

The Need of Integrating Pragmatic Aspects into Foreign Language Curricula: Challenges and Possibilities

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Résumé :

The present paper seeks first and foremost to show the importance of incorporating the pragmatic aspects of the TL in the curricula of teaching English at the tertiary level. Nowadays, pragmatic competence has been recognized as an essential component of communicative competence. However, there is a total dearth of pragmatic aspects and their teaching seems to be marginalized compared to other aspects of the target language. There is a scarcity of pragmatic information contained in the Algerian curricula. The present syllabuses almost never provide adequate pragmatic input. Consequently, learners find difficulties in using the language appropriately in different contexts. Therefore, we would like to highlight the importance of integrating pragmatic aspects into foreign language curricula. Our other aim, is to explore the challenges and possibilities for teaching pragmatics in the EFL setting.

Key words: Integrating/Pragmatic Aspects/ Foreign Language/ Curricula

المُلخَص :

يعتبر تدريس القدرات التداولية إحدى الجوانب المهملة في برامج تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر. هنالك ندرة حقيقية لتداولية في مضامين 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

With the advent of pragmatics as a specific area of study, the focus is no longer on teaching isolated structures that are often of little help to learners. Therefore, in order to be communicatively competent foreign language learners need not only to know the grammar and text organization of the target language but also its pragmatic aspects. Since the concept of communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972), it was recognized as a teaching goal. According to Widdowson (1989), the shift from language usage rule to language use rule was the result of the advent of pragmatics as specific area of study within linguistics that favored a focus on interactional and contextual factors of the target language.

Today, teaching English to foreign language 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. Here, pragmatic competence can be defined as: 'knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to context (Kasper1997). Given the afore mentioned facts, pragmatic competence should be an important asset to any person and developing pragmatic ability should be the goal of language teaching alongside the other aspects of the target language. The need for pragmatic input has become essentially relevant for university students since at this level students are sufficiently equipped with linguistic competence that could help them acquire pragmatic rules of the target language.

2. The Importance of Teaching Pragmatics

What could be the goals of teaching pragmatics? What are its benefits to learners? These and many others questions have inspired a huge amount of research in second and foreign language teaching. However, developing pragmatic competence cannot be achieved overnight. In fact, it is a long process that requires knowledge from different fields of study. Research into the pragmatic competence of foreign and second language learners has shown that grammatical development does not guarantee a concomitant level of pragmatic development and that even advanced learners may fail to comprehend or to convey the intended intentions and politeness values. It is of a crucial importance for foreign language learners to be able to create and understand language that is appropriate to the situation in which one is involved.

According to Bardovi -Harlig and Manahan-Taylor (2003) the main goal of teaching pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interaction in the target language. They further indicate that the goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity 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.

The main objective in teaching English as a foreign language is to enable learners to communicate effectively in many situations and contexts. This involves being able to control a wide range of language functions which are how speakers use language for requesting, congratulating, greeting, complaining, consoling, and promising, among many other functions (Teresa 2009). Nowadays, there is an intimate relationship between pragmatics and language learning and teaching. Therefore, Bouton in Guerra (2003) believes that pragmatics and language learning are inherently bound together.

In fact, pragmatic instruction should aim at providing learners with the means to be able to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals and the kinds of act in being performed (Cohen 2007).

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.

3. Linguistic Competence Versus Pragmatic Competence

Researchers in interlanguage pragmatics and educationalists agree that there is a demonstrated need for instruction in pragmatics. Foreign language learners often show differences from native speakers in the areas of language use, executing and comprehending certain speech acts, in conversational functions such as greeting and leave takings, in refusing an offer, declining an invitation, and in conversational management such as back channeling and short responses.

Research has also shown that without instruction, differences in pragmatics become evident in the English of foreign learners regardless of their language proficiency. In other words, learners of high grammatical or linguistic proficiency may not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic development. That is because most of the time learners are not aware of the social, cultural and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations (Bardovi-harlig, 1999). Therefore, Kasper (1997) considers the state of incompatibility between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic performance as evidence that instruction in pragmatics is necessary. So, without instruction, many aspects of pragmatic competence do not develop.

Furthermore, 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?

Moreover, communicative language pedagogy and research into communicative competence have shown that learning exceeds the limits of memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rule (Canale, 1983). As a matter of fact, the goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and to give them the choices for their interactions in the target language and help them become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in that very 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.

4. Pragmatic Instruction: Implicit or Explicit?

The question whether pragmatics should be taught implicitly or explicitly is still open and not settled yet. Some researchers emphasize the necessity of explicit instruction to achieve pragmatic objectives whereas others claim that it is only taught implicitly integrating the pragmatic aspects of the target language that foreign learners could benefit its development. The distinction between explicit and implicit teaching and their potential effectiveness are key aspects related to these concerns. Therefore, in order to understand the difference between these two types of instruction, let us define them.

