

Teaching of English: A study of the Socio-Pragmatic competence of the teachers in higher education in Odisha

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Introduction

Ever since the recognition of Pragmatics as a main subject of inquiry in mainstream language research, many Foreign Language Teaching curricula have adopted it as an important constituent for a more communicative language teaching objective. Despite such a credit, the pragmatic dimension has largely been underrepresented and is scarce in Foreign Language Classrooms in Odisha though with the latest Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees reforms, it has been included as an independent module in different Language Sciences' programs. The problem is that the nature of Pragmatics requires a more "pragmatic" implementation, i.e., in addition to knowledge about the different politeness strategies, speech acts and conversational routines provided by the Pragmatics module, offering students the opportunity to practice it seems to be indispensable for a more developed pragmatic competence. And since time allotted to the module is barely enough to cover the theoretical aspect of the subject, setting pragmatic competence as an objective for the productive skill modules (written and oral) would put theory into practice and offer more opportunities for students to develop their pragmatic ability.

Over the past few years, important strides have been made toward recognizing the development of pragmatic competence as a less peripheral component of foreign Language proficiency. Current research questions have extended beyond the confines of how important is integrating pragmatics in Language syllabi to addressing issues like what strategies, techniques and kind(s) of instruction should be implemented for a more sustained pragmatic competence. The contribution of the present paper is threefold; first, revisiting the different Pragmatics developmental models that proved thriving and productive in Foreign Language contexts. Second, reviewing students' perception of the place the pragmatic objective holds in their oral and written courses syllabi and, finally, making a case for a more pragmatics-oriented language teaching at the university level, not only by an explicit instructed learning but by situating pragmatics at the heart of Foreign Language Teaching.

Pragmatic Competence and FL Advanced Learners

Because of a conspicuous lack of longitudinal studies in the field, not much is known about the order of acquisition in pragmatic development. While a minimal level of grammatical competence is necessary for pragmatic competence development, high levels of grammatical competence do not ensure equally high levels of pragmatic competence. Interestingly enough, both are not contradictory. In other words,

linguistic competence is necessary but not sufficient as a platform for FL pragmatic competence development. So the acquisition of L2 linguistic competence generally precedes the acquisition of the L2 socio-cultural rules needed to decide which form to map onto which function in which context.

Pedagogical Framework for FL Pragmatic Development

As it has been attested to by numerous investigations the greater the distance between cultures, the greater the difference is in the realization of the pragmatic principles governing interpersonal interaction. And in these cases, more than others, instruction in pragmatics is necessary so that without some form of instruction, many aspects of pragmatic competence do not develop sufficiently. The lack of sufficient pragmatic instruction is a leading cause to run the speakers towards the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence. Following this line of reasoning, a fair amount of classroom activities was suggested to facilitate the development of learners' pragmatic competence with respect to understanding and performing communicative action in foreign language contexts. So Communicative action comprises not only speech acts such as complaining, apologizing, or refusing, but also dynamic participation in conversation, engaging in different types of oral or written discourse, and maintaining interaction in complex speech events.

Literature review

Pragmatic competence, for the purpose of the present study, refers to "pragmatic ability" as emphasized by Savignon (1972), rather than the broader "pragmatic competence" as defined by Hymes (1972), Widdowson (1983), Canale (1983), and Canale and Swain (1980) who equate "competence" with "Knowledge". According to Savignon (1972), communicative competence is "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting –that is, in a dynamic exchange in which competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (p.8). According to her, the nature of communicative competence is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute, and it is this definition to be adopted throughout this study.

In spite of the agreement that pragmatic competence is one of the vital components of communicative competence (Bachman 1990, Bachman and Palmer 1996), there is a lack of

