ASJP
Algerian Scientific Journal Platform

مجلة الآداب واللغات
Al Àdab wa Llughat

Volume : 11 / N°: 1 (2016), pp 46 - 53

Received : 28/09/2016 Published : 30/12/2016

Discourse Awareness And Language Teaching/Learning Of Speech Acts

Fatiha Hamitouche[1]*,
[1] University of Algiers 2, Algeria

Abstract

In a previous study day, I drew attention to the role and importance of discourse awareness in language teaching/learning, dealing with written discourse and putting emphasis on discourse grammar and discourse devices that create cohesion. In the same line of thought, I would like to put emphasis on the role of discourse awareness in teaching/learning spoken language. Spoken discourse analysis is a very vast subject which examines aspects of spoken language such as speech acts, discourse intonation patterns, conversation analysis, adjacency pairs, turn taking, transactional and interactional talk as well as genres and types of spoken discourse such as storytelling, anecdotes, jokes, gossip, media, political speech and many other genres. Each of these constitutes a whole area of discourse analysis and academic research. Because of this vastness in the field, the present paper examines only one of these topics, which is speech acts, to illustrate the importance of developing discourse awareness in the teaching/learning of the speaking skill.

Keywords: discourse, teaching, learning, political speech, interactional talk

Speech acts are one of the main concerns of spoken discourse analysis, cross-cultural pragmatics and socio-pragmatics. Since the publication of Austin's book, entitled: *How to do things with words* (1962), which deals with speech acts, a great interest in this subject in the theoretical and practical fields of research has developed. More interest is also developing in this subject in ESL/EFL teaching and learning, but still, as Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989:10) note:

> Clearly there is a definite need for studies examining speech act realization in a wider spectrum of target languages and cultures, if inter-language pragmatics is to contribute to solving one of the central problems of second language acquisition research, viz., which aspects of nonnative language development are universal and which are language specific

Speech act studies have been one of the main concerns of a subject called philosophy of language (Austin, Searle, Grice and others). Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) explained that speakers, when using language, do not just make propositions about things, facts, states of affairs, etc…they also, to use Austin's terms, perform actions, they act, they 'do things' with language (as in the book title).

After these philosophers' theoretical analyses of speech acts appeared, other language specialists started to claim that teaching/ learners the formal linguistic aspects of ESL/EFL was not enough to develop their communicative or pragmatic/discourse competence and, as a result, teaching materials started to, a small degree only, to include some speech acts. It seems, however, from what is reported, that not enough is done in the field, not only in Algeria but also in other parts of the world.

Human communication is based on performing speech acts of different types such as making statements, requesting, apologizing, complaining, agreeing, complementing, warning, denying, inviting, and many others which have been examined by discourse analysts. Some consider that they "operate by universal pragmatic principles" and others think that "they vary in conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages" (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989:1). It goes without saying that speech acts carry strong socio-cultural implications but they also probably present some universal common features across cultures and languages. It is unlikely and we cannot imagine a society or culture without some basic principles of politeness for instance, like thanking, apologizing etc, and,

> Yet, cultures have been shown to vary drastically in their intercultural styles, leading to different preferences for modes of speech act behavior. Culturally colored interactional styles create culturally determined expectations and interpretative strategies, and can lead to breakdowns in inter-cultural and inter-ethnic communication. (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989:1)

Blum-Kulka et al (1989: 5-6) report in the following, about several studies dealing with examples of such features as directness versus indirectness, appropriateness versus inappropriateness, silence versus reply (as in compliments) etc. For instance, it has been observed (Tannen,1981) that speakers of American English are more direct than Greek and that the latter's cultural norm of indirectness risks to be misunderstood by Americans. Also, German speakers are found to be more direct than British English speakers in requests and complaints. Americans make compliments in some situations in which these would be inappropriate in some other cultures (Wolfson,1981). Observation of British English speakers and Indian English speakers in England, has shown (Gumperz,1979) that "differences in cues resulted in systematic miscommunication" eg: whether the speech was a question, an agreement, an emphasis, rude or polite, giving the floor or interrupting, etc… The following example shows how socio-cultural norms influence speakers' reactions to compliments in two different socio-cultural settings but with same types of subjects: white middle class university students in New York and South Africa. The American students scored 7% whilst South African students scored 43% responses to compliments.

This is to say that ESL/EFL students need to be made aware of socio-cultural specificities of English discourse to be able to identify and use speech acts appropriately. Our oral classes do not generally practice discourse tasks to draw students' attention and trigger their awareness to levels of acceptability, formality, politeness, social distance, stretches of silence, pause, hesitation, use of discourse markers (well, now, right, actually…), in other words how and what to do with language.

