

Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication

‘The PIC project’

RES - 000 - 23 - 0410

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/>

FINAL REPORT
accompanying statement

I The Background to the Project

1.1

The main precursor of the PIC project was the HEFCE/fdtl-funded Interculture Project (1998-2002) <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/interculture/> which documented the experiences of British students during periods of residence in European countries abroad. One of the key findings of The Interculture Project was the sensitivity surrounding the relationship between language teaching assistants and the teacher/mentors responsible for their professional welfare on the inter-governmental Assistants Programme.

1.2

In the aftermath of The Interculture Project, colleagues from the Universities of Lancaster and Cambridge agreed to investigate the assistant-teacher relationship from a more concentrated, explicitly theoretical perspective. The new project would focus on only two European countries participating in the Assistants Programme: France and England. The project would need to be supportive of the Programme's objectives and to provide further insight into its operation.

1.3

Extended negotiations with the British Council and the French Ministry of Education engaged the support of both parties. The project was thought timely and potentially valuable. Considerable infrastructural preparation would be required. Students would need to be recruited from a range of universities in both countries and the schools which agreed to take part to represent a cross-section of institutions in a variety of social environments. Special arrangements would be necessary with The British Council, the Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP) and the Local Education Authorities or Académies.

II Aims, Objectives and Theoretical Models

2.1

The PIC Project had three main goals:

- (i) to extend the existing boundaries of research in intercultural pragmatics with particular reference to Anglo-French communication;
- (ii) to contribute to the quality of pedagogical training for intending assistants in France and England;

- (iii) to develop further techniques and materials for raising students' cultural awareness before and during their period in post.

To advance research in intercultural pragmatics was the primary objective. However, it was intended that the data generation process should contribute to the fulfilment of aims (ii) and (iii), while at the same time, acting as a catalyst in the discussions between the universities and the government agencies concerned.

2.2

The main research questions were the following. These are an elaboration of the original proposal and more accurately reflect the outcomes of the research so far:

- (i) What were the principal determinants of success or failure in communication between language assistants and teachers in France and England?
- (ii) What were the relative contributions by, for example, linguistic proficiency, factual knowledge, cultural insight, levels of preparation, personality and political and institutional context to the successful outcome of exchanges?
- (iii) What were the main differences in attitude and speech behaviour between French and English students in the environments in which they were placed?
- (iv) How adequate were existing theoretical models as paradigms for analysing the dynamics of cross-cultural communication between these particular sets of informants?
- (v) What refinements might be brought to existing methodologies and theoretical principles currently in use in the analysis of cross-cultural communication?

2.3

The project was designed to provide data which included (a) background information on the outlook, linguistic proficiency, preparation and personality of the participants (gathered through questionnaire, personality test, essay and workshop discussion), (b) recordings of authentic exchanges between assistants and teachers occurring early in the period of the assistantship and (c) retrospective analysis or 'metadata' which would offer an insight into those aspects of national or institutional culture which had aroused participants' concern. The experimental design thereby incorporated two levels of reflexivity and an in-built 'action research' component which catered for changes in outlook and states of knowledge occurring during the data gathering period.

2.4

In the original proposal, emphasis was given to Thomas's (1983) distinction between 'pragmalinguistic' and 'sociopragmatic' knowledge. This implied that language proficiency, factual knowledge and cultural insight were posited as primary ingredients of successful intercultural communication. Apart from gauging the attitude of participants, an important aspect of the project would therefore be to identify to what extent these factors were present or absent when misunderstandings occurred. At the same time, it was essential to analyse the dynamic of the exchanges in terms of their constitution (context, participants, topic, goal) and structure (move sequences, the conventions governing 'allowable contributions' and so on).

