

Pragmatic Competence as an Integral Part of EFL Teaching

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Abstract: In many recent studies teachers and other professional educators in EFL circles highlight the importance of teaching pragmatic competence as a vital part of language teaching curriculum. This probably was the result of generations of learners of English language who completed their studies in the foreign language with a relatively good general language proficiency but weaker skills to interpret the messages and intentions that are conveyed in conversations, correctly. This particular competence is referred to as pragmatic competence. This paper aims to overview most widely used techniques to teach pragmatic competence in an EFL classroom as well as provide theoretical background for the concept and closely related notions such as speech acts and politeness strategies.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Pragmatic Competence, EFL, Speech Acts, Politeness

1. Introduction

The importance of learning English is obvious in our modern world. The need for the knowledge of the language resulted in many language teaching courses and institutions worldwide. Though, more often than not, EFL learners in most cases end their studies with relatively good knowledge of the “form”, i.e. grammar and extended vocabulary but without communicative competence, and more narrowly, pragmatic competence in the target language, lacking interaction skills, intuition and knowledge of rules of interpreting the language, unable to appropriately respond to different verbal and non-verbal situations.

Before setting out to discuss various ways of teaching pragmatic competence, it is necessary to define the terms pragmatics, competence and the combination of the two, pragmatic competence. As Yule (1996, p. 3) defines it, the study of pragmatics explores the following four components:

1. What people mean by their utterances and what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves.
2. How speakers organize what they intend to say in accordance with the addressee, place, the social context or situation.

3. How listeners can infer the intended meanings of utterances and interpret conveyed message correctly.
4. How does distance/closeness determine the choice of the amount of the said or the unsaid.

The term competence, on the other hand, as defined by Crystal (2008) refers to:

“...term used in linguistic theory, and especially in generative grammar, to refer to speakers’ knowledge of their language, the system of rules which they have mastered so that they are able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, and to recognize grammatical mistakes and ambiguities” (p.92).

Thus it could be interpreted as the person’s ability to form and comprehend sentences, including the stretches of language that the person has never heard before. This also includes the ability to distinguish between sentences that are grammatically correct and incorrect.

The notion of pragmatic competence is defined as “.. knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts and finally knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language’s linguistic resources.” (Barron, 2003, p. 10) Thus, it can be said that pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of the linguistic resources and the ability to use and interpret them appropriately in various contexts.

Many professionals in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) circles, stressed and emphasized the teaching of pragmatic competence as essential based on their observations and experiences in their own EFL/ESL classrooms and outside. However, the teaching of pragmatic competence still tends to be overlooked in language teaching. Some of the reasons might be overloaded teachers, time constraints, and more importantly lack or inadequacy of the EFL teachers’ own pragmatic knowledge in the language (Koran, 2015).

As stated above, learners that have completed a language program successfully, still show significant differences from native speakers in the area of pragmatics, in other words, language use, especially in interpreting and understanding particular speech acts such as refusing-accepting offers, expression of agreement and disagreement, making-responding to compliments, etc. (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 1999). This aspect does not seem to be proportional to the learners’ level of general language proficiency. In a study conducted by Matsumura (2003) the findings revealed very insignificant effects of linguistic proficiency on pragmatic performance. Moreover, in contrast with grammatical errors, mistakes made in terms of pragmatics, lead to more serious consequences as the speaker might appear uncaring, impolite, offensive and rude. Thus, instruction is of primary importance in developing EFL learners’ pragmatic competence, especially in EFL situations where usually the only exposure to the target language that learners receive is language classrooms.

After having explored the meanings of the core concepts such as pragmatics, competence, pragmatic competence, and discussing the importance of teaching thereof we naturally arrive at the discussion of the ways and techniques for developing the pragmatic competence.

According to Rueda (2006) teaching pragmatic competence should embrace: preparing proper input for instruction, using genuine activities for teaching the competence and enhancing students' consciousness in it.

A concept that is closely related with the notion of pragmatic competence is that of the "*politeness theory*" by Brown and Levinson, 1987). Politeness has been a very important code of conduct in any human interaction including social interaction. The choice of appropriate social expressions is affected by the idea of "face", which was explained by Goffman as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by his or her self-presentation" (1967, p.5) and by Deutsch (1961) as "one of individuals' most sacred possessions" (p. 897) which has to be maintained in order to sustain a healthy self-esteem. The above definitions can be summarized into one: that the "face" is a public self-image of the speaker. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) there are four main types of politeness strategies including bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record/indirect.

Bald on-record strategies do not aim to minimize the threat to the hearer's face and are used to directly address the other interlocutor to express one's needs. Using imperative expressions such as "*close the window*", or "*I want to use one of your pens*" are good examples to illustrate them.

Positive politeness strategies are used to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face through using expressions that recognize the hearer's desire to be respected but also show that the relationship is friendly and expresses reciprocity. Some of them are:

- Noticing and expressing interest in the hearer
- Avoiding disagreement and seeking agreement
- Using in-group expressions/linguistic markers
- Making jokes
- Being optimistic
- Promising and offering
- Showing common ground with the hearer
- Assuming/expecting reciprocity

On the other hand, **negative politeness** strategies refer to the avoidance of imposition on the hearer, respecting the hearer's autonomy and recognizing the desire of the hearer to be respected usually by apologizing for imposition, hesitation, asking for a permission to ask a question etc. Below are some of the strategies identified with negative politeness:

- Indirectness
- Using hedging or questions
- Being pessimistic
- Minimized imposition
- Apologizing
- Impersonalizing both the speaker and the hearer by not mentioning the addressee.