Training in perception and production of speech acts can be achieved through different types of discourse awareness tasks. However, as noted above, lack of instruction through discourse

consciousness raising tasks is not a peculiarity of the Algerian context. Discourse/pragmatic aspects of target language are often overlooked and speech acts are not given their due place and importance in ESL/EFL curricula and textbooks in general. When speech acts do occur in dialogues in textbooks, they are often not emphasized enough and presented in unauthentic language situations. Due to this lack, the responsibility to develop students' discourse/ pragmatic awareness falls to the teachers.

The following study shows how discourse and pragmatics concerns or how to say what to whom and when, are often overlooked in ESL/EFL curricula and materials. In a textbook review survey undertaken at TESOL Summer Institute at St Michael's College in Vermont, U.S, I examined 25 ESL/EFL books randomly chosen from the college library, looking at /for speech acts dealing with invitations (as this speech act is very frequent in the target language culture). Only 6 textbooks out of 25 dealt with this speech act in any manner even though the latter is a very important speech act in the ESL/EFL socio-cultural context (as Americans socialize a lot through invitations). Moreover, these 6 books often did not provide adequate tasks for learners from cross-cultural backgrounds, only one book presented speech acts fully with tasks .

To illustrate what has been said above we will examine the invitation speech act in English speaking environment. Invitations are a good example of speech/conversational analysis as they contain sub-acts such as making, accepting, or declining invitations and they range from very formal to very casual depending on the context, which is the most characteristic feature of discourse analysis. Invitations involve also sub-acts such as negotiation which is a particularly important realization for non-native speakers as it includes interaction, politeness, etc.

The responsibility for developing awareness about these important pragmatic aspects falls to the language teachers if they do not wish to send students into the English speaking environment with the grammar but without the pragmatic skills that make them effective communicators. So how to make, accept, and reject an invitation must be taught through awareness raising tasks. Negotiation about availability, time, place, activity, is a process which involves both interlocutors to act, and is an ability as important as accepting or politely rejecting such an invitation. In English rejections or refusals usually include an explanation, excuse, statement of future availability, or a counter-invitation. Pragmatically failing to follow these conventions may jeopardize the speakers' social relations and may also create embarrassing misunderstandings.

Pragmatic interference or transfer from the native language/culture may, for instance, lead to miscomprehension and miscommunication, and as expressed in the following statement:

> Just as in earlier inter-language research, particular importance has been attached to 'linguistic errors', as these provide valuable insight, attention has been focused on learners inappropriate speech act realization in order to uncover their pragmatic knowledge (….) studies of inter-language pragmatics demonstrated that even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value. (Blum-Kulka et al 1989: 10)

To go back to the example of invitations, as we said, because it is one of the most important everyday life speech acts in the target language/culture, it is due its place in the textbooks used by English language learners especially those already living in the target culture. More particularly because this speech act is realized differently within the same culture (informal /formal) as well as cross-culturally. ESL/EFL learners are usually at a disadvantage if they are not aware of how to extend, understand and respond to invitations as they occur in the target language context. Extending appropriate invitations, identifying them and responding to them, accurately is a crucial aspect of communicative competence. The primary purpose of teaching speech acts like inviting is to enhance the fluency and the social skills of learners. It aims at developing their consciousness not only of the forms of invitations but also of the appropriate situations in which to use them. They are an indication of conversation management and authentic speech. In the teaching of speech acts theoretical pragmatic description /analysis must be supported by empirical evidence by studying speech acts data taken from native speakers' production for comparability, so as to draw learners' attention and develop their awareness about specific socio-cultural forms /formulas.

As part of another project in pragmatics and discourse at TESOL Summer Institute at St Michael's College again, we examined in a research group some aspects of invitations looking at data collected from students' scenarios, ie: role play elicitation tasks by native and non-native speakers inviting each other. Comparison of non-native and native speakers' invitations, have shown the following.

First, the native speakers 'prefaced' their invitations, (eg: 'I was wondering, uh', 'we're having a party', etc…), while non-native speakers were often too blunt and too formal, (among the egs:' I want you to come to a party', 'I would like to invite you to a party' etc…) Throughout the analysis two semantic formulas which are obligatory components of inviting were examined in each produced speech act: [event] + [invitation] versus [invitation] + [event]. It was observed that native speakers used [event + invitation] more frequently than the learners who used [invitation + event] more often.

