

Exploring the Challenges of Teaching Pragmatic Competence in EFL Classes

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بحث صعوبات تدريس البراكامتية (التداولية) في صفوف الدارسين للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية

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المخلص

يهدف البحث الى تسليط الضوء على تطوير القابلية البراكامتية (التداولية) للطلبة الدارسون اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية (EFL). وياخذ بنظر الاعتبار ايضا امكانية وتحديات تدريس التداولية في هذه المرحلة من التعليم. ويطرح البحث سؤالاً وهو كيف تساعد التوجيهات البراكامتية على تطوير ادراك البراكامتية للطلبة. ويقوم البحث باخذ النظر بدور المناهج الدراسية والتدريسيون كوسائل ملحة لتدريس البراكامتية (التداولية) في صفوف الطلبة الدارسون للغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية.

يختتم البحث بان المعرفة في اللغة من الافضل تقبلها بواسطة عرض الطلبة على الوسائل الطبيعية والاصلية الموثوق بها وفي حالة حرمان الطلبة من هذه الوسائل فانهم يحتاجون الى تدريب خاص في هذا المجال وهذا ما يسعى البحث الحالي لابرازه.
الكلمات المفتاحية: صعوبات، تدريس، البراكامتية، التداولية، الدارسون، اللغة الانكليزية.

Abstract

This paper aims at bringing into account the importance of raising pragmatic competence in the language classroom with language learners (EFL) It also considers the possibility and the challenges of teaching pragmatic competence in EFL classes. The paper answers: How can Pragmatic instruction help develop learners' Pragmatic awareness?

The study considers the role of the textbooks and the role of language teacher's talk as demanding possibilities of teaching pragmatics in EFL classes. It concludes that pragmatic knowledge of a language is better acquired by exposing the learners to natural environment and authentic materials. In the case of EFL, students are deprived of such conditions; moreover, these conditions cannot be completely provided for in the classrooms, so students may need special training in this aspect.

Key Words: Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence, EFL, L1, L2.

1-Introduction

Teaching English to foreign students should involve not only familiarizing them with the sounds, vocabulary, and grammar of English, but also helping them to use the language effectively through making them acquainted with the pragmatic rules that govern the appropriate combination of utterances and communicative functions.

As many linguists and educational specialists observed foreign language learners, they emphasized that there is a demonstrated need for instruction in pragmatics. Foreign language learners often show significant differences from native speakers in the area of language use, in executing and comprehending certain speech acts, in conversational functions such as greetings and leave takings, in refusing an offer, declining an invitation, and in conversational management such as back challenging and short responses. Without instruction, differences in pragmatics show up in the English of foreign

learners regardless of their language proficiency. That is to say, a learner of high grammatical or linguistic proficiency might not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic development.

In a nutshell, The present paper is to investigate the challenges and the possibilities of teaching pragmatics to EFL classes. It seeks to discuss why teaching pragmatics in language classes and the role of Pragmatic Competence in the Process of Teaching and Learning foreign language.

1-Pragmatics: Definitions

Definitions of Pragmatics In researching pragmatics, it is discovered that there are many definitions for the concept of pragmatics in the field. According to Liu (2007), Charles Morris introduced the first modern definition of pragmatics, and since then many other specialists have continued to conceptualize this branch of linguistics. Morris originally defined pragmatics as “the discipline that studies the relations of signs to interpreters, while semantics studies the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable” (as cited in Liu, 2007, p. 6).

More recently, Crystal defined pragmatics as: ... the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. (Original emphasis)” (as cited in Barron 2003, p. 276)

A simpler definition of pragmatics, one intended for second language learners, is proposed by The Center of Advanced Research in Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota: 9 [Pragmatics] is the way we convey meaning through communication. This meaning includes verbal and non-verbal elements and varies depending on the context, the relationship between people taking, and many other social factors. (2006) This definition puts the emphasis on communication and names social factors.