Explicit instruction refers to a conscious process in which learners are aware of the new knowledge they are receiving. However, implicit learning is seen as a non-conscious process in which learners are not aware of what is being learned, since their focus is on of the surface features of a complex stimulus domain. Doughty (2003) states that explicit instruction includes all type of teaching in which rules are explained to learners whereas implicit instruction makes no overt reference to rules or forms.

Moreover, a number of studies conducted so far propose that learners benefit from attention-drawing activities with pragmatic instruction and appropriate feed-back more than being exposed to new language items without any instruction. However, some others such as Kasper (1997) and Rose (2001) believe that the target pragmatic features are better learned if they are taught explicitly using some enhancement techniques. Akashi (cited in Kasper and rose 2001:171-199) states that "the target pragmatic features

were found to be most effectively learned when they are under the condition in which a relatively high degree of input enhancement was realized with explicit meta-pragmatic information”.

According to Kasper (2001) when dealing with the learning of functions of language two main options are usually considered: explicit and incidental learning. The former advocates for a conscious presentation of information to be learned. It is commonly assumed that being conscious and aware of what we have to learn is more efficient for acquisition. The latter advocates usage (meaningful usage with no explicit information on the words). In a study conducted by Kasper (2001), it was found that the explicit meta-pragmatic instruction is more effective than implicit teaching irrespective of other possible intervening factors such as learners level of proficiency in the target language or length of instruction. In line with these authors, we do believe that the target pragmatic features should be explicitly taught no matter how the learners are able to use that knowledge in their social interactions.

Following what has been said earlier in this section, in teaching pragmatics we have to design tasks that are meant to raise learners' pragmatic consciousness mainly in socio-pragmatics and pragma-linguistics. These conscious raising tasks are necessary because first, they can raise learner's awareness about specific socio-cultural and pragma-linguistic routines. Second, they can provide learners with explicit socio-cultural and pragma-linguistic knowledge about those routines. According to Tatsuki (2005), there are three main aspects in teaching pragmatics. First, there should be a focus on form in which metapragmatic explanations are provided. Second, it is important to focus on meaning. And finally, awareness since pragmatic competence will improve only if learners become aware of mistakes between L1 pragmatic norms and those of the target language.

5. The Teachability of Pragmatics in the Algerian EFL Context

Over the last few years, both 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 the structural components of language remain crucial, the main goal of learning a language is after all communication. Many leading authors (Rose and Kasper 2001; Bordovi-Harlig 1999, Yoshinmi 2006) all express an increasing interest in giving priority to developing learners' pragmatic competence. Teaching pragmatics in Algeria is still in its infancy and developing Algerian learners pragmatic competence is one of the most neglected area in the English language curriculum.

Nowadays, learning English is regarded as an essential component in the curricula at different levels. Therefore, the goal of teaching English should be to cultivate Algerian learners' communicative competence. In the

Algerian context, there is a total dearth of pragmatic components and their presentations are marginalized compared to other language aspects. Traditionally, in the Algerian context, teachers and students alike are obsessed by the desire to acquire rules as much as they can. Consequently, teachers devote invaluable time to rule explanation and to lengthy lectures that are most of time accompanied by handouts often distributed as references for possible exams. This is quite understandable since the context of the entire course proposed turns around purely structural approaches to teaching the TL. However; with the reforms in education at the university level and with the implementation of the LMD system new courses were introduced in the curriculum. Those innovative reforms led to the inclusion of new modules such as; 'pragmatics', 'culture', 'Theme and Version' and 'Discourse Analysis'. Nevertheless, these curricular innovations will remain inefficient as long as a solid and interwoven coordination is non-existent between these different modules.

As far as the Algerian context is concerned, English is more a foreign language than a second language. In other words, Algerian learners of English do not use it frequently in their lives. Despite this situation English is being accepted everywhere especially for foreign communication. Therefore, developing learners' pragmatic ability must be given importance just as the linguistic aspect of the target language do. As a result, it is now high time that teaching pragmatics became an essential goal in the teaching of English in Algeria. Furthermore, it is important to establish a national program that should have the means to ensure that learners gain this knowledge throughout the curriculum.

