

The role of pragmatics in teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract

Studies have shown that even language learners who know grammar and word meanings still often fail to convey their intended messages because they lack pragmatic competence. This paper reviews some of the literature related to pragmatics and makes suggestions on how the addition of explicit pragmatic instruction into the classroom could compensate for the restricted opportunities for developing pragmatic competence in a foreign language setting.

Introduction

One of the challenges in language instruction is teaching the appropriate use of language. Previous studies have shown that even those language learners who know grammar and word meanings still often fail to convey their intended messages because they lack the necessary pragmatic or functional information (Wolfson, 1989). When opportunities for developing pragmatic competence are limited, the result is that even those who have studied

English for many years may still find it difficult to use the language appropriately in communicative contexts.

David Graddol (1997) identified three kinds of English speakers: “those who speak as a first language, those for who it is a second language or additional language and those who learn it as a foreign language” (p.10). For those who do not speak English as a first language, it might be argued that in authentic settings, a second/foreign language learner's pragmatic competence might be more important than grammatical accuracy. Whereas linguistic errors may be tolerated as innocent learner mistakes, learners' pragmatic errors may not be so easily tolerated. Given that culturally inappropriate L2 use can be a major source of misunderstanding, it is vital to systematically incorporate a focus on appropriate use of language in L2 instruction.

The needs of L2 speakers who are becoming functional bilinguals are somewhat different from those of monolingual native English speakers. Research has shown that learners may use the L2 in a way that is

Key words : pragmatics, pragmatic competence, foreign language setting

pragmatically different from native speakers. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) contends that learners' production can diverge from that of native speakers' in at least four areas: choices of speech acts, semantic formulae, content, and grammatical form. While not all of these differences are problematic in communication, if a learner cannot communicate with a level of accuracy sufficient to convey intended meaning and appropriateness in a given situation then communication will breakdown. In order to help prevent these breakdowns, a pragmatics standpoint needs to be addressed in the L2 classroom.

The role of instruction in pragmatics becomes even more important in foreign-language classrooms because pedagogical intervention is the main avenue by which most learners explore the target language. Learning English is rather difficult in an EFL environment when compared to the English as a second language (ESL) environment because EFL learners do not interact with native speakers as ESL learners do. Cook (2001) stated that in foreign-language classrooms, the target language tends to be viewed as an object of study instead of a means of socialization and communication. Language class activities in EFL settings often focus on de-contextualized language practice, which does not expose learners to the types of sociolinguistic input that facilitate competence. For a non-native English speaker, linguistic

forms can be learned by practicing and learning the rule and structures. However, there are no definite rules for appropriate language use since the variables related to language use interact in complicated ways.

What is Pragmatics?

There have been various definitions of the term pragmatics in the scholarly literature. Some offer multiple definitions of pragmatics, addressing or emphasizing different dimensions of the construct (e.g., Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Others offer more compact definitions. For example, Mey defines it as "the science of language seen in relation to its users...science of language as it is used by real, live people, for their own purposes and within their limitations and affordances" (1993, p. 5). Similarly, Crystal (2003) stresses this user perspective in his definition: "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using the language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in an act of communication" (p. 364).

However, as Thomas (1995) observes, these definitions represent one of the two approaches to pragmatics: *speaker meaning* and *utterance interpretation* (p. 2). She aptly points out that either approach alone neglects the nature of meaning in interaction and therefore, both are inadequate. Some

of the more recent definitions incorporate this interactive aspect of pragmatics in line with Thomas' observation. For instance, LoCastro (2003) stresses the interactional and dynamic nature of pragmatics explicitly and defines it broadly as: "the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and nonlinguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities" (p.15).

As LoCastro's definition clearly indicates, the pragmatic use of language, (i.e., the appropriate use and understanding of communicative actions in sociocultural contexts), is largely shaped and influenced by culture (Canale, 1983, Wierzbicka, 1991). Language users adjust their use of language according to various aspects of the sociocultural context of the interaction. The central contextual factors that are known to influence the pragmatic use of language include: the relative social status /power in relation to age, gender, and social role of the speaker and hearer, and the level of acquaintance (i.e., psychological distance or closeness between the interlocutors). Another crucial contextual factor is the content of the speech such as severity of imposition (e.g., borrowing a car vs. borrowing a pen, or seriousness of an offense being apologized for) (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Enoch and Yoshitake, 1999; Hudson, 2001; Scollon and Scollon, 1995). The ways in which speakers assess

these contextual factors differ cross-culturally, much as their choice of verbal and non-verbal strategies does (e.g., syntactic and semantic formulae, tonal features, and non-verbal cues) (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996).

