The studies by Ishihara (2013) and Ishihara and Chiba (2014) have shown that similar instructional input can result in rather different outcomes. More instructional studies are needed that explore which input materials and teaching methods and approaches benefit young L2 learners and that also provide insights on factors that may impact young L2 learners' pragmatic development, such as individual differences or learning environment.

I wrote at the beginning that there are several reasons for not conducting research relevant to young learners. However, if we truly believe that pragmatic competence is a key part of an L2 learners' (intercultural) communicative competence, then more researchers in L2 pragmatics need to conduct research with this learner group and on input materials intended for young learners. This is necessary in order to help lay good foundations for young L2 learners' pragmatic competence and to ensure that at the very least young learners have the pragmatic skills necessary to ask for help and explain what kind of help they need if they should find themselves in a situation where they need to do so.

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## Address for correspondence

Gila A. Schauer  
Linguistics Department  
University of Erfurt  
Nordhäuser Straße 63  
99089 Erfurt  
Germany  
[gila.schauer@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:gila.schauer@uni-erfurt.de)  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4051-9742>

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