

DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

As EFL teachers, we need to be aware of the different ways in which pragmatic transfer manifests itself as it can have a profound impact on our students, their experiences within English speaking environments and on their interlanguage progress. Using English in a sociocultural appropriate way is vital for effective communication and for immersion into an English-speaking society and culture. This is why the role of EFL teacher and his understanding and awareness of L2 pragmatic competence and development are paramount.

Keywords: pragmatic failure, pragmatic competence, 'Presentation-Practice-Production' approach, grammatical and communicative competence, 'Illustration-Interaction-Induction',

INTRODUCTION

Input-Interaction-Output hypothesis, socio-cultural competence

The EFL teacher has a responsibility to intervene in the devastating process that pragmatic failure (i.e., not using language appropriately in context) can trigger for a second language learner. 'A stitch in time...' comes to mind.

Pragmatic competence is crucial for healthy communication because the lack of it can result in communication breakdowns which can even have severe consequences in some cases. The situation in which a language user cannot maintain effective communication because of the inability to appropriately use the language and the incapability to understand the intended meanings is described as pragmatic failure. That is why; ESL and particularly EFL curriculum should cover teaching pragmatics if the main purpose of language learning is to communicate. However, although there has been a great interest concerning the value of pragmatic competence, there is still some deficiencies in terms of including pragmatics instruction in language education. What is commonly stated by these researchers is that language instruction still focuses on teaching the linguistic and lexical features of the target language while ignoring the pragmatic aspects. Despite the introduction of and growing awareness towards communicative competence and approaches to develop it, there have not been enough attempts to teach and especially assess pragmatic competence. The possible reasons for the lack of pragmatic instruction are proposed as follows: instructional materials, limited instructional time, artificiality of the activities, teachers' inadequacies in terms of language competences or instructional skills and the attitudes towards teaching pragmatics. Whatever the probable reasons are, it is stated by different researchers that pragmatic instruction does not get the necessary attention it deserves. Considering the inadequacy of pragmatic instruction, some researchers also explain that the heavy emphasis on teaching linguistic features may result in a good command of grammatical competence. However, having a high level of linguistic competence does not guarantee a high level of pragmatic competence. It is commonly stated that even advanced learners experience pragmatic failures regardless of their levels of linguistic

competence. It is also possible that learners who are not well developed in terms of pragmatic skills may adopt transfers between L1 and L2 as a strategy to deal with communicative cases. However, the transfers at pragmatic levels may not be as healthy as those at other levels. This naturally results in problems in communicative situations and can negatively affect the language development of the learner as well as the self-confidence in language learning. Regarding the frequency of experiencing communicative situations, it is essential to develop pragmatic competence; thus, including pragmatic competence as a significant part of language instruction is. In order to highlight the significant nature of teaching pragmatics, English methodologist researcher Kasper maintains that what should be discussed should not be whether to teach pragmatics, the focus of attention should be how to teach it in language classes. Providing learners with instruction means providing them with the necessary input they can utilize. Accordingly, language input offers learners not only the linguistic knowledge but also the knowledge of appropriate ways of using the language to promote effective interaction and to advance pragmatic abilities (Li, 2012). Input provided through instruction can be considered as a stimulating factor in language learning. In order to underline the significance of providing instruction for the development of pragmatic competence, presenting some studies would be more helpful. A great percentage of the studies on the effects of, either explicit or implicit, instruction revealed the positive impacts of instruction on pragmatic development. For example, in three studies conducted successively one year after the other, researcher Takimoto found that providing learners with instruction and input in different sorts would yield positive contributions in the learning process. Takimoto aimed to examine the effectiveness of structured input tasks accompanied by explicit information, structured input tasks without explicit information and problem-solving tasks. The results revealed that the group that received structured input tasks accompanied by explicit information performed better than the group without explicit information. Based on these results, the researcher conducted another study to investigate the impact of deductive and inductive instruction on the development of pragmatic competence. In this experimental study with 60 Japanese learners of English, there were three treatment groups receiving deductive and inductive instruction with problem solving tasks and one control group. The results of the pre-test, post-test and follow-up tests pointed at the positive contributions of any treatment types compared to no instruction. The results of these two studies were also supported by another study by Takimoto. Examining the effectiveness of structured input instruction, comprehension-based instruction and structured input instruction, Takimoto found that, though there are some differences between the treatment groups, those receiving instruction outperformed the others in the control group.

