

2 Developing pragmatic competence through language digital resources

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Abstract

According to Kasper (1992), L2 pragmatic knowledge affects all communicative acts. It can be described as the speaker's ability both to adapt linguistic formulae to social contextual constraints and to understand the implications of indirect utterances. The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) describes pragmatic competence as an integral component of communicative language competence. It relates to "the functional use of linguistic resources, production of language functions, speech acts, drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges; it also concerns the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, the identification of text types and forms, irony and parody" (CEFR, 2001, p. 13). The present article aims at providing some useful examples of tasks created on the basis of language digital resources, such as language corpora, online forums, and communities where learners can observe language used in digital communication in order both to attain pragmatic knowledge and enhance their language skills. The proposed tasks were implemented in the Italian courses at B1/B2 level organised by the Faculty of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warsaw in the years 2014-2015. Such tasks constituted additional activities within a conversational module focused on developing communicative competence in which pragmatic abilities and sociocultural knowledge play a crucial role.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, Italian language teaching, digital resources, action-oriented approach, classroom learning.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, European institutions, and in particular the Council of Europe, have endeavoured to introduce multilingual and plurilingual policies at every stage of education. The policies aim at promoting linguistic diversification and life-long learning in order to facilitate communication between different nations, focusing on cultural, vocational, and other personal needs. The Council of Europe language policies are supported by the CEFR, which describes and defines six levels of language ability (CEFR, 2001).

Pragmatic competence constitutes an integral element of communicative competence in a foreign language, which, according to the CEFR, consists of three main components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences (CEFR, 2001, p. 108). Its balanced development enriches learners' general knowledge and skills so that they are able to use a foreign language appropriately in a given situation. The question posed in the present article is how to teach and how to maximise pragmatic competence development in Italian as a foreign language through online resources.

2. Theory and methodology

2.1. Pragmatic competence

According to Kasper (1992), pragmatic knowledge affects all communicative acts regardless of the language used. It can be described as the ability of the speaker both to adapt linguistic formulae to social contextual constraints and to understand the implications of indirect utterances. The development of pragmatic competence depends on general communicative knowledge and interactional opportunities to: (1) practise the target language, allowing learners to demonstrate their skills; (2) receive constructive feedback; and (3) observe linguistic input. In comparison with the CEFR's recommendations, Bachman (1990) states that pragmatic competence refers to illocutionary abilities (i.e. speech strategies, language functions, pragmatic routines) and sociolinguistic

abilities (i.e. socially acceptable linguistic/cultural behaviour in a given context), and is an integrative component of general language competence.

When foreign language pragmatic information is insufficient, learners develop their own pragmatic interlanguage, transferring knowledge from the first language or from universal knowledge to their linguistic performance in a foreign language, which may cause a pragmatic failure of a communication act (Kasper, 1992). Current research suggests that learners who receive explicit pragmatic instruction outperform those who are only exposed to linguistic input without such information (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990).

2.2. Action-oriented approach to foreign language teaching

The action-oriented approach, recommended by the CEFR, fulfils the current needs of modern language teaching. It “views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances” (CEFR, 2001, p. 9). The action-oriented approach is mainly embodied in task-based teaching, where students learn by doing, and which provides a stimulus for experiencing a foreign language (Piccardo, 2010; Willis, 1996). The task is defined as “any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved” (CEFR, 2001, p. 10). The nature of the task can vary in creativity, complexity, and level of language difficulty. The notion of *task* is similar to *activity* (Piccardo, 2014).

2.3. Pragmatic competence development in the classroom

As far as language teaching is concerned, there is the problem of how to teach pragmatic competence. Pragmatic instruction should be introduced explicitly in order to help students understand certain language subtleties, then correctly interpret them. It is advisable to use authentic language examples and to introduce a classroom discussion which explores pragmatic differences in order to raise students’ awareness (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor 2003,

p. 38). Designing tasks based on digital language resources promises to be a very creative process for tutors as well as learners. The materials are available at any time, and the type of language used in online forums, chat-lines, or social media often consists of features typical of spoken, written, and online language suitable for communicative competence development, including also pragmatic competence. The implementation of such didactic tasks falls within online teaching, a subject area which has been broadly analysed by many scholars such as Warschauer (1997), Furstenberg (1997), and Mezzadri (2001). As stated by Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni (2000), online resources represent a very useful language tool for creating differentiated teaching tasks that support collaborative learning and individual research by students, while also requiring innovative pedagogical practices and technological competence (Furstenberg, 1997; Hampel, 2006).