2.5

Focusing primarily on politeness theory, the project would engage with related concepts such as 'face', 'framing', 'activity type', and the cross-cultural comparison of speech act formulation and with the increasing emphasis in intercultural pragmatics on negotiating 'rapport' through recourse to 'strategic interactive principles' (SIPs): cf. inter alia Brown and Levinson [1987], House [2000], Goffman [1974], Kasper and Blum-Kulka [1993], Kerbrat-Orecchioni [2001], Kim [1994], Leech [1983], Levinson [1992], Pavlidou [2000], Sarangi [2000], Sinclair and Coulthard [1975], Spencer-Oatey [2000 ff.], Tannen [1974; 1993], Thomas [1983; 1995], Watts [2003]. It was intended simultaneously to test the validity of these methodologies by applying them to the data and thereby to seek answers to the research questions raised above. Our aim was to compare at every turn the behaviour of the French and English informants, identifying differences between them and detecting patterns which might be markers of cultural specificity.

III Infrastructure and methodology

3.1

The tasks undertaken in Year 1 (October 2003 to September 2004) were:

- (i) to identify approximately 60 student volunteers from universities in France and England (30 per country) and brief them fully on the requirements of the project in training workshops;

- (ii) to agree procedures with The British Council and the Centre International des Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP) for the students to be identified as PIC participants and directed towards selected schools which had themselves agreed to take part in the project;
- (iii) to gain the approval of a representative range of Recteurs d'Académie and LEAs that schools in their regions participate in the project and to ensure that the schools were notified;
- (iv) to inform the principal teachers of the schools of the background to the project and the administrative implications of their involvement;
- (v) to identify the teachers responsible for the assistants appointed to the schools concerned and to seek their attendance at preparatory workshops in Cambridge and Paris in order to brief them on the entailments of participation.

For further details, see calendar at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/>

3.2

Personal contact was established with the Heads of French at the English Universities supplying the largest numbers of student recruits to the Assistants Programme: Durham, Exeter, Lancaster, Leeds and Warwick. A similar exercise was carried out in France, engaging the collaboration of three Universities with which Lancaster had Erasmus agreements: Lyon II, Rennes II and Poitiers. With assistance from these Universities, a total of 58 students were recruited to the project (33 from England and 25 from France [see Appendix Table 1]). The English students having been divided into two groups, two workshops were organised: at Cambridge in April and Lancaster in June 2004. A similar workshop was organised at Cambridge in September 2004 for the incoming French students in the days before the start of the English school year.

3.3

With the assistance of The British Council and the CIEP, special arrangements were made for the PIC students to be directed to particular schools. Following a presentation by the Project Director in November 2003 to the Délégation aux Relations Internationales et à la Coopération (DRIC) of the French Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, and with the DRIC's active support, agreement to participate in the project was granted by the Recteurs d'Académie of Paris, Versailles, Créteil, Nantes, Poitiers, Rennes and Toulouse. A similar exercise was masterminded in England by the British Council in

collaboration with the LEAs of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Peterborough and Suffolk. In each school, a teacher/mentor was technically named as the person 'responsible' for the PIC student during the project. Special preparatory workshops were provided for both French and English teacher/mentors: in Paris in April 2004 for the French and in Cambridge in September 2004 for the English.

See Appendix, Table 2 – Student allocation to LEAs/Académies and schools

3.4

Given the complexity of the infrastructure, the first phase of the project was an undoubted success. We owe a massive debt of thanks to the senior administrators of the Assistants Programme in both countries, and especially to staff who took a personal interest in the project, attended the workshops and oversaw liaison with the schools in their region. The project could not have succeeded without their support.

For the list of administrative officers and colleagues who assisted in the organisation of the PIC project, see <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/>.

IV The workshops

4.1

The workshops were a central element of the project. They enabled vital data to be collected and allowed the participants to understand what would be expected of them when they were 'in post'. The quality and volume of the data collected stand as evidence of their effectiveness. Role plays based on known 'incidences of misunderstanding' had been re-enacted and video-recorded in advance. These were used to invite the students to imagine themselves as either the 'assistant' or the 'teacher' in the video and then to write up their reflections on the 'event' as a rehearsal. The personal, cultural and institutional implications of the incident were then discussed by the whole group in the light of the individual analyses. The students were also asked to enact mini-scenarios by taking the part of a student in a live interaction with a 'mentor' played by a native speaker. Once again, these were recorded, played back and discussed in plenary session.

