

Developing Pragmatic Competence in the EFL Context: Opportunities and Challenges.

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Abstract:

Teaching pragmatics is one of the neglected aspects in English language teaching in Algeria. There is a total dearth of pragmatic contents and their presentations are marginalized as compared to other language items. Therefore, in order to make learners communicatively competent, there should be a shift from previous theoretical frameworks which considered language as a formal system based on the acquisition of rules, towards a more communicative orientation. The current paper, therefore, looks into the challenges and opportunities in teaching pragmatics to language learners in the EFL context and the way to forward it.

Key words:

Pragmatic/Competence/EFL/
Context/Opportunities.

المأخَص:

يعتبر تدريس القدرات التداولية إحدى الجوانب المهملة في برامج تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر. هنالك ندرة حقيقية لتداولية في المضامين وتقديمها مهمش بالمقارنة بالجوانب الأخرى للغة. ولذلك و من أجل تقوية قدرات التواصل لدى الطلبة بات من الضروري الابتعاد عن الأطر التعليمية السابقة و المبنية على اكتساب قواعد نظرية إلى نظرة تواصلية شاملة .

هذا المقال يتناول تشخيص العوائق التي تواجه تدريس التداولية في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. كما يهدف إلى اقتراح الأطر المناسبة لتنمية هذه القدرة.

1. Introduction

One of the main goals of teaching English in Algeria is to cultivate and develop the communicative competence of Algerian learners. Consequently, many innovations have been made to promote English education contexts and cultivate the communicative competence of Algerian learners. In fact, learning English is nowadays regarded as an essential component in the curricula at different levels. English has gained the status of an international language and is now being recognized as the world language of communication and information exchange.

Given this worldwide spread of the use of English as a means of communication, learning and teaching it is more than a necessity in our country. Therefore, developing learners' communicative competence has been successfully recognized as a goal of language teaching since the concept was introduced by Hymes (1972). He maintained that learners must not only speak grammatically but also appropriately to achieve communicative goals. According to Widdowson (1989), the shift from language usage rule to language use rule was the result of the advent of pragmatics as a specific area of study within linguistics that favoured a focus on interactional and contextual factors of the target language. Today, teaching English to foreign learners entails developing their pragmatic competence in order to help them use the language effectively through making them familiar with the appropriate pragmatic rules that govern the appropriate combination of utterances and communication functions.

With regard to the Algerian context, English is more a foreign language than a second language. That is to say, English is not used frequently in daily life outside the classroom. Despite this handicap, English is increasingly getting acceptance for both domestic and foreign interaction. Thus, pragmatic competence should be an important asset to any person and developing pragmatic ability should be the goal of language teaching alongside the other linguistic aspects of the target language. However, before we delve into the importance of teaching pragmatics, let us define this construct.

2. Defining pragmatics

Etymologically speaking, Pragma is traced back to the Greek language and refers to activity, deed, affairs (Trosborg, 1994:5). Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. It studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on the linguistic knowledge i.e. grammar, lexicon and phonology of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, and the inferred intent of the speaker (Kasper, 2004). In this respect, pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity since meaning relies on the manner, place, and time of an utterance (Cohen, 2008). The ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning is called pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997). An utterance describing pragmatic function is described as metapragmatic (Verschueren, 2000)

The historical development in linguistic studies showed that pragmatics came as a reaction to the Saussurian structuralist paradigm and the Chomskyan generative transformational grammar which merely accounted for an ideal grammatical knowledge shared by the native speakers of a given language. Neither of the two paradigms took into account the real use of language. In other words, they did not regard the notion of communication. Development in linguistics witnessed the emergence of a new area of research called pragmatics that has aroused the interest of many scholars over the last decades.

Throughout its development, pragmatics has been steered by the philosophical practice of pragmatism and evolving to maintain its independence as a linguistic subfield by keeping to its tract of being a practical to treating the everyday concerned meanings. The pragmatic view which is not found in other neighbouring discipline is the focus on the speaker-hearer interaction, the links between them, the text and the context, and the will to explain meaning. So, pragmaticians are keen on exploring how interlocutors can successfully converse with one another. This has given different shades and nuances to the various orientations within pragmatics.