a widely accepted definition of the term. According to Bachmann's model (1990), Pragmatic Competence is subdivided into illocutionary competence (knowledge of speech acts and speech functions) and sociolinguistic competence, which entails the ability to use language appropriately according to different contexts. Another definition to pragmatic competence, offered by Kasper (1997), is "knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out" (illocutionary competence) and the "ability to use language appropriately according to context" (sociolinguistic competence). As reported by Roohani and Mirzei (2012), Pragmatic competence could also be defined as "the ability to use language appropriately in a social context", and this involves both "innate and learned capacities and develops naturally through a socialization process" (Taguchi, 2009). Another attempt to define the term is offered by Dippold (2007) [5] who describes it as "knowledge of forms and strategies to convey particular illocutions (i.e. pragma-linguistic competence) and knowledge of the use of these forms and strategies in an appropriate context i.e. socio-pragmatic. Thus, in order to be pragmatically competent, it is widely agreed that learners must map their socio-pragmatic knowledge on pragma-linguistic forms and strategies and be able to use their knowledge online under the constraints of a communicative situation (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Roever, 2004) [14]. Austin (1998) [1] calls equally for a "need to acquire pragmatic knowledge in a holistic context, encompassing all the discrete components of pragmatic ability, including discourse management ability and, most importantly, culture". (P. 326). However, some other researchers (BlumKulka, 1990; Muller, 1981; and Wierzbicka, 1994) have not only proved convincingly that there is a need for instruction to focus on the Pragmatics of the FL, but also demonstrated that the absence of instruction could result in other linguistic problems ranging from the L1 Schematic transfer (which, according to House (1993) stems primarily from a lack of the culture-specific pragmatic knowledge needed for a given situation) to a total divergence from their native culture (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) [7]. Blum Kulka (1990) proposed what she termed the "General Pragmatic Knowledge Model", where the learner is presented with an organized schema containing all the target language linguistic forms used for a specific speech event. This schema is governed by a "cultural filter" which decides the situational appropriateness of the realization of the linguistic forms. She argues that this type of instruction is necessary because the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general pragmatic knowledge base appears to be their restricted FL linguistic knowledge or difficulty in accessing it smoothly. In addition to acquiring processing control over their already existing pragmatic foundations, adult L2 or FL learners need to develop new representations of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge not existing in their L1 (Bialystok, 1993). A similar model called the "cultural script" was suggested by Wierzbicka (1994), which she defines as "a specific type of schema which captures characteristic L2 cultural beliefs and values in order for learners to understand a society's ways of speaking" (p. 2). Capturing L2 beliefs and values according to Wierzbicka includes input exposure to pragmatic realizations, discussions of the meta-pragmatic knowledge underlying communicative action, and engagement in communicative activities where learners can practice using the linguistic knowledge they have acquired. Muller's (1981)

which is an interpretive strategy emphasizing the importance of prior knowledge for acquiring pragmatic competence, is a combination between assimilation and spot-the-difference strategy whereby the FL Learner is helped to situate FL communicative practices in their socio-cultural context and appreciate their meanings and functions within the FL community.

Rationale of the study

One issue, which has long been debated, is whether language learners need assistance in order to develop a second or foreign language pragmatic competence. In other words, to study whether pragmatic competence simply develops alongside lexical and grammatical knowledge, or it requires a pedagogical intervention. Since the deciding factor that underlies pragmatic ability is culture, and culture is a subconscious system, then it is difficult, not to say impossible, to make it teachable. When talking about the possibility of developing pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language, it is more appropriate to address the issue of how to arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence.

Objectives of the Study

- a. To develop a second or foreign language pragmatic competence
- b. To study the development of pragmatic competence alongside lexical and grammatical knowledge.
- c. To study the pedagogical intervention in pragmatic competence.
- d. To study the possibility of developing pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language,

Methodology

Research Instruments

Assessing students' perception of the importance of Pragmatics and of an eventual pragmatic-oriented language teaching calls for a descriptive design. To achieve such an objective, it was judged that the use of a questionnaire as a research tool is more appropriate for it affords a good deal of precision and clarity because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions.

Population and Sample

In order to discover what students had retained from the module of pragmatics and whether they were offered opportunities to use this knowledge in the oral/written modules, the questionnaire was submitted to 120 University students of different universities of Odisha, representing thus 23,64% of the entire population. The sampling technique used to select the survey subjects is random sampling technique, i.e. without taking into consideration any parameter other than their "availability" and cooperation.