5.1 The Role of the Curriculum

In the previous section, we discussed the difficulties related to teaching pragmatics. We tried to answer the question whether pragmatics is teachable. We would really ask ourselves if this aspect of language use is teachable and manageable. Many recent studies advocate instruction is better than no instruction to develop FL learners' communicative competence. In fact, instruction calls for pedagogical action directed towards the selection of pragmatic aspects to be taught. A quick look at most English curriculum in Algeria at all level reveals a total absence of pragmatic features of the target language. This results from the nature of pragmatics that involves language use that takes into consideration language users, social context, and norms of communication. Consequently, it is most of the time challenging to select the target aspects of pragmatics that could serve the purpose of instruction.

Another challenge related to selecting and teaching pragmatic norms is the field of needs analysis. It is important to get information about who the learners are in their classes, and consider their individual needs. Conducting needs analysis will certainly guide both syllabi designers and material developers in their choice of pragmatic aspects to focus on in designing the

curriculum. So far, most curricula have focused on certain preselected pragmatic aspects and introduced them in a structured, fixed discourse context. These curricula adopt the language in an isolated manner. Therefore, we believe that syllabi designers have to consider the following aspects of language use:

- Pragmatic competence is dynamic
- Pragmatic aspects must be practiced in more authentic context.
- Selecting and grading pragmatic features according to learners' needs.
- Instruction must be based on key elements of pragmatics (context, functional language use and interaction).

5.2 The role of English Language Materials

One of the pillars of teaching a language are ELT materials which play an important role in developing both learners' linguistic and pragmatic competence. In the selection of materials, we should try to frequently include pragmatic materials to help learners develop their pragmatic awareness and abilities. However, in most English foreign language curricula there is a total dearth of pragmatics aspects. This is due to the fact that most teachers tend to focus on the teaching of isolated structures or purely grammatical rules. This situation results from adopting those tightly lexico-grammatical syllabuses that concentrate on the acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary. This kind of input can hardly prepare learners to use the target language adequately and naturally as it is used the main stream society.

Moreover, in the foreign language teaching contexts there exist few possibilities to use the target language for communicative purpose. Very often the material used fall into two main kinds created, adopted but rarely authentic. These materials which lack any real use of the target language constitute the major source of pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, contrived and de-contextualized to an extent that they present learners with language that is poorly selected. They very often include texts, short dialogues and conversations which do not help learners develop their pragmatic ability. In addition to this, the external environment in the foreign language context is far from being a positive support to the learners.

Consequently, authentic language input provided by natural language could supplement text books and pedagogical materials. In fact, those types of materials which are recorded in their natural state must be selected and graded to meet learners' needs, interests and motivation.

5.3 The Role of the Teacher

The teacher's role is of crucial importance because she/he is involved in many teaching learning processes. Practitioners have a major role in determining what best suits their learners' needs. Moreover, teachers' beliefs and perceptions have a considerable influence not only on their teaching practices but on their learners' achievements. However, in general teachers

do not care much about pragmatic and communicative functions in the classroom. In fact, teachers' role is very often associated with a particular method or approach, ranging from structurally to more communicative orientations. Teachers' neglect of pragmatic aspects can be attributed to different reasons including:

- The examination driven systems
- Overcrowded classes and shortage of time
- Teachers confusion about what pragmatic aspects to develop
- Lack of training in teaching pragmatics.
- Lack of knowledge of the target culture

The question that arises is: What opportunities are available for pragmatic learning? In fact, in the foreign language setting pragmatic input in the classroom is scarce. And learners get most of their pragmatic knowledge from especially designed materials, the teachers or their mates. Teacher talk constitutes the major source of input. However, foreign language teachers themselves lack this type of knowledge. According to Savignon (2006) we have to shape or design language curriculum that entails five components out of which one is "language for different reasons. Therefore, we would argue that it is important for teachers pay attention to the types of materials they select as well as the way they sequence them in order to meet learners' communicative needs.

It should be worth noting here, that researchers have varying views about teacher's talk. For some it is useful and necessary input. Others consider it as only important at early stages of learning. In any case, teacher talk is unavoidable but should fulfill certain conditions. Firstly, it should exhibit most of the features of natural language with its redundancy, discourse markers and paralinguistic aspects.

5.4 The Role of Culture.

Language is inseparable from culture. A particular language is associated with a particular culture, the language provides the key to the understanding of the associated culture, and language itself cannot be really learned or fully understood without enough knowledge of the culture in which it is deeply embedded. As a matter of fact, language is influenced and shaped by culture. According to Kramsh (1998), language has a cultural value, it symbolizes cultural reality. Therefore, learning about culture and the way it is reflected in discourse becomes a crucial prerequisite for developing learners' pragmatic awareness. Indeed, cultural awareness is necessary for pragmatic ability to develop. This, of course, will facilitate learners' ability to find socially appropriate language for the situations they come across and give them choices about their interactions in the target language.

