

## Teaching Pragmatics to Indonesian Learners of English

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### Abstract

Pragmatic competence constitutes a significant factor in determining the success of communication. In real life interaction, a language learner is not only expected to use language and produce utterances which are understandable or grammatically correct, but is also expected to produce utterances which are socioculturally appropriate. However, for students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the pragmatic competence, which can actually be acquired naturally through social interaction, is quite difficult to acquire due to the limited, if not absent at all, use of English to reach a communication goal in an authentic social interaction/setting (not in a role-play classroom activity). This paper aims to figure out some of those issues of teaching pragmatics in EFL classrooms in Indonesia and to explore the possible solutions based on the concept and approaches informed by the previous studies. The importance of the use of authentic materials, input and production activity, along with understandable feedback are highlighted as some of the ways to fill the lacking space in EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge.

### A. INTRODUCTION

Encouraged by the communicative competence models proposed by Canale & Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990), the view of second language (L2) learning has undergone a significant shift. Based on these models, L2 learning which was previously seen simply as a mastery of grammatical forms is then perceived to be the acquisition of those forms in a contextualized setting to serve certain social purposes. Consequently, the ability to communicate and interpret meaning in social interactions has become the focused component in L2 teaching due to its role in improving learners' language proficiency.

However, in English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) classroom, particularly in Indonesia, the input for learning is mostly acquired from textbooks with very limited explanation on contextual use of expressions. In addition to that, the fact that English is only spoken in the classroom and that the practice is done in learning context provide students very limited opportunity to use the language for other social interactions which are not related to

classroom activity. Consequently, it is predictable that the acquisition of English pragmatics is very much hindered.

This paper aims to figure out some of the issues of teaching pragmatics in EFL classrooms in Indonesia and to explore the possible solutions based on the concept and approaches informed by the previous studies. The first section reviews some concepts on the importance of teaching pragmatics for EFL learners and the competence it involves to consider whether or not a learner has good pragmatic competence. Then, the second section discusses the samples of material currently used for teaching pragmatics in Indonesian classrooms and underlines the mismatch between the students' need and the learning input. Finally, some solutions are proposed, all of which are informed by the research findings from the existing studies.

## **B. PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE**

Crystal (1985:204) described pragmatics as 'the study of language from the point of view of the 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'. Based on this definition, it can be understood that pragmatics is about the reason behind speakers' or writers' choice of language influenced by their knowledge and awareness of the community accepted norms. Similarly, Leech (1983) defined pragmatics as the study of the way speakers or writers participate through the use of language as social actors, who do not only want to get their message transferred to the readers or listeners but also consider the impact to their interpersonal relationship with the readers or listeners.

From both definitions, it can be concluded that pragmatics goes beyond the study of grammatical rules. It takes into account the sociocultural context. Therefore, pragmatic competence relates to 'a set of internalized rules of how to use language in socio-culturally appropriate ways, taking into account the participants in a communicative interaction and features of the context within which the interaction takes place' (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000:19). In other words, to be considered having good pragmatic competence, learners have to be able to not only produce utterances which are grammatically correct, but also socio-culturally appropriate.

Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) came up with a concept that pragmatic competence consists of two components, namely *pragmalinguistic* competence and *sociopragmatic* competence. *Pragmalinguistics* refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and

relational or interpersonal meanings. Such resources include pragmatic strategies, such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a group of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts. For example, when making request for an extension (Woodfield & Kogetsidis 2010:105), one of the research participant said '*I need an extension* because I was ill and I could not do it on time' while another participant said 'I've been having some difficulty completing this assignment. *Would there be a chance of an extension?*'. In these examples, both speakers propose to get an extension by providing reasons, but the former example indexes a very different attitude compared to the latter. The choice of linguistic form the latter speaker makes (the use of interrogative sentence and *would*) softens the request whereas the former one (the use of affirmative sentence) makes the request sound imperative and imposing.

