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Is Pragmatics Teachable?

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Abstract

It has long been debated that a linguistic theory which only pays attention to linguistic issues must be considered an inadequate linguistic theory. Effective communication cannot be achieved without extra-linguistic factors; that is why pragmatics comes into the play. Pragmatics deals with the incongruities between what is said and what is meant, because in most real life communications, speakers mean more than what they say semantically. Analysis of classroom-based research on L2 pragmatics tells about both limitations and potential of L2 classroom for learning pragmatic, saying that it can be travelled only through data-based studies. In order to investigate how pragmatic learning is affected by instruction, the following points were paid attention to: (1) what makes us pragmatically competent? (2) Pragmatic development theories, (3) pragmatic competence processes, and (4) factors affecting pragmatic development.

Kasper (1997 & 1992) believes that a great sum of L2 pragmatic knowledge is available to adult learners, which can be attained without any specific instructions; some pragmatic knowledge is claimed to be universal, or it is successfully transferred from L1 to L2 (through positive transfer), while at the same time the probability for negative transfer increase as well. However adult learners do not always use such information available to them through mere exposure. The implication, here, is that learners need instruction for pragmatic development. It should be noted, however, that whether instructors could truly benefit from research-based recommendations for pragmatic learning depends on their own pragmatic awareness, that's why some researchers speak about implicit teaching of pragmatic issues which calls for consciousness raising. As Cook (1985) correctly points out, instructors need to be aware and at the same time knowledgeable of pragmatic components in order to bring them to learners' attention. The study conducted by Tateyama, et. Al. (1997) showed that we are to sensitize learners to such pragmatic information. The key task of language instructors might be to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and offer more opportunities for communicative practice in classroom context.

Keywords: pragmatic, linguistic theory, sociocultural theory, communicative competence.

Introduction

It has long been debated that a linguistic theory which only pays attention to linguistic issues must be considered an inadequate linguistic theory. Effective communication cannot be achieved without extra-linguistic factors; that is why pragmatics comes into the play. Pragmatics deals with the incongruities between what is said and what is meant, because in most real life communications, speakers mean more than what they say semantically (Fernández, B. M. & Fontecha, A. F., (2008).

According to various models of communicative competence, successful communication and in any given language requires something more than just linguistic knowledge. An appropriate communication calls for the ability to use this linguistic knowledge in a given sociocultural context. Therefore, pragmatics is an essential feature of language ability in order for L2 learners to understand and be understood in their communications with native speakers (NSs). In spite of all these, pragmatics has long been a neglected area in second language acquisition (SLA) research; this is while pragmatics has been long recognized as a critical research area in first language (L1) development. It is only recently that pragmatics entered as a valid point of inquiry in mainstream SLA research, and since then considerable progress in understanding the pragmatic aspects of language has been made. However, we should note that most L2 pragmatic studies have a comparative or contrastive nature, which primarily looked at learners' language *use* rather than *development* (Kasper, 1996; Rose, 1997). We are yet so far from complete about how L2 pragmatics is acquired and the processes in this regard.

Studies of L2 pragmatics have so far attended to a wide range of topics such as cross-cultural issues relevant in L2 teaching, the relationship between pragmatics and grammatical ability, lexical pragmatics, the role of stress, intonation and tone of voice as sources of potential implicatures, the role of pragmatics in the new media, the pragmatic uses in L2 writing, or the need to use authentic language in the classroom, and in L2 materials (Fernández, B. M. & Fontecha, A. F., 2008).

Accordingly we are to pay attention to 4 points:
(1) What makes us pragmatically competent?
(2) Pragmatic development theories,
(3) Pragmatic competence processes, and
(4) Factors affecting pragmatic development.

1. WHAT MAKES US PRAGMATICALLY COMPETENT?

Performing Speech Acts

Several studies have recognized that key components of pragmatic competence are learners' abilities to use appropriate speech acts and their abilities to choose appropriate linguistic forms to realize this speech act.

