

## TEACHING PRAGMATICS TO YOUNG LEARNERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDERS MYRSET

● Anders Myrset  
| University of  
Stavanger, Norway



Anders Myrset is Associate Professor of ELT Methodology at the University of Stavanger, Norway. His research

has mainly focused on children's L2 pragmatic development. He is co-author of the book 'Researching and Teaching Speech Acts with Young L2 Learners: Beneath the Linguistic Surface' (2025).

**You are a specialist for researching and teaching pragmatics to young learners. Why is it relevant to teach L2 pragmatics to young learners?**

Good question! Pragmatics is a field within linguistics that focuses on how we use language in context. In other words, it deals with communication and is situated at the intersection between the language we use and the social contexts we are in. So, we have the language – what linguistic resources are at your disposal for realising the intended meaning? – and the context – how can the utterance be interpreted or understood in that given context?

For example, there are a number of ways that you could potentially apologise, such as saying "I'm sorry". However, the context, for example the severity of the offence and the social relationship between you and the person you are apologising to, may influence the linguistic realisation of the apology. An apology is only one

example of what we refer to as speech acts, that is, when we use language to perform social actions, or doing things with words rather than just saying things, with others being, for example, requesting, refusing, and complimenting. They represent the most discussed and researched aspect of pragmatics, but other aspects covered within pragmatics would be, for example, irony, idioms, sarcasm, small talk, and humour. What they all have in common is that they are firmly grounded within social encounters, that they can often transcend a literal meaning, and that they require a speaker who produces an utterance and a hearer who interprets it within the social context.

So, from the perspective of L2 learning and teaching, being able to communicate appropriately in a variety of social contexts is at the core of language learning, which is why pragmatics should be considered such a crucial part of language instruction at all levels, including early language

teaching. Communication is becoming increasingly intercultural, which means that speakers must navigate a linguistic landscape with people from diverse backgrounds, not just native speakers of a language – who are in themselves diverse – but also L2 users from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This means that we as teachers must prepare our learners for such encounters, to help them understand that we have different ways of communicating, and that what we say may have consequences for how the conversations unfold and whether or not we achieve what we intended. Preparing learners for such a landscape, where they are able to negotiate and co-construct meaning in communication, and make choices about what to say and how, is crucial for their continued development as users of the language. This view, with an emphasis on intercultural communicative competence is closely connected to policy documents, such as many national curricula – for instance the Norwegian one – and the CEFR.

This is why L2 pragmatics is such an important topic to work with, even with young learners: whereas grammatical mistakes can be perceived as just that – a mistake – communicating what we didn't intend to may cause offence, and not be as easily identified by the hearer as a mistake made by a language learner who still hasn't mastered all the nuances of the language. What research has now started showing us is that pragmatics is something that we can start focusing on early in the process of teaching a second or foreign language.

**You are also an author of ELT textbooks for young language learners. According to you, what aspects of pragmatics should be covered in ELT for young learners?**

This is kind of a difficult question, because as a textbook author you have to think of L2 pragmatics as just one of many topics for development. What we tried to do, within the limited space we had in the *link* series, was to introduce a range of speech acts, and also to show a variety within these. For example, there are a range of different ways to

request, from very direct imperatives, such as “Clean your room” to those that are less direct, such as “Can you clean the room?” or “Your room is a mess”. What research has shown is that this variety is often lacking in textbooks, with the majority being of a direct nature, which may not reflect spoken discourse. In addition, research has also shown that there tends to be limited variety of speech acts, and that the most common one is requests. This is why we attempted to include a wider variety of speech acts with increasing complexity throughout the series to address the shortcomings identified in textbooks for young learners so far.

**“Being able to communicate appropriately in a variety of social contexts is at the core of language learning, which is why pragmatics should be considered such a crucial part of language instruction at all levels, including early language teaching.”**

One part of textbooks that holds huge potential for a focus on pragmatics is textbook dialogues, which are quite common in textbooks. Speech acts are often used in communication and have a tendency to also appear in such dialogues, whether they were intentionally placed there for a focus on speech acts or not. Research has shown that such dialogues hold great potential for discussions about the language forms themselves as well as to go deeper into aspects related to the impact the language forms may have on the hearer. In other words, dialogues in textbooks provide an opportunity to raise an awareness about language use.

Raising such an awareness could be achieved through questions and tasks that aim to push learners' thinking further. Why do we communicate in one way or another? Why do you think that something is appropriate or inappropriate, and what could be other views? Why did the speaker

choose this form and what else could they have said? How do you think the hearer feels and why? Such questions would be extremely useful for their learning and would also help prepare them for communication outside the classroom and help them understand that we have different ways of communicating, depending on our background and on what we want to achieve.

