

Received : 22-09-2020

Published : 30-12-2020

Pragmatic Divergence In Efl Learning And Teaching

Faiza Bensemmane ^{1*}
University of Algiers 2, Algeria

Abstract

Pragmatic instruction has always been viewed as an important feature of learner's acquisition to the foreign languages' learners. As early as 1983, a distinction was drawn by both Leech and Thomas between two components of pragmatic competence: socio-pragmatic knowledge and pragma-linguistic knowledge. In the present article, I will the main difference between the two concepts , and the importance of their adaptation in teaching EFL students.

Keywords: Pragmatic instruction- foreign languages- pragma-linguistic knowledge- Leech - Thomas

Introduction

In the 1980's, the construct of communicative competence led to the pragmatic component of communication. Thus, Canale and Swain (1980) included implicitly pragmatic competence into the sociolinguistics component of communicative competence. Bachman used the term "pragmatic competence" explicitly to distinguish between grammatical competence and textual / organizational competence . Pragmatic competence deals with the relationship between utterances and the acts performed through these utterances as well as the context. As a result, pragmatic instruction to the foreign language learner has been viewed as an important feature of learner's acquisition of pragmatic competence as ,for instance, teaching learners routines and strategies needed to perform specific speech acts (requests, refusals, apologies , complaints, etc). As early as 1983, a distinction was drawn by both Leech and Thomas between two components of pragmatic competence: sociopragmatic knowledge and pragmalinguistic knowledge.

Sociopragmatic knowledge is the knowledge of the means that are likely to be most successful in a given situation. It is the social perceptions underlying the users' interpretation and performance of a communicative/speech act. Pragmalinguistic knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the linguistic resources used to convey communication acts and interpersonal meaning.

1. Pragmatic Failure and Pragmatic Divergence

Early research studies on pragmatics and language teaching regarded learners' inability to express appropriately different speech acts as "pragmatic failure". Pragmatic failure was described as largely due to the learner's linguistic limitations and incorrect judgments about social conventions of the target language and the target culture (Thomas 1983, Ellis 1994, Kasper & Rose 1999), that is failure in both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. But recent research has re-examined this pragmatic phenomenon from a different perspective, that of Interlanguage Pragmatics. Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993:3) define Interlanguage pragmatics as "the study of non-native speaker's use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language". Interlanguage Pragmatics is viewed as a research agenda substantially more complex than pragmatics as it attempts to explore the ways in which learners' pragmatic competence develops in a variety of learning contexts.

Within the framework of Interlanguage Pragmatics, two perspectives have taken up the issue of the acquisition of pragmatic competence by L2 learners: a cognitive perspective and a socially-oriented one.

- i- The cognitive perspective regards the development of pragmatic competence as an individual mental process (See studies by Schmidt on the Noticing Hypothesis, 1995) . This perspective has been applied by most researchers on the teachability of pragmatics, but few of them have dealt with the university context as research setting. However, all suggest that explicit and deductive instruction is more effective for pragmatic learning than implicit and inductive teaching (Alcon 2005, House 1996, Takahashi 2001).
- ii- The sociocultural perspective views social interaction as being crucial. This view has been gaining ground in the last decade (Hall 1998, Ohta 2001, Kanagy 1999). It has much influenced comparative cross-cultural pragmatics. Bardovi-Harlig (2001)'s comparative study of native speakers and non-native speakers' use of different speech acts in advising sessions is worth mentioning. The findings indicate that native speakers use suggestions and different content while non-native speakers use rejections.

This perspective has also addressed studies involving the use of translation to improve pragmatic competence. It was found that students can improve their pragmatic competence when they are using L2 cross-culturally. Translation is a universal cross-linguistic and cross-cultural social practice, as old as at least 2000 years, and because it can build bridges and extend horizons, translation can have a facilitative and enabling function, increase L2 pragmatic competence and reduce pragmatic divergence. It has been suggested that writing advertisements in English based on a native language text can improve L2 learners' pragmatic competence. For instance, the teacher can discuss with students assumptions underlying ads and their linguistic peculiarities.