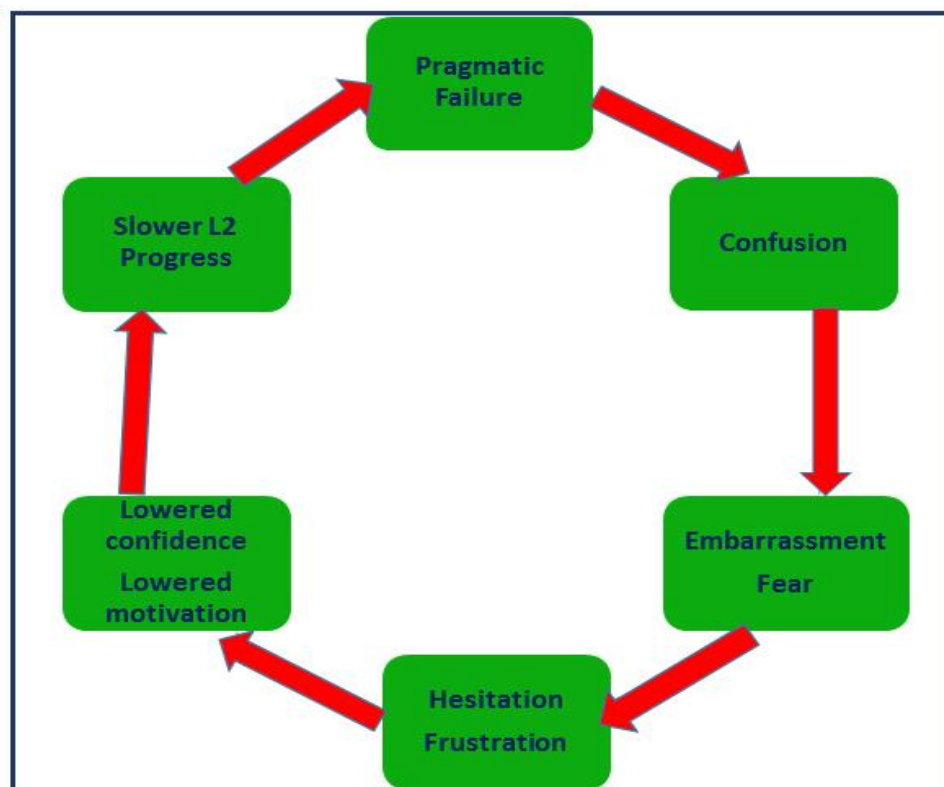


Figure 2. The devastating process that pragmatic failure can trigger for a second language learner.

A teaching approach which encompasses pragmatic competence is necessary to complement our approach to developing communicative and grammatical competence. Instead of the 'Presentation-Practice-Production' approach for grammatical and communicative competence, 'Illustration-Interaction-Induction' has been suggested by McCarthy (1998) as an effective approach in developing pragmatic competence. It simply consists of using examples from real spoken language, interacting with them and analyzing them before finally drawing general conclusions from the examples as to how language is used in context. This ties in nicely with the Input-Interaction-Output hypothesis of SLA (Gass, 1997) which emphasizes the role of interaction in SLA. As learners interact with the language, they begin to test hypotheses about it, notice their errors and self-correct which results in much more consolidated learning. By interacting with the language, learners can better analyze and understand the use of language in context and develop their pragmatic competence.

As English continues to dominate as the lingua franca, we have a duty to our students to ensure, at the very least, that they have an awareness of sociopragmatically appropriate language (pragmatic competence) as a complement to the foundations of communicative and grammatical competence. This leads to improved English language skills and an enjoyable experience in an English-speaking environment for our students as well as enhanced intercultural communication overall.

In teaching the language and Language learning is a process of promoting pragmatic competence. Different scholars hold different opinions on the definition of pragmatic competence. He Ziran introduced some of them in *Pragmatics and English Learning*. Hymes (1972) first expanded the concept of competence proposed by Norm Chomsky in 1960s, and then

put forward that term of communicative competence, which consists of four components: possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance. It is generally believed that the first component is equal to linguistic competence, while the rest three components are submitted to pragmatic competence. Leech (1983) first distinguished pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, thus pragmatic competence is divided into two parts of pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. The former is a pragmatic competence of using correct grammar and appropriate language form to realize certain communication, while the latter requires the speaker to conform to the social rules of language use to reach proper communication. Besides, Bachman in 1990 provided a much more detailed illustration about linguistic competence.