2-Pragmatic Competence:

Given these definitions of pragmatics, another important aspect must be addressed: pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to comprehend, construct, and convey meanings that are both accurate and appropriate for the social and cultural circumstances in which communication occurs. This is the goal for EFL learners, and as it is describe in other parts of this paper, it is a challenging task. Blackman (cited in Barron, 2003, p. 173) identified pragmatic competence as one element of communicative competence, placing pragmatic competence as part of illocutionary competence, which is a combination of speech acts and speech functions along with the appropriate use of language in context.

The notion of pragmatic competence was early on defined by Chomsky (1980) as the “knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use (of the language), in conformity with various purposes” (p.224). This concept was seen in opposition to grammatical competence that in Chomskyan terms is “the knowledge of form and meaning.” In a more contextualized fashion, Canale & Swain (1980) included pragmatic competence as one important component of their model of communicative competence. In this model, pragmatic competence was identified as sociolinguistic competence and defined as the knowledge of contextually appropriate language use (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). Later on, Canale (1988) expanded this definition, and stated that pragmatic competence includes “illocutionary competence, or the knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language functions, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions for performing language functions appropriately in a given context” (p.90).

According to Celce-Murcia and Elite Olshtain (2000:3):

Human communication fulfills many different goals at the personal and social levels. We communicate information, ideas, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes to one another in our daily interactions, and we construct and maintain our positions within various social contexts by employing appropriate language forms and performing speech activities to ensure solidarity, harmony, and cooperation – or to express disagreement or displeasure, when called for. The acquisition of communication skills in one’s first language is a lifelong process, but the basic skills are acquired quite

early in life. When learning another language, we have to add to, change, and reajust our native language strategies to fit the new language and culture.

Pragmatic competence encompasses a variety of abilities in the use and interpretation of language in context (Bialystok, 1993). These include a speaker's ability to use language for different purposes (such as greeting, requesting, informing, demanding and so on), the speaker's ability to adapt or change language according to the needs or expectations of the listener or situation, and the speaker's ability to follow accepted rules; the maxims, if you will, for conversation and narrative.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language appropriately in a social context. It is the key to effective communication in a second language. While communicative competence and grammatical competence are explicitly taught and developed in the EFL classroom, developing pragmatic competence is often overlooked. However, it is actually the skill which native speakers subconsciously use to define a non-native speaker as a successful communicator...and, hence, as someone they would like to talk to, help, be friends with and even hire.

3- Related Competencies of Influence on Pragmatics:

3- 1 Cultural Competence:

Lyons (1990:302) defines the term culture as, "Culture may be described as socially acquired knowledge: i.e. as the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society." Thus, cultural competence can be defined as the ability to understand and use language in a way that would be understood by the members of that culture.

According to Le Page (1978:41), "When we come to the central question of 'competence' we have to ask: 'What is it an individual needs to know, in order to operate as a member of this society?' A society only exists in the competence of its members to make it work as it does; a language only exists in the competence of those who use and regard themselves as users of that language, and the latter competence is the essential mediating system for the former." Here, the term competence is regarded as a living social action which effects social behaviour in order for the latter to be achieved clearly and to avoid misunderstandings.

3-2 Actional Competence:

In turn, corresponds to "[...] matching actional intent with linguistic form based on the knowledge of an inventory of verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force (speech acts and speech acts sets)" (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995: 17). Accordingly, a learner must know how to greet other individuals, make introductions, express/acknowledge gratitude, compliment or congratulate, extend/accept/decline invitations, ask/give information, explain/discuss information, agree/disagree with other individuals, express/find out about his feelings or those of other interlocutors, suggest, request, give orders, persuade, encourage/discourage, complain, criticise, or blame among many other language functions but, more importantly, how such functions are performed by means of specific speech acts and the conversational sequences or moves of those speech acts.

3-3 Linguistic Competence:

Concerns the very foundations of communication, basically the phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic elements of a language and how they are reflected in writing. For an L2 / FL learner to become linguistically competent, s/he must know the sound inventory of the L2/ FL, its spelling rules, the meaning of its lexical items and routines, how to order them so as to form phrases and sentences, the elements that can or cannot collocate with others, etc.

