The Effect of Pragmatic Instruction on the Speech Act Awareness of Third Year Graduate Students of English, University of Constantine1

FERATHA Mouna
University of Constantine

Abstract:

This study deals with the application of pragmatics research to EFL teaching. The study investigates the effect of explicit pragmatic instruction on the speech act awareness of a sample of third year EFL students at the Department of English, University of Constantine1. A pre-test-post-test control group design is used. The results reveal that students' speech act comprehension improves significantly and that pragmatic competence is not impervious to instruction even in EFL settings.

الملخّــــص:

هذه الدراسة محاولة لتطبيق ما توصل إليه البحث في مجال البراغماتية اللغوية في سياق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ حيث أنها تستكشف أثر تلقين قواعد أفعال الكلام بطريقة بينة وواضحة على التمكن من تطبيقها في التواصل الفعلي لعينة من طلبة السنة الثالثة في قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية ، جامعة قسنطينة 1. يُختبر في الدراسة فوجان أحدهما يلقَن أفعال الكلام نظريا والآخر يمارسها دون تلقين. تبرز نتائج الدراسة أنّ هناك تحسن ملحوظ في معرفة الطلبة لأفعال الكلام و مهارتهم في استعمالها وبالتالي فإن الكفاءة البراغماتية والتواصلية تحتاج إلى تلقين بين وواضح لأفعال الكلام في سياق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Introduction

One of the benefits of learning pragmatics is that learners can understand the meanings of language from a broader intercultural feature. Acquiring the basic concepts of pragmatics will allow them to be more responsive to people's intended meanings.

This work is an attempt to apply some of the findings of research in pragmatics to EFL teaching. In the process of learning a foreign language and how to communicate in it, a great number of learners fail pragmatically when they are involved in the actual act of communication. Trying to get the meaning and function across, they may simply translate speech acts from their mother tongue to the target language. It is possible that such problems are due to the flagrant lack of explicit instruction about pragmatics and the communicative load of language. Foreign language learners' pragmatic competence (their ability to use language in context) is an essential part of their general communicative competence. In that respect, many sociolinguists note that the development of communicative competence should be one of the most important goals of language teaching.

The study attempts to investigate the effect of pragmatic explicit instruction on the speech act awareness of a sample of third year students of English as a Foreign Language at the Department of English, University of Constantine1. It includes a theoretical background and explains the methodological issues and the rationale procedures followed throughout the research work including the research participants, instrument and procedures.

Research Question

To what extent does the introduction of explicit pragmatic instruction affect student's awareness of speech acts?

Research Hypothesis

"If students are more exposed to explicit pragmatic instruction and communicative tasks, they will develop better their speech act awareness."

Background of the Study

This study is theoretically grounded in the area of Pragmatics and EFL teaching, pragmatic explicit instruction and Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP).

The Importance of teaching Pragmatics in Language Classes

The contribution of pragmatics to language teaching is undeniable. Pragmatics, in essence, is a study of language and language teaching from a functional perspective. It is because of this reason that pragmatics is a theory of linguistic performance.

According to Eslami-Rasekh, "the responsibility of teaching the pragmatic aspect of the language use falls on teachers" (2004: 301). Indeed, many teachers struggle finding an effective way to create or raise awareness of pragmatic competence in their learners.

The classroom provides one of the best places for learners to learn and experiment. There, learners are able to try out new forms and patterns of communication. For example, they can experiment with unfamiliar forms of address, or attempt shorter conversational openings or closings than the ones to which they are used. This might at first make them feel abrupt or they might try longer openings or closings that initially might be too drawn out. The instructor and other student participants can provide feedback.

The significance of Pragmatics

From the perspective of learning English for applying it to communication in real life, one of the benefits in learning pragmatics is that learners can understand the meanings of language from a broader intercultural perspective. When the students have a basic concept of pragmatic organization, they will be more responsive to people's intended meanings. Furthermore, with frequent practice in using other peoples' linguistic output and interaction in a global way, students will be more likely to be proficient in reacting to foreigners' conversation in a more successful and more exhaustive way.

