Deep Impact of Pragmatics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Ahmed Hassani Y. Al-Abbasi
University of Tikrit
College of Arts
Department of Translation

Istabraq Tariq J. Al-Azzawi
University of Tikrit
College of Education
Department of English

Abstract

There are many reasons why we want to teach pragmatics in our classes. Pragmatics provides students with opportunities to listen to language in context rather than in bits and pieces. Teaching of some concepts in pragmatics introduces new vocabularies within a rich network of associations. Equally important, pragmatics equals linguistics can have a deep impact on persons' constructions of knowledge.

Pragmatics helps us to make sense of our world. Even in academic research, it has lately been given a higher status. Pragmatics also has the power to reach deep within us into areas that regular teaching may not visit, thereby validating the language classroom for reasons that go beyond first language learning. Our students tell and show us that they have changed beliefs, attitudes and behaviours after hearing our illustrations and interpretations. This deep impact makes language learning an enriching experience that students find intrinsically valuable.

Introduction

This paper intends to discuss the influence of pragmatics on foreign language teaching. It mainly deals with the relationship between pragmatics and teaching. Pragmatics in language teaching examines the acquisition of pragmatics - language use in social contexts - in second and foreign language classrooms. Pragmatics in
language teaching offers a comprehensive and essential introduction to a rapidly growing area, and should be of interest to researchers, graduate students, and language teachers.

Pragmatics directs what to teach and selects which syllabus. It also directs teaching while teaching experiences are the practical material for pragmatics research. However, this paper gives a deep discussion about pragmatic context and cultural pragmatics which is an important factor in the study of pragmatics and foreign language teaching.

However, foreign language instructors cannot always attribute learners' poor performance with respect to certain pragmatic competence to deficiency of pragmatic knowledge. Instead, this kind of poor performance may be attributable to a lack of its corresponding linguistic knowledge (Kasper, 1997) (cited in http://www.aatk.org/html/KLA10/AByon.pdf).

What is Pragmatics?

Pragmatics is defined in various ways, reflecting authors' theoretical orientation and audience. Stalnaker (1972: 383) clarifies that pragmatics is "the study of linguistic acts at the context in which they are performed". Leech (cited in Thomas,1983, 92) separates pragmatics from semantics by describing the former as "intended meaning" and the other as "sentence meaning". For some linguists, this may seem a simplistic delineation without further development, as sentence meaning, at times, could be the intended meaning. Hatch (1992, 260) seems to narrow pragmatic meaning to "that which comes from context rather than from syntax and semantics".

Moreover, Freeman (cited in Brown, 1994 :348) points out that grammar is one of three dimensions of language that are interconnected. Grammar gives us the form or the structure of language it selves, but those forms are literally meaningless without
a second dimension, that of meaning/ semantics, and a third dimension, pragmatics. In other words, grammar tells us how to construct a sentence (word order, verb and noun system, modifier, phrases, clauses, etc.). Semantics tells us something about the meaning of the words and strings of words or, I should say, meanings, because there may be several. Then pragmatics tells us about which of several meanings to assign the given context of a sentence. Context takes into account things like:
- Who the speaker/writer is,
- Who the audience is,
- Where the communication takes place before and after a sentence in question,
- Implied vs. literal meaning,
- Styles and registers.

In addition, Poole (2000, 11) states, "the disparity between what we intend to communicate and what we actually say is central to pragmatics". Hornby (2001: 990) defines pragmatics as "the study of the way in which language is used to express what somebody really means in particular situations, especially when the actual words may appear to mean something different". Besides, the study of pragmatics explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate.

Besides, the definition that appeals to the researchers, because of its significance for foreign language pedagogy, has been presented by Crystal (2001 :364) who pinpoints that pragmatics is "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constrains they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication".

