The Relevance of Pragmalinguistic Failure to Language Teaching

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence refers to the capacity to use a language effectively in order to fulfill a certain goal and to understand language in context. When people are unable to understand what is meant by what is said, the result is communication will breakdown, and so called pragmatic failure. Some factors cause pragmatic failure; firstly, failure to express or interpret speaker-meaning in which communication breaks down if either level of meanings (sense and reference) or (force or value) is not successfully produced or interpreted. Secondly, failure to observe cultural values in which social conditions on language in use are different and utterer or the interpreter fails to observe the cultural values. Thirdly, culture-specific pragmatic features; mental sets: a frame of mind involving an existing disposition to think of a problem or a situation in a particular way. The implications of pragmalinguistic failure to teaching second and foreign language teaching are that first, learners need to understand why such conventions are accepted. Second, language learners need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language. Third, teacher is expanding students' knowledge and understanding of L2 pragmatic features regarding positive/negative pragmatic transfer from their first language (L1). Next, adult learners rely heavily on universal or L1 based pragmatic knowledge. Finally, teachers must be sufficiently socialized to L2 pragmatic practices, so that they can comfortably draw on those practices as part of their communicative and cultural repertoire.

Key words: pragmatic failure, communication, sense and reference, force, value.

1. Introduction

It is commonly known that the main purpose of learning a second language is communication. Nevertheless, many students are surprised when they realize that, in spite of having a perfect dominion of the L2 grammar rules, they have difficulties at interpersonal level when establishing a conversation with native speakers.

As well-known, a competent language learner should speak fluently, correctly and appropriately as well. He is supposed to master good grammar and to have the ability to produce and understand utterances which are appropriate to the context in which they are made. As Morain (1986, p. 64) puts it, being able to read and speak another language does not mean that understanding will occur. Any communication breakdown resulting from verbal and non-verbal factors is bound to destroy the pragmatic principles or diverge from the conventions of the target culture. This has been investigated by many linguists and scholars, among whom Thomas proposes the notion of "pragmatic failure" which often stands in the way of effective communication.

This is due to the fact that even fairly advanced language learners often lack communicative competence (Hymes, 1964), that is to say, the necessary knowledge and experience to correctly use the sociocultural norms of the L2. Numerous comparative discourse studies (Blum-Kulka, 1982) hve shown that these norms vary from one culture to another. Therefore, a student requires more than just linguistic knowledge to communicate effectively in the L2 (Rose and Kasper, 2001, cited in Lucia Fernandes Alaya, 2005))

In order to progressively develop their communicative competence, students must be able to carry out some communicative tasks. These form a set of actions that have a concrete communicative purpose within a specific scope. For their accomplishment, different linguistic and conversational skills are used in context. Pragmatic competence refers to the capacity to use a language effectively in order to fulfill a certain goal and to understand language in context.

Therefore, pragmatics constitutes a basis part of language ability for L2 learners. However, L2 teachers often see pragmatics, because of difficulty of in teaching it, and instead focus on the grammatical aspects of language. The result is the students are lack of pragmatic competence on the part of L2. Consequently, students can lead to pragmatic failure and, more importantly, to a complete communication breakdown. As Blum-Kulka and Olhstain (1986: 169) point out "… pragmatic failure might carry serious social implications".

In this paper, several examples are used to illustrate how pragmatic failures affect the interpretation of messages and sometimes block communication completely, thus defeating the principal purpose of L2 acquisition. Then it will be discussed *the understanding of pragmatic, pragmatic failure, factor causing the pragmatic failure. The relavance of pragmatic failure to language teaching.*

2.   Understanding Pragmatic

There are many definitions of pragmatics around. One I find particularly useful has been proposed by David Crystal. According to him, "Pragmatics is 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 other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal 1985, p. 240). In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Communicative action includes not only speech acts - such as requesting, greeting, and so on - but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and sustaining interaction in complex speech events. Following Leech (1983), I will focus on pragmatics as interpersonal rhetoric - the way speakers and writers accomplish goals as social actors who do not just need to get things done but attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time.

Pragmatic ability in a second or foreign language is part of a nonnative speakers (NNS) communicative competence and therefore has to be located in a model of communicative ability (Savignon, (1991, for overview). In Bachman's model (1990, p. 87ff), 'language competence' is subdivided into two components, 'organizational competence' and 'pragmatic competence'. Organizational competence comprises knowledge of linguistic units and the rules of joining them together at the levels of sentence ('grammatical competence') and discourse ('textual competence'). Pragmatic competence subdivides into 'illocutionary competence' and 'sociolinguistic competence'. 'Illocutionary competence' can be glossed as 'knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out'. The term 'communicative action' is often more accurate than the more familiar term 'speech act' because communicative action is neutral between the spoken and written mode, and the term acknowledges the fact that communicative action can also be implemented by silence or non-verbally. 'Sociolinguistic competence' comprises the ability to use language appropriately according to context. It thus includes the ability to select communicative acts and appropriate strategies to implement them depending on the current status of the 'conversational contract' (Fraser, 1990).

