Centrándose en Actos de Habla para Entender y Enseñar Pragmática en la Instrucción de Idiomas

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RESUMEN

La Pragmática se considera que es un aspecto importante de la enseñanza de idiomas. Hoy en día, los académicos en la enseñanza de idiomas reconocen que los alumnos deben desarrollar competencia lingüística y pragmática. La competencia pragmática ayuda a los estudiantes a entender, emplear, e interpretar el lenguaje en su contexto. Sin embargo, la pragmática es considerada como uno de los aspectos más arduos de la enseñanza de idiomas y el aprendizaje. Los estudios realizados en la pragmática aún tratan de responder a la pregunta sobre la educabilidad de características pragmáticas específicas, lo que abre la pregunta sobre si la pragmática se puede enseñar con eficacia. ¿Puede la pragmática ser totalmente enseñada o deben los educadores centrarse en las características claves de la pragmática como los actos de habla, que es quizás en la actualidad la parte establecida más importante del tema? Ciertamente, la pragmática y la enseñanza de idiomas deben acompañar una a la otra. Sin embargo, con el fin de asistir y evaluar a los alumnos en el uso apropiado del lenguaje en su contexto, los profesores de idiomas deben hoy recibir alguna instrucción explícita sobre la pragmática. Tienen que estar al tanto de los recursos disponibles para enseñar normas pragmáticas. Actos de habla, como parte de la pragmática, pueden ayudar a los profesores a orientar su instrucción en el desarrollo de un conocimiento general de cómo se utilizan las formas de lenguaje en su contexto. Los actos de habla proporcionan un marco en el que los profesores pueden crear oportunidades de aprendizaje para desarrollo pragmático de L2. Los actos de habla pueden apoyar en gran medida el desarrollo del alumnado en la competencia pragmática. Centrándose en los actos de habla al enseñar la pragmática parece ser la respuesta hoy en la enseñanza de idiomas; al menos hasta que nuevas investigaciones surjan para ayudar a los maestros a encontrar recursos y materiales sobre normas y características pragmáticas.

Palabras clave: Competencia Pragmática, Actos de Habla, Aprendices del Idioma Inglés (ELL), Segunda Lengua (L2), Idioma de Destino (TL), Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas (SLA), Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL).

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Focusing on Speech Acts to Understand and Teach Pragmatics in Language Instruction

ABSTRACT

Pragmatics is considered to be an important aspect of language instruction. Today, scholars in language instruction recognize that learners must develop linguistic as well as pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence helps learners understand, employ, and interpret language in context. However, pragmatics is regarded as one of the most strenuous aspects of language teaching and learning. Studies in pragmatics still seek to respond to the question about the teachability of targeted pragmatic features, which opens the question about whether pragmatics can be taught effectively. Can pragmatics be fully taught or must educators focus on key features of pragmatics such as speech acts, which is perhaps currently the most important established part of the subject? Certainly pragmatics and language teaching should accompany each other. However, in order to assist and assess learners in the appropriate use of language in context, language teachers today must receive some explicit instruction about pragmatics themselves. They need to be acquainted with the resources available to teach pragmatic norms. Speech acts, as part of pragmatics, can help teachers orient their instruction on developing a general awareness of how language forms are used in context. Speech acts provide a framework on which teachers can build learning opportunities for L2 pragmatic development. Speech acts can greatly support students´ development of pragmatic competence. Focusing on speech acts to teach pragmatics seems to be the answer today in language instruction; at least until new classroom research arise to help teachers find resources and materials of pragmatic features and norms.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, speech acts, English Language Learner (ELLs), second language (L2), target language (TL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

INTRODUCTION

The linguistic area of pragmatics has grown rapidly in the last couple of decades. A number of studies have examined English language learners´ pragmatic competence in their interlanguage, that is, English language learners´ linguistic system based on English language learners´ (ELLs) experiences with the second language (L2). Interlanguage is a language developed by a nonnative speaker (NNS) of a language that is neither the NNS´s first language (L1), nor his or her target language (TL) (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), pragmatics has gained importance. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of publications about pragmatics in the second language teaching and learning field. Several studies on pragmatics argue that English language learners need to be proficient not only in linguistic competence but also in pragmatic competence (Lin, 2007). Thus, in language teaching it is seen essential that ELLs control a range of linguistic forms such as grammar and lexis at their disposal to perform language functions such as greetings or requests. Through proper language instruction, ELLs can understand socio-cultural norms and rules that govern the usage of such linguistic forms as well (Taguchi, 2008).