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence entails both receptive and productive skills: ability to understand meaning as intended in the particular sociocultural context and to vary one's language use appropriately as intended according to the context (Thomas, 1983). In second language acquisition (SLA) pragmatic competence has been identified as an essential component of communicative competence. For instance, Hymes (1972) argues that communicative competence includes judgment of appropriateness in light of relevant contextual features. According to Canale's (1983) influential work (based on Canale and Swain, 1980), communicative competence comprises four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. In this conceptualization, pragmatic competence is part of sociolinguistic competence, which addresses "the extent to which utterances are produced and understood *appropriately* in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors" (p.7, italics his). More recently Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative

language ability subsumes pragmatic competence under language competence along with organizational competence (grammatical and textual/discourse competence), and thus considers pragmatic competence a vital component of communicative competence.

Pragmalinguistics and Sociopragmatics

The construct of pragmatic competence can be divided into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competences (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). Pragmalinguistic competence is primarily linguistic knowledge for realizing and understanding the speaker's intentions (e.g., knowledge of syntactic structures and semantic formulae for a speech act). Pragmalinguistic failure is caused by gaps in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force and occurs as a result of misunderstanding of the intended meaning of an utterance, or misrepresenting the intended meaning by using inaccurate or inappropriate linguistic forms. Sociopragmatic competence, on the other hand, is knowledge of sociocultural norms and conventions and the ability to evaluate contextual factors in understanding and expressing intended meaning (e.g., semantic content and choice of politeness strategies). Learners' inappropriate perceptions of "what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior" (Thomas, 1983, p.99) in the L2 may result in sociopragmatic failure.

For pragmalinguistic failure, Nelson, Car-

son, Al Batal, and El Bakary (2002) use the example of identifying oneself on the phone, saying "I am Sarah," instead of "this is Sarah." In this utterance, the intended meaning was expressed inaccurately due to an inappropriate choice of linguistic form. In contrast, a dinner guest's asking, "How much did this house cost?" might be grammatically correct but socially inappropriate in most situations in the United States, and thus is an example of sociopragmatic failure (Nelson et al., 2002, p.163). The latter may derive from inappropriate judgment of the social context.

This distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure can be useful in the teaching and assessment of L2 speakers' pragmatic competence (Thomas, 1983). Some pragmatic failure occurs when learners inappropriately transfer their first language (L1) linguistic strategies or sociocultural norms into the L2, where the perlocutionary force (i.e., hearer's interpretation, or effects or results of the utterance, Austin, 1962) fails to match the illocutionary force (i.e., the speaker's intended function, Austin, 1962). Although the two types of pragmatic failure are not clearly mutually exclusive (Beebe and Waring, 2001) and defy easy empirical validation (Niezgoda and Rover, 2001), the distinction is often useful in directing learners' attention to both linguistic and sociocultural aspects and in detecting the exact

source of gaps in their knowledge.

Pragmatics and Language Instruction

For second and foreign language learners, the opportunity to develop the pragmatics of the second language comes from two main channels : exposure to input and production of output through classroom use of the target language, or from a planned pedagogical intervention directed toward the acquisition of pragmatics (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Compared to the environment outside the classroom, language classrooms have been considered poor environments for developing pragmatic ability in a target language because they generally offer low interaction with native speakers of the target language. This limitation imposes huge demands on instruction that most likely cannot be attained through the traditional classroom format.

Foreign-language learners have limited exposure to the target language compared to second-language learners. Language class activities in EFL settings often focus on de-contextualized language exercises, which do not expose learners to the types of sociolinguistic input that facilitates pragmatic competence acquisition. In addition, research has shown that many aspects of pragmatic competence cannot be acquired without a focus on pragmatics instruction (Kasper, 2000). Schmidt (1993) suggested that simple exposure to the target language is insufficient ; pragmatic functions

and relevant contextual factors are often not salient to learners and thus are not likely to be noticed despite prolonged exposure. Furthermore, Schmidt noted that even the learning of first language pragmatics is facilitated by a range of strategies that caregivers employ to teach children communicative competence, which means children learning first language pragmatics do so with more than mere exposure to the target language. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) proposed the necessity of instruction in pragmatics by documenting that second-language learners who do not receive instruction in pragmatics differ significantly from native speakers in their pragmatic production and comprehension in the target language.

As suggested above, the addition of pragmatics to the classroom could compensate for the restricted opportunities for developing competence in a foreign-language setting. Furthermore, continued practice leads to faster and more efficient acquisition of sociopragmatic and pragmatic knowledge in the learners' inter-language system.

As discussed earlier, Kasper and Rose (2002) stated that learners may develop the pragmatic competence of the target language through two modalities found in the classroom : students may learn from exposure to input and production through instructional activities not necessarily intended for the development of a prag-

matic function, and they might learn as a result of planned pedagogical action directed towards the acquisition of pragmatics. Based on this supposition, explicit pragmatics instruction is needed in foreign-language classrooms in order for language learners to develop pragmatic ability and practice the target language pragmatic abilities through a planned intervention that helps them further acquire pragmatic competence.