2.1 Pragmatic failure: theoretical considerations

Thomas (1983: 91) defines pragmatic failure as "...the inability to understand ´what is meant by what is said´". The author prefers the term 'pragmatic failure' to 'pragmatic error' because she thinks that a grammar error can be explained by means of prescriptive rules, while the nature of the pragmatic ambivalence is so, that we cannot say that the pragmatic force of a sentence is incorrect, but that has not been able to reach the speaker's communicative intention.

Here is an example of pragmalinguistic failure:

> A: You've lost a lot of weight. What have you been doing?
>
> B: Thank you. I've started jogging regularly and it seems to work.
>
> A: You shouldn't overdo it. You are looking quite thin. (Homes & Brown, 1987, p. 526)

Although B construed the comment as a compliment, it becomes apparent that A meant it as a declaration of concern. The basis for the misinterpretation in this context lies in a perceptual differentiation of appropriate topics for compliments. Hence, in some cultures rapid weight loss may be a cause for concern, whereas in others it may be cause for celebration.

Example 2:

Two women discussing their children:

A: How is Tom going at school? B: Ah, well ... you know what they say: boys will be boys. A: Yeah, but girls are no easier ... you know what Jess did the other day? ...

Speaker B does not explicitly state how Tom is progressing at school. Still, her remark "boys will be boys", which is a tautology and literally quite meaningless, provides sufficient information to her interlocutor for the conversation to continue smoothly. In this case, Speaker B conveyed more than the literal meaning of her words would suggest. At other times the implicature of what is said may be quite different from the meaning of the words used, as in the following example:

Example 3: On being disturbed by the next-door neighbour's lawnmower early on Sunday morning:

A: Great way to wake up! B: (grumpily) Sure is.

The above exchange is an example of what Grice has termed conversational implicature, while the use of the word 'but' in the following example provided by Thomas (1995, p. 57) is one of conventional implicature:

Example 4: "My friends were poor, but honest."

Regardless of the context in which it occurs, the word 'but' carries the implicature that what follows will run counter to expectations. The 'expectation' in example 4 being, that "poor people are dishonest".

The three first examples are taken from the plays Look Back in Anger (LBA) and Time and the Conways (T&C) written by J. Osborne and J. B. Priestley, respectively, and their corresponding translations into Spanish.

MRS C: Really, Madge, you are absurd. (T&C, 56)

SRA. CONWAY: Realmente, Marta, eres absurda. (60)

In this example Mrs. Conway is criticizing her daughter Madge. This FTA threatens the daughter's positive image, since the speaker is indicating that she has not liked an act that the listener has carried out, putting into risk her desire to be appreciated and approved by others. In order to reduce this threat, the speaker uses a negative politeness strategy: the hedge 'really', which is maintained in the translation.

Jenny Thomas (1983, pp. 91-94) defines pragmatic failure in Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said". She notes that cross-cultural pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion "on which H (the hearer) perceives the force of S's (the speaker's) utterance as other than S intended she or he should perceive it", and offers the following examples to illustrate the point:

(1) H perceives the force of S's utterance as stronger as or weaker than S intended she/he should perceive it;

(2) H perceives as an order an utterance which S intended she/he should perceive as a request;

(3) H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;

(4) S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance but is relying on the system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not share.

Example (4) illustrating "a":

    A: Do you know who set the fire last night?

    B: No, it's not me.

    A: Oh, I don't mean that.

Actually, A only wanted to know who had set the fire. But B perceived the force of A's utterance as stronger than A had intended, so B responded very severely.

Example (5) illustrating "b":

    Boss: Are you free this evening? Will you come to my house to have a chat?

    Mike: I will come, anyway.

In fact, Mike was not free, but he perceived the utterance of his boss as an order.

Example (6) illustrating "c":

    A: There's a football match tonight. Would you please go with me?

    B: OK.

    A: (later) Are you sure you want to go?

    B: OK, let's not go. I've something to read.

In the conversation, B perceived A's utterance as being ambivalent, so he changed his decision.

Example (7) illustrating "d":

    A: Do you like rugby?

    B: I am a New Zealander, you know.