These socio-cultural norms are part of the study of pragmatics. Broadly defined, pragmatics refers to the study of speakers´ comprehension about social practices, and the ways speakers interact with one another in particular social situations according to those social practices (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Pragmatics is considered to be both an important aspect of language instruction and an important component to be learned by English language learners (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Accordingly, ELLs´ pragmatic competence development is deemed important in language instruction at all levels of learning. Speakers require appropriate and accurate employment of language to express their ideas, and to grasp the

meaning and intention of what other speakers say (Chen, 2011). In order to avoid miscommunication caused by cultural differences, awareness of what is and is not appropriate in given contexts is imperative (Lin, 2007). Therefore, encouragement of instruction to develop greater pragmatic competence is becoming an increasingly important issue in the Second Language Acquisition field (Takimoto, 2008).

A number of studies about the instructional effects of learning pragmatics, as well as the importance of keeping a close relationship between pragmatics and language teaching, have been well reported. However, pragmatics is still regarded as one of the most strenuous aspects of language teaching and learning (Lin, Su, & Ho, 2009). Pragmatics accounts for a number of categories or features such as speech acts, felicity conditions, conversational implicature, cooperative principles, conversational maxims, politeness, phatic utterances, and dexis, among others (Ariel, 2011.) These features pose a challenge for teaching. Studies reveal that some pragmatic features are indeed teachable, but not all of them (Rose, 2005). As Rose contends, studies on the effect of instruction in pragmatics still seek to respond the question about the teachability of targeted pragmatic features, which opens the question about whether pragmatics can be taught effectively to second language learners. Can pragmatics be fully taught or must educators focus on key features or principles of pragmatics such as speech act theory, which is perhaps currently the most important established part of the subject? Typically all research in pragmatics has been focused on one or more speech acts (e.g. requests) (Holtgraves, 2008).

Pragmatic Competence

Researchers contend that pragmatic competence should be noticed by language learners and educators (Lin, Su, & Ho, 2009). One of the issues in language teaching is, then, teachers´ and learners´ complete understanding of pragmatic competence. Scholars

emphasize the importance of teaching pragmatic competence; however, the term "teaching pragmatic competence" is too broad and actually inexact. Pragmatic competence cannot be taught, only developed. Competence in a general sense refers to a type of subconscious knowledge that people posses, develop, use, or lose. Competence is knowledge and skills. Therefore, pragmatic competence can only be developed or enhanced. In language instruction, developing existing knowledge or skills in learners can help them raise their awareness of how language forms are used appropriately in context (Lin, 2007). As Lin, Su, and Ho contend, pragmatics is a study that makes learners figure out verbal communication diversities that exist in a mixture of speeches in global communications. The purpose, then, of pragmatic education would be that language learners become acquainted with various appropriate structures based on intercultural knowledge.

Natural competence about pragmatic aspects of language has been proven to be problematic to comprehend as it is based on intuition or interpretations (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Interpretations are naturally inferred, based on human rational thinking and inference drawing abilities. Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm contend that what people think they do in conversation and what they actually do may be incongruent. People seem to have an abstract pragmatic knowledge and an actually pragmatic performance, which may differ depending on the context. As stated previously, pragmatics is context-dependent. Pragmatic competence is a phenomenon that is extra-linguistic. Such a phenomenon requires from a person a deep analysis that goes beyond the sentence structure or form itself. It requires that the person infer the meaning behind subjective and implied utterances (Ariel, 2011). In social interactions speakers communicate more than what they say, which is linguistically encoded. The listener needs to be able to come to the overall comprehension of the linguistic message by decoding and inferring. Undoubtedly,

teaching pragmatic features is challenging for language teachers. Therefore, teachers as well as learners need to be instructed on issues of pragmatic competence in order to properly address those issues within language teaching. Teachers ought to provide learning opportunities to ELLs for developing L2 pragmatic ability, ability that is required today in language classrooms (Lin, Su, & Ho, 2009). Otherwise, learning opportunities to ELLs for developing L2 pragmatic ability would be limited.