Pragmatic Instruction

Since its introduction in linguistics, pragmatics has had diverse applications. Research in this field has always been of crucial importance in teaching and learning foreign languages. A number of researchers have drawn attention to the importance of developing learners' pragmatic awareness which enables them to use language appropriately. Since it is obvious that learners' pragmatic failure is due to their lack of knowledge of certain language forms that are socially appropriate in the target language community, researchers presume that pragmatic competence can be developed through pragmatic instruction. This point is fittingly observed by Bardovi-Harlig:

"Research on instruction in second language (L2) pragmatics has made fundamental contributions to the teaching of pragmatics in an L2 and a foreign language (FL) context and has shown the benefits of instruction versus exposure in various aspects of pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin, 2005; Kasper & Rose, 2002 [chap7]; Kolke & Pearson, 2005; Rose, 2005; Rose and Kasper, 2001)" (2006:165).

Different studies looked at the effect of pragmatic instruction on increasing pragmatic awareness and instructional methods used to focus learner's attention. These studies have been devoted to examine the effect of different types of instruction on the foreign language learners' awareness of the pragmatic aspects that enable them to use the target language appropriately in its different contexts. Ritchie and Bhatia stated that:

A vigorous line of research on pragmatics therefore examines the effectiveness of different instructional arrangement, especially those commonly referred to as "implicit" and "explicit" "respectively. Based on approximately 40 studies available to date, reviews (Kasper, 2001; Rose, 2005) and a meta-analysis of 13 quantitative studies (Jeon & Kaya) suggest that explicit instruction is generally superior to implicit instruction" (cited in Bhatia and Richie, 2009:268)

A great deal of research on pragmatics has been done on specific and, often, isolated aspects such as speech acts; this means that the use of speech acts is of crucial importance in pragmatics. In fact, it is the basis of pragmatics. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995), for instance, referred to pragmatic competence as proficiency in performing different speech acts. They defined it as "competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech act and speech acts sets" (1995:9).

Goals of Teaching Pragmatics via Instruction

The chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and to give them choices about their interactions in the target language. The goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to conform to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. With such instruction, learners can maintain their own cultural identities (Kondo, 2001) and participate more fully in target language communication with more control over both intended force and outcome of their contributions. Kondo notes that "successful communication is a result of optimal rather than total convergence" (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991).

Instruction should allow for flexibility for the students in how much of the pragmatic norms of the culture that they would like to adopt or adapt to their own repertoire. No matter how much learners intend to produce, they will be able to better interpret the speech of others. They will enjoy a greater level of acceptance in the target culture.

Methodology

This section presents an overview of the methodology used in this study. It describes the procedures and instruments used to collect the data, the participants in the study, as well as the way the data were analyzed.

Participants

The original sample selected to participate in this study was 100 third year students majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL) from the University of Constantine 1. However, several participants were absent in part of the treatment or in the pre-test(s) or post-test(s). Therefore, the final sample was 72 graduate students. The students belonged to two classes and were enrolled in the option of applied language studies. Because of administrative constraints, it was not possible to assign students randomly to different groups, thus making it necessary to work with two intact groups.

The two groups were: (1) the control group, which received no explicit instruction on pragmatics but had instructor-led lessons from the textbooks; (2) the experimental group in the classroom setting with explicit instruction on pragmatics from the instructor. There were 34 students in the control group and 38 students in the experimental/Teacher Instruction group; both the pre-test(s) and post-test(s) were randomly assigned to the intact classes. The study was

conducted in the second semester of the students' third-year of English at University of Constantine 1.

Materials

The data collection tool used in this study is henceforth called Two Group Experimental Design (Pre-test Post-test). The Two Group Design is, by far, the simplest and most common of the pre-test-post-test designs, and it is a useful way of ensuring that an experiment has a strong level of internal validity. Both groups are pre-tested, and both are post-tested; the basic difference is that one group was administered the treatment.

