

Publication

“After all, the last thing I wanted to be was rude”: Raising of pragmatic awareness through reflective writing

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This study reports on findings from a corpus of reflective writing texts written by medical students at a British university (N=178). During their training, the BA students take a compulsory course on communication skills where they learn the importance of noting medical histories, listening to patients, using open and closed questions, keeping eye contact, showing adequate empathy and creating rapport and trust among other skills. A requirement of this course is to submit a written text of two to three pages in which the students are asked to first recall a memorable encounter with a patient, then to reflect on their communication skills during that episode and finally to conclude by formulating aims for future conduct (cf. Branch and Paranjape 2002, Hampton 2012 on reflective writing). While the teaching of the communication skills does not explicitly include raising awareness of rapport and politeness issues on a theoretical level as discussed in linguistics, the texts raise concerns about relational and interpersonal issues (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2007; Locher and Watts 2005). The questions pursued are ‘which communication skills are taught?’; ‘what communication skills surface in the students’ texts?’; and ‘what is the link to interpersonal pragmatics?’ The methodology employed consists of critical close readings of the texts with an interpersonal pragmatics lens (cf. The Handbook of Interpersonal Pragmatics, Locher and Graham 2010) within the framework of relational work (cf. Locher and Watts 2005; Locher 2012). The paper reveals that the students choose to write about interpersonal (e.g., empathy, rapport) rather than interactional (e.g. ask questions) communication skills to a large degree and they identify relational issues that overlap to a striking degree with issues that are currently debated in linguistics: The importance/value of rapport and empathy; interpersonal consequences of communication on relationships; the challenge of finding the right level; and the role of emotions. The paper ends with a discussion of the potential of the reflective writing task for awareness raising of pragmatic rules in teaching.

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