4.2

The workshops were also used to gather preliminary data: questionnaires on preparation and previous foreign language learning experience, essays on 'FrenchNESS' or 'EnglishNESS', written from the point of view of the 'other'

nationality, and a standard, web-based personality test ‘The Big 5’, <http://www.testsonthenet.com/Big-Five.htm> recommended to us by the Psychology Department at Lancaster University. (for the results of the test and preliminary conclusions see <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/>). The uniformly positive evaluations of the workshops showed that they not only served the purposes of collecting data and preparing the participants for the project but were also highly effective as a preparation exercise which could be applied more widely.

4.3

The same could be said of the two preparatory workshops for teacher/mentors. The event for English teachers was better attended than that for the French. This was because it had been easier in England to identify the members of staff who had been designated for the role of ‘mentor’. Nevertheless, the French workshop was well attended by inspectors and regional administrators which greatly facilitated the next phase of the project. (See Table 3 – attendance at workshops).

4.4

The final workshops, held in May 2005 in Cambridge and Paris, brought together mentors and students and allowed further retrospective data to be collected. It also enabled proposals to be made for the subsequent development of the Assistants Programme. Again, the mentors attending the Paris workshop were for the most part limited to those from the Paris region, and, in order to compensate for any shortfall in data, the remaining French mentors were interviewed personally by phone from Lancaster by a French native speaker.

4.5

It might be said that the workshops introduced experimental bias into the design of the project by sensitising students and mentors towards specific issues and by directing their reports. (see website – ‘Instructions to students’). It is certainly true that the issues to be considered were defined in advance in the light of previous research. However, the students’ responses to them were not. Their commitment to the project and the training they received at the workshops disposed them favourably towards their interactions, implying that if they subsequently had negative reactions, it was because they felt the more strongly about the issues concerned. The bias could therefore be said to favour the validity of the findings rather than the other way round. It would in any case have been impossible to generate the type of data we were seeking without preparing the participants carefully.

V The data: recording, transcription and codification

5.1

As has been seen, the range of data collected can be summarised as follows:

Student assistants

- (i) questionnaires on preparation and foreign language proficiency;
- (ii) 'NESSays' (Essays on students' unstructured reflections on the concepts of FrenchNESS or EnglishNESS) – followed up by plenary discussion of findings at Workshop 1;
- (iii) personality tests ('The Big 5' see web reference above);
- (iv) live recordings of meeting with teacher/mentor ('entretiens' – in a few cases, two meetings were recorded: the first in the initial stages of the assistantship, the second towards the end);
- (v) short-term recorded oral reflections on the meetings ('témoignages');
- (vi) journals ('journals de bord' – covering the first three months of the assistantship);
- (vii) retrospective reflections or 'commentaries' (written in margins of journals at the final workshop)

Teacher Mentors

- (i) live recordings of meeting(s) with student/assistant ('entretiens' – as above)
- (ii) retrospective reflections (final workshop)
- (iii) retrospective reflections (telephone interviews)

See Appendix: Table 4 – volume and type of data collected

5.2

The full data set, together with summary reports on the findings derived from each data type is accessible on the project website and is available on the CD (enclosed). The questionnaires and NESSays are published in full and summarised independently. The data was transcribed and then codified using AtlasTi5, according to a taxonomy agreed at meetings held during year 2. All the live student/teacher interviews ('entretiens') and the telephone interviews with the French teacher/mentors had been recorded. As far as the 'entretiens' were concerned, a qualitative distinction was made in the taxonomy of codes between 'topic' and what we initially termed 'goal driven

activity'. 'Topic' referred literally to the subject matter of the chunk of discourse concerned. 'Goal-driven activity' referred to the salient intention which dominated a given sequence of moves e.g. 'seeking advice', 'giving information', 'complaining', 'giving instructions' etc... The latter term was therefore applied exclusively to the live 'entretiens' and not to the metadata. As adjustments were made to the codification or to the data itself, these were transferred to the website which remains the most updated version of the data available. Transcription and codification extended into the third year of the project. Extensive data analysis, publication and dissemination started in earnest in January 2006 and still continue.

