The Significance of Pragmatics in English Language Teaching

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates that pragmatics should be viewed as a branch of linguistics and its significant role in English as a second language. In pragmatics, meaning in communication has an important role and it can be categorized into two elements such as verbal and nonverbal. It depends on various contexts, relationship between utterers, and social factors. Nowadays English plays a key role in the world and it is known as an international language which enables people to connect all around the world and English can be called as a global language because it is helpful in the processes of globalization. As English has played an indispensable role in global communication, it is essential for English language users, both native and non-native, to use clear, comprehensible and educated English that allows smooth communication and avoids misunderstandings in social interactions. Hence, pragmatic competence can facilitate language users to successfully achieve their communicative aims in intercultural communication. Consequently, pragmatic elements have noticeable roles in communication between speakers because such elements can hinder inaccuracies and misunderstandings during communication. Teachers should teach pragmatic competence in second language English classes through different activities and tasks.

Index Terms: pragmatics, pragmatics competence, English language teaching, language competencies.
1. Introduction

As Held et al., (1999) mention “Globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life” and it is an inevitable process. Crystal (1997) believes that English becomes a truly global language since then it has kept its privileged position among other world languages towards the end of the 20th century. It is estimated that about 1.5 billion people all over the world speak English. According to Kachru’s terminology, the Inner Circle countries are the first and majority group language, the Outer Circle countries such as India, Pakistan, Singapore, and Nigeria use English as a second language together with other languages as a means of intranational communication, the Expanding Circle covers an unspecified number of countries which employ English as a foreign language in schools (Kachru & Nelson, 2001).

As Wardhaugh (1987) comments that “What is remarkable about English and what makes it unique is the extent to which it has spread throughout the world. No other language has ever had the influence in world affairs that English has today.” As Richards (2001) states that English is no longer viewed as the property of the English-speaking world but it is an international commodity sometimes referred to as English an International Language.

2. Pragmatics definitions

Pragmatics can be defined from different views in different ways. As indicated by Roever (2010), in applied linguistics, Pragmatics research is mostly concerned with the interrelationship between language use and the social and interpersonal context of interaction. Morris (1938) recommends the modern usage of pragmatics firstly. He defines the term pragmatics as “the study of the relation of signs to interpreters”, whereas he defines syntax as “the formal relation of signs to one another” and semantics as “the relation of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable.” He provides the scope of pragmatics in accordance with his particular behavioristic theory of semiotics. According to Levinson (1983), “It is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs.” Trosborg (1995) proposes that pragmatics can be known as a branch of semiotics dealing with the relation between signs of linguistic expressions and those who use them; it is one of a branch of linguistics which deals with the contexts people use language and the behavior of the speakers and listeners. The uses of pragmatics are to analyze linguistic words in people’s communication and to interrupt what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said. It examines how speakers organize what they want to say in accordance with who they are talking to, when, where, and under what circumstances (Yule, 1996). Crystal (1997) believes pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on their participants in the act of communication.” Hence, pragmatics can be defined as the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context (Rose & Kasper, 2001).

3. Definitions of language competencies

Language competencies can be classified into subcompetencies in the following:

1) Grammatical competence: Bachman (1990) discusses that grammatical competence consists of the individual’s knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology.

2) Communicative competence: Canale & Swain (1980) propose an influential model of communicative competence that includes sociolinguistic competence. Nieszgoda & Rover (2001) summarize the subcompetencies under this model as follows:
a) Grammatical competence: The knowledge of linguistic code features such as morphology, syntax, semantics, phonology;
b) Sociolinguistic competence: The knowledge of contextually appropriate language use;
c) Discourse competence: The knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in spoken or written communication;
d) Strategic competence: The knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication and make communication effective.

Bachman’s (1990) model of communicative competence also provides an inclusive description of the knowledge required to use language. In addition to the knowledge of grammatical rules, communicative competence consists of the knowledge of how language is utilized to achieve particular communicative goals. He categorizes language competence into organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence relates to a speakers’ control of the formal aspects of language and is further subdivided into grammatical competence (vocabulary, syntax, morphology, phonology), and textual competence (cohesion/coherence, rhetorical organization). As noted by Niezgoda & Rover (2011), pragmatic competence is classified into sociolinguistic and illocutionary competence.

4. Pragmatic competence
As mentioned by Thomas (1995), Pragmatic competence means the ability to use language in socially appropriate ways and to interpret both implicit and explicit meaning according to context. Since the mid-1970s, the general purpose of language teaching and assessment concentrates on developing learners’ communicative competence, knowledge of the pragmatics and linguistics aspects of language use to enable students to become proficient in the target language. Taguchi (2003) mentions that pragmatic knowledge “deals with language use in relation to language users and language use settings.” Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) suggest that pragmatics is classified into two components: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics deals with pragmatic strategies such as the use of semantic formulae, routines, and linguistic forms that can serve the purpose of making the communicative act more direct or indirect, softer or more intensified. Sociopragmatics relates to social behavior, and the way speakers in a certain community interpret and accomplish a communicative act. As indicated by Leech (1983), pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic/grammatical aspects of a language, while sociopragmatics is driven more towards the socio-cultural end of pragmatics.