    A: (confused)

A was confused because A and B did not share the same system of knowledge or beliefs. A had no idea that the New Zealanders love rugby.

Obviously, language users must share certain rules and conventions which enable them to understand one another in the many instances where the meaning and the intent, i.e. the *illocutionary force* (Yule, 1996, p. 48), of utterances are not explicitly stated. In his text "Logic and conversation" Grice (1975, cited in Thomas 1995, pp. 61-63) suggests four conversational maxims and the Cooperative Principle (CP) to explain the mechanisms through which people interpret implicature. *Grice's Cooperative Principle* states:

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Grice's formulated the conversational maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner as follows:

Quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. **Relation**: Be relevant. Manner: Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

Regardless of the teaching context, our primary responsibility is to improve second language communicative competence. This not only involves focusing on form but also addressing pragmatic concerns. Put another way, even if students can produce grammatically correct sentences, it does not guarantee that they can order food appropriately at a restaurant. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997) looked at pragmatic competence in academic counseling sessions and found that pragmatic errors were more severe than grammatical errors. For example, the non-native group tended to use less mitigation in their suggestions and rejections, which resulted in their being perceived as too direct or even rude.

When addressing pragmalinguistic failure, one should take into consideration the cultural gap between the L1 and L2. For instance, different strategies would need to be employed in teaching complimenting behavior to Indonesians. As Wolfson (1981) reported, compliments are only used by Indonesians who have been exposed to Western customs. Another example related to complimenting behavior is from Nelson, Bakary, and Batal (1989). They found that Egyptians tend to compliment each other on natural attributes although this is an infrequent topic for complimenting in North America. An Egyptian may give a compliment such as: "Your skin is beautiful." However, within a North American context, this may be misconstrued as sexual harassment. As in the first example, the basis for misinterpretation in this context lies in the perceptual differentiation of appropriate topics for compliments. Hence, in some cultures it may be appropriate to compliment someone on their natural attributes, but in others it could lead to a lawsuit.

In the same way, Blum-Kulka y Olshtain (1986: 166) believe that pragmatic failure takes place "... whenever two speakers fail to understand each other's intentions". Thus, the listener can easily identify a grammar error, but we cannot say the same of pragmatic failure. If a non-native speaker is fluent, inappropriate speech may cause him or her to appear unintentionally rude, uncultured or awkward. For this reason, pragmatic failure is an important source of intercultural communication breakdown. Despite its significance, teachers and L2 text books writers have ignored pragmatic competence.

Thomas thinks that leaving pragmatics aside in L2 teaching is mainly due to two reasons:

    a.   pragmatic description has still not obtained the precision level of grammar, describing linguistic competence;

    b.   pragmatics - language in use - is a delicate area and it is not still very clear how it

       can be taught.

In spite of this, Thomas defends teaching pragmatics. She affirms that, although some grammars are beginning to make reference to pragmatics, the concept has not been clearly defined yet. Pragmatic failure is not noticed in the superficial structure of statements, but it becomes evident when analysing with the listener what force was s/he trying to express. These are the type of discussions that should be carried out in L2 teaching, but to do that,

Thomas considers that the students should be provided with the necessary tools first: teachers must develop a metapragmatic capacity in their students - the capacity to analyse the language in a conscious way. For this, it is essential to make a distinction between two types of pragmatic failure: *pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic*.

Pragmalinguistic failure takes place when the pragmatic force of a linguistic structure is different from that normally assigned to it by a native speaker. An important source of this type of error is pragmalinguistic transfer, where speech-act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2. For example, using "Can you pass the salt?" in Russian to make a request, since this would be interpreted as a question to know if the listener has the physical ability to pass the salt.

Sociopragmatic failure, on the other hand, stems from the different intercultural

perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. As Thomas states this

type of pragmatic failure is more difficult to correct and overcome by the students since

this involves making changes in their own beliefs and value system.

Some examples of sociopragmatic failure derive from:

    a.   The size of imposition: for example, what a person considers a free good (i.e. asking 'what time is it?') varies depending on the relations and the situation

    b.   To make reference in the L2 to something taboo in that culture, although this topic can be openly discussed in the L1.

c. Power and social distance assessments that vary interculturally, for example, teachers in some cultures have more power over students than in others.

As can be seen, pragmatic failures not only affect language production but also understanding. A non-native speaker can interpret foreign language conversations following his or her own cultural norms and will wrongly think that native speakers are being rude in situations where they are acting appropriately according to their linguistic community norms. The problem is knowing what kind of sociocultural norms are going to be followed in this type of interactions, in which people from different countries speak in English: I thought that the one of the language being spoken. But as can be seen by the example, although the Algerian man spoke in English, he evaluated the behaviour of the other interactants according to his own cultural and communicative norms.

