

TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED TEACHING OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence has been defined as the ability to express and interpret the intended meaning with regard to the context in which the utterance mentioned has been referred to as one of the main components of communicative ability in a second language (L2). However, various studies have indicated that, this ability does not develop in L2 learners along with their linguistic competence. Therefore, it is necessary to think most of the effective ways and resources for the development of this aspect of communicative competence in L2 learners. Different studies have mentioned lack of enough exposure to the L2 in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and have called for the necessity of instruction of pragmatic aspects of language in these contexts. This study, admitting the need for the instruction of pragmatics, suggests using the available technology to enhance the learning of this ability in language learners. It suggests teachers to guide their learners to use some technological tools which are easy, quick, and available almost everywhere and at any time in order to enhance their development of pragmatics.

Keywords: Second Language Teaching, Technology in Language Teaching, Pragmatic Competence, Blogs, Discussion Forums, Podcasts

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use and interpret language appropriately in relation to the context in which it is used. Bialystok (1993) defines pragmatic competence as "a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in contexts, or most prominently the ability to use and interpret non-literal forms, such as metaphorical uses of language and indirect requests . . ." (p. 43).

Different models of communicative competence, starting with Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence, have stressed the significance of pragmatic competence as one of the components of communicative competence. However, there is evidence (Tajeddin & Pirhosseinloo, 2012) indicating that a high level of language proficiency does not necessarily mean a high, or at least acceptable, level of pragmatic competence in language learners. This problem has been partly connected with the characteristics of EFL contexts, including lack of sufficient exposure to the L2, Non-Native Speaking (NNS) teachers, and the quality of L2 teaching resources referred to by Rose (1997). Therefore, many scholars have emphasized the need for the

instruction of pragmatic aspects of language in EFL contexts. However, the same characteristics of the EFL contexts make pragmatic instruction a difficult task, many teachers do not tend to focus on. NNS teachers who do not have textbooks rich in pragmatic aspects of language are at a disadvantage as Rose (1997) states. Using technology in the teaching of pragmatics can compensate for the mentioned problems. Technology enabled learners guided by their teachers to have access to a lot of authentic materials in different formats and these authentic materials mostly involve the pragmatic aspects of language.

Significance of Pragmatic Competence

The emphasis on the pragmatic side of language started with Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence. Hymes argued that, for successful communication, learners need some knowledge of rules of language used in addition to the knowledge of language rules. Following Hymes' model, other models of communicative competence emerged (Bachman 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Canale and Swain 1980, Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell, 1995). All these theoretical models

stress that pragmatic competence is a distinct, indispensable component within L2 proficiency (Taguchi, 2009). Among these models, the one by Bachman (1990) is the most referred to model. For Bachman, communicative competence involves two components: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Thus, according to Bachman, pragmatic competence is as important as organizational (linguistic) competence in being able to use the language for successful and effective communication.

Necessity of Teaching Pragmatics

Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) divide pragmatics into pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic resources needed for conveying communicative acts and relational and interpersonal meanings (Kasper & Rose, 2001; Leech, 1983). Sociopragmatics refers to "the sociological interface of pragmatics" (Leech, 1983, p. 15), which means the social perceptions underlying interactants' interpretation and performance of communicative action (Kasper & Rose, 2001; Taguchi, 2009). According to Taguchi (2009), being pragmatically competent requires both types of knowledge. Learners need to have access to a range of linguistic forms in order to perform language functions; in addition to the knowledge of linguistic forms, they need the knowledge of sociocultural norms and rules governing the usage of these forms (Taguchi, 2009). Röver (2006), too emphasizes the need for some degree of competence in both subareas because, "sociopragmatic knowledge provides language users with the rules of what is socially acceptable and appropriate, and pragmalinguistic knowledge equips them with the tools for expressing themselves" (p. 231).

Despite emphasis on the need for both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic abilities, there are a lot of L2 learners who do not have an acceptable level of pragmatic competence; in other words, for many language learners, the pragmatic competence lags behind linguistic competence.

A rather limited number of studies have been carried out on the acquisition of pragmatic awareness by ESL/EFL learners (Schauer, 2006). Hinkel (1997) studied the pragmatic awareness of Chinese learners of English in giving advice.

The results showed significant differences between the ESL learners' and the native speakers' choice of appropriate advice. Also, Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) investigated the recognition and rating of grammatical and pragmatic errors of the ESL in the United States and EFL Hungarian learners. The findings revealed that the EFL learners recognized grammatical mistakes more than pragmatic errors and considered grammatical errors to be more important than pragmatic ones. In another line of research, Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) studied the pragmatic awareness of ESL learners in identifying pragmatic infelicities in a video and repairing them. The results indicated that although the learners had high awareness of pragmatic infelicities, the repairs provided by them differed from the target-like norms. Mohammad Bagheri (2011) investigated the status of pragmatic awareness and instruction among Iranian EFL teachers and students. The results of the study revealed that, although Iranian EFL learners had an acceptable level of pragmatic awareness, they thought that they did not have enough pragmatic knowledge.