Pragmatic competence is the competence of understanding and using language correctly and appropriately in a particular context to achieve successful communication.

The purpose of language learning and language teaching is to use it communication, that is:

LANGUAGE COMPETENCE			
Organization competence		Pragmatic competence	
Grammatical competence	Discourse competence	Illocutionary competence	Sociocultural competence

In this illustration, as for the two parts of pragmatic competence, illocutionary competence refers to the competence of understanding communicative act and knowing how to carry it out; and socio-cultural competence refers to the competence of using language appropriately in specific context.

In the last two decades, the cognitively-oriented view of pragmatics paved the way to a further turn in pragmatic research, namely ‘an ‘experimental turn’. The goal of Experimental Pragmatics is to investigate pragmatic phenomena via experimental methods, and specifically to test the theoretical models proposed in the field, deriving psychologically sound hypotheses from them. Experimental Pragmatics is based mainly on the behavioral data and techniques from psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. More recently, also clinically oriented research (‘clinical pragmatics’; Cummings 2017) and neuro-oriented research (‘neuropragmatics’; Bambini and Bara 2012) developed considerably. The main of clinical pragmatics is to describe the profile of pragmatic impairment in clinical population, whereas the main goal of neuropragmatics is to characterize the cerebral localization and neurochronometry of pragmatic processes using methodologies that include fMRI, MEG and EEG. Admittedly, distinctions among these areas are often difficult to draw, and in this work, we will consider evidence from all strands of empirical research in pragmatics and use Experimental Pragmatics as an umbrella term for all these approaches. In Experimental Pragmatics, the use of complex paradigms, relying on both experimental settings and on neuropsychological tests, has become crucial for identifying whether specific cognitive functions correlate with processing of specific pragmatic phenomena (e.g., implicatures, presuppositions, figurative language). This approach has massively investigated the role of ToM but more and more interest has been devoted also to other cognitive functions such as executive functions, working memory, inhibitory capacity, etc. As a result, many studies allowed to shed new light on the relation between pragmatic processing and ToM (Cummings 2009), as well the complex interaction with other cognitive

functions. In what follows, we will try to argue that a careful survey of the most recent literature in Experimental Pragmatics can offer solid evidence in support of this thesis: pragmatic competence is not limited to the ability of understanding speaker's intentions and, hence, pragmatic competence cannot be reduced to ToM ability. One element supporting this thesis is that pragmatic competence has specific, i.e., distinct from ToM, characterization in terms of developmental trajectories, patterns of decay, and neural substrates. Indeed, pragmatic processing is supported by ToM but also, sometimes more prominently, by a cluster of other cognitive functions, in ways that differ across types of population and of pragmatic tasks. Our position differs from the one of those who interpret the complexity of the cognitive underpinnings of pragmatics as indicative of the epiphenomenal nature of pragmatics, where this is seen as the emergent result of the interaction between linguistic, cognitive, and sensorimotor processes.

Traditionally, teachers mainly teach language form and grammatical rules, but neglect the language function and language use. Many teachers believed that with the study of language form and grammatical rules, FL learners would gradually realize the language function and acquire the competence to use the language. However, recent research findings show that pragmatic competence could not develop spontaneously with grammatical competence [3]. In other words, there exists a great gap between language form and language function or language use.

Theoretically, if language form always coincides with language function, the communication will be direct and easy to understand. But the actual relationship between language form and language function is hierarchical. Due to various contexts, a single language form may entail various language functions, and a single language function may be transmitted in different language forms. For example, "The door is open." at least has the following functions in different situation:

- 1) Stating or explaining the fact "the door is open";
- 2) Reminding the hearer of closing the door when he or she leaves;
- 3) Scolding the hearer of not having closed the door;
- 4) Suggesting that it is cold in the room and requesting the hearer to close the door.

On the other hand, to realize the language function of requesting the hearer to close the door, the speaker has various choices:

- 1) Door!
- 2) Close the door, please.
- 3) Would you please close the door?
- 4) Do you mind closing the door?
- 5) It's cold in here.

This simple example serves to illustrate that language form is different from language function. And to achieve successful communication needs to know the hierarchical relationship between language form and language function and to use appropriate language form, which involves advanced pragmatic competence.