**“My experience from doing research with these age groups is also that they need quite a bit of guidance in reflections about language use, but that when they get this support, they can arrive at complex reflections about language use in the contexts they are familiar with.”**

**What teaching approaches/methods do you recommend for teaching pragmatics to children?**

It is important to look at available research to be able to make any recommendations. When it comes to research on L2 pragmatics instruction with children, we are still at a very early stage, meaning that we still have quite a few knowledge gaps related to both what the suitable approaches are as well as what instructional targets we can introduce. This means that we also have to rely a little on the research on adolescent and adult learners, groups that have been much more commonly researched. Although there are of course marked differences between these learner groups, such as the

attention span, their ability to think in abstract ways, and their cognitive development, the research we have seen on teaching L2 pragmatics to children has so far mirrored findings with older learners. The most important of these findings is that explicit instruction is more conducive to learning.

I think what has been interesting to see in the research is that the studies have largely adopted similar approaches to those used with adults, but that they have been nicely tailored to younger learners. For example, some have used picture books as a starting point for introducing and discussing polite requests and greetings or as a way in to introducing different language forms. Others have used script writing to produce and discuss the use of requests to accommodate learner interests, and one study even used a humanoid robot as a teaching assistant when teaching learners how to make simple requests in English. The robot was programmed to perform some chosen movements and produce some utterances to facilitate learner development. With all of the aforementioned approaches to introducing L2 pragmatics to children, I would say, is a very clear teacher-led approach. By this I don't mean teacher-fronted, with the teacher talking and children listening, but that the teacher had a very clear role as, for instance, guide in discussions to help push the learning to the next level. I can't think of having come across studies that employed an inductive approach with young learners, where the learners were left to figure out and learn by themselves. My experience from doing research with these age groups is also that they need quite a bit of guidance in reflections about language use, but that when they get this support, they can arrive at complex reflections about language use in the contexts they are familiar with.

I think we have much to learn from the instructional studies that have already been conducted, and we still have so much to explore within the field. Here, I really think that the floor is wide open for interesting studies, focusing on a range of pragmatic targets, and I think that the groundwork that has already been done can inform some exciting future research.

**In your research, you also investigated young learners' metapragmatic awareness regarding the (in)appropriateness of requests. Why were you interested in this and what did you find out?**

Another interesting question! I got into this research together with some colleagues – it was actually a colleague of mine, Milica Savić, whom I have since published quite a bit with, who initiated this. We saw that topics related to this were very much present in the policy documents. For example, topics related to politeness, intercultural communication, and adapting one's language to the listener are all mentioned in the English subject curriculum in Norway, as early as the primary level. Similarly, we find such topics in other national curricula as well as in international documents, such as the CEFR. At the same time, we found that there was very little research on this topic with young learners, meaning that there was a mismatch between the policy documents and the research. We work with pre- and in-service teachers, and an important focus here is that our teaching should be grounded in research, which was quite problematic given that we knew very little about young learners' reflections on language use, especially second language use, in context. So, we first decided to go out and conduct a study with learners aged approximately 9, 11, and 13 in Norway, and wanted to explore their language production as well as their metapragmatic awareness, that is their ability to think about and talk about language, the context, and their interplay. We then got to know a colleague, Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis, in Cyprus and conducted the same study with the same age groups there, and we have since explored that data from various perspectives. The three of us have since published a book and various chapters and articles based on this research.

It's difficult to go into much detail about what we have found in this interview, but the key finding is that learners in these age groups are capable of much more than we have previously thought, I would say, perhaps especially when it comes to their metapragmatic awareness.

I think for a long time it has been assumed that L2 pragmatics should only be taught once learners are slightly older and more mature, but what our research has shown is that with the right prompts and questions, and sufficient scaffolding, even children aged 9 can discuss and co-construct understandings about pragmatic behaviours. This, in turn, can create a nice foundation for further development. The research that we have conducted shows that learners in these age groups draw on a range of perspectives, such as hypothetical scenarios, historical knowledge, stereotypes about first and second language behaviours, others' and own's feelings, etc., and use these actively to build on each other's ideas and build metapragmatic understandings. Some of these reflections were more and some less sophisticated, but in essence these co-constructed ideas largely resemble findings from research with much older learners as well as views presented in theoretical discussions, for instance related to linguistic politeness. As I said, we have just brushed the surface with these groups of learners, and it will be very interesting to see findings from future research.

**Thanks a lot for the interview, Anders!**

**“Learners in these age groups are capable of much more than we have previously thought, I would say, perhaps especially when it comes to their metapragmatic awareness.”**