2- Difficulties in the Acquisition of Pragmatic Norms in EFL Learning

Few applications of pragmatic theories to the L2 classroom have been made, and few textbooks offer instruction in or practical applications of pragmatics . As Ishihora et al (2010)comment , “instructional pragmatics” is the missing link in L2 teaching, and research-informed as well as pedagogically-informed approaches are needed to make new contributions to the field. These should involve learning processes and classroom practices, modes of assessment, curriculum writing, the pragmatics of oral and written discourse, to name but a few.

How easy is it to teach Interlanguage pragmatic competence to L2 learners?

What does it mean to be pragmatically competent?

According to Kasper and Roever(2005), becoming pragmatically competent means for a language learner, being able to understand and produce sociopragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions . In other words, getting as close to the native speaker’s competence as possible.

However, it is noteworthy that with the spread of English as an international language, or as a lingua franca (Jenkins 2007), the dichotomy between native speaker and non-native speaker is becoming increasingly blurred. The pragmatic norms of a community can be constructed, not by native speakers of the language (eg: of English, French, German, Spanish)but by “pragmatically competent expert speakers, native or non-native”(Ishihora et al 2010), as non-native speakers can be as pragmatically effective as native speakers. Hence, pragmatic ability can be better viewed as “contextually constructed in interactions, often negotiable in context”(op.cit: Introduction;x). Yet this pragmatic competence is one of the most complex and challenging aspects of communicative competence and its acquisition by learners in an EFL instructional context is not unproblematic.

What causes learners’ difficulties in acquiring interlanguage pragmatic competence and what causes pragmatic divergence? Ishihora et al (2010)suggests five main causes:

- i- Insufficient pragmatic ability (or pragmatic transfer)
- ii- Limited L2 grammatical ability
- iii- Overgeneralization of perceived L2 pragmatic norms
- iv- Effect of instruction or instructional strategies
- v- Resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms

i- Insufficient Pragmatic Ability

This can translate as negative transfer or positive transfer of pragmatic norms, that is, not knowing the pragmatic norms of L2 or assuming the learners’ own pragmatic norms apply in the given situation of the target culture.

ii- Limited L2 Grammatical Ability

Learners may have a good grammar knowledge but fail to understand the listener’s intended meaning. This may have an impact on L2 pragmatic competence.

Eg: - Could I borrow your book over the weekend?

This is easier to understand than:

-Would you mind if I borrowed your book over the weekend? Or:

-I was wondering if you could possibly lend me your book over the weekend.

iii- Overgeneralization of Perceived L2 Pragmatic Norms

Overgeneralization is the application of a certain rule in language situations where it does not apply (Selinker 1972); for instance, using *eated, *telled, *taked, instead of ate, told, took.

An L2 learner may overgeneralize the pragmatic norm for apologizing in English by simply saying “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me”. This works in some situations, but not in others, depending on the listener and on the magnitude of the offense . For instance, one can use:“I’m awfully sorry”/ “I do apologize for...”/ or “Is there anything I can do to make for this offense? “ etc for a very serious offense.

It is reported that Asians tend to be more indirect in their use of language compared to English speakers, and would speak rather directly in such situation. Misconceptions may occur at a linguistic level too. For eg, “May I” is often inappropriately associated with extreme informality because it is short, while it actually implies greater formality(Matsuura 1998).

iv- Effect of Instruction or Instructional Strategies:

Selinker (1972) calls the errors resulting from “transfer of training” ,“teacher induced errors” or “materials induced errors” . In such situation, the responsibility for pragmatic divergence does not necessarily lie with the learner (because of insufficient pragmatic awareness or incomplete pragmatic control) but with the instruction. In the classroom, the teacher may insist that learners produce complete sentences for structural practice, thus violating Grice’s pragmatic Principle of Economy. Complete sentences are lengthy and redundant in spoken discourse, and pragmatically divergent. For eg:

Teacher: Have you already had a chance to visit the cave drawings of Tassili?

Student: No, I have never had a chance to visit the cave drawings of Tassili.