(For the list of topics and goal-driven activities and the guidelines for codifiers, see website <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/pic/>)

5.3

One aspect of the codification process which had wider theoretical implications was the 'size' or 'extent' of the language segments codified. It was apparent that the focus of the project was on 'language in context'. To conceptualise 'speech acts' as individual enunciations was not our primary objective though it might, incidentally, yield some interesting comparative data at a later stage. 'Goal driven activities' needed to be understood as a series of moves within the context of a given 'activity type' applicable within a real-life situation. Some 'median segment of discourse' needed to be defined which was somewhere between a 'speech act' and a complete 'event', a concept which corresponded closely to the term 'discourse type' as applied by Sarangi [2000]. In that sense, the project was going beyond House and Edmondson's, and Kasper's classic comparative work on German and English by locating the object of analysis within an interaction. The 'metadata' rarely, if ever, referred to individual statements. Rather it reflected on the event as a whole or on the relative success or failure in achieving a particular objective. These 'pointers' in the metadata, emphasising such issues as 'requests for information', 'topics of complaint', 'praise', 'formality' and so on, conditioned the type of topic we prioritised as research items.

VI Activities, outputs and findings

6.1

In view of the range of data available, it was challenging to focus our research investigation on a finite set of topics. At the time of writing, the analytical phase continues and, following uniformly favourable reviews by readers from the UK and the USA, an agreement has been secured with Cambridge

University Press to publish a full account of the project in book form under the title Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication. In the meantime, a total of five research papers have been completed (see website for complete list to date and a detailed bibliography of the project as a whole), one of which will be appearing in August 2007. Three others will be submitted to journals by the end of March and a further one by the end of April 2007. We had, early on, agreed to identify topics which corresponded to the interests and expertise of the investigators, to have one of the three main researchers take the lead on a given topic, to present the subject at a conference or nationally constituted research colloquium and then to write it up for publication. The topics chosen have followed the logic of the research questions as described above. Further outstanding research issues will be incorporated into the book.

6.2

Papers whose primary objective was research driven were distinguished from presentations whose main purpose was to inform the wider community about the project's progress and administrative structure. Apart from the website developed in years 2 and 3, information about the project was distributed at specialist colloquia (see project website for the calendar of presentations made by project members to date) Summary versions of the final report have been publicised electronically by the National Centre for Languages, CILT <http://www.cilt.org.uk/research/index.htm> , and the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies <http://www.llas.ac.uk/news/newsitem.aspx?resourceid=2699> . Copies of the report have also been sent to The British Council (who have advised us on the content of the website), the French Inspectorate, the DRIC and the CIEP. Thus, information about the project has been disseminated to the UKHE community as a whole, the government agencies responsible for the Assistants' Programme, and, through the presentation and publication of research findings to specialist experts in cross-cultural pragmatics.

6.3

Apart from the workshops described in section IV above, two examples demonstrate the close interaction between the project and the government agencies. The first was the invitation to the Project Director by the British Council to act as the British spokesperson in Paris in the all-day, video-linked colloquium between Paris and London set up to explore the joint Anglo-French management of the Assistants' Programme. This unique event, which took place on December 7th 2005 as part of a special series known as 'Café Education', was organised by the British Council in Paris to complement the celebrations of the Programme's Centenary. The organisers used the preliminary findings of the PIC project as a template for the topics to be

discussed and specifically invited the French officials who had facilitated the Project to take part.

6.4

The second example was the national research symposium in intercultural pragmatics held at the British Council Head Office in London on March 27th 2006. A number of invited experts in the field listened to presentations by the Project team and commented critically on the findings to date (see colloquium agenda and report on project website). Two research topics additional to those already identified by the team were suggested by delegates: one on the implications of the project's findings for the employment of assistants in English and French secondary schools, the second on the performative dimension of student participants' language in the metadata as a function of experimental design. Both have been incorporated into the CUP book proposal.