Pragmatic rules for language use are often subconscious, and even native speakers are often unaware of pragmatic rules until they
Pragmatic Information Processing

The basic idea of pragmatics is that when we are speaking in certain contexts we also accomplish certain social acts. Our intention of such actions, as well as the interpretations of actions of other speech participants, is based however on sets of knowledge and belief. A characteristic of communicative contexts is that these sets are different for the speaker and hearer, although largely overlapping, and that the knowledge set of the hearer changes during the communication, ideally according to the purpose of the speaker. Trivially, when we make a promise or give advice, we want the hearer to know that we make a promise or give advice. This knowledge is the result of a correct interpretation of the intended illocutionary act. At the same time we want the hearer to know what we are asserting, promising or advising, viz what is the case, what we wish to be the case, what is to be done or what we will do, in some possible world (mostly the actual one). By uttering the sentence John is ill I may express the propositional concept 'that John is ill', and in so doing accomplish a referential act if I denote the fact that John is (now) ill. These, as we saw, fairly complex arts have a social point as soon as I have the intention to demonstrate that I have this particular knowledge about this particular fact. But as long as my observer-hearer also has this knowledge, there is little more than such a demonstration, and nothing changes beyond the fact that my hearer understand that I have some knowledge (Van Dijk, 1977: 218-9).
Pragmatics and Culture

In order to visualize the place of pragmatics in the teaching of language and culture one must start by defining and locating culture. To do this it is helpful to refer to the pioneering work by Geert Hofstede who looked at the way local culture was expressed in corporate culture. Hofstede (1991) (cited in www.geocities.com/etymonline/) differentiates between culture in the narrow sense of education, art, or literature, and culture as viewed in social or cultural anthropology. In the latter, broader view, culture is seen as patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. He visualized the position of culture in the following diagram:

A central problem to the study of pragmatics (and culture) is the distinction between what is desirable and what is desired. "Desirable" refers to how people think the world ought to be. In this case the norm of behavior is absolute--right/wrong, agree/disagree. On the other hand, desired is what people want for themselves. In this case the norm is statistically--based on actual behavior. The gap between desirable and desired behavior is parallel to some extent with the competence and performance distinction in that the performance of language users (even native speakers) does not
Deep Impact of Pragmatics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language  
Ahmed Hassani Y. Al-Abbasi / Istabraq Tariq J. Al-Azzawi

Exactly match their competence. What we know (our knowledge) and what we do (our behavior or performance) is not always the same. Pragmatics-as-use research strives to clarify which of the observed (primarily linguistic) behaviors exemplify collective values and which of the observed behaviors are individual expressions. Pragmatics-as-effect research examines the changes and adaptations that people make as they develop language from childhood to maturity as well as those which learners make as they use a new language. The direct benefit to language learners of both types of research is reliable information about language use in defined contexts and the effects of such use (Ibid.).

When learners encounter new foreign language norms that conflict with their already existing first-culture based values, they are likely to feel resistant to the foreign language norms. Thus, it may be beneficial to provide learners an explicit explanation as to why foreign language speakers conventionally use the language as they do, why certain meaning is conveyed differently in the foreign language, and how underlying foreign language ideologies, shared cultural values, beliefs, morals, and assumptions, i.e., subjective culture, influence the pragmatic behavior of natives. Although objective culture (e.g., cultural artifacts) has conventionally been incorporated into culture learning in the foreign language education, subjective culture is central to pragmatics, informing pragmatic use of language (Meier, 2003; Richards & Schmidt, 1983, cited in http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeecacts/ForResearchers.htm).

Although current foreign language teaching tends to simply present target forms, expecting learners across the board to adopt them, learner interviews in a study by Ishihara (2003), (cited in: http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeecacts/ForResearchers.htm) revealed that learners were unwilling to accommodate to certain pragmatic norms until they began to understand why native speakers use them, that is, the cultural reasoning behind the foreign
language use. Learners revealed that they came to understand the cultural assumptions behind the pragmatic foreign language use gradually as they were exposed to the foreign language culture or obtained native-speaking informants who would explain why they spoke the way that seemed democratic, unfair, or even discriminatory to the learners. Knowledge of subjective foreign language culture is likely to benefit learners in understanding foreign language pragmatic use, particularly when learners’ first language use, beliefs and values are incompatible with those in the foreign language.

However, as Mangubhai (1997, 24) states, "Nonetheless, it is possible to discern certain patterns of behaviour, or primary tendencies within a cultural or sub-cultural group that permit one to address learners as a group." He evidently draws attention to variation within culture.

Instruction should allow students to choose how much of the pragmatic norms of the culture they would like to include in their own repertoire. They will also enjoy greater insights into the target culture (http://exchange.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm).