To continue with, *sociopragmatics* refers to the knowledge of how to select an appropriate choice of linguistic forms for a particular goal in a particular setting. Thus, *sociopragmatic competence* relates to the ability to make an adjustment to speech strategies appropriately with reference to different social variables, such as the degree of imposition, social dominance and distance between participants of conversation, and participants' rights and obligations in communication (Harlow 1990). For example, lacking of knowledge in L2 sociopragmatics and mere reliance to L1 norms, Japanese learners of English tend to omit an initial expression of positive opinion, e.g. *I would love to* when making refusal. Their refusal tends to contain only statement to refuse the invitation and is followed by expression of regret if the interlocutor is of higher status (Beebe et al. 1990). This is opposed to the native speaker norms which usually initiate their refusal with an expression of positive opinion to an invitation.

There have been a lot of studies providing arguments on why it is important for language learners to have adequate pragmatic competence. One of the most significant findings is from the study done by Blum-Kulka (1997) which revealed that language learners' pragmatic mistakes are judged more unacceptable than their linguistic mistakes by their target language interlocutors. In other words, because the purpose of communication is not only to get the message transferred (by producing utterances which are grammatically correct and understandable), but also to cause a perlocutionary effect (e.g. to get the interlocutor's approval as in the extension request case), language learners need to pay more attention to the way the message is transferred by adjusting their utterances to the target-language speakers' norms in order to sustain good relationship and achieve the goal of the communication.

In the following section, I will look into the teaching material and teaching method

currently applied in Indonesian classrooms in order to show how far they contribute to improve language learners' pragmatic competence, how effective they meet the need of EFL learners and figure out what is the mismatch between the input for learning and the language learners' need.

### C. MISMATCH BETWEEN NEEDS AND INPUT

A number of important factors which contribute to learners' pragmatic development have been discussed in the previous studies, e.g. exposure to authentic input or availability of pragmatic input, methods of instruction, pragmatic transfer, learners' proficiency, and length of exposure (Bardovi-Harlig 2001:24). However, in this paper, I will limit the scope of the discussion and touch only the first three factors mentioned above.

Being outside the target language community, Indonesian learners of English rely on classroom input and activities to acquire pragmatic competence. It emphasizes how important the role of teaching material is in providing language learners input for learning. As mentioned by Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor (2003a:3), the first important issue related to input is to make language available to learners for observation. Because the learners' main source of information about how target language speakers communicate is from the textbook, it is very important that the content of the textbook is authentic and thus gives learners exact representation of language in use by the target language (TL) speakers.

Kasper (1997) argued that it is very important that language learners be exposed to authentic material because exposure to authentic material enables language learners to acquire sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic information. As in the case of compliment, for example, authentic material will expose language learners to TL norms, e.g. what function complimenting has in the TL culture, what appropriate topics for complimenting are, and by what linguistics formulae compliments are given and received.

#### Pragmatic Input

Appendix 1 shows how three types of speech act (offering, accepting, and declining) are taught in Indonesian classroom. In the given list of useful expressions, the difference between the speech act *semantic formulas* in the TL and those in the L1 can be observed. Bardovi-Harlig (2001:16) defines that *semantic formulas* are '...the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished in terms of the primary content of an utterance'. In other words, from the examples in Appendix 1, the *semantic formulas* of a refusal in the TL culture contains an

illocutionary force indicating device (e.g. *Yes, please* or *No*), an expression of gratitude (e.g. *Thanks, Thank you*), a comment on the interlocutor's behavior (e.g. *That's very kind of you*) and an explanation or reason of refusal (e.g. *unfortunately I have to work tomorrow, but I am on a diet*). Distinct to the TL, refusals in the L1 tend to be direct, containing an illocutionary force indicating device only or sometimes followed by an expression of gratitude.

Besides the different *semantic formulas* of the speech act, it can also be observed that the language material provides some choices of linguistic forms and makes a classification of how the speech act is accomplished in informal and formal setting. Thus, it can be concluded that the students are exposed to adequate information about the TL linguistic forms.