VII Findings and their significance

7.1

At the institutional level, the Project's principal finding has been that despite the extremely high quality of available material offered by government agencies, significant lacunae persist in students' preparation for the programme. This applies particularly in the field of pedagogy, given the increasing demands placed on assistants in schools. Responsibility for this shortfall must be laid at the door of the universities. There is little that the British Council can do to influence university curricula beyond supplying learning materials and information packs, organising and supporting highly valued preparation courses and maintaining close working relations with the institutions which are their main suppliers of recruits. The co-ordination of the programme within universities in England and France relies on the commitment of individuals and is not highly rewarded. Moreover, the period of residence abroad is accredited in different ways and to different degrees by different universities in England and not at all by those in France. However, amongst the participants in the project, accreditation in itself made little difference to the attitude or motivation brought to their jobs by students from the two countries. This may well be because the PIC students were volunteers and, as the 'Big 5' personality test confirmed, were almost without exception 'outgoing' and 'friendly'. It was as if the Project had replaced the normal university assessment requirements (though we were at great pains to separate the two entirely). Clearly other factors such as local conditions, personality, vocation, ability and level of support in the school were more

important as determinants. Two practical recommendations arising from the above are (i) that the activities created by the project be incorporated into the syllabi of HE institutions and (ii) that its findings promote the closer involvement of regional authorities in the use made of assistants in schools.

7.2

Another infrastructural variable which is well known to students and officials concerns students' notification of their placements in schools and the effectiveness of communication with schools before they take up post. Since this depends almost entirely on the efficiency of communication between the regional authorities and the schools, and the speed of uptake by the students themselves, there is little if anything which the national agencies can do to accelerate matters. Differences in timing between regions outweighed differences between practice in France and England, except that the level of demand for assistants in France is higher than in England due to the compulsory inclusion of English in the primary school syllabus. The allocation of students to schools is arguably more complex in France since in many cases, assistants are shared by more than one school. This makes the task of negotiating timetables more onerous than in England. Examples such as these represent important, if obvious, differences in the local environment. These cultural factors impact directly on the type of issue raised by the students within the school and on the type of conversational strategy which it is reasonable to adopt. By extension it also affects the type of institutional preparation they ought to receive.

7.3

At the theoretical level, the Project has demonstrated that intercultural verbal communication cannot satisfactorily be understood in terms of universal politeness principles. Specific cultural codes regulate what is considered appropriate in given situations, for instance those dominated by such functions such as 'giving information', 'seeking advice', 'complaining', 'praising', 'criticising' and 'apologising'. These codes are likely to be as much the product of particular contexts as of nationally determined linguistic patterns of behaviour. Not surprisingly, students need to be aware in advance of the codes appropriate to the contexts concerned if they are to manage their professional relationships successfully in the foreign school environment. This was the principle exemplified in our first research paper, presented in December 2004 and accepted for publication in August 2007. Its objective was to test a methodological hypothesis, viz. that Sinclair and Coulthard's approach to discourse analysis could successfully be used to differentiate between learning practices already internalised by teachers (termed 'cultural') and those externally imposed by government (termed 'political'). The number of conflict moves was higher in exchanges involving

the former than the latter since the teacher took personal responsibility for the practices concerned. It would be important for students to be aware of the distinction between the two types of issue and how they were likely to affect the culture of the school(s) where they were working.

7.4

Having validated a methodology for studying the internal structure of exchanges, we agreed that our next task should be to examine how the concept of 'activity type' as defined by Levinson (1977) and later Thomas (1995) could usefully be applied to the data. What constituted a 'speech situation' in which the 'allowable contributions' were sufficiently consistent that a set of underlying rules could be said to apply? If such rules could be identified, were they the same in England as in France for specific 'goal-driven activities' and what was the degree of variation between different local contexts? The conclusion of the paper on this topic which focused on the activity of 'seeking advice', first presented in Landau in March 2005 and subsequently submitted to *The Journal of Text and Talk*, was that a distinction had to be made between core criteria (analogous to formal principles) and culturally specific conventions, the latter being different in France from England. In line with our original objective, we had, as we saw it, succeeded in combining a refined version of Levinson's work with Thomas's notion of the 'pragmalinguistic' and offered a useful insight into cultural differences in speech behaviour.