Choosing appropriate pragmatic strategies and culturally acceptable mappings of speech events to speech acts are necessary for speech act ability. Learners also have to be awake to the point that their L1 and L2 are different regarding the linguistic forms which are selected to realize a given pragmatic function. According to Schmidt and Richards (1980), the English modals '*can'* and '*could'* may not be identified by Czech speakers as indicating a request; and the English conditional form '*would'* may not be recognized by Japanese speakers as carrying imperative force.

Up to now, what should be known for a successful speech act performance can be mapped in a "top-down processing" manner (Kasper, 1984, p. 3). He says learners first have to recognize the extra-linguistic and cultural constraints that happen when a native speaker performs a particular speech act in a particular context. They also have to know how to realize this speech act at the linguistic level and in accordance with the L2 sociocultural norms. Cohen (1996) calls this knowledge as "sociocultural knowledge:" a "speaker's ability to determine whether it is acceptable to perform the speech act at all in the given

situation and, if so, to select one or more semantic formulas that would be appropriate in the realization of the given speech act" (p. 254).

Non-literal Meanings; Conveyance and Interpretation

Pragmatics, in a simple sense, goes to relationships between linguistic forms and the *uses*, while semantics (closely related to pragmatics) pays attention to relationships between linguistic forms and their *referents*. Grice (1975) distinguishes between *sentence meaning* (referring to propositional meaning of an utterance), and *speaker meaning* (referring to indirectly conveyed meaning beyond the linguistic meaning). Having a look from this viewpoint, we can say that pragmatic competence tries to bridge the gap between sentence meaning and speaker meaning in order to interpret the speaker's intention (which is mostly indirect). Interlocutors arrive at speaker meaning through *the Cooperative Principle*s, these principals are realized to be universal.

Since cultural backgrounds bring about different values and customs, even when speakers and listeners share an understanding of *conversational maxims*, they may end up with different interpretations, when talking of L2 learners and native speakers.

Performing Politeness Functions

Brown and Levinson (1992) suggest universal principles for linguistic politeness based on a social motivation. However, according to many cross-cultural pragmatic studies on politeness, the application of these principles varies across cultures and languages.

Performing Discourse Functions

Getting and conveying the intentions when communicating necessitate a number of turns at talk between participants.

First of all, some researchers put emphasis on the ability to efficiently enter into and end discourse. Literature on conversational analysis has demonstrated that conversation closing is accomplished mostly in conventional ways. What is important is that these studies have neglected the fact that conventions clearly vary across cultures, and that this is a major source of pragmatic failure. Furthermore, there is a transfer from L1 to L2; learners tend to transfer the illocutionary force or significance of pauses or silences from their L1 to the L2. so it makes a difference between communication between two native speakers on one hand and a native speaker and a non-native one on the other (Austin, 1998; Scollon & Scollon, 1995), accordingly we should be careful not to be misled in making generalization.

Secondly, the ability to use discourse markers appropriately is another important aspect of discourse pragmatics. Scarcella (1983) states that everybody has his own 'discourse accent'; this is true for even highly proficient learners. This is manifested in their inappropriate use of discourse markers (for example Spanish learners of English used more fillers such as *you know* and *uhm* than NSs, (p. 306) these fillers are sometimes misinterpreted even by native speakers).

Using Cultural Knowledge

The four characteristics of pragmatic competence discussed above overlap noticeably with each other. They actually do not operate individually rather interact with each other in complex but systematic ways that govern learner linguistic behavior. More importantly, specific L2 culture-bound knowledge has been discussed as a key factor motivating different aspects of pragmatic ability. That's why culture is located at the heart of L2 pragmatic competence. The interdisciplinary nature of pragmatic competence calls for a need to acquire pragmatic knowledge in a holistic context, incorporating all the separate components of pragmatic ability, including discourse management ability and, most importantly, culture (Austin, 1998).

2. PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Since the early 1990s, research into L2 pragmatics considered pragmatic development as sociocognitive in orientation (Kasper, 2001a), contrasting to the prior focus on language learning as internal, cognitive processes of the individual learners. Being determined to pay attention to language acquisition as a social phenomenon, we are to go to three theoretical models, seeking a more holistic approach to L2 pragmatic development (taking both learner and sociocultural context into consideration): **1.** Speech Accommodation Theory, **2.** Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and **3.** Language Socialization.

Speech accommodation Theory

The Communication Accommodation Theory was developed by Howard Giles, professor of linguistics and psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It evolved from the Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), but can be rooted back to Giles' Accent Mobility Model of 1973. The Speech Accommodation Theory was developed in order to demonstrate the value of social psychological concepts to understanding the dynamics of speech. It tried to explain "the motivations underlying certain shifts in people's speech styles during social encounters and some of the social consequences arising from them". Particularly, it focused on the cognitive and affective processes underlying individuals' speech.

Zone of Proximal Development

The zone of proximal development, often abbreviated ZPD, is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. It is a concept developed by Soviet psychologist and social constructivist Vygotsky (1896 – 1934).

Vygotsky stated that a child follows an adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help. He defines ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level (marked by independent problem solving) and the level of potential development as (marked by problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers).

Vygotsky believed that we in the class are to provide learners with points which were within their zones of proximal development. Through this we can encourage their individual learning. The zone of proximal development defines functions which are in a process of maturation, that will mature tomorrow, but they are not matured yet. These functions could be called the blooms of progress, rather than the fruits.

Language socialization (LS) theory seeks to explain how a learner learns language as a social & cultural form in the process of becoming a proficient member of a community. In essence, LS suggests that children acquire sociocultural knowledge by participating in language-mediated daily interactions. This process of socialization through language happens either explicitly or implicitly. Explicit LS occurs when caregivers openly teach the appropriate behavior by providing metapragmatic information on the social norms which all the members hold. On the other hand, implicit LS means that children learn to be experienced members of society by taking part in daily activities and thereby learn the points with no explanations of the rules of pragmatics. Learners as a slice of LS are to learn how to use language meaningfully, properly, and effectively, and, accordingly, Language Socialization is an insightful standpoint into pragmatic development in recent years (Kasper, 2001b).

3. PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE PROCESSES

Pragmatic Transfer

Interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics studies provides plenty of evidence that L2 learners transfer knowledge of their L1 pragmatic knowledge, this affects their comprehension and production of pragmatic performance in the L2 significantly (Kasper, 1992). There is enough evidence that negative transfer of pragmatic knowledge affects L2 learners to appear inexperienced in performing pragmatic functions.

Fossilization

No studies have examined fossilization in learning pragmatic *per se*. This is perhaps because of its methodological difficulty. That is, pragmatics is not as available to be examined as syntax or morphology, because its object is language in use, which is unpredictable and it is difficult to write some ideal forms or functions. Although little is known about pragmatic fossilization, a few studies report some empirical evidence for its existence. It is reported that an ESL setting itself fail to provide an enough context for weakening fossilized interlanguage performance. To make any conclusive assertions in this regards, however, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the specific fossilized item has absolutely stopped going towards the L2 norm (Jung, 2002).

Acquisitional Order

Little is known about the order of pragmatic development because of an obvious lack of longitudinal studies. Nevertheless, there are some studies claiming that at a macro-level, the acquisition of L2 form-function mapping generally leads the acquisition of the L2 sociocultural rules which are necessary to determine which form to which function in which context is to be traced (Jung, 2002).

4. FACTORS AFFECTING PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Grammatical Competence

L2 pragmatic studies came to the conclusion that levels of grammatical competence do not ensure the equal levels of pragmatic competence (Hoffman-Hicks, 1992). In short, the literature gives rise to two popular claims about the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence: (1) grammar is not a sufficient condition for pragmatic competence; however, (2) grammar is a *necessary* condition for pragmatic competence.