The rather limited number of studies on the acquisition of pragmatic awareness (Schauer, 2006) indicate that EFL learners normally do not develop enough pragmatic awareness and that ESL learners are more advantageous in this regard. The failure to develop an acceptable level of pragmatic competence in EFL contexts may be related to the nature of such contexts as Rose (1997) believes. According to Rose (1997), in EFL contexts, learners do not have sufficient exposure to the L2, teachers are mostly NNS teachers, and L2 teaching resources do not focus on pragmatic aspects of language due to the nature of pragmatics. Liu (2007), in this regard, states that compared to the environment outside the classroom, language classrooms have been considered as poor environments for developing pragmatic ability in a target language because they generally offer low interaction with native speakers of the target language.

The Role of Technology in Teaching Pragmatics

If lack of enough exposure to the L2 is a major problem in the development of pragmatics, then technology might be of great help due to its facilitating characteristics. A few

of these characteristics are described here.

1. Technology provides its learners with a lot of authentic learning materials. The material may be in the form of a song, a story, someone's report on something, sequences of discussions in a discussion group, scientific materials from a book or a journal, or any of the vast number of sources available to learners. The authentic materials usually contain linguistic elements used to carry certain functions so they are helpful in enhancing pragmalinguistic ability of learners. Many technological tools, e.g. chat rooms, blogs, discussion forums, etc. require the users to know and observe the social rules of the language used which is in most cases English. Therefore, the learners can be benefited by improving their sociopragmatic ability.
2. Access to many technological tools is easy and quick for many of the language learners and teachers. Especially, if the technology required is the Internet, a large portion of language learners can access it easily by having an internet connection.
3. Technology offers various options to its users and thus it can create motivation in language learners. Because learners have options to choose what, when and how to use it, the tools and/ or activities selected would be mostly based on their likes and therefore motivating to them.
4. Implementation of technology can take various forms and users can use it at the time most convenient to them. Though initially they need guidance from teachers, they get more and more autonomous as they continue using technology for language learning. Therefore, the use of technology provides them with the opportunity to become autonomous language learners.

The attributes mentioned above show why technology must be implemented by EFL teachers whether in or out of the classroom. Aside from the important role of technology in pragmatic research as stressed by Abraham and Williams (2009a) and in language assessment as stressed and implemented by Abraham and Williams (2009b), technology can be implemented in pragmatic instruction. Abraham and Williams (2009b) refer to online authorship,

social networking, mobile learning, and digital game playing as technological tools that can facilitate teaching and learning L2 pragmatics.

The Web 2.0 is the most commonly used and discussed technology in education. Web 2.0 (the second generation of the World Wide Web) indicates a change from the linking of information to the linking of people (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007), from accessing information to participation (Negueruela-Azarola, 2009). In the following part, only a few applications of the Web 2.0 as examples of technological tools are briefly discussed.

Blogs

Blogs are a good example of the shift towards a more social Web (Negueruela-Azarola, 2009), towards participation of people in the creation and distribution of information. A blog is a type of online journal which is often published in reverse chronological order. Blogs allow groups and individuals to publish personal experiences, preferences, and views. Although most blogs are primarily written language, more recently, blogs have been increasingly using photos, audio files, and video clips to produce different types of blogs referred to as phlogs (photoblogs), audioblogs, and vlogs (videoblogs).

According to Negueruela-Azarola (2009), there are three basic interrelated pedagogical uses for blogs in language learning beyond the L2 classroom:

- 1) *a conceptual use* which enables the learners to construct meaning through reading, writing, interpreting and publishing blogs in the L2;
- 2) *a communicative use* which requires learners to interact with bloggers through commenting on others' blogs or creating a personal or group blog; and
- 3) *a community use* which helps learners to create a classroom learning community through constructing a classroom blog that links and tags students' preferences as they are engaged in documenting their own learning projects. Therefore, EFL teachers can help their learners start using blogs for conveying their knowledge and opinions and get feedback from others. The last two uses of blogs mentioned by Negueruela-Azarola (2009) require the learners to

notice the social conventions of the language as they attempt to communicate with others. Also, they become aware of the linguistic resources that are/should be used in any specific context. So, blogs, if purposefully used, can lead to pragmatic development in language learners.

Online Discussion Forums

Discussion forums, also referred to as discussion boards, threaded discussions, or message boards, provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time. Research has shown that discussion forums allow learners to focus on grammatical forms in addition to increasing their intercultural awareness (Basharina, 2009; Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Liaw, 2006; Sengupta, 2001). Other research has shown that discussion forums help the development of academic registers (Montero, Watts, & García-Carbonell, 2007; Van Deusen-Scholl, Frei, & Dixon, 2005).