Indeed, this design evaluates the efficiency of the sampling process and also determines whether the group given the treatment showed a significant difference.

A true random sampling was not possible and intact groups were used. Therefore a pre-test – post-test group design was adopted in this study. A two - group experimental design has practical advantages over the true and quasi experimental designs because it deals with intact groups and, thus, does not disrupt the existing research setting. This reduces the reactive effects of the experimental procedure and, therefore, improves the external validity of the design. Indeed, conducting a legitimate experiment without the participants being aware of it is possible with intact groups, but not with random assignment of subjects to groups. The participants were not allowed to interact with one another while completing the task.

A pre-test/post-test design was utilized as the preferred method by which to evaluate the learners' speech act awareness (comprehension and production).

In this design, we are most interested in determining whether the two groups are different after the explicit pragmatic instruction. Typically, we measure the groups at one or more levels. The data in this study was collected by a pragmatic and speech act assessment that was presented in the form of tests.

Procedures

This section shows the data collection procedures.

Stage I: Test Construction

A pre-test and post-test were given before and after the treatment to measure the participants' pragmatic proficiency at the level of speech act awareness (speech act comprehension + speech act performance).

Speech Act Awareness Test

Because pragmatic language is a part of all communication, any communicative language assessment should include the test of speech act awareness which is the amalgamation of two tests (speech act comprehension test + speech act production test).

✓ **Speech Act Comprehension Test**

The Test of speech acts comprehension is an effective instrument designed to assess student's comprehension of the intended meaning of different utterances and to provide information on crucial dimensions of pragmatic language: physical setting, audience, topic, purpose…etc

The Test of speech act comprehension allowed us to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the student's pragmatic language comprehension. It also provided important information about their social interaction skills. It was administered in approximately 45 minutes.

✓ **Discourse Completion Test (DCT)**

The test used in order to assess the student's speech act realization (production) is a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Using a DCT was nearly unavoidable, as it would have been all but impossible to collect 'natural' data as a result of observer fieldwork with a reasonable number of participants interacting with all the different types of interlocutors and communicative situations that were proposed. Golato notes that DCTs are "widely used in the field of pragmatics, intercultural communication, and second language acquisition, mainly because their simplicity of use and high degree of control over variables lead to easy replicability" (2003: 93).

Stage II: Treatment (Instructional Materials)

The two intact classes were randomly assigned to two experimental groups: an implicit group (IG) and an explicit group (EG). Both groups were given 10 treatments, each of which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes of the class of pragmatics. The instructional materials included two parts; one was for the instructor and the other was for the participants.

The two groups received instructions in different ways. In the EG, instruction of request and apology was realized through six phases i.e. three phases for each speech act. In the first phase, the input exposure phase, students were provided with models of English requests and apologies. These were explained explicitly by the teacher (instructor). In the second phase, the strategy recognition phase, students were

provided with a brochure and were asked to identify the formulas and strategies of making requests and apologies. Then, they were given a list of request and apology strategies and formula (metapragmatic rules for both speech acts strategies were taught). Students ranked the given pragmalinguistic formulas in the order of directness, discussed the factors that affect the choice of these formulas and strategies such as power, social distance, imposition, settings, and talked about the differences and similarities in the way that the social factors affect the choice of formulas and strategies. It was expected that this knowledge would help learners make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions and their social distribution through lectures, handouts, group or pair work and explanatory feedback. The third phase, the production practice phase, included role-played activities which engaged students in different social roles and speech events where they could practice and gain familiarity with the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatic aspects of request and apology. During the practice task, errors were pointed out, if any, and feedback was provided. In addition to the explicit instruction, a number of activities which are useful for pragmatic development were designed. Such activities aimed at raising students' pragmatic and speech act awareness that offers opportunities for communicative practice. Awareness raising activities are activities designed to develop recognition of how language forms are used appropriately in context. Students were also involved in role-play activities.