The fact is that, just because we are speaking another language, we should not become a different person. As Pohl (2004: 6) claims "Striving for intercultural competence does not mean assimilation into the target culture". L2 students must be urged to observe and learn the cultural norms of the language that is being studied, but without changing their personalities. Nevertheless, we must let them know that this type of situations can happen. If they understand them, communication will not break.

2.2 Factors Cause of pragmatic failure

2.2.1　Failure to express or interpret speaker-meaning

As discussed above, when one makes an utterance, he or she is expressing two kinds of meanings: level 1 speaker-meaning (sense and reference) and level 2 speaker-meaning (force or value). When an utterance is made, the interpreter is expected to interpret the "force" of the utterance. Communication will break down if either level of meanings is not successfully produced or interpreted. On the one hand, the speaker may fail to convey his communicative intent if the words or expressions he uses do not convey the senses and references intended, and the sentence he utters does not conveniently express the illocutionary force he suggests. On the other hand, the addressee may misinterpret the sense and reference. For example:

(1) (The American teacher A wants to know if the Chinese student B really likes to drink black tea or green tea.)

A: What do you like to drink, black tea or green tea?

B: No problem. As you like.

(2) (One Chinese couple is having dinner at the table; the husband is complaining that the soup is bland.)

H: Have you put salt in?

W: Yes, I have.

(3) (One teacher asks one of her students to tell her the time so that she can decide whether to have a break or not.)

T: Do you have a watch?

S: Yes, I have.

In example (1), the American teacher expected the Chinese students to make a choice, while the students did not get the illocutionary force of the teacher, thus answered the question improperly. In example (2) and (3), the addressee interprets that speakers' utterance as a genuine question, rather than, a complaint of the blandness of the soup, and a request to tell her what the time is.

From the examples above, we can see that the communicative breakdown may occur at both levels of speaker-meaning. Strictly speaking, both the reference and the force of an utterance are studied in pragmatics. More often, the focus is on the second level, that is, whether the illocutionary force is successfully conveyed. Of course, failures on both levels are closely related. Sometimes, a speaker's

inability to provide clear and sufficient proposition may prevent the intended illocutionary force from being successfully conveyed.

3. Failure to observe cultural values

Here, for practical purpose, we tend to define culture as a shared set of beliefs, values and patterns of behavior common to a group of people. We know that since every country has its own culture, cultural differences are inevitable. Each culture has its own perceptions regarding what kind of linguistic behavior is appropriate. Pragmatic failure occurs when social conditions (cultural norms, values, religious beliefs, etc.) on language in use are different and utterer or the interpreter fails to observe the cultural values. In other words, it stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior

4. Culture-Specific Pragmatic Features

Many culture-specific pragmatic features are implicit, but they are nonetheless central in communicative encounters. The following are just some examples: mental sets: a frame of mind involving an existing disposition to think of a problem or a situation in a particular way (Sternberg, 1995, cited in Zegarac & Pennington 2000, p. 166); e.g. what is the meaning of an offer of coffee after a meal; is it an invitation by the host to stay a little longer or a polite hint to guests that it is time to leave?

schemata: a pre-existing knowledge structure in memory involving a certain pattern of things (Yule, 1996, p. 88); e.g. what constitutes an apartment, a holiday, a school, a restaurant etc.

scripts: a pre-existing knowledge structure for interpreting event sequences (Yule, 1996, p. 87); e.g. a visit to the doctor, shopping at a supermarket, phoning to make an appointment at a hairdressing salon, etc.

speech events: a set of circumstances in which people interact in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome (Yule, 1996, p. 57); eg. how does one make a request, a compliment, express disagreement or a complaint etc.?

sociocultural norms determine culturally appropriate paralinguistics, phatic utterances, opening/closings, turn-taking, the use of silence etc. (Barraja-Rohan, 2000, p. 65)

linguistic etiquette (Kasper, 1997, p. 381): determined by factors such as relative social distance between interlocutors, social power or authority, the degree of imposition associated with a given request or another face-threatening act, etc.

pragmatic accent (Yule, 1996, p. 88): aspects of a person's talk which indicate what s/he assumes is communicated without being said.