In fact, there exist a myriad of definitions from different perspective in the literature. Since its appearance pragmatics has been defined by many scholars and in various ways reflecting authors' theoretical orientation and audience. Most definitions agree on the fact that interpretation of words varies to the specific context in which they are said. Stalnaker for instance (1972:383) views pragmatics as “the study of linguistic acts and the context in which they are performed” . For Roberts, Davies and Jupp (1992) pragmatics is centrally concerned not only with meaning of words but with meaning intended by the speaker and interpreted by the listener. Yule (2008:4) views pragmatics as ‘the study of the relationship between linguistic forms and the users of those forms’. Not far from this, Searle, Kiefer, and Biertwisch (1980) defined pragmatics as being concerned with the conditions according to which speakers and hearers determine the context and use-dependent utterance meanings. Kasper (1997) in her turn views, pragmatics as ‘the study of communication action in its socio-cultural context”.

All the above definitions converge towards two main aspects of pragmatics which make it different from other discipline such as syntax and semantics. Pragmatics focuses not only on the users of language but on the context in which they interact. The result was that context became a key concept when dealing with pragmatics.

3. Communicative competence

In reaction to Chomsky's theory, authors such as Campbell and Wales (1970) and Hymes (1972) introduced what has been widely known as communicative competence. This new concept included not only Chomsky's grammatical aspect of the language but also the contextual factors that have close links with language use. In Campbell and Wales' (1970:247) words: “the most important linguistic ability is to produce or understand utterances not so much grammatical but appropriate to the context in which they are made.” In his turn, Hymes (1972:277) believes that: “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar will be useless”. The same author and in order to show the social function of language between the real

speaker and listener proposed a theory of communicative competence which consists of four different aspects of knowledge: - a) Systematic potential - whether something is formally possible; b) appropriateness-whether something is feasible in the virtue of the means of implementation available ; c) occurrence - whether something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated ; d) feasibility - whether something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

In fact, Hymes' (1972) theory was a combination of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural and probabilistic systems of competence. Since then, there was a shift from the study of language in isolation towards the study of language as communication. This new concept of communicative competence differs completely from Chomsky's model of linguistic competence. According to Cenoz (1999), the basic difference between linguistic competence and communicative competence is that the former is a static concept based on grammatical rules and related to individuals. Communicative competence however, is a dynamic concept based on the negotiation of meaning between two or more speakers. Sharing the same view with Hymes, Savignon (1983) also emphasizes the negotiative nature of communication, an aspect that was missing in Chomsky's view of the competence performance dichotomy. Therefore, we conclude that both Savignon and Hymes focus on the social aspect that characterizes competence in communication. Not far from this, Canale and Swain (1981:29) for instance, start from the assumption that communication is based on sociocultural interpersonal interaction, to involve unpredictability and creativity to take place in a discourse and sociocultural context to be purposive behaviour.

Moreover, the concept of communicative competence has had a positive effect on language teaching and in SLA in particular, since it laid the foundation to a new teaching approach called communicative language teaching. This approach is premised on the belief that the development of communicative ability is the goal of classroom learning.

4. Why teach pragmatics?

Teaching pragmatic competence is one of the most neglected aspects in English language teaching in most countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Teaching English to FL students should involve not only familiarizing learners with the sounds, vocabulary, and grammar of the TL, but also helping them to use the TL effectively through making them acquainted with the pragmatic rules that govern the appropriate combination of utterances and communicative functions. Besides, it has long been assumed that grammar and vocabulary can be developed through explicit teaching in the classroom context. However, is it possible to do the same thing with pragmatics? Can we teach those aspects of language use which require understanding the context, and the cultural rules that seem to come naturally to native speakers? How can we teach those elements such as sounds, expressions and other non-grammatical tools? Put simply, can we teach pragmatics?

Before setting out to talk about the teachability or non-teachability of pragmatics, let us first define the term pragmatic competence. One good definition of pragmatic competence is given by Barron (2003:10) “pragmatic competence...is understood as knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing illocutions, knowledge of the appropriate contextual uses of the particular languages’ linguistic resources”. Two main aspects of pragmatic ability can be discerned in this definition: the linguistic resources of the learner with the TL and the contextual use of those resources. Therefore, as Kasper (1997) contends, pragmatics is: “the study of communication action in its socio-cultural context”. Communication action is preferred over ‘speech act’ to expand to what language use can, and in fact, do : engage in conversation via speech acts to participate in different types of discourse, and ultimately, keep interaction going in more complex communicative events. But it also covers the written realization of communication.