Teachers Training

Certainly, pragmatics and language teaching should coexist. Pragmatic instruction in the classroom can help English learners develop greater pragmatic competence (Koike & Pearson, 2005). Teaching to ELLs appropriate usage of language in context can help learners at all levels of learning reduce communicative failure when speaking to native speakers of the target language (Su, 2010). However, in order to assist ELLs in the appropriate use of language in context, language teachers must receive some explicit instruction about pragmatics themselves, so that they can develop awareness about pragmatic norms. They need to become resourceful and well informed professionals (Sharpless & Vasquez, 2009). As Sharpless and Vasquez assert, being pragmatically competent in the first language does not ensure that a teacher will automatically know how to instruct pragmatics properly in a second language classroom.

Unfortunately, in English teaching programs, training about students´ pragmatic competence is limited (Chen, 2011). This limited training restricts university students to improving their own pragmatic competence understanding on their own, which leads to unsound teaching practices after graduation. Therefore, knowledge about pragmatics is important for language teachers as part of their professional development. At the university level, incorporating pragmatics should be a priority in undergraduate and graduate programs.

Making pragmatics part of school programs will ensure that future English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers meet and assess the pragmatic-related needs of the ELLs population they will eventually encounter (Fukuya & Matínez-Flor, 2008). Teachers need to know what pragmatic features are teachable and what type of materials are provided to meet the needs of the ever-growing number of English language learners.

Speech Acts Theory

In the 1950s, the philosopher J.L. Austin (1911-1960) claimed that many utterances are equivalent to actions. His Speech Act Theory mostly explains that utterances have three parts or aspects: locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary acts. Austin explained that there is a clear distinction between words that are uttered which he called "locution," the effect that speech brings which he called "perlocution," and the very act of speaking which he called "illocution" (Davies, 2007; Fisher, 2010). People do not only utter words, but they also act with their speech. In summary, people perform speech-acts; for instance by asking, disagreeing, asserting, stating, inviting, requesting, greeting, predicting, recommending, among others. Therefore, a fundamental feature of pragmatic competence is the ability to recognize the specific speech act that a speaker performs. Language is used for performing a variety of actions. Moreover, being able to recognize the actions that people perform with their utterances is a significant component of successful language use (Holtgraves, 2007; Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Thus, it is necessary to teach learners appropriate pragmatic realizations patterns of speech acts in the target language (TL) classroom (Takimoto, 2008).

Speech acts are, in fact, the most studied component of pragmatics. Studies usually focus on one or more speech acts (e.g. requests) (Holtgraves, 2008). A great number of empirical studies have examined the effects of instruction on pragmatic features using speech acts (Grossi, 2009). The most compelling argument is that teaching pragmatics through speech acts has proven effective (Sharpless & Vasquez, 2009). After all, performing certain speech acts is based on cultural norms (Yu, 2005). A significant component of speech acts is that there are many ways in which the same speech act can be performed (Fisher, 2010). Speech acts can be performed explicitly or implicitly. However, classroom research concentrating on pragmatic development in L2 learners strongly suggests that pragmatic components (e.g. speech acts) are taught more successfully with an explicit approach (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Takimoto, 2008). L2 learners appear to accelerate their ability to express more native-like speech act performance with explicit instruction. As a result, in SLA the findings in the studies encourage the use of instruction, explicit or implicit, to guide ELLs to notice pragmatic norms and consequently to produce speech acts in a contextual dialogue (Koike & Pearson, 2005).

DISCUSSION

Today, scholars in language instruction recognize that ELLs must develop pragmatic as well as linguistic competence. Pragmatic competence helps learners understand, employ, and interpret language in context (Chen, 2011). Moreover, speakers need to employ language appropriately to communicate with people and avoid communication breakdowns. They need to be aware of the restraints they may encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language may have on other participants in the act of communication. Only through learning pragmatic forms can learners raise their pragmatic consciousness so as to produce effective speech acts (Koike & Pearson, 2005).

