

Issues in Teaching Pragmatic Aspects of Language

Hiroko Tsujioka / Toshihiko Ashikaga

Introduction

Pragmatics is defined as the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said or written (Yule, 1996). It is evident that the difficulty of learning second language sometimes lies in acquiring such pragmatic competence. That is mainly because unlike linguistic rules, pragmatic rules are usually hidden under surface structures and determining the degree of appropriateness in a specific context may differ across cultures and languages. As a result, a second language learner might fail to realize and achieve socially appropriate norms when they communicate in a second language. This pragmatic failure in intercultural communication poses more serious problems than linguistic failure because grammatical errors reveal the incompetence of the speaker's communication skills, while pragmatic errors might inadvertently convey the speaker's unintended messages.

In this paper, we will first talk about

issues in teaching pragmatic aspects of language by examining previous studies. Then we will discuss practical implications for a second language classroom.

Issues in teaching pragmatics

The issue of whether, or to what extent, pragmatic rules can or should be taught in the ESL classroom is a controversial one. For instance, Terrel (1977) argues that communicative aspects of language are absorbed unconsciously in the process of learning more obviously teachable features. Similarly, Rintell (1979) considers that learners can acquire pragmatic competence quickly in the culture where language is spoken. However, there is a growing body of evidence which indicates that non-native speakers, even at the advanced level of linguistic proficiency, have considerable difficulty acquiring the rules for communicating appropriately.

Williams (1988) argues that the large number of language functions and speech acts makes the teaching of specific acts an unattainable goal. Bardovi-Halig et al.

(1991) further claim that since there is equally a large number of language contexts and purposes, the teaching of these is equally prohibitive. They claim that the ideal of classroom teacher is not to instruct students in the intricacies of speech acts, but to make students more aware of the existence of pragmatic functions in language for their use.

Several researchers stress the importance of teacher's imparting the knowledge of pragmatic rules to their students. This should be done so that their students will be able to interpret values and patterns that might be unfamiliar to them.

Two empirical studies have been done on the efficacy of formal instruction of pragmatic rules. Billmyer (1990) investigated the effect of classroom instruction in complimenting and found that learners in the tutored group consistently produced a greater number of norm-appropriate compliments than learners in an untutored group. Olshtain and Cohen (1990), in their study of teaching apology, found similar results. They argue that the teaching of speech act behavior is a worth while project even if the aim is to only raise the learners' awareness of appropriate speech act behavior.

Furthermore, in the fields of cognitive psychology, Schmidt (1993) argues the efficacy of consciousness-raising in learning second language. He purports that explicit teacher-provided information about the

pragmatics of the second language can play a role in learning, provided that it is not based solely on fallible native speaker intuition. Therefore, we believe that language learners should be made aware of the pragmatic rules as much as possible.

Implications for a second language classroom

Before teaching pragmatic rules to students, teachers should collect information on how native speakers perform certain speech acts in various situations. These speech samples are available in empirically based textbooks and research literature. Once information is obtained, teachers can follow several steps described below to plan and implement lessons.

1. Diagnostic assessment

Teachers determine students' level of pragmatic competence (e.g., assign a discourse completion test).

2. Classroom exercises

a) Students listen to model dialogues and identify specific speech acts.

b) Students are given a set of speech acts (e.g., apology) and evaluate situation-specific strategies used in the dialogue (e.g., intensifying the apology).

3. Feedback and discussion

Students discuss their perceptions and awareness of cross-cultural differences in speech acts.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to assert that the analysis of the patterns of speech behavior and the use of these research findings could be of considerable use to both teachers and students. With greater awareness, students can interpret and respond appropriately in target language, there by reducing unnecessary miscommunication.

(つじおか ひろこ

本学全カリ運営センター英語非常勤講師
あしかが としひこ

本学全カリ運営センター英語非常勤講師)

Selected References

- Billmyer, K. (1990). "really like your hairstyle": ESL learners learning how to compliment. *Penn Working Papers in Educational Linguistics*, 6 (2), 31-48.
- Cohen, A. D. (1996). Speech acts. In S. L. McKay & N. H. Hornberger (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, (pp. 383-420). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olshain, E. & Cohen, A. D. (1990). The learning of complex speech act behavior. *TESL Canada Journal*, 7 (2), 45-65.
- Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. New York: Newbury House.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.