In fact, FL learners already possess pragmatic competence and practice of an array of speech acts they deal within L1, some of which

have been classified as universal, such as greeting, requesting, interrupting, suggesting, etc. As non-native speakers, they do not know the difference or similarities in the TL. Studies have shown that they are not aware of them, they fail to recognize them, and they cannot differentiate them, or simply ignore them, depending on the given context when non-native speakers are tested. That does not mean that they do not know what to do but that they do not do it because they lack experience or awareness of what is expected from them. This is a valid reason to confirm that pragmatic features, routines and acts should be taught. Moreover, there are four focal areas of instruction that should be addressed, namely the choice of communicative acts, the strategies by which and act is realized, its content, and finally, its linguistic form.

Moreover, communicative language pedagogy and research into communicative competence have shown that learning exceeds the limits of memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules. (Canale, 1983). In reality, the goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and to give them the choices for their interactions and help them become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. According to Kasper (1997), pragmatic competence is not a piece of knowledge to be added to the learners' grammatical knowledge, but it is an organic part of the learners' communicative competence. Therefore, the question whether pragmatic competence can be taught has inspired a number of research projects exploring the role of instruction in learners' pragmatic development. (House & Kasper (1987), Wildner-Bassett (1984) & (1986), Billmyer (1990), Olshtain & Cohen (1990), Bouton (1994), Kubota (1995), Morrow (1996), and Tateytama et al. (1997). In fact, while many linguists deny the teachability of pragmatic competence others believe in the possibility of developing some of its aspects. Kasper (1997), for instance, believes that while pragmatic competence cannot be taught, students should be provided with opportunities to develop it. She argues that "Pragmatic knowledge is a kind of knowledge learners possess, acquire, use, or

lose. The challenge for foreign and second language teaching is whether we can arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2”.

The importance of teaching pragmatics in the EFL classroom is not disputed, yet its place has only recently begun to be questioned. Teaching pragmatics which aims at the comprehension of oral language in terms of pragmatic meaning should enable learners to comprehend meaning pragmatically. A good number of studies made on non-native speakers of English confirm the postulate that pragmatics is teachable, and even more, instruction in pragmatics is necessary mainly at the advanced level. Therefore, research in pragmatics should play a very important role in bringing pragmatics into the classroom. However, we believe that bringing pragmatics into the classroom successfully will undoubtedly require the joint efforts of many professionals involved in different endeavours related to pragmatics. The question, then, is: why bring a focus on pragmatics into the classroom? Research has shown that classroom instruction on pragmatics can help learners improve their performance of speech acts and thus facilitates their interaction with native speakers.

5. Teaching pragmatics in the FL classroom.

Most of the time teachers are advised to explicitly teach pragmatic features of the TL and make use of authentic models of language to help learners practice using appropriate language as it is used in the main stream society. However, the question that we should ask is whether the FL classroom in its classical format can really offer opportunities for pragmatic learning. Information about pragmatic aspects of language and pragmatic-focused instruction are lacking. However, developing EFL learners’ pragmatic competence cannot be achieved overnight unless learners are exposed to and practice authentic language use. Besides, research into pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has proven that linguistic proficiency does not really guarantee a concomitant level of pragmatic proficiency. Even advanced learners with high linguistic proficiency may fail to interpret or to convey messages as native

speakers do in real life. Therefore, pragmatic competence should be an important asset to a person, and thus rehearsing pragmatic skills alongside other linguistic aspects should be one of the objectives of language teaching in formal education.

However, in order to make learners become communicatively competent in the TL, there is today a shift from previous traditional frameworks which considered language as a formal system based on grammar rules, towards a more communicative perspective. In fact, teaching a language exceeds the mere acquisition of grammar rule, and should aim at making learners use the TL appropriately in different contexts. Each context has its unique traits that require unique forms of language. Pragmatic ability above all is context-dependent and if language learners want to function smoothly in the target language community, their pragmatic ability is of crucial importance.