Off-record or indirect strategy is referred to as the use of indirect language in order to lift the pressure off of the hearer and rather get the hearer to infer the indirect request for himself/herself such as the ones mentioned below:

- Using hints
- Using irony, metaphors
- Being ambiguous
- Making generalizations and not mentioning the hearer directly
- Giving clues through associations

Teaching examples of the above-mentioned strategies in EFL classes would definitely benefit the learners to make better choices in communication. When speakers communicate they do not simply exchange the information but they shape interpersonal relationship at the same time. Instruction of the politeness strategies is particularly important since they are very intertwined with the cultural aspect of the language and learning the target culture is very difficult in EFL situation without the direct immersion or exposure to the target culture.

Any notion of teaching pragmatic competence is incomplete without the central notion of speech acts. Speech acts are a concept that is important to pragmatic competence and have been classified and grouped in various ways over time including Austin (1962) and Leech (1983) and many more, but the grouping that gained most widespread use is the classification of illocutionary acts by Searle (1969). According to Searle, the classification of speech acts is as follows:

- Representatives – refer to the general assertions about the world as the speaker believes it is.
- Commissives – expressions such as promises, threats, etc. that are used to commit oneself to some future action.
- Directives – are the expressions of what the speaker wants someone else to do (advice, requests, invitations, etc.).
- Expressives – are the statements of how the speaker feels (apology, refusal, request, etc.).
- Declarations – are the type of speech acts that change the world as they are uttered (e.g. “I now pronounce you husband and wife”).

An important question to consider while or prior to the actual teaching is: how to make it maximally learnable and/or teachable. The techniques can be roughly divided into two: explicit instruction and implicit instruction respectively. According to the studies conducted on the subject, both are found to be effective in teaching the competence but explicit instruction was found to be slightly more effective (Xiao-le, 2011; Salemi & Mitra Rabiee, 2012; Kasper & Rose, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Trosborg, 2003).

Thus, the effective way to develop the competence is to employ both of the ways.

Explicit way of teaching, as the name suggests, accounts for the unambiguous instruction of the structures and patterns, in our case of speech acts such as requests, compliments, agreeing/disagreeing etc. In contrast, implicit instruction refers to exposing the learners to various types of speech acts mentioned above without providing clear explanation of the rules/patterns that govern their usage.

The following example is to illustrate the explicit instruction:

- A teacher first plays a video-taped material featuring people making different types of requests;
- Next, they are provided with the script to the video and are asked to identify and/or repeat the requestive formulas the characters in the short video material used.
- This is further followed by ranking activity where the learners are requested to rank different request examples in order of directness;
- The learners are asked to discuss of the factors that affect the preference of one particular request over the others in any given context including power, social distance, and imposition.
- Compare and discuss differences and similarities in the way how those factors mentioned above affect the choice of appropriate requests in the learners' own language and in the foreign language.
- Match various situations, on a worksheet provided by the teacher, with the most appropriate request form and explain the reasons for the choice.
- Create a role play activity in groups which engages learners in various social roles and speech events.

EFL teachers need to be aware of the Important nuances of locutionary, perlocutionary, illocutionary acts, direct and indirect speech acts, conversational implicature etc. and gradually, as the level of the learners in the target language increases, introduce some relevant examples. To a hostess who had sent him a letter stating that on a certain day she would be "at home", G. B. Shaw is reported to have replied "So will G. B. Shaw". This humorous example can be presented in class and students could be asked to make guesses: a) what the hostess meant with her letter; b) what Bernard Shaw meant with his reply. Such activities develop learners' ability to interpret the speaker's intentions and tone correctly.

As has already been mentioned above, Implicit teaching refers to a way of teaching where the teacher does not express the goals clearly and does not overtly explain the structure, in this particular case speech acts and the factors that one considers while choosing one pattern over others in a specific social situation, but rather simply introduces the structure, usually embedded in a context, and allows the learners to draw their own conclusions and shape their own conceptual structures, interpret and store the information in a way that makes the most sense to them.

In contrast to the example of explicit way of instruction described above, an implicit way of instruction of requests through using the same video-taped material as above would be as follows:

- The video material, containing different request patterns, is played

- The learners are provided with a script to it
- The learners are then asked to answer comprehension questions for the video including on the plot and content of requests.
- Optionally, learners can be engaged in a role-play activity involving making requests and responding to them

One main difference here between the two examples is that the video clip is not followed by any kind of the activities aimed at raising awareness such as ranking the formulas in order of directness, matching the expressions with appropriate situations etc,

One important point to consider while designing activities for developing pragmatic competence is to keep the activities authentic and meaningful. Meaningful input and tasks are created by aligning and matching them to the learners' interests, cultural backgrounds, age etc., and by the feasibility that students will come across these events of speech in the future (Hedge, 2000). Authentic materials and tasks are genuinely similar to real life situations carrying with them the essential feature of being communicative (Underhill, 1987). They logically embrace one more essential aspect of teaching socio/pragmatics - contextualized practice, according to Hedge (2000) who argues that "it aims to make clear the link between linguistic form and communicative function. This means finding a situation in which a structure is commonly used" (p.273).

Conclusion

Pragmatic competence can and should be developed through explicit and implicit instruction, with the prevalence of the former, with a range of activities and situations/contexts. Especially the rules of social norms that are different from the ones in the learners' native cultures should be given emphasis. After all, communication is not a mere exchange of messages, but it also is correct and appropriate interpretation of intentions on both sides and being able to respond accordingly. That is why, integrating elements of pragmatic competence in EFL curricula and lesson plans is of crucial importance.

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