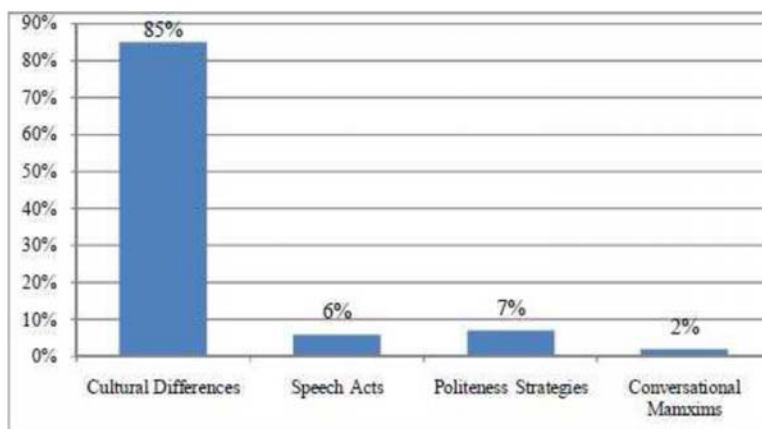
Questionnaire Description

The questionnaire (attached as appendix A) comprises nineteen items, grouped into four major categories according to the aim of each set of questions: Questions about Pragmatic Knowledge/use, Questions about the Oral Expression Module, Questions about the Written Expression Module, and a Question about coordinating objectives. The questionnaire in its whole comprises two open ended questions, thirteen closed questions, one likert-scale question, and the remaining three are

multiple choice questions. Sometimes one question is asked (differently) in more than one section in order to test the validity of the answers. Overly long questions, double-barreled and leading questions were avoided.

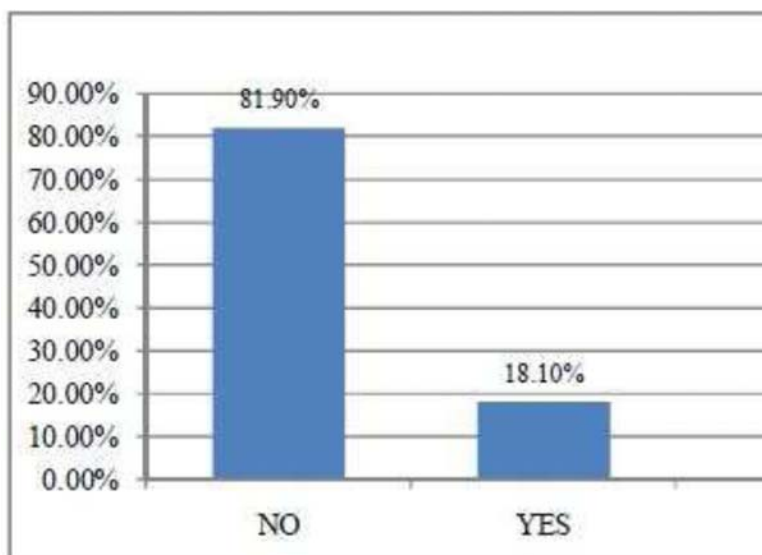
The table below represents the pragmatic aspects by the respondents based on the questionnaire provided to them.

Table 1: The Importance Given to some Pragmatic Aspects by Respondents



Opportunities for practicing the pragmatic abilities outside the pragmatics course, is studied as represented in the table below.

Table 2: Opportunities for Practicing the Pragmatic Abilities outside the Pragmatics Course



Analysis and Discussion

Following the responses of the participants to the questionnaire, it is noted that all the students (100%) are aware of the importance of the pragmatic module in their curriculum; they claimed that it helped them broaden their knowledge about the English language, mainly matters related to the cultural traits differentiating the English language and Odia (85.71%) while performing different speech routines. However, the majority (81.90%) of the respondents claimed that, outside the pragmatics class, they are not offered opportunities to practice this knowledge. Concerning the productive skills modules(oral and written expression), all students reported that oral expression activities range from book reviews presentations to exposes discussions, while written expression activities vary between “writing short stories and plays” (about 38.09%) and discussing assigned literary works (61.90%), and although this discussion might be

perceived as “offering opportunities to practice written communicative ability” (5.6%), that is not the case, as argued by some researchers who suggest that if the FL learner is not consciously targeting a specific pragmatic aspect, the learner will not develop competence.