Goals of Teaching Pragmatics

One may ask what are the goals of teaching pragmatics? What are the ultimate benefits to learners? The chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interactions in the target language. The goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. With such instruction, learners can maintain their own cultural identities, participate more fully in
target language communication, and gain control of the force and outcome of their contributions (http://exchange.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm).

The ultimate goal of teaching pragmatics is to install in learners skills with which they can improve their pragmatic ability autonomously, a pragmatic curriculum should assist learners in developing metapragmatic awareness and strategies. For learners, in order to be constantly, making and renewing hypotheses about foreign language pragmatic use, they need to learn to monitor and evaluate their own foreign language pragmatic comprehension and production (http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeecacts/ForResearchers.htm).

**The Significance of Teaching Pragmatics**

Teaching pragmatics can enhance pragmatic awareness which will lead to certain benefits, and help to avoid pragmatic mistakes, thus reducing the number of embarrassing situations; make students feel more certain; help them better understand the connotative messages in each situation, and make correct presuppositions (Ibid).

Richards and Schmidt (1983, cited in http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeecacts/ForResearchers.htm) contends that in order to teach learners to truly understand what foreign language speakers mean, it is necessary to integrate an explanatory perspective in the teaching of foreign language pragmatics.

**Pragmatics and Language Teaching**

Teaching Pragmatics explores the teaching of pragmatics through lessons and activities created by teachers of English as a foreign language.
In order to be successful in communication, it is essential for foreign language learners to know not just grammar and text organization but also pragmatic aspects of the target language (http://www.jrc.sophia.ac.jp/kiyou/kondo.pdf).

In teaching pragmatics the materials must reflect authentic [foreign language use and]…. the materials must be carefully selected, modified, or created for second language instruction (Judd, 1999, cited in http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeechacts/ForResearchers.htm). If the pragmatic features are present, then the validity of the research and the materials is enhanced. In the light of the spoken data, Ishihara (2003) (cited in http://www.lies.umn.edu/introtospeechacts/ForResearchers.htm) determines whether the research findings about certain… [foreign] language pragmatic features are credible and worthwhile teaching. Prior to data collection (recording of … [foreign] language samples), Ishihara had considered what varieties (e.g., gender, age, and regional varieties) of foreign language pragmatic norms should be presented as models and recruit model speakers accordingly. We focused mostly on the language use among college students as a standard variety. Learners might need some paralinguistic scaffolding, such as a vocabulary explanation or other related pragmatic information. Teachers might give learners individual feedback about their foreign language pragmatic use and discuss more extended conversational routines (Ibid).

As a concrete ideas, some situations are employing in pragmatics in foreign language teaching. These are as follows:

**Situation (1):**

In teaching comprehension, the teacher is going to teach a lot of vocabularies. Through the teaching process of some
Deep Impact of Pragmatics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language
Ahmed Hassani Y. Al-Abbasi / Istabraq Tariq J. Al-Azzawi

vocabularies, he/she will face the pragmatic difficulty which definitely affects the understanding of the students. For instance:
1- This book is /red/. (spoken)
2- He has a hard will. (written)

The above two examples include the pragmatic impact, because in the first one, if the teacher said (orally) 'This book is /red/ ', the students may have a misunderstanding due to the multi-meanings of the word /red/. So that, the first meaning is: Someone reads this book. And the second meaning is: The colour of this book is red.

Thus, to have a full understanding for this example, it should be put in a certain situation to clarify the meaning of /red/ whether it is 'red' or 'read'.

Moreover, concerning grammar, the students will face a kind of confusion related to pragmatics. However, they have to specify whether this example is passive or active voice. So, if it is an active, the word /red/ means the red colour (as an adjective). And if it is passive, the word /red/ means the past participle of read (as a verb).

Meanwhile the second example is 'He has a hard will'. The teaching of 'hard' and 'will', causes a confusion for the students, because it has more than one meaning, that is:
- He has an order to be roughly recommended.
- He has a strong desire.

Situation (2):

During the correction of the homework, the teacher tells his student that he has no pen. That is to say, the teacher wants a pen to correct the homework. Through this situation, the pragmatic knowledge has been understood by the student. He understands the teacher's speech as: 'Give me a pen to correct your homework'.

As a result, the teacher should make a suitable situation to illustrate the closest meaning of the used vocabularies or structures.
And he/she should explain the use of these vocabularies or structures in it's intended meaning within a certain context and accurate position throughout a spoken or written situation.