2.3 Teaching pragmatics

Thomas (1983) points out that, making students understand the difference between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures, the teacher allows them to make pragmatic decisions to break the rules if they wish. Davies supports this idea when indicating: "Rather than being taught to be polite, learners should be given the possibility of choosing to be either polite or impolite". (Davies, 1986: 121 cited in Lucía Fernández Amaya, 2008)

Thomas (1983 cited in Lucía Fernández Amaya, 2008) 'speaking English well' does not necessarily mean to follow the cultural rules. This author considers that the task of the teachers is to make sure that their students know what they are saying. In addition, the teacher has to take into account that pragmalinguistic failures can be corrected, while sociolinguistic failures are indicated and discussed, since these last ones show the learner's value systems and vision of the world.

But, what must the students learn to be competent from a pragmatic point of view? According to Jung (2002, cited in Lucía Fernández Amaya, 2008), the student must develop the following abilities:

1) Ability to carry out speech acts. It is necessary for the students not only to know how to choose the speech act needed in every situation, but also, they should be able to choose the suitable linguistic codification to carry out this speech act. For example, in the Egyptian culture it is not appropriate to compliment pregnant women or children.
2) Ability to produce and interpret non-literal meanings.
3) Ability to use politeness strategies. As we have seen, these strategies may vary from one culture to another and it is necessary to recognize them.
4) Ability to carry out discursive functions. For example, taking turns, pauses or silences, discourse markers, phatic utterances, etc …
5) Ability to use cultural knowledge.

Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) found that when examining conversational closings in 20 textbooks few of them represented naturalistic use, implying that even the native speakers who contribute to textbook development may lack explicit knowledge of pragmatics. The course of action for instruction should follow a two-pronged approach. First, awareness raising provides opportunities for students to increase their knowledge base vis-a-vis pramalinguistics. For example, students could be taught under what circumstances it is appropriate to compliment someone, what topics are appropriate, and what syntactic formulas are most commonly used. Second, students could be given a task such as studying a film outside of class in conjunction with its screenplay and taking notes on the pragmalinguistic features that were explained in class. This approach would provide opportunities for students to focus on applicable features in the film context and at the same time enable them to "make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings" (Kasper, 1997a, p. 10, cited in Lucía Fernández Amaya,2008).

Judd (1999) indicates that techniques for developing L2 pragmatic competence can be divided into three categories:

1. cognitive-awareness raising activities, such as presentation, discussion, and pragmatic-consciousness-raising techniques;
2. receptive-skills development by using teacher generated materials or natural data;
3. productive-skills teaching through role playing.

2.3.1   Implications For Second and Foreign Language Teaching

It is often claimed that knowledge without justification is not real knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge is no exception (Zegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 180). It is not enough for people to be aware that cross-cultural pragmatic differences exist, e.g. that it is quite appropriate to adopt an argumentative style in informal conversation with German speakers. Learners also need to understand why such conventions are accepted, i.e. that to many Germans, it makes conversation more interesting and lively, it indicates that interlocutors take each other's views seriously, and so on.

Language learners need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language, even if they do not choose to replicate native speakers' behaviour (Liddicoat, 2000, p. 51). Schmidt (1993, cited in Cook 1999, p. 1) highlights the importance of conscious noticing of linguistic forms, functional meanings, speech styles and relevant contexts. Trosborg (1994, p. 481) and Kasper (2001, p. 515) also advocate the sharpening of learners' awareness of appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic behaviour through explicit teaching and *metapragmatic* treatment of pragmatic features by way of description, explanation, and discussion. More specifically it is suggested that pragmatic and grammatical awareness are largely independent, and that "high levels of grammatical

competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, cited in Kasper 2001).

Barraja-Rohan (2000) proposes conversation analysis as a tool in the teaching of conversation and sociocultural norms. below. It represents a conscious attempt at drawing together and expanding students' knowledge and understanding of L2 pragmatic features in conjunction with positive/negative pragmatic transfer from their first language (L1). Incidentally, Kasper (2001, p. 511) notes that studies of interlanguage pragmatic use and development consistently demonstrate that adult learners rely heavily on universal or L1 based pragmatic knowledge.

Finally, Kasper's (2001, p. 522) observation on what is required of teachers themselves is worth noting: Teachers must be sufficiently socialized to L2 pragmatic practices, so that they can comfortably draw on those practices as part of their communicative and cultural repertoire, and so that their metapragmatic awareness enables them to support students' learning of L2 pragmatics effectively.

3. Conclusion

The relevance of pragmalinguistic failure to language teaching is that it is an important component in the development of communicative competence. It is important to examine the L1/L2 relationship in regards to corresponding effects and also determine the types and degrees of difference between two respective cultures. Furthermore, learners need to be made explicitly aware of what they already know in order to consistently and correctly apply their knowledge. This should involve the use of authentic materials to raise awareness and to provide opportunities for practice.

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