Data Analysis Procedures

To investigate the research question proposed earlier and to make a scientific interpretation, the data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. Both types of statistics were used to describe the basic features of the data. They provided simple summaries about the sample and the measures. Together with simple graphics analysis, they formed the basis of virtually every quantitative analysis of data. The significance value was set at 0.05 at all statistical tests in the present study. The data of the study were collected from two sources. One was the subjects' score on pragmatic and speech acts tests; means, standard deviations, t-test and Pearson correlation analysis of each group are compared to see whether there was any significant difference between the scores obtained before and after the experiment.

Findings

The general teaching effects in the present study were shown by the comparison of the mean scores between the pre-test and the post-test and the distribution frequency of improvement among the students after instruction. The comparison of the mean scores was used to find out if there was a significant difference between the two tests, Furthermore, the distribution of improvement can reveal to what extent the students improved after instruction. To find out the general teaching effects, the scores of pre-test and post-test within the two groups were compared. Therefore, an independent t-test was used as a statistical method to obtain the results for the second research question and to test the hypothesis.

The result of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups before the treatment. Therefore, it could be concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of pragmatic comprehension of the speech acts under study. Summary of the findings for both groups in the pre-test is provided in Table 1.

Comparison of the Pre-test in Speech Act Awareness between EG and IG

Group	N	Mean	SD	Var
Experimental	38	8.29	3.36	11.29
Control	34	8.51	3.42	11.69

Table 1: Summary of Data for Both Groups (Pre-test)

From the table above, one can see that the scores for the pre-test of the speech act awareness were not significantly different before the treatment, the t obtained was -0.27 (**t= -0.27).** The result of the the t test showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups before the treatment. It was hoped that this balance might guarantee a valid result for the post-test.

Comparison of the Post-test in Speech Act Awareness between EG and IG

Group	N	Mean	SD	Var
Experimental	38	12.52	2.48	6.15
Control	34	8.5	3.16	9.98

Table 2: Summary of Data for Both Groups (post-test)

The post-test was used to measure the participants' speech act awareness after the treatment. The mean scores of the IG and EG for the post-test were compared through an independent t-test (table). It was found that the EG gained a higher mean score in the post-test than the IG did. The statistical analysis showed there was a significant difference between the two means in the independent t test; the t obtained was 5.79 t-test **(t=5.79).** This indicated that explicit instruction helped facilitate the participants' speech act comprehension and speech act production of request and apology**.**
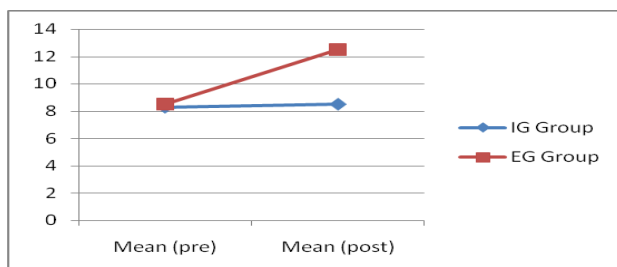

Figure 1: Difference in the Mean of both   (Experimental and Control Group)

Conclusion

All in all, the results from the data analysis supported the claim that explicit instruction facilitates interlanguage pragmatic development. Although this study did not deal with the 'sequence' of acquiring speech act patterns and strategies, it showed that explicit pragmatic instruction in these patterns and strategies makes significant contributions to the learners' speech act comprehension processes. The results revealed that pragmatic competence does not seem to be resistant to explicit pragmatic instruction.

The findings of this study shed light on the rather controversial issue of what effects–if any–explicit instruction has on interlanguage development in an EFL setting. As indicated, the results of the data analysis of this study showed that explicit pragmatic instruction, by providing input enhancement in the EFL classroom, raising EFL learners' awareness about the input features, and engaging students in productive class activities and language use, precipitated and facilitated IL pragmatic development to a considerable degree. The study shows the pivotal role that explicit instruction can play in EFL settings.

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