Or the learner tends to assume that all questions in English are direct (or that there are very few indirect ones). For eg:

A Japanese asking an American:”What is your religion?”, basing it on the pattern “What’s your name?”. This question may be interpreted by an American listener as too direct and too personal. Instructional materials are often simplified to accommodate learners’ levels of proficiency, and as a result, they may be misleading as they might not reflect the reality found in different situations.

v- Pragmatic Divergence due to Learner's Resistance to Using perceived L2 Pragmatic Norms

Learners may resist or intentionally diverge from the pragmatic norms of L2. Learners' subjective disposition (their social identity, attitude, cultural values, personal beliefs, world view, principles) is likely to influence how they present themselves in their L2 pragmatic behaviour. Their attitude may be ambivalent: on the one hand, they may adjust to L2 norms in order to communicate effectively, or to be accepted by the social community. On the other hand, they may deliberately diverge from L2 norms to accentuate their linguistic and cultural differences (See Beebe & Giles 1984's Speech Accommodation Theory). Learners may even choose to isolate themselves from the L2 group and to maintain their subjectivity, that is, their cultural identity, personal principles, values and integrity which they feel are in conflict with a perceived L2 norm. They may even refuse to learn certain language forms that conflict with their own subjective position. Or they may choose not to use a specific form that they have control over linguistically as a way of asserting their subjectivity. For instance, Algerian boys/men tend to use the Arabic rolled "r" in place of the French "r", that is typically used by girls/women.

A number of studies report on L2 learners not always willing to learn pragmatic norms or to use them, or not striving for native-like pragmatic use. Ishihara et al (2010:76) explain that "learners' sense of identity is intertwined with how they use the language, and for this reason, they sometimes choose not to behave in a native-like fashion". Hood (2008) also reports on a study done by Ishara (2008) on western women learning Japanese in Japan. The study describes the role of learner subjectivity in the acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence, as in the following two examples:

Example 1:

"I don't think I've found my Japanese persona yet, who I am when I am speaking Japanese-I was listening to this lady speaking on the telephone in a little squeaky voice (imitates voice)it's like, no, I don't think I can do that, it's not for me-um-I don't know...".(Karen,25,American, English professor and Japanese language student, Hiroshima, Japan 1991)

Example 2:

"I cannot stand the way she talks. She is so humble all the time. I don't want to be that humble. I am just going to stick with the desu/masu (polite) form, it is polite and safe".(Arina, 25, Hungarian, student of Japanese literature and language, Hiroshima, Japan, 1991-commenting on a Japanese female acquaintance)

The issue of learner resistance has important pedagogical implications for language teaching and is quite problematic: any imposition of the adoption of L2 norms on learners could be interpreted as "cultural imposition" or "exercise of power"(Kasper & Rose 2002). However, teachers must ensure that learners acquire receptive pragmatic skills to be able to recognize common interpretations of L2 pragmatic norms in the target community, and productive

pragmatic skills to produce appropriate pragmatic forms in L2. But it would be safer for an L2 learner to use neutral speech style. For instance, it is better to have a respectful speech style on the phone and to say: “May I ask your name, please?“, instead of “Who are you?”, which sounds unpleasant and even rude. Learning tasks which raise students’ awareness of some potential reasons for pragmatic divergence or which make them examine their own productions critically, can contribute to their understanding of pragmatic divergence (see Appendix 1).

Conclusion

What causes pragmatic divergence in EFL learning is not always clear, and often teachers use “a rule of thumb” to identify problems and weaknesses and to bring in solutions. Furthermore, even if teachers focus on the acquisition of receptive and productive L2 pragmatic skills in the classroom, the transfer of this ability to “real life” is not secured. Today, in many places around the world, language users have to use less predictable exchanges than those encountered in the classroom. Multiple languages are used, different languages and different dialects for various identification purposes. Interlocutors have to mediate complex encounters with people having different language capacities and cultural backgrounds, with different social and political memories, and who do not necessarily share a common understanding of the social reality they are living in (Blommaert 2005). Taking these facts into account, pragmatic divergence is likely to become the “Trojan Horse” of Interlanguage pragmatics, which will come back recurrently when all other linguistic questions have been settled.