4- Reasons for Teaching Pragmatics in Language Classes:

The study of pragmatics explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate; in Stalnaker's words, pragmatics is "the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed" (1972, p. 383). The teaching of pragmatics aims to facilitate the learners' sense of being able to find socially appropriate language for the situations that they encounter. Within second language studies and teaching, pragmatics encompasses speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, conversational management, discourse organization, and

sociolinguistic aspects of language use such as choice of address forms. As Bardovi-Harlig (1996) advocate, teaching pragmatics because quite simply, observation of language learners shows that there is a demonstrated need for it and that instruction in pragmatics can be successful. Kasper & Schmidt (1996) explain further that learners show significant differences from native speakers in the area of language use, in the execution and comprehension of certain speech acts, in conversational functions such as greetings and leave takings, and in conversational management such as back channeling and short responses.

The goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. With such instruction learners can maintain their own cultural identities (Kondo) and participate more fully in target language communication with more control over both intended force and outcome of their contributions. The first issue is to make language available to learners for observation. Some speech acts, such as invitations, refusals, and apologies often take place between individuals, and so learners might not have the opportunity to observe such language without being directly involved in the conversation.

5- The Role of Pragmatic Competence in the Process of Teaching and Learning a Second and Foreign languages:

“We don’t learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 13) Dewey makes a simple but powerful point: experience is not the source of learning, but rather it is reflection on this experience. The four skills in language learning; reading writing, listening and speaking do not occur in isolation in communicative texts or activities. In order to shape a good pragmatic competence for the language learner, the following should be taken into consideration. 1. The goals and the objectives of a language course should be designed to meet the needs of the language learner to help them develop and improve their communicative competence. Since the primary goal of learning a second language is to provide fluency and accuracy in written and spoken modes of communication, first, the language teacher and the learner should pay attention to design communicative activities which would help to develop the communicative competence.

Stern (1983:346) summarizes ‘competence’ in language teaching as: a) The intuitive mastery of the forms of language. b) The intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings, expressed by the language forms. c) The capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form. d) The creativity of language use. Obviously, the term competence invites both the teacher and the learner to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic skills, in order to achieve complete and accurate communication. 2. The language teacher should design the course material to engage the learners in the pragmatic, coherent and functional uses of language for communicative purposes.

As Erton (1997:7) claims, “The functional study of language means, studying how language is used. For instance, trying to find out what the specific purposes that language serves for us, and how the members of a language community achieve and react to these purposes through speaking, reading, writing and listening.” The pragmatic competence of the learner must be well developed; consequently he or she will be able to conduct communication with accuracy. The development of coherence and the ability to react in different situations show a good level of functional competence. The grammar of the target language should not be taught in isolation with its use. The learned should be able to put his or her knowledge of language into practice. 3. There are a number of activities useful for the development of pragmatic competence. Moreover, they should raise the learners’ awareness of the importance of such competence in the process of acquiring the target language. As Mey (1993:185-6) states, “Linguistic behaviour is social behaviour. People talk because they want to socialise, in the widest possible sense of the world either for fun, or to express themselves to other humans, or for some ‘serious’ purposes, such as building a house, closing a deal, solving a problem and so on.” Thus, Mey claims that, language is a tool for human beings to express themselves as social creatures and the

language used in that particular context is important in terms of linguistic interaction that takes place. "Such a context naturally presupposes the existence of a particular society, with its implicit and explicit values, norms, rules and laws, and with all its particular conditions of life: economic, social, political and cultural." admits Mey (Ibid:7).