The Role of Explicit Instruction in the Acquisition of Second Language Pragmatic Awareness

Schmidt's (1990, 1993a, 1994a, 1995) noticing hypothesis addresses the role of conscious process in L2 acquisition. It is concerned with the initial stage of input (the L2 resources available in the learner's environment) processing and the attentional conditions required for input to become intake (Schmidt, 1995). In Schmidt's opinion, learning requires awareness at the level of noticing. Schmidt's noticing hypothesis accounts for initial recognition and focuses on the importance of attention and consciousness (1993) in second-language acquisition. According to Schmidt, in order to distill intake from input and make it available for further processing, relevant input has to be noticed-detected while in a state of awareness and attention (Schmidt, 1995, 2001).

Some researchers have previously claimed that learning a language is primarily an unconscious process (Chomsky, 1965, 1986, 1990; Krashen, 1982). The importance given to subconscious processes in language learning led in part to the rejection of a target language in favor of a pedagogy that focused on meaning with little or no explanation of grammar, error correction, or focused practice (e.g., the Natural Approach). Other researchers (Fisk and Schneider, 1984; Kihlstorm, 1984), however, support the idea, also present in Schmidt's work, that "there is no learning without attention" (Schmidt, 1995, p.9). In addition, various theories of consciousness (Gardner, 1985; Schmidt, 1990)

have suggested a crucial role for consciousness in dealing with novel information, novice behavior, and learning.

In studies of second-language acquisition, Schmidt found evidence that supports the role of consciousness in learning a language. The study on the preterit/imperfect distinction by Leeman, Arteagoitia, Friedman and Doughty (1995) found that enhanced input within a communicative teaching methodology involving no specific discussion of rules led to higher rates of accuracy and frequency of use of Spanish past tense forms by learners as compared to those who were only given the communicative teaching technique. In addition, Schmidt cited a study of his own acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese (Schmidt and

Frota, 1986) and found that he applied a lexical semantic distinction for choosing between preterit and imperfect. In addition, forms that were frequent in the input had a high correlation with their correct usage, possibly an indication of a positive effect of noticing. Huot (1995) reported on the acquisition of English in a naturalistic setting by a French-speaking child. Observations revealed that the child noticed various aspects of English, providing metalinguistic notes on new words and forms encountered. A comparison with her English production found that these noticed forms were also present in her English utterances.

For acquiring second- or foreign-language pragmatics, Schmidt (2001) pointed out that global alertness to the target language input is not sufficient; attention has to be allocated to specific learning objects, or “directed to whatever evidence is relevant for a particular domain...In order to acquire pragmatics, one must attend to both the linguistic forms of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated.” (p. 30). In addition, Schmidt distinguished between the concepts of noticing and understanding. Noticing is defined as the “conscious registration of the occurrence of some event,” while understanding implies “the recognition of some general principle, rule, or pattern.” “Noticing refers to surface-level phenomena and item learning, while

understanding refers to deeper levels of abstraction related to (semantic, syntactic, or communicative) meaning, system learning” (p. 29).

Schmidt (1995) elaborated on the distinction between noticing and understanding as follows :

In pragmatics, awareness that on a particular occasion someone says to their interlocutor something like, 'I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but if you have time could you please look at this problem?' is a matter of noticing. Relating the various forms used to their strategic development in the service of politeness and recognizing their co-occurrence with elements of context such as social distance, power, level of imposition and so on, are all matter of understanding (p. 30).

Conclusion

Studies have indicated that advanced learners with higher-level L2 competence still have gaps in their pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, pragmatic competence should not be viewed as a mechanism that is activated automatically as linguistic competence increases. Giving learners explicit instruction on pragmatics can help direct their attention to aspects of the target language uncovered through class discussions and practice. Explicit instruction on pragmatics has much to offer L2 acquisition and instruction. Increasing the

role of pragmatics in language instruction fosters the goals of communicative methodology by offering contexts for learners to acquire and comprehend the forms and features of target language. Presenting the target language forms in the pragmatic frames may facilitate acquisition by learners who can make immediate connections between a linguistic time and its application in interactions.

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外国語として英語を教授する場合のプラグマティックスの役割

Jerrold Frank

ABSTRACT

様々な研究が、外国語を学習する者がその言語の文法や単語の意味を知っていても、プラグマティックな能力を欠くと、伝えようとするメッセージがその主旨のまま伝わらない事を挙げている。ここではプラグマティックスに関する文献を調査し、授業の中でより明確に語用論の指導をすることにより、限られた状況の中で、外国語を使う上での実践的な能力を補っていけるかを提案する。

キーワード；プラグマティックス、実践的な能力、外国語を使う状況