References

- Alcon, E. 2005. “Does instruction work for learning pragmatics in the EFL context?”, *System* 33: 417-435
- Bachman, L. 1990. *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. 2001. “A new starting point? Investigating formulaic use and input”, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 24:189-198
- Beebe, L.M. and Giles, H. 1984. “Speech accommodation theory: A discussion in terms of second language acquisition”, *International Journal of Second Language* 46:5-32
- Blommaert, J. 2005. *Discourse*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Canale, M and Swain, M. 1980. “Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing”, *Applied Linguistics* 1/1:1-47
- Ellis, R. 1994. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hall, J.K. 1998. “Differential teacher attention to student utterances: The construction of different opportunities for learning in the IRF”, *Linguistics and Education* 9:287-311
- House, J. 1996. “Developing pragmatic fluency in English as a foreign language: routines and metapragmatic awareness”, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18: 225-252
- Ishara, H. 2008. In M. Hood (ed), *Proceedings of the 2008 Temple University of Japan Colloquium on Language Learning*, Tokyo
- Ishihara, N. et al. 2010. *Teaching and Learning Pragmatics: Where Language and Culture Meet*, London: Longman

- Jenkins, J. 2007. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kanagy , R.1999. “Interactional routines as a mechanism for L2 acquisition and socialization in an immersion context”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 31:1467-1492
- Kasper , G.and Blum-Kulka, S (eds) .1993 *.Interlanguage Pragmatics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kasper, G. and Roever, S. 2005. In E. Hinkel(ed), *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*
- Kasper,R. and Rose , K.R.,1999.”Pragmatics and second language acquisition”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 19:81-104
- Kasper, R.and Rose, K.R. 2002. *Pragmatic Development in a Second Language*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell
- Leech, G. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*, London: Longman
- Matsuura, H. 1998.”Japanese EFL learners perceptions of politeness in low imposition request, *JALT Journal* 20/1
- Ohta, A.S. 2001.*Second Language Acquisition Processes in the Classroom: Learning Japanese*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum
- Schmidt, R. W.1995. *Consciousness and Foreign Language Learning: A Tutorial on the Attention and Awareness in Learning*, Honolulu: University of Hawai
- Selinker, L. 1972. “Interlanguage”, *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10: 209-31
- Takahashi, R. 2001.”The role of input enhancement in developing interlanguage pragmatic competence”. In R. Kasper and K.R. Rose, *Pragmatics in Language Teaching*
- Thomas , J.1983. “Cross-cultural pragmatic failure”, *Applied Linguistics* 4/2: 91-112

Appendix

Learning Task 1: Read the examples below and suggest a potential reason for the pragmatic divergence underlying them

Example 1:

An American girl was expelled from a public bath resort in Japan because she had a small rose tattoo on the back of her shoulder which, according to the bath house rules, is ground for expulsion. She complains to her uncle who sees the receptionist and insists that the public bath manager refunds her \$29 entrance fee.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence?.....

Example 2:

A beginning learner of English asks a friend to help her with a course paper in English. The friend says: “If you’d told me earlier, I could’ve helped you”. The learner catches the “...I could...help” portions of the message and is somewhat confused about what the friend means, i.e. if she can help or not?

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence?.....

Example 3:

An English speaking learner of Indonesia hears the expression “Did you eat yet?” as a regular greeting used among Indonesian native speakers, but she avoids using it herself because it does not really seem like a greeting to her.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence?.....

Example 4:

A learner of English who reads in an ESL textbook: “Americans say ‘Thank you’ to a compliment received “starts responding that way to all compliments she receives and expects all fluent English speakers to react that way.

Potential reasons for pragmatic divergence?.....

Learning Task 2:

The following examples of pragmatic divergence were collected randomly , mostly from first year students in the English department. They were produced on different encounters. The students were asked to discuss their “deviance from the norm” and provide correct answers.

- T: Did you have your Cultural Studies test?
S: Normally
- Miss, thank you for the book you passed me. I’m sorry
- Miss, we don’t want to have a “course” at 8:30. We want to change it .
- Repeat, Miss
- What? What have you said?
- Miss I want a green pen . My friend has one
- I’m late. It’s not my fault; it’s the COUS (student bus)
- Miss, I can’t see the blackboard; push the chair
- Thank you a thousand, Mrs.