Such tasks targeted at pragmatic competence development prove to be extremely useful because of their innovative character. Tutors can create didactic materials which meet learners' particular communication goals in contrast with traditional textbooks which present fixed content that can neither be updated nor tailored to a rapidly changing sociocultural reality. To a certain extent, pragmatic knowledge can be built by observing authentic text samples and skills can be taught by inviting learners to take part in activities that require their involvement and effective language use.

3. Results: developing tasks

The present article aims at providing certain task examples focused on the development of pragmatic competence through observation and active participation on the basis of given online resources, such as Italian language corpora available on the Internet, forums, and online communities. In the present article, the notion of task refers to the definition proposed by the CEFR (2001): “any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved” (p. 10), but also to the concept of a pedagogical

task explained by Willis and Willis (2001) as a “classroom undertaking where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 173). The CEFR definition is very generic in character, allowing its integration according to students’ learning needs, while Willis’ pedagogical task emphasises communicative goals – especially required to develop the pragmatic competence.

The following tasks were designed and developed for two groups of 15 students, level B1-B2 in Italian, in their third year of the undergraduate degree at the Faculty of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, in the academic year 2014-2015. They were implemented within the conversation module which has 30 contact hours of scheduled teaching in the classroom per semester. The objective was to provide students with the pragmatic explicit information in Italian, the lack of which may constitute a problematic issue for Polish-speaking students coming from a diverse cultural background.

As far as language corpora are concerned, the text samples selected for pragmatic goals should have an interactive nature, and be representative of spoken language in which learners can observe specific elements. These tasks enhance learners’ creativity and autonomy, promoting student-led discovery learning and research (Aston, 2001). The tutor’s task is to select the corpus extracts, indicate the required structures or expressions, and give initial instructions, but the main task, which involves observation, identification, and reapplication, is carried out by learners who, working in pairs or in small groups, firstly analyse the given text samples with regard to pragmatic functions and then present the outcomes in the classroom. The last phase consists in the reapplication of the learnt forms which may be accomplished by teaching techniques, such as dramatisation of the discussed dialogues, role-making focused on given pragmatic goals, taking part in online information exchange, and commenting or writing their own requests or questions.

The first task was developed on the basis of Zorzi’s (2001) research concerning the pedagogical use of a spoken Italian corpus (LIP: Lessico di Frequenza dell’Italiano Parlato). The task involved the observation and investigation of

Italian discourse markers used within given situational contexts. These markers play a significant role in Italian language communication, therefore within Italian language classes a particular focus should be put on their meaning and usage.

Task 1. Osservate e analizzate i significati dei seguenti segnali discorsivi / Observe and analyse the meaning of the following discourse markers.

A: ecco # ah ma avevi ragione tu in aula occupata accanto al bar a Sergio o a Ester

B: proviamo

A: cosa *

B: devo trovare Marco prima che % la Corte dei Conti % provo dopo pranzo

A: no no

B: cioè volevo chiamare Marco prima che chiuda la Corte dei Conti però mi sa che ormai so' già andati via vero

A: boh che ore sono *

A: ma dai il primo giorno se ci pensi te lo ricordi il primo giorno

A: ah allora proviamo dai

The students were asked to discuss and make hypotheses about the meaning of the highlighted words, taking into account the situational context of the dialogue. The tutor's objective was to draw their attention to given discourse markers which are typical of Italian language. Then, the students were invited to reflect on possible translations into Polish and whether or not there existed

equivalents. The most difficult elements turned out to be markers such as: *boh* and *(ma) dai*, the latter having different meanings according to context, raising further doubts about its correct use. Active observation and a focus on meaning broadens students' knowledge concerning the possible contexts in which a given discourse marker can be used.

The next tasks discussed the realisation of speech acts within a forum community where members exchange tourist information. In general, the language of the forum community offers a great many examples to be analysed in terms of the realisation of selected speech acts. Learners have an opportunity to observe the communication dynamics between the members of such communities, i.e. how they ask questions, explain issues, thank, apologise, joke, give advice, make requests and express different feelings. The second task involves matching given illocutionary functions to the selected posts. Its aims are to show the language structures needed to achieve specific communication goals, and at the same time to invite learners to reflect upon the interaction in Italian.

Task 2. Osservate i seguenti brani. Abbinare una funzione illocutiva a ogni testo / Observe the following texts, then match an illocutionary function to a given post.