The purpose of the application of different teaching and learning activities is to help students become more. Through awareness-raising activities, students acquire information about pragmatic aspects of language—for instance, what strategies are used for apologizing in their first language (L1) and second language (L2)/ FL, what is considered an offence in their culture compared to the target culture, what are different degrees of offence for different situations in the two languages, and how the nature of the relationship between the participants affects the use of apologies. The aim is to expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2)/FL and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use. These activities are designed to make learners consciously aware of differences between the native and target language speech acts. The rationale for this approach is that such differences are often ignored by learners and go unnoticed unless they are directly addressed (Schmidt 1993). Several techniques can be used in order to raise the pragmatic awareness of students. The two major techniques commonly used are teacher presentation and discussion of research findings on different aspects of pragmatics, and a student-discovery procedure in which students obtain information through observations, questionnaires, and/or interviews (Kasper 1997).

6-Challenges of Teaching Pragmatic Competence in EFL Setting:

In foreign language context teachers are non-native speakers of English language and they need to be well-prepared for teaching the pragmatic aspect of knowledge of language. In addition to this fact there are no sufficient, or no course, is offered to teachers either during pre-service or in-service education programs in the area of pragmatics. This situation is what El-Okda (2010) calls as 'paucity of pragmatic courses in both pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development' (169). If the student teachers or those teachers that are handling the teaching of English language are provided with the pragmatic courses, '[they] can help their students see the language in context, raise consciousness of the role of pragmatics, and explain the function pragmatics plays in specific communicative event' (Brock and Nagasaka, 2005:20).

The second pillar in developing the pragmatic competence of learners is ELT material. Language teaching materials need to frequently include pragmatic materials so as to help learners develop pragmatic competence, because 'teachers in EFL settings, where there are relatively few opportunities for students to use the language in communicative contexts' (Brock and Nagasaka, Ibid.), will make use of textbooks as the major source of pragmatic knowledge. However, the attempt of including very few mini-dialogues for certain speech acts and that are contrived and de-contextualized does not help the learners develop their pragmatic competence or does not represent the reality outside the classroom (El- Okda, 2010:180). Let alone the external environment, 'many students do not know how to make polite requests in English in the classroom' (Brock and Nagasaka, 2005:21).

Teachers in most cases complain for the unmanageable class size. Large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication are some of the features of the EFL context that hinder pragmatic learning (Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2004; Rose, 1999).

Understanding teachers' perceptions and beliefs is important because teachers, heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes, are practitioners of educational principles and theories (Jia, Eslami & Burlbaw, cited in Eslami and Fatahi, 2008). Teachers have a primary role in determining what is needed or what would work best with their students. Findings from research on teachers' perceptions and beliefs indicate that these perceptions and beliefs not only have considerable influence on their instructional practices and classroom behavior but also are related to their students' achievement. In most cases teachers do not give attention to pragmatic/communicative functions in the

classroom. Omaggio (see in Uso-Juan, and Martinez-Flor, 2008) gives the following three reasons for neglecting intercultural/pragmatic competence in the language class:

1. Teachers usually have an overcrowded curriculum to cover and lack the time to spend on teaching culture, which requires a lot of work;
2. Many teachers have a limited knowledge of the target culture and, therefore, afraid to teach it;
3. Teachers are often confused about what cultural aspects to cover.

7-Key Components of Teaching Pragmatics in EFL Classes:

7-1 The Role of Language Teacher's Talk:

Teachers vary in their attitudes to 'teacher talk' according to findings. Some of them accept that it is useful source of language input for all language levels, except from the more advanced ones. Others regard it as an important part of the early stages of learning, but believe it should be abandoned as soon as possible" (Lynch as quoted in Adriana 2009:1). There are at least three main reasons that make teacher talk worth studying and improving. The reasons are as follows:

A-People have recognized the vital link between comprehension and the progress made in the language classroom.

B-Studies of classroom language have shown that certain aspects of teacher talk, such as the way we ask questions, influence the way learners use language.

C-It is not easy for learners to understand what the teacher is currently trying to focus their attention on (ibid).

Due to its importance, it is inevitable to make sure that the teacher talk fulfils certain criteria. First of all, it should be simplified, but not unnatural. It needs to exhibit a certain level of redundancy (words like let me see, in fact, well, etc.) and words, together with structures, should be repeated at regular intervals.