Second, concerning the inviting forms, there seemed to be some preference for the most formal form in both subjects, eg: both used 'would you like to + VP' and 'I/we'd like to + VP'. However, as the results below show, the frequency of their use is different: the non-native speakers used the most formal form of inviting more often:

	Non-native	Native
Would you like to + VP?	33.3%	29.1%
I/We'd like to + VP.	5.6%	8.1%

It seems that the reason behind this difference in use is that native speakers had a greater variety of choice of invitation formulas than the learners; on the other hand the latter seemed to feel more on the safe track by using the most common formal formulas. As for the other formulas the following were particularly noticeable:

	Non-native	Native
Why don't you…	0%	10.5%
Do you want to …	5.6%	0%
Imperative: Come to…	13.8%	0%

The differences we can see from the above results may be attributed to the fact that the learners have lower language proficiency or are bound by their culture since the last form is too direct or order like.

Third, besides the above mentioned differences, two different contexts of use or situations: formal and informal, were examined. We can see in other examples below how directness/politeness varies. In the formal context of inviting a teacher, non-native speakers used also forms like: 'Would you like to join a party, come on and join us' and 'do you want to go with us to…' We notice here that they do not really make a clear distinction according between the formal and informal use according to who they are addressing and often mix them or alternate between the two forms.

Native speakers in this same context used forms like: 'We would really like to have you join us, if you are free…' and 'We would love to have you…' which sound more appropriate to invite a teacher. Now, in the informal context of inviting a classmate, non-native speakers used also forms like: 'Do you like to come with me…' and 'You can join us, come on and join us…', whereas the native speakers used other forms like: 'We would like you to come to…' and 'I hope you can come to…'

The formality versus informality, directness versus indirectness according to the social and cultural context (and values) of the target language are among the aspects of discourse and pragmatics that teachers can draw attention to as norms of use or conventions are culture bound. Certain speech acts are strongly tied to learners' cultures i.e.: behaviors/ practices, strategies vary from one socio-cultural context to another in both content and form. Other communication features, discourse practices and strategies associated with speech acts such as politeness, argumentation, persuasion, negotiation of roles for dealing with conflicting or non-cooperative situations (compare, say, between Algerian versus British attitudes) are all aspects of, discourse/pragmatic competence.

The concept of indirectness, which we mentioned above as varying from one culture to another, is considered by Lakoff (1990:34) to be a form of politeness in order to facilitate interaction between people "by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange. We like to think of conversation as conflict-free, with speakers normally being able to satisfy another's needs and interest…" in some cultures this seems to be an important norm and attitude to adopt when speaking, in others it is less so. He explains that for instance in English some grammatical devices can be used to minimize a speaker's personal involvement, such a case is the use of the passive form and impersonal forms like 'one' (as subject of the verb); words that can convey 'dangerous emotions' are replaced by 'safer' ones. We can add that what Lakoff calls grammatical devices are in facts

just discourse strategies and in relation to this Hymes (1972) has included in his definition of communicative competence the 'strategic competence'. Lakoff (1990: 34) concludes that "if societies did not devise ways to smooth over moments of conflicts and confrontation, social relationships would be difficult to establish (...). Politeness strategies are the means to preserve at least the semblance of harmony and cohesion".

This is to say that ESL/EFL students need to be made aware of socio-cultural specificities of English discourse to be able to identify and use speech acts appropriately. Our oral/conversation classes do not usually include discourse awareness raising instruction and tasks, comparisons between cultures to draw students'attention and trigger their awareness to levels of formality versus informality, differences in politeness rules, the role of discourse markers in speech (now, actually, right…) acceptability of stretches of silence, hesitation, social distance of interlocutors etc, which all vary in different social environments and cultures, so as to avoid learner specific and language specific pragmatic failures. In Blum-Kulka et al's view (1989:10)."

> Some of the learners' speech act behavior [results] from overgeneralization, simplification, or reduction of socio-pragmatic or pragmalinguistic inter-language knowledge. While such intra-lingual processes are bound to occur in learner's attempts to cope with language learning or communicative tasks, it is particularly interesting from a cross-cultural point of view to examine the influence of the learners' native language and culture on their [target] language act performance.

We can illustrate the arguments presented above with Thomas' (1983: 105) example of requesting in Russian, eg: asking for a cigarette: 'daite sigaretu' (give-me-a-cigarette), this is a minimal degree of politeness in an English speaking environment as it is too direct and order like; "a Russian (…) in [GB] using a similar strategy would either have wrongly encoded the amount of politeness s/he intended (covert grammatical or pragmatic failure) or seriously misjudged the size of imposition (socio-pragmatic failure)". So, an ESL/EFL Russian learner needs to be aware of this.

It is also observed by Kasper (1994:3209) that refusals speech acts which are particularly difficult to say are "perceived as being more socially offensive by Japanese and Chinese interlocutors and thus tend to be avoided whereas it seems more consistent with American interlocutors' right to self-determination not to comply with another person's wishes". In other words people's behaviors, attitudes, acts and speech acts are determined by their socio-cultural environments. Therefore, language learners need to interpret and use the target language/culture specific speech acts.