Message board engagement can be a productive way for participants to learn language since it provides the opportunity for "learner-learner collaboration" which Kasper (2001) believes provides opportunities for L2 learning. Participating in discussion forums or newsgroups provides learners with opportunities to create joint knowledge in addition to learning from others' reports of their experiences. In order to do so effectively, it requires the learners to learn the rules of how to function in the given newsgroup. Therefore, the social cooperation of the members contributes to their pragmatic development.

Message board participants learn both linguistic and social appropriateness from one another. Whitworth (2009) analyzes the discourse of two English-language discussion forums and demonstrates how pragmatic functions (e.g., greeting, requesting information, and scolding) are expressed by a range of linguistic forms. Learners notice the relationship between these functions and forms as they try to have successful contribution and understanding of the discussion. Their pragmatic awareness is increased as they notice that they may misunderstand or be misunderstood because of their lack of familiarity with the social rules of the L2 or lack of linguistic knowledge to carry out particular functions. Because the communication is asynchronous

on message boards, learners have enough time to reflect upon the relationships between forms and functions in the L2 as well as the social rules of the language and thus learn both what they need and what others are using in order to prevent miscommunication to happen.

Also, learners can read and observe various pragmatic conventions used on message boards and through learning these conventions become more comfortable with their second language (Whitworth, 2009). This is very important since on some message boards, the miscommunications due to lack of pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic competence may prevent participants from participating the message board.

So, discussion forums can be an effective tool for both language teachers and language learners in their attempt to develop learners' pragmatic competence. According to Abraham and Williams (2009b), discussion forums are "discursively and interactionally versatile communication environments" (p.340) in which participants can incorporate all the rhetorical, pragmatic, syntactic, and grammatical devices that are used in both spoken and written discourse through synchronous or asynchronous communication.

Podcasts

Podcasts are audio files, usually in mp3 format, that can be downloaded from the internet. In the specific sense, podcasts need to be syndicated to be one in a series of episodes. However, the term podcast has been extended in some popular sense to include most downloadable sound files on the internet, without the need for the two characteristics mentioned. If used in the broader sense, many radio stations, news organizations, and even some periodicals can be considered as podcasts.

Podcasts represent another way in which the internet has made vast quantities of information available to its users. Podcasts are new linguistic resources which give learners access to a limitless amount of authentic materials from all around the world. They are a rich source of cultural and pragmatic information, and when students learn how to find podcasts of interest to them, they are likely to become more motivated and autonomous learners (McBride, 2009). Various articles (e.g. McCarty, 2005; Rossell-Aguilar,

2007; Sze, 2006) have discussed different types of podcasts and their possible pedagogical uses. Teachers can refer to such studies for insights to best ways of helping their learners start and maintain using podcasts for language learning, in general, and pragmatic development, in particular.

Remarks

As mentioned before, this study has referred to the use of only a few of the many online tools that EFL teachers can use with the purpose of helping learners develop pragmatic competence. There are a lot of other technological tools that teachers can select based on the particular context in which they are teaching. Among other tools are chat rooms, social networks such as Facebook, Digital games, Web-based assessment, Emails, and Wikis. These various tools can be used for a wide range of activities aimed at increasing learners' pragmatic ability. The online tools can be used for both creating pragmatic assessment activities by learners and participating in online communication. Both of these activities are highly effective in the development of learners' pragmatic ability since both lead to awareness raising in learners.

Conclusion

Pragmatic competence is an important part of communicative competence. In EFL contexts, usually pragmatic competence does not develop along learners' language proficiency. Technology can help language teachers guide their learners in becoming "autonomous, lifelong learners of both language and culture" (McBride, 2009, p. 165). Teachers can guide their learners to use certain online activities which enable them to become more independent and more assertive in the L2. However, technology is not a guarantee for better L2 classrooms. Decoo (2001, in McBride, 2009) warns that "... quite often 'the media makes the method'" (p.9), meaning that sometimes practitioners choose their teaching methods based on the technology they can use instead of first choosing what they want to do in the classroom and then looking for tools that best support those goals. The success in using the technology in the L2 classroom depends on how meaningful the activities are to that particular context. In other words, we should consider "effectiveness in terms of

the specifics of what people do with computers, how they do it, and what it means to them" (Kern, 2006, p. 187). If the activities are not managed appropriately, the use of technology may even impede L2 development. Therefore, teachers' familiarity with and skill in using technology is a must for them to be able to suggest their learners how to use the technology. They need to refer to recent research (e.g. Salaberry, 2001; Thorne, 2003; Warschauer, 1999) for getting insights on how to implement technology in the L2 classroom in meaningful ways.

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