Bachman (1990) supports this approach and describes language ability broadly as “the ability to use language communicatively.” He proposes two models in his model which includes two elements: language knowledge and strategic competence. Language knowledge consists of “organizational knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge.” The pragmatic knowledge he refers to considers the appropriateness of a particular communicative goal (what he calls “functional knowledge”) and the appropriateness of the language use setting (“sociolinguistic knowledge”).

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), pragmatic knowledge involves the relationship between utterances, language users, and settings support the views of well-known researchers in the field that came before them. Crystal (1985) defines pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.” Rose and Kasper (2001) develop the concept of communicative ability and summarize the study of pragmatics as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context.” Communicative action happen not only when one engages in different types of discourse encountered in social situations (which vary in length and complexity depending on the degree of familiarity between interlocutors, differences in social status, and degree of imposition), but also when speech acts (such as requests, refusals, apologies, compliments, and suggestions) are employed.
5. Teachability of pragmatics in ESL classes

According to several ILP studies on how to teach pragmatics which teachers are interested in, on the basis of both empirical and theoretical studies, Awareness-raising is one of an effective approach to the teaching of pragmatics. The purpose of this approach is to develop learners’ pragmatic awareness through classroom application of available descriptive frameworks and research results. It does not attempt to teach specific means of, say, performing a given speech act, but rather attempts to sensitize learners to context-based variation in language use and the variables that help determine that variation (Rose, 1994).

Drawing from research that focuses on the significance of noticing in language acquisition and L1 pragmatics development, Schmidt (1993) believes awareness of pragmatic input is considerable for the acquisition of pragmatic competence and in the development of L2 pragmatics. “Consciously noticing to the relevant features of input and attempting to analyze their significance in terms of deeper generalization are both highly facilitative.” Hence, tasks that focus the learner’s attention on pragmatic forms, functions, and co-occurring features of social context are helpful in developing adult language learners’ ILP. Empirical studies in ILP and contrastive pragmatics also indicate that awareness-raising facilitates students in using the pragmatic knowledge they already possess.

Kasper (1997) discovers that L1 and L2 speakers have access to identical lists of semantic formulae and other pragmatic resources, but language learners underuse universal or L1 pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, awareness-raising activities are helpful in making language learners aware of their existing pragmatic competence and encouraging them to utilize the pragmatic resources they already possess. One of the main shortcomings of teaching pragmatics for teachers is that it is so extremely context dependent. No “magic line” will be appropriate for all contexts, and it is equally unrealistic to attempt to cover all contexts that students could possibly encounter. By being taught to be aware of pragmatics in various contexts, learners can develop the ability to understand pragmatic patterns in new and previous contexts.

6. Pragmatic competence role in teaching and learning a second language

The four language skills in language learning such as reading writing, listening and speaking do not occur in isolation in communicative texts or activities. Through forming a good pragmatic competence for the language learner, the following should be considered.

1. The aims of a language course should be designed to meet the needs of the language learner to help them improve their communicative competence. Since the primary goal of learning a second language is to provide fluency and accuracy in written and spoken modes of communication, first, the language teacher and the learner should notice to design communicative activities which help to develop the communicative competence. Stern (1983) summarizes ‘competence’ in language teaching as:

   a) The intuitive mastery of the forms of language.
   b) The intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings, expressed by the language forms.
   c) The capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form.
   d) The creativity of language use.

Obviously, the term competence seeks to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic skills, in order to achieve complete and accurate communication for both teachers and learners.
2. The language teacher should design the course material to engage learners in the pragmatic, coherent and functional uses of language for communicative purposes. As claimed by Erton (1997), “The functional study of language means, studying how language is used. For example, attempting to discover what the specific aims that language serves for us and how the members of a language community develop and react to these goals through speaking, reading, writing and listening.” The pragmatic competence of the learner must be well developed; consequently he or she will be able to conduct communication with accuracy. The development of coherence and the ability to react in different situations demonstrate a good level of functional competence. The grammar of the target language should not be taught in isolation with its use. The learned should be able to put his or her knowledge of language into practice.

3. Several activities are helpful for the development of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, they should raise the learners’ awareness of the importance of such competence in the process of acquiring the target language. As Mey (1993) indicates, “Linguistic behavior is social behavior. People talk because they want to socialize, in the widest possible sense of the world: either for fun, or to express themselves to other humans, or for some ‘serious’ purposes, such as building a house, closing a deal, solving a problem and so on.” Hence, Mey believes that, language is a tool for human beings to express themselves as social creatures and the language used in that particular context is important in terms of linguistic interaction that takes place.

7. Conclusion
The notion of pragmatics should be noticed as a significant branch of linguistics in English teaching especially pragmatic competence along with other four language skills. Through various teaching and learning activities, the development pragmatic competence can be demonstrated to L2 learners and teachers should accept that pragmatic competence is one of the primitive teaching goals. By applying pragmatic competence in English teaching in class, learners can realize various levels of grammars and functions well in an accurate, fluent, and coherent way.
References