Yule (1996:87) puts emphasis on cultural background knowledge and considers that differences in expectations are based on cultural 'schemata': "It is almost inevitable that our background knowledge structures, our schemata for making sense of the world, will be culturally determined". Its role in determining the way speakers act socio-culturally and linguistically has been the subject of study in various fields relating to language. Various linguists/authors dealt with the role of schema/schemata in relation to language skills; and it is now part of the broad area of investigation of cross-cultural pragmatics to explain socio-

cultural specificities of language use. Widdowson (2007:32) refers to socio-cultural/pragmatic background knowledge as cultural schemata explaining that:

> "Schemata are representations in the mind of what is familiar or customary. But all this is relative, what is familiar to one group of people may be unknown to another and customs vary across communities. So what such schemata represent are culturally different ways of ordering the world, different versions of social reality. These schemata are cultural, taken-for-granted constructs and they become so firmly entrenched in our consciousness that we often find it difficult to envisage any alternative ways of thinking. We talk about common sense but tend to forget that this sense is only locally common and is in fact, communal sense, the way a particular community has constructed reality for itself".

So evidence is established that this cultural background knowledge determines speech acts. Yule (1996:88) also puts emphasis on the fact that various speech acts are culture specific and notes again that there exist significant differences cross-culturally in interpreting and using concepts carried by speech acts like the ones he cites: complementing, thanking and apologizing. He illustrates this focus with an example: "the typical American English style of complimenting creates great embarrassment for some native American Indian receivers (it is perceived as excessive) and can elicit a reaction similar to apologizing from some Japanese receivers (it is perceived as impossible to accept)."

The above arguments and illustrations have shown why teaching speech acts is important and how seriously it needs attention in order to help ESL/EFL develop, through discourse/pragmatic awareness instruction and tasks, their communicative competence and performance in real life situations.

To move to the practical side and the ways speech acts can be taught/learnt, various awareness raising tasks can be thought of by teachers (a little creativity is called for here), but to illustrate, we can suggest two types of tasks in practice in the field. Scenarios and DCTs (discourse completion tasks/tests) are among the tasks used in the subject of pragmatics/discourse analysis to examine cross-cultural variation and compare between native and non-native speakers of the target language. In case there are no native speakers available (as in the case of Algeria), data from videos, recordings and other forms of technology can be used for observation and cross-cultural, cross-linguistic comparison.

While teachers may think of various other ways and tasks to raise learners' awareness about speech acts, DCTs are useful to start with. They are in fact tasks which consist of scripted dialogues in/of different social situations and speech acts. A dialogue is preceded by a brief description of the situation, with the setting or context of use (participants' status etc,) then the subjects are given a dialogue to complete to produce the speech act under study. As for the scenarios, speech act situations or little scenarios are written on a small piece of paper to make students role play the speech act aimed at (videotape). With these two examples of tasks or elicitation techniques we have both written and spoken data to work on for cross-cultural comparability which will serve not only in language teaching/learning but also in pragmatic/discourse analysis from a theoretical and descriptive perspective and in academic research in the field.

To conclude, one can just say that dealing with speech acts as a specific discourse/pragmatic subject in oral/conversation classes will certainly bring insight into raising learners'discourse/ pragmatic awareness, improving their perception/production of speech acts, as well as developing their speaking skill or in more general terms, their communicative competence and performance.

References

1. Austin, J. L. (1962**),** *How to Do Things with Words*.Oxford University Press

2. Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., Kasper, G. (1989), *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*. Vol.x xxi, New Jersey: Ablex Pub.

3. Gumperz, J. J. (1979), 'The Socio-Linguistic Basis of Speech Act Theory'. In Boyd, J. & Ferra, S. (eds). *Speech Act Ten Years After*. Milan, Italy: Versus

4. Kasper,G.(1994), 'Politeness'. In Asher, R.E. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Vol.6; Pergamon

5. Searle, J. (1969) *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.*Cambridge University Press

6. Tannen, D. (1981), 'Indirectness in Discourse: Ethnicity as Conversational Style'. *Discourse Processes,* 3 (4), 221-38

7. Thomas, J. (1983), 'Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure'. In *Applied Linguistics*. 4/2

8. Widdowson, H.G. (2007), *Discourse Analysis.* Oxford University Press

9. Wolfson, N. (1981), 'Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspective'. *TESOL Quarterly, 15* (2), 118-124

10. Wolfson, N.(1989),*Perspectives: Socio-Linguistics and TESOL. The Unrecognized Need for Negotiation: a Look at Invitations*. Boston, M.A: Heinle & Heinle Pub, 118-124

11. Yule, G. (1996), *Pragmatics.* Oxford University Press