The relationship between Grammatical rules and the rules of Language Use

When people use their native language to communicate with each other, they conform to both the formal rules of language, that is, grammatical rules, and the functional rules of language, that is, rules of language use. But concerning with the FL learners, they may violate either of the rules or even both of them. This suggests an important point in learning foreign languages, that is, we should know both grammatical rules and rules of language use and apply them in the practice.

What deserves our notice is that some grammatically correct sentences are hardly acceptable in pragmatic principles; and some sentences, although ungrammatical, are valuable in certain context.

a) (A Chinese principle introduced an American teacher to the staff and all the students) Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to introduce to you a very pretty girl, Miss Brown. She is a very good teacher from the USA...

b) I can't do it very good.

In this sentence a), the school principle utters grammatically correct sentence, but it will make the American teacher embarrassed and uncomfortable. First, "girl" is a term for innocent and immature females in western culture, so a female over 18 would prefer to be called "woman" or "lady", and second, western people tend to objectively introduce the guests, without any partial evaluation. Contrarily, sentence b) is ungrammatical but still acceptable in certain context.

This example tells that in real communication, appropriate use of language in particular context is much more important than grammatical correctness. It also shows the importance of pragmatic competence in communication.

Pragmatic failure

"Pragmatic failure does not refer to the performance errors in language use, in making phrases and sentences. Instead, it is caused by the inappropriateness of speech, either the improper way of speaking or unidiomatic language expressions, which make it impossible to achieve the desired effect." Thomas said in Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure that in speech communication, if the speaker could not make phrases and sentences according to the standard grammatical encoding scheme, he would at most be considered "speaking badly", but if he/she does not obey the pragmatic principles in speaking, he would probably be regarded as "behaving badly", or as insincere, deceitful, and dishonest person. Here, we can recognize that pragmatic failure would do great harm to interpersonal communication, so we must do our best to overcome it.

However, it is not an easy job to overcome pragmatic failure. Just concerning the use of "please", Ron White has discovered several situations in which pragmalinguistic failure occurs. Take one situation as an example, H and S have just finished a meeting in an unfamiliar part of the building, and H is leaving while S is returning to her office. They come to an elevator which is located in a different part of the building from the one normally taken by H:

A to B: I can take this elevator, can I?

C to D: Yes. Please get off on the ground floor.

By the misuse of "please", A turned her confirmation into a request and violated Grice's quantity maxim by giving more information than is needed. B might get confused when hearing such a reply, so C actually made the situation an instance of pragmalinguistic failure.

Ron White concluded the situations of pragmalinguistic failure as the following: 1) conflicting signals; 2) creating tension; 3) risking offence; 4) creating confusion; 5) public embarrassment; 6) interpersonal breakdown. Only a “please” could have so many kinds of pragmatic failure, and cause a lot of problems in communication. So we should pay more attention to pragmatic competence so as to diminish pragmatic failure in communication.

Based on the above-mentioned studies, one can infer that instruction, implicit or explicit, in pragmatics is beneficial. Most of the studies in the relevant literature revealed that pragmatic instruction is much more contributory in nature than no instruction as it provides learners with the necessary input they can utilize in the process of developing their language abilities. However, presenting mere instruction out of appropriate and meaningful context would also not yield the desired and expected results. As pragmatic instruction has an undeniable significance in language development, it is essential to provide learners the type of instruction which is integrated with other language activities to raise learners’ awareness and attention towards the appropriate ways of using the language. It is clear that mere exposure to a huge amount of input is not effective for pragmatic development. Instead, language input should be incorporated with other activities in different contexts increasing the meaningfulness of the learning process. In order to highlight the significance of designing and planning lessons, Solak and Bayar suggest that language lessons should be organized according to a practice-based orientation instead of a traditional theory-based orientation. In such meaningful and practical contexts, learners can have the chance of practicing language beyond memorizing or mastering the linguistic forms without the ability to apply them in interactional contexts. Integrating pragmatic features in language instruction is especially vital in EFL contexts as learners in these educational settings do not have much chance of learning and practicing the target language outside the classroom environment. The learners have limited opportunities for interaction in and exposure to the target language in communicative contexts. The famous scientists Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor suggest the integration of pragmatic instruction in language teaching curriculum explaining that exposure to pragmatics promotes learners’ perceptions of the target language and its speakers.

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