The first claim is based on the observation that a learner, already knowing the linguistic structures, is yet to learn about pragmatic strategies.The second claim is based on the evidence that a learner, knowing the suitable pragmatic strategy for a given context, does not know how to use it due to a problem in his linguistic knowledge.

Instruction

There are some hints saying that there are benefits in teaching pragmatics. Several studies reports that L2 pragmatic development profits from instruction in various areas: speech acts, conversational implicatures, conversational management, and pragmatic fluency (Jung, 2002). All and all, studies which believe in teaching pragmatics to L2 learners can be categorized into two general teaching approaches: explicit vs. implicit teaching. Implicit teaching (which is motivated by Schmidt's (1993) ideas of the role of consciousness and noticing-of-the-gap), involves consciousness-raising activities, i.e., presenting archetypal uses of the item in meaningful contexts with little or no input enhancement.

Here are some words on the effects of instruction in pragmatics. Tateyama et. al. (1997) did a research on the effects of instruction in pragmatics. They provided a report on the investigation on the effects of explicit and implicit instruction in the use of a Japanese routine formula "sumimasen" on beginning JFL learners. This commonly-used Japanese phrase has three different functions, i.e. getting attention ("Excuse me"), apologizing ("I'm sorry"), and expressing gratitude ("Thank you"). Both explicit and implicit groups were given four treatments over an eight-week period. The explicit group received

explanations on the use of sumimasen and watched video clips which included this routine. The implicit group received no explanations but only watched the same video clips. Two measures were used for this study. A week after the first and fourth treatments, the learners were asked to perform a role-play with a native speaker and also complete a multiple-choice test, which were followed by two different kinds of self-report, namely, a questionnaire (on the multiple-choice test) and a retrospective interview (on the role-play performance). The results were that both the multiple-choice tests and role-plays showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups, although the effect of explicit instructions was clearer in her pilot study (Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay & Thananart, 1997). However, close examination of the multiple-choice test results reveal that the explicit group performed better in items which involved higher formality, indebtedness, and severity of offence. On the other hand, the explicit group became overly polite, which suggests that the explicit instruction resulted in teaching-induced hyper-correction (Tateyama et. al., 1997).

Input Factors

If there is no input, there will be no learning. When it comes to the learning of pragmatics, it becomes even more critical. However, scholars believe that *ease* of access to pragmatically correct input clearly plays a positive role to second language learning over foreign language learning. In foreign language learning contexts, learning occurs almost solely in classrooms where many teachers share the same L1 and cultural background as their students, and where only a limited range of social interactions is provided, e.g., shorter and less complex discourse organizations, minimal openings/closings, and fewer discourse and politeness markers (Lörscher & Schulze, 1988).

Taken as a whole, research has suggested that a quantitatively and qualitatively richer input is provided by second language learning settings than foreign language learning settings, and that learners show regular movement to NS pragmatic behavior as they reside more and more in an English speaking context. Of course this point that staying more in an English community contributes to being a better speaker pragmatically is open to debate because of lack of a lack of studies which follow this specific line of inquiry.

Biological Factors

Few studies have paid attention to biological factors and, thus, little is known in this regard. Among all those biological factors, sex and age are paid attention to, of course so briefly (Fernández & Fontecha, 2008).

Individual Factors

Among different types of individual variables, SLA research has acknowledged socioaffective factors such as motivation, attitude, and identity as key factors that influence learning attainments (Ellis, 1994).

Conclusion

Analysis of classroom-based research on L2 pragmatics tells about both limitations and potential of L2 classroom for learning pragmatic, saying that it can be travelled only through data-based studies. In order to investigate how pragmatic learning is affected by instruction, the following points were paid attention to: (1) what makes us pragmatically competent? (2) pragmatic development theories, (3) pragmatic competence processes, and (4) factors affecting pragmatic development.

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