Unquestionably, teaching pragmatic norms is important in helping ELLs recognize and interpret intentions behind utterances in contextual settings. As Sharpless and Vasquez argue, the most convincing statement

about teaching pragmatic forms is that instruction has proven effective. Future professionals and in-service teachers need to be acquainted with the resources available to teach pragmatic norms in the TL classroom. In language instruction the challenge for language teachers is arranging learning opportunities in such a way that ELLs can develop their pragmatic competence in the target language. Educators do not have to teach pragmatics fully, but rather to orient instruction to language functions (e.g. greetings) underlying a particular pragmatic component for communicative purposes (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Teaching pragmatics can be a taxing task for teachers due to the complex nature of the field. Speech acts, as part of pragmatics, can help teachers orient their instruction on developing a general awareness of how language forms are used appropriately in context. Consequently, pragmatics can be taught through speech act strategies for various particular purposes (Lin, 2007). Speech acts provide a framework on which teachers can build learning opportunities for L2 pragmatic development. After all, speech acts across cultures share several function structures (e.g. requests, complaints, offers). ELLs have the same range of speech act realization strategies as native speakers of English, irrespective of their proficiency level. However, the way they implement these strategies and distribute them in social contexts may vary (Holtgraves, 2007).

In the target language, teachers and ELLs require techniques and strategies in speech acts, for both teaching and learning. Unfortunately, materials for teaching cultural differences are not easily found. Few textbooks incorporate pragmatics in language instruction. ESL and EFL teaching textbooks tend to be based on the textbook writers´ intuition, rather than on actual patterns of language use. In addition, most of the material appears to be native-like oriented (Lin, Su, & Ho, 2009; Sharpless & Vasquez, 2009). However, the lack of teaching materials should not be seen as a shortcoming, but as an opportunity. The knowledge already possessed from observing native speakers of English could serve as a baseline for developing pragmatic materials (Woodfield, 2010). For instance, native speakers of English, when requesting, use embedded sentence structures, mostly in the form of questions. Teachers can use this information about native speakers´ requesting strategies and develop and adapt material that help ELLs interpret requesting utterances in various ways. In the framework of language teaching, teachers should center their pragmatic teaching on the interpretation of some speech acts or language functions (e.g. apologies, refusals). They cannot provide a context for all language functions, but they can create awareness of the cultural differences in terms of language practices in context. After all, it is recognized that the classroom does not usually provide proper context for learners to pick up all pragmatic information (Sharpless & Vazquez, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In Second Language Acquisition and English as a Foreign Language teaching, the field of pragmatics has witnessed a sudden growth. A number of studies that examine learners´ pragmatic competence in their interlanguage have received great attention in language teaching. Researchers contend that language learners and educators should pay attention to pragmatic competence (Lin, Su, Ho, 2009). Competence, either grammatical or pragmatic, is the ability of speakers to employ appropriate and accurate language to express their ideas and to interpret meaning or intention behind utterances. Pragmatic competence can be enhanced or developed, which is practiced in present L2 classrooms. Only through learning pragmatic forms students can develop their pragmatic competence to communicate effectively without a breakdown caused by limited knowledge of pragmatics.

Furthermore, in order to equip ELLs with useful pragmatics strategies, language teachers´ own knowledge of pragmatics should be developed as well. In the language classroom, teachers encounter

a taxed workload when they try to assist students anticipate, interpret, and produce language sequences underlying verbal activities. Teaching pragmatics can be overwhelming; therefore, speech acts, the most important established and studied part of pragmatics, can provide a framework on which teachers can elaborate their teaching. Pragmatics taught through speech acts - that is, intentions behind utterances -can support students´ development of pragmatic competence. Focusing on a specific speech act or function, teachers can help learners enhance their pragmatic competence awareness to co-construct conversational moves, such as asking and answering a question, issuing an invitation and either accepting or rejecting an offer (Holtgraves, 2008). Focusing on speech acts to teach pragmatics seems to be the answer today in language instruction; at least until new classroom research arise to help teachers find resources and materials of pragmatic features and norms.

Further exploration on pragmatics instruction, including classroom research, is required. There is a necessity of doing classroom research (Lin, Su, & Ho, 2009). If pragmatics is to be fully integrated into language teaching, teachers need to know what pragmatic features can be taught, what materials are available, and what other factors interact with English language learners´ competence in the target language. Definitely, there is still much to identify when it comes to understanding language and culture in the field of SLA and EFL.

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