Thus the communicative dimension (including the pragmatic one) is very scarce, and not enough to reinforce the pragmatic knowledge provided by the module. Finally, student have been unanimous in recognizing the importance of coordination between the more theoretical Pragmatics module and the productive skills modules, mainly to reinforce pragmatic knowledge, and to offer them a possibility to practice what they have acquired.

Findings

Empirically speaking, it is widely observed that many students do have a considerable amount of pragmatic knowledge

(thanks to the pragmatics module and / or a supposedly sufficient exposure to the target culture), but these students don't always make good use of it. They either negatively transfer their L1 pragmatic routines into the target language or, in some cases, they totally converge to the target culture. Thus, there is a clear role for a pedagogical intervention.

Suggestions

Awareness-Raising Activities:

Students should acquire both socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic information. These activities are based primarily on observation of particular pragmatic features in various sources of oral or written data, ranging from native speaker 'classroom guests' to videos of authentic interaction, feature films, and other written and audiovisual sources. Students can also be given a variety of observation assignments outside the classroom. Depending on what aspects these tasks focus on, observation tasks can be classified into socio-pragmatic or pragma-linguistic tasks.

Socio-pragmatic Tasks

These aim at making learners discover under what conditions native speakers express communicative acts, when, for what kinds of goods or services, and to whom. Such observation tasks may be open left to the students to detect what the important context factors may be structured with an observation sheet which specifies the categories to look out for like social distance, degree of obligation etc

Pragma-linguistic Tasks

These focus on the strategies and linguistic means by which speech acts are accomplished the observations made outside the classroom are reported back to class, compared with those of other students, and commented and explained by the teacher. By examining in which contexts the various ways are used, socio-pragmatic and pragma linguistic.

Practicing FL pragmatic Activities

These activities require student-centered interaction. Most small group interaction requires that students take alternating discourse roles as speaker and hearer, yet different types of task may engage students in different speech events and communicative actions. It is therefore important to identify very specifically which pragmatic abilities are called upon by different tasks.

Referential Tasks

Generally speaking, Referential communication means communicative acts in which some kind of information is exchanged between two speakers. This exchange depends above anything else on successful acts of reference, whereby entities are:

- 1) Identified (generally by naming or describing),
- 2) Located or moved relative to other entities (by giving instruction or direction)
- 3) Or are followed through sequences of locations and events. Such tasks expand students' vocabulary and develop their strategic competence.

Interpersonal Communication Task

It is concerned with participants' social relationships and include such communicative acts as opening and closing

conversations, expressing emotive responses as in thanking and apologizing, or influencing the other person's module of action as in requesting, suggesting, inviting, offering,...etc It is clear that the purpose of the proposed learning activities is to help students become pragmatically competent, and consequently more effective communicators in the FL. However, it is very important to mention that "pragmatically competent" does not mean having the same or very similar pragmatic ability as native speakers. As aspects are combined, such observation tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence indifferent social contexts, and their cultural meanings. Students are thus led to notice the information they need in order to develop their pragmatic competence in the target language. These discussions can take on any kind of small group of whole class format. Second language learners do not merely model native speakers with a desire to emulate, but rather actively create both a new inter language and an accompanying identity in the learning process. Thus, the objective of teaching pragmatics and culture bound linguistic strategies is not a complete convergence towards a stereotypical target Language norm, but rather an accommodation between the two cultures, and accommodation undoubtedly needs a pedagogical assistance.

Conclusion

The present research attempted to shed light on the importance of instruction in pragmatics paralleled with an actual practice ensured by the productive skills modules. The results obtained confirm that the FL learners can be instructed/lectured on the strategies and linguistic forms by which specific pragmatic features are performed and how these strategies are used indifferent contexts, and then this instruction should be reinforced by some communicative activities (written or oral) in which a set of activities could be proposed. That is to say, the Oral and Written expression modules should be designed to provide learners with the opportunity to learn and practice the different functions of language. It is important to mention however, that the aim of this pragmatic oriented language teaching is not to force learners to adopt native speaker pragmatic choices at the expense of their own, but rather to make them aware of a variety of linguistic resources that are used in combination with specific contextual factors. This knowledge progressively enables learners to make more sound decisions when interacting in the foreign language.

10. References

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