**Pragmatic Difficulties Encountered by foreign Language Learners**

Some of the pragmatic [functional and sociolinguistic] aspects of language are very subtle and therefore very difficult. Make sure your lessons aim to teach such subtlety (Brown, 1994: 30).

Language classrooms are especially well suited to provide input and interpretation. Instruction addresses the input problem by making language available to learners for observation – the first problem (http://exchange.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm).

Consequently, in the classroom setting, a teacher may wish to identify the most common misunderstanding on the part of learners and emphasize more accurate interpretation of foreign language pragmatic norms.

The second problem of input that instruction addresses is salience. Some necessary features of language and language use are quite subtle and not immediately noticeable by learners, such as the turns that occur before speakers actually say 'goodbye' and the noises they make when encouraging other speakers to continue their turns (Ibid).

Furthermore, many pragmatic difficulties face foreign language learners, these are:

1- The pragmatic knowledge should be got independently.
2- Consequences of pragmatic differences are usually interpreted on a social or personal level rather than as a result of the language learning.
Deep Impact of Pragmatics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language
Ahmed Hassani Y. Al-Abbasi / Istabraq Tariq J. Al-Azzawi

3- The making of pragmatic mistakes may lead to various unpleasant consequences.
4- Such mistakes may hamper good communication between speakers.
5- They may even make the speaker appear rude or indifferent in social interactions.
6- One of the goals in foreign language teaching is to adopt pragmatic context.
7- There is an urgent need for pragmatic knowledge.
8- Pragmatic knowledge will help learners to understand why native speakers use certain structures in different speech situations (http://www.balti.iatp.md/new-trends/evarzari2.ppt).

**How Can Pragmatics Be Taught?**

The teaching of pragmatics aims at facilitating the learners' ability to find socially appropriate language for the situations they encounter. The explicit instruction of pragmatic concepts may have a beneficial result on learners, even if the course is very short, or if teachers at least reserve several minutes for such activities but on a regular basis. A lot of textbooks lack pragmatic information, that is why the importance of a reading class is becoming more significant and the obtained experience is indisputable.

It is emphasized that there is not a single best way to teach pragmatics. Because pragmatics directs how to teach (whether the student-centered or teacher-centered, use what techniques and so on). But, since pragmatics is an area of language instruction in which teachers and students can learn together (http://exchange.state.gov/education/engteaching/pragmatics.htm), teachers should use well elected ways in teaching pragmatics and avoid depending on their intuition. "It is important to take into account the fact that, just as teachers cannot rely on their intuition in
teaching pragmatics, neither can learners do so in their second/foreign language prior to instruction" (Ibid).

Most of teachers try to raise students' pragmatic awareness during conversational classes, but it is common knowledge that the reading class is also a perfect place for it. Any reading passage/text could be discussed pragmatically (http://www.balti.iatp.md/new-trends/evarzari2.ppt).

All languages have pragmatic systems, and with a little encouragement all learners will recognize that their first languages also have 'secret rules'.

The process of teaching pragmatics may be useful for the first language learners as well as the foreign language learners. Demonstrations may include the use of space, such as where people stand in a line, or nonverbal gestures that accompany certain types of talk, such as shaking hands during greetings or introductions (http://exchange.state.gov/education/engteaching/ pragmatics.htm).

**Conclusions**

We as teachers don't live in an English speaking environment. So, we have to use every lesson (grammar, conversation, listening or reading) in order to enhance students' pragmatic awareness. Before the reading class, teachers should thoroughly select the reading text, which is a rather difficult task due to the limited range of books available in our libraries.

Definitely, teaching pragmatics will lead to certain benefits which help in avoiding pragmatic mistakes, thus reducing the number of embarrassing situations.

Finally, the classroom is the ideal place in which learners are helped to interpret language use. Instruction can help learners understand when and why certain linguistic practices take place. It can help learners to better comprehend what they hear (What does this formula mean?) and to better interpret it (How is this used?
Deep Impact of Pragmatics in Teaching English as a Foreign Language
Ahmed Hassani Y. Al-Abasi / Istabraq Tariq J. Al-Azzawi

What does a speaker who says this hope to accomplish?). The classroom in which discussion of pragmatics takes place is also a good area to explore prior impressions of speakers.

References
- www.geocities.com/etymonline/