7.5

A similar approach to the data has been adopted for the other three papers which have been presented and written so far. Each has taken a specific 'discourse type' and has considered the different ways these have been articulated by the two national sample populations. The four subjects involved so far have been 'seeking advice', 'formality', 'praise', and 'complaint'. In each case, the papers, summarised on the website, can be said to be offering an original perspective on cultural differences between French and English modes of communication, with, in some cases, unexpected results. The fact that the level and intensity of complaint amongst English students was greater than that for the French ran counter to stereotype and raised wider questions as to the possible causes. French students' misinterpretation of 'praise' on the part of English teacher/mentors seemed also to correspond to a more general cultural trait which it would have been hard to derive intuitively. Similarly, the (unprompted) perceptions by the English students that the French teachers were more 'formal' in their speech behaviour than their English counterparts, was demonstrated by the qualitative and quantitative evidence provided by the project data.

VIII Impact

8.1

The overall impact of the project has been alluded to and illustrated above. The involvement of government agencies has been the most pertinent example to date of its potential influence on current practice in schools and universities. Its longer term impact is perhaps best demonstrated through the website, which is itself an output and was a key element in the project's dissemination. All the material generated by the project is accessible to a wider public, from the administrative documents, through the data sets to the summaries of the research papers. The existence of the site and its potential as a locus of research in intercultural pragmatics is still developing. The CUP publication and the establishment of a discussion forum will, we anticipate, raise its profile still further. The potential impact of the project derives first from the 'yield' offered by the data, which enables a variety of methodologies to be applied, a process facilitated by AtlasTi5, and second, in the relationship between the metadata and the 'live' exchanges which has allowed the research topics to be generated by the data itself, lending the project the 'grounded' character we anticipated in the original proposal. Third, it is breaking new ground in intercultural pragmatics by closely analysing French-English/English-French communication.

IX Future Research Priorities

9.1

Within the contractual period of the project officers, a period of approximately 9 months (January-September 2006) was allowed for serious data analysis. Having been able to secure further funding for three months for the Research Assistant to the project, we have so far been able to complete the five papers already referred to and have secured the agreement for the CUP book. In terms of our research programme, there is still a wealth of topics to be considered before we can say that we have fully answered our original research questions. So far, we have made what we consider to be a convincing methodological case for the approaches we have adopted and have revealed some of the sources of intercultural misunderstanding between assistants and teachers in the two countries under consideration. At the same time, we have demonstrated that the data set offers the potential for further investigation. The topics on which we shall continue to work include:

- the comparative use of the term 'culture' in the metadata;

- the relationship between personality and student attitude as revealed through style;
- the expression of 'repair';
- metalingual style in French and English;
- forms of address;
- the issue of performance;
- the pedagogical integration of the assistant into the language learning curriculum in France and England.

As the text of the CUP book proposal demonstrates, we intend to address all these issues within the publication. Our aim is to relate the findings of the PIC project to current research in intercultural pragmatics within the world as a whole, and to do so more comprehensively than has hitherto been possible within the boundaries of our individual journal articles. We have sought to position the work of the project within a paradigm in which intercultural communication is first and foremost a site of negotiation, one in which, in line with recent work by Kim and Spencer-Oatey, cultural conventions are modified according to circumstances in order to establish 'rapport'. If, as in the case of the PIC project, volunteers are carefully prepared and approach their experience with an open mind, yet misunderstandings still occur, then it is fair to assume that some basic principles of intercultural communication have been ignored. The project is still in the process of investigating what these principles are.

Robert Crawshaw, Project Director,
Lancaster University,
on behalf of the Project Team
February 15th, 2007