As far as the EFL classroom is concerned, one question that comes to mind for both researchers and teachers is whether learners are exposed appropriate and sufficient input. Here, we believe that learners either do not receive relevant input or do not receive it from sources they consider relevant, or they may not notice the relevant input due to either their lack of pragmatic awareness or possibly even grammatical competence. According to Vellegna (2004), pragmatic ability did not receive attention in the EFL context .A study that he conducted on the evaluation of textbooks revealed that neither English textbooks nor English classroom teaching provide adequate pragmatic input to learners with regards to quantity and quality of pragmatic input required.

6. Teaching pragmatics in the Algerian context

In foreign language teaching, pragmatic competence – the ability to use language appropriately in the given context - has been recognized as an important component of communicative language ability (Canal and Swain1980; Bachman 1990).Traditionally in the Algerian context, teachers and students alike were obsessed by the desire to acquire rules as much as they could. Teachers allocated

whole invaluable time to lengthy lectures that were most of the time accompanied by printouts often distributed as references for possible exams. In fact, this is quite understandable since the content of all the courses proposed for graduate students turned around purely structural approaches to teaching the language. However, with the recent reforms in education at the university level and with the implementation of the LMD system new courses were included in the curriculum. Those innovative reforms resulted in the incorporation of modules such as ‘Pragmatics’, ‘Culture’, ‘Theme and Version’ and ‘Discourse Analysis’. Pragmatics is deemed important in teaching and learning English in the Algerian FL context. This course is now taught in the syllabuses of three successive levels at the university, namely, third year, and first and second year master.

Recently, teachers and students began to realize that language is not a mere collection of lexico-grammatical rules to be learned and forgotten afterwards. However, while these components remain crucial, the central organizing principle is in fact communication. Many recent publications and conferences on teaching pragmatics in formal instructional settings (Rose and Kasper 2001; Bardovi-harlig 1999; Yoshimi 2006) all express an increasing interest among educators and researchers in giving priority to pragmatic competence. Subsequently, there has been increasing efforts to teach pragmatics. However, the teaching of pragmatics in the Algerian context is still in its infancy. Furthermore, if nurturing pragmatic knowledge is essential among the Algerian educational goals in the university level, it becomes vital to set up a program that should have the means to ensure that learners gain this knowledge throughout the curriculum.

Moreover, to enable learners to produce discourse that is both socially and culturally appropriate demands the joint efforts of all teachers and in all the modules. It is worth mentioning here that the inclusion of the so-called ‘General Culture’ together with ‘Theme and Version’ and ‘Discourse Analysis’ can be very adequate means in raising learners’ cultural awareness. Nevertheless, these curricular

innovations will remain inefficient as long as a solid and interwoven coordination is non-existent between these different modules.

7. How can authentic language materials develop pragmatic competence?

Developing learners' pragmatic competence in the target language requires presenting rich and contextually appropriate input. According to Ellis (1994), the development of pragmatic competence depends on providing learners with sufficient and appropriate input for their cognitive processes to be able to turn input into intake and implicit knowledge. Krashen (1985) in his input hypothesis regards comprehensible input as a fundamental element for the acquisition to take place. Allright and Bailey (1991:20) define input as “the language which the learners hear or read – that is the language samples to which they are exposed”. Therefore, the context in which language is learned is very important in terms of both quality and quantity. Learners being in direct contact with the TL community can easily develop their pragmatic ability. In contrast, FL learners lack this kind of exposure which can constitute a real disadvantage since they rely exclusively on the input provided by their teachers, the teaching materials and their mates.

As a first source of input, the teacher talk tends generally to be modified to the learners' levels and needs. This kind of language involves a simplified register, syntactic simplifications, short utterances and simplified phonological features. However, teachers who are considered to be models that provide learners with the rules of politeness or the formulaic expressions and the linguistic forms depending on the social parameters themselves seem to lack this very pragmatic ability. Several studies have shown that input provided by teachers rarely reflect any pragmatic aspects of the language. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996), for example, stated that the requests teachers made to the learners were status bound, therefore, they could not serve as models for learners. Lorsch and Shultze (1988) who conducted a study on the teacher's talk found that the teacher's transactional style were neither appropriate models of politeness nor

ways of mitigating or intensifying speech acts in English. Another study conducted by Nikula (2002) revealed that a high use of direct strategies by teachers and the authoritative role of the teachers and their status as non native speakers might be the cause. Consequently, most teachers have a limited repertoire of expressions to adjust their talk.