Moreover, raising learners' pragmatic awareness should be the goal of foreign language teaching. In fact, the teacher's responsibility is to make learners aware that what works in one culture does not necessarily work well

in another. What I am pointing out here is that pragmatic interpretation and discourse structure are culture specific and that they need to and can be taught..What needs to be stressed here, is that language and culture must be studied together, and great efforts must be made in the study of the culture in which the target language operates. Improving our cultural quality may make our language fluent, vivid, and elegant. Therefore, we have to enable learners to gain that type of knowledge throughout the curriculum.

6. Challenges Related to Teaching Pragmatics

Recently, pragmatic competence - the ability to use language appropriately and efficiently- has been recognized as an important element in the curricula of teaching English as a foreign language. Therefore, there is now a shift from previous traditional paradigms which viewed language as sum of rules, towards a more communicative perspective. However, in contrast to SL context where learners have more opportunities for exposure to the TL, FL learners are in a disadvantageous situation. In fact, FL learners depend largely on the input provided by their teachers the textbooks on their mates.

Consequently, learners' lack of pragmatic competence can be attributed to different factors especially the textbooks which contain texts and dialogues which reflect no pragmatic insights that can develop their oral proficiency. In the FL context, teachers are non native speakers who need to be well prepared for teaching pragmatic aspects of the TL. Therefore, they need pre-service and in-service training. The second important element in teaching pragmatics is closely related to the materials presented to the EFL learners. We know that in the EFL context there is much less occasion for learners to use the target language outside the classroom. The major type of input is provided by course books. However, the language they propose is not natural and very often de-contextualized. As a result, it loses much of its communicative value. In the coming section we will deal with the difficulties that hinder the development of pragmatic competence in the EFL context.

6.1. The Textbooks

In the EFL context where there are few opportunities for exposure to the target language, course books represent the main source to help learners be aware pragmatically, However, most text books present a kind of language which is attended to or simply adopted to meet certain pedagogical purposes. Therefore, the language they contain is completely de-contextualized and lacks natural language that reflects the real nature of the TL. Many research conducted on textbooks revealed that these types of materials are not sufficient to provide pragmatic input that help in developing EFL learners pragmatic competence.

6.2 Teachers' Training

The teacher is the second main source of input in the EFL classroom. However, quite often the teachers' talk is often simplified and adapted to the

learners' level. Consequently, teachers' talk does not prepare the learners for the real natural use of the target language. Today, pragmatic competence has been recognized as an important element of communicative competence that requires the knowledge of pragmatics and the ability to use it. Moreover, in the foreign language context teachers are not trained in teaching pragmatic aspects and do not possess the ability to create pragmatic learning tasks for their students. In the EFL context, teachers who are very often non-native speakers themselves need exposure to the target language as used by native speakers. As a result, both teachers and learners need instruction in pragmatics.

6.3 Overcrowded Classrooms

In the EFL context, the classroom is the only space where learners could be provided with input for developing their pragmatic competence. However, this space can hardly offer any conditions that enable learners to practise the target language. Most of the time teachers are unable to manage their classes due to the class size. The classroom in its actual state can hardly supply any opportunities for pragmatic development because of limited contact hours and, lack of pedagogical media and no intercultural communication.

Moreover, the features of a teacher-fronted classroom reflect an interactional pattern where each participant is assigned a particular role. Teachers' roles and learners' roles are limited to the basic interactional pattern of the traditional teacher-fronted teaching described by Chaudron (1988) as the: "pedagogical exchange of elicitation by the teacher response by the student – feedback by the teacher". It becomes clear that the language classroom in its classical format does not provide students with opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence. Moreover, teachers in most cases do complain of the unmanageable class size. Large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication are some of the features of the foreign language context that hinder pragmatic learning.

6.4 Learners' Attitude towards the Target Language

Do learners realize the importance of learning a foreign language? How do they react to language classes? Do they know that having a good command of English is a key to their success? As far as English is concerned, most learners take it for granted. In fact, they rarely use it outside the classroom. Some even find it shameful to use it between them. All these factors may constitute real obstacles for any pragmatic development. Of course, all these results in the loss of motivation to learn the TL. Actually, English is used for music, for movies for fashion but with limited and incomprehensible manner.

Conclusion

Pragmatic competence should be an essential ingredient in the EFL language curricula if we are aiming at developing naturalistic use of

language. The ability to quickly choose language which is appropriate to the situation and context is often overlooked in the curricula of teaching of English as a foreign language. This aspect of language use is not only essential, but also very teachable if educators and syllabi designers adopt a more flexible approach and utilize other forms of resources and sources of input other than standard pedagogical materials. 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.

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