7-2 The Role of Textbooks:

Textbooks are key component in most language programs. In some situations they serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. They may provide the basis for the content of the lessons, the balance of skills taught and the kinds of language practice the students take part in. In other situations, the textbook may serve primarily to supplement the teachers' instruction.

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argues that since teachers' talk cannot be considered as a pragmatically appropriate model for learners, "textbooks with conversations are designed to be models for students, and yet they generally fall short of providing realistic input to learners" (p. 25).

8- Increasing Learners' Pragmatic Competence:

Through awareness-raising activities, students acquire information about pragmatic aspects of language—for instance, what strategies are used for apologizing in their first language (L1) and second language (L2)/FL, what is considered an offence in their culture compared to the target culture, what are different degrees of offence for different situations in the two languages, and how the nature of the relationship between the participants affects the use of apologies. The aim is to expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2)/FL and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use. These activities are designed to make learners consciously aware of differences between the native and target language speech acts. The rationale for this approach is that such differences are often ignored by learners and go unnoticed unless they are directly addressed (Schmidt 1993). There are two ways in which pragmatic competence can be taught: through direct and indirect instruction. Kasper (1997) suggests that adult learners of a second or foreign language can acquire a great number of pragmatic features without instruction considering the fact that some of these pragmatic features are universal. There is also the possible transference or mapping between L1 and L2/FL, which provides important background for language learners. However, some pragmatic knowledge is not transferable and when it is, it may cause a break in communication

8-1 Teacher Presentation and Discussion:

Teachers can use presentation/discussion techniques to relay information drawn from research on pragmatic issues to students. This can be done inductively (from data to rules) or deductively (from rules to data). To show the importance of contextual variables in the use of different language forms, teachers need to provide detailed information on the participants, their status, the situations, and the speech events that are occurring. The information provided to students in awareness raising activities will help learners build awareness of pragmatic features in both L1 and L2.

8-2 Student Discovery:

In the data collection phase of the student-discovery procedure, students become ethnographers and observe and record naturally occurring speech acts. The aim is to help learners have a good sense of what to look for in conducting a pragmatic analysis, make them adept at formulating and testing hypotheses about language use, and help them become keen and reflective observers of language use in both L1 and L2/FL.

9 –Conclusion:

Pragmatics addresses expression at the level of utterances, which can range from one word (e.g., "Oh!" as a reaction of dismay or pleasant surprise) to a lengthy discourse (e.g., a heated political debate). What is important is the communicative function the utterance plays in interaction with others, so pragmatics operates at the level of meaning (and how others understand those meanings).

It is possible that a learner knows vocabulary and grammar of the target language, but is unable to communicate intentions at the moment of speaking. It is also possible that, as a listener, the learner understands the speaker's intentions but cannot find the most appropriate way to respond to what has just been said.

In theories of language acquisition, pragmatics has often been de-emphasized and shuffled aside under the rubric of syntactic knowledge and has gone unrecognized as a significant knowledge component in language learning. That tendency has begun to change significantly, however. In recent theories of communicative competence in L2 teaching, pragmatics features prominently (Kasper, 1996).

Lack of pragmatic knowledge might cause the learners to be unsuccessful in their communication and, thus, may result in breakdown in the interpersonal relationship between the speakers and listeners. According to Byram (1997), to successfully master English language in international communication, the people need to have intercultural communicative competence in addition to communicative competence as a successful non-native speaker. Besides emphasizing on only grammar aspects, teachers must encourage language learners to pay more attention to how to use language appropriately in different contexts and avoid making pragmatic mistakes to breakdown the communication.(p.123) To help learners avoid making pragmatic mistake, it is necessary to teach them the sociocultural rules of the English. Pragmatic knowledge of a language is better acquired by exposing the learners to natural environment and authentic materials. In the case of EFL, students are deprived of such conditions; moreover, these conditions cannot be completely provided for in the classrooms, so students may need special training in this aspect. Foreign language learners should be taught to recognize the situations and circumstances in which different kinds of language are appropriate, and should be given enough practice in using the proper linguistic forms according to those contexts.

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