Therefore, we do agree with Kasper (1997) and Bardovi-Harlig (1992, 1996, and 2001) who insist on the development of training program for teachers to improve their talk and use appropriate materials to develop their learners' pragmatic acquisition. Thus, it has become obvious that the classroom discourse in its classical format does not sufficiently provide learners with what they need to communicate in the world at large.

In fact, what our learners need to acquire both the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence is an immersion in the target language through various sources of oral and written data, ranging from "native speaker guests" (Bardovi-Harlig et al 1991) to video of authentic interaction, feature films (Rose, 1997) and other fictional and non fictional written and audiovisual sources. So, we believe that bringing AM into the classroom will certainly offer learners a wider exposure to pragmatic input. As Bardovi-Harlig (1996:34) put it "it is important that learners observe native speakers in action. For instance, they could observe how native speakers express gratitude, how they compliment, how they thank, what linguistic formulae are used in different social contexts, the degree of formality, speakers and hearers status and familiarity".

The incorporation of adequate authentic materials to develop pragmatic competence is vital especially in a confined foreign language learning context. For that reason, Boxer (2003) thinks it is only when spontaneous speech is captured in authentic data for language material that we might begin the strategies of speech behaviour. So, it is indispensable that the material we exploit and the teaching practices we adopt should be based on natural language data

if we want our learners to build their own pragmatic knowledge on the right kind of input.

8. Difficulties facing the teachability of pragmatics

In the FL context, learners are dependent on their teachers for an appropriate model of the target language .However, this source of input or teacher talk has been considered as language that is generally attended to or simplified to be adapted to the learners needs. According to Trosborg (1995), this adapted or structured ‘easified’ language is characterized by a simple register, short utterances, and no ungrammatical speech. Moreover, teachers are regarded to be models that provide their learners with the different pragmatic aspects such as the rules of politeness, the appropriate use of formulaic expressions, employing different linguistic forms depending on social parameters. However, many studies have revealed that the input provided by teachers is hardly favourable for acquiring communicative competence in the classroom. Most of the time teachers who are considered to models for their learners are non native speakers of English and do not really master all the aspects of the pragmatic competence of the TL. Therefore, we do agree with Kasper (1997b) and Bardovi-Harlig (1992, 1996, and 2001) who believe that it is indispensable to develop training programmes for teachers to make them aware of the importance of their talk.

The second factor to take into account in developing FL learners’ communicative and pragmatic competence, are ELT materials. In the FL context where contact with the target language is scarce, the introduction of spontaneous speech captured in authentic data would certainly develop the underlying strategies of speech behaviour. The advantage of such materials is that they provide a link of classroom language learning with language usage outside the classroom in real life contexts. In fact, we do agree with Bardovi-Harlig (1996:34) as she states that “it is important that learners observe native speakers in action”. Nunan (1997) also argued that exposing learners to authentic texts is important because of the rich language provided by these materials a “real language full of overlaps, hesitations, false starts,

repetitions, requests of clarifications and so on". As a matter of fact, those features actually facilitate comprehension and adequately prepare the learners for dealing with genuine communication either inside or outside the classroom. In this respect, and in order to develop learners' communicative and pragmatic competence many researchers advocate the use of authentic materials over the overly simplified language of non authentic materials which depend on concocted texts and simplified versions.

Conclusion:

If developing learners' pragmatic competence is to become more central to language teaching in the Algerian universities, it has to be given more focus. Just as teachers are equipped with know-how in the areas of grammar and vocabulary of the language they are teaching, so they also need to be made aware of the core concepts of pragmatics. More particularly, they need to be made aware of how pragmatic norms differ from one language to another. Moreover, developing learners' communicative and pragmatic competence is essential if we are aiming at their naturalistic use of language. The ability to quickly choose language which is appropriate to the situation and context is not only essential, but also very teachable if educators adopt a more flexible approach and utilize other forms of resources and sources of input other than standard pedagogical materials and textbooks.

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