CONSIGLIO / RICHIESTA DI INFORMAZIONI / ACCORDO / RIFIUTO

NORA: Ti consiglio di fare la parte lago tutta in giornata e di prendere un biglietto giornaliero: puoi acquistarlo nella prima biglietteria.

GIANNI: Neda, grazie di cuore, ma non posso accettare perché fino ad ora ho rifiutato tutte le nomination ricevute. Ti ringrazio comunque, sei gentile. Un caro saluto.

ALICE: Sono d'accordo. Il mondo va avanti veloce - innovazione, globalizzazione - in alcuni settori giovani di tutto il mondo creano impresa e servizi con mercati mondiali...

LUCIA: Vorrei sapere se c'è un limite di tempo entro il quale le segreterie devono rilasciare ai docenti i certificati di servizio richiesti.

After completing the task, the students were asked by the tutor to compare the ways in which such speech acts are realised in both Polish and Italian. The authentic communication context made them more involved in the task that they considered useful and interesting.

Furthermore, in the third task, the learners were asked to observe how community members exchange tourist information, and subsequently, they were invited to write a similar request and post it in the same forum. It allowed learners to participate actively in digital communication acts and gave them an opportunity to interact with other participants, often native Italian speakers.

Task 3. Leggete i seguenti brani. Specificate le strutture linguistiche che servono a richiedere informazioni. In coppia scrivete la vostra richiesta di informazioni riguardo a ristoranti convenienti di Perugia. Inserite la vostra richiesta nel forum: <http://www.tripadvisor.it> e raccogliete le risposte. / Read the following texts. Then identify the linguistic structures that serve to ask for information. In couples write a short text in which you ask information about affordable restaurants in Perugia. Publish your post in the forum: <http://www.tripadvisor.it> and collect the answers.

JOE: Ciao, vorrei qualche informazione sulle escursioni che si possono fare partendo da Lecco. Io e la mia ragazza staremo lì dal 18 al 22 Luglio e oltre a visitare Lecco e diversi paesi (Varenna, Bellagio, etc) ci interesserebbe fare camminate, magari anche in montagna.

GIOVANNA: Urgente!!! Parto sabato prossimo! vacanza decisa all'ultimo, avevo scelto un'altra destinazione, poi accantonata. Già prenotato hotel a Cernobbio, lette belle recensioni. Domande: non capisco nulla della rete di navigazione dei battelli. Chi mi sa chiarire le idee?

ALEX: Ciao. Cerco consigli per una giornata a Como. Arriveremmo la mattina da Milano Cadorna a Como Lago Nord.

At the final stage, students also collected posts published as responses to their information request. The task was carried out both in the classroom (observation and writing requests) and as homework (collecting responses or communicating with other forum participants) in order to maximise learning opportunities. Its multidimensional nature aimed at developing students' different abilities, such as: (1) analysing how the speech acts tend to be realised; (2) communicating with native speakers within an online information exchange; and (3) comprehending the received responses. The tutor's main task was to monitor the appropriateness of students' requests.

After completing the tasks, the course participants were invited to discuss their effectiveness. Based on their responses, the subject area and the real-life communication context converged with their interests, which enhanced their involvement in the activity and facilitated the tutor's work. The accomplishment of the third task was rather extended in time, the first analytical part was performed during the lesson, then, the second practical one outside the classroom. The students appreciated both the real life situational context and the opportunity to interact with Italian speakers.

4. Conclusion

This article has attempted to offer some didactic proposals which may provide a pattern for further activities aimed at developing pragmatic competence in relation to such areas of practice as: (1) identifying language forms from a given corpus; (2) identifying and aligning language functions from a given forum exchange; and (3) participating actively in a forum exchange. Their inventiveness depends on tutors' and learners' needs, as well as on the organisational and technical possibilities available in the classroom. After completing the tasks, the tutor discussed the subject area and their effectiveness with the students who gave positive feedback on the digital communication context in which the tasks were

collocated. They considered them particularly useful as far as the completion of the given speech acts is concerned.

As stated by [Kasper and Rose \(2011\)](#), a simple exposure to the target language does not imply the development of pragmatic competence. Learners are not able to distinguish certain pragmatic factors related to the communication context only through the observation and analysis of the language input. Digital resources offer Italian tutors an opportunity to create more or less complicated tasks in which they can emphasise structures, collocations, or single words used to express given speech acts or other discursive functions. The action-oriented approach proves an effective method for tutors to design tasks whose main objective is to show pragmatic language features related to real-life communication.

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