### Methods of Instruction

While exposure to authentic L2 input does expand the range of linguistic forms language learners have in order to perform certain speech act, studies have revealed that mere exposure to the TL linguistic forms does not necessarily secure successful pragmatic development. Kasper and Rose (2002) claim that prolonged exposure to authentic target language does not necessarily increase learners' pragmatic competence because they tend to consider pragmatic considerations less salient and thus focus on the message they are trying to say.

This evidence is found in the study conducted by DuFon (1999) on the acquisition of politeness in L2 Indonesian. The finding revealed that what her six participants noticed depended partly on a feature's pragmatic salience. All participants gave an extensive comment on address terms and greetings which are the salient components in L1 (Indonesian language) communication, but gave very few comments on the other linguistic forms. As suggested by Norton's (2000) study on learners' subjectivity, learners' personal value may influence how much effort they give to understand L2 pragmatic and what L2 pragmatic component they will attend. This shows how sociocultural and grammatical knowledge are closely intertwined in learners' language use and how the existence of instruction potentially draws language learners' attention to focus on the salient components in the TL.

In terms of learning pragmatics through classroom observation, Kasper (1997) argued that when language learners observe L2 communicative practices (through textbook), their minds do not simply record what they read. The development of pragmatic competence starts when learners attend the input and analyze it through the lenses of their L1 custom. It emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge and awareness of L1 speech act for comprehension and learning. In the process of understanding the practices of an unfamiliar TL

norm, learners tend to classify the experiences into ‘familiar’ and thus not requiring further analysis, and the ‘unfamiliar’ ones, which need further analysis and explanation.

This conscious attention to form is largely known as ‘noticing’, a hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1993). Noticing refers to ‘registering the simple occurrence of some events (Schmidt, 1993: 26). In his ‘noticing’ hypothesis, Schmidt (1995:20) stated that what learners notice in the input (pragmatic information) is what becomes intake for learning. He argued that for pragmatic information to be noticed and thereby made available for further processing, it has to be attended to or stored in short-term memory. One of the ways to do that is to identify the surface linguistic forms (Ishihara 2010: 102).

Further, Schmidt (2001:29) points out that to reach maximum level of pragmatic learning, learners’ attention has to be allocated to specific learning because a global alertness to target language input is not sufficient. For pragmatic information to be noticed and thereby made available for further processing, ‘one must attend to both the linguistic forms of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated’ (Schmidt, 2001: 30).

In his noticing hypothesis, Schmidt (1995: 30) distinguished ‘noticing’ from ‘understanding’ by saying that:

‘In pragmatics, awareness that on a particular occasion someone says to their interlocutor something like, ‘I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but if you have time could you look at this problem?’ is a matter of noticing. Relating the various forms used to their strategic deployment in the service of politeness and recognizing their co-occurrence with elements of context such as social distance, power, level of imposition and so on, are all matters of understanding’.

From that description, it can be concluded that understanding implies recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern. Understanding represents a deeper level of awareness than noticing which is limited to elements of the surface structure of utterances in the input rather than the underlying rules (Schmidt, 2001:5). Understanding would imply that language learners realize the meaning of each choice of linguistic form and the reason behind that choice.

Based on that explanation, I would argue that the currently used teaching material in Indonesian classroom as can be observed in Appendix 1 only ends at the ‘noticing’ stage. For the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a foreign language context, not only attention to linguistic forms and functional meanings are required. The relevant contextual features are also required, e.g. power of relation, social distance, etc. This is what is absent in the teaching

material currently used in Indonesian classrooms. The learners are exposed to a range of linguistic forms but there is very limited contextual feature provided to help learners to be more sensitive to the context in which each of the linguistic form should be used. The only one classification given is whether the form should be used in formal or informal setting. There is no explanation on what sociocultural factors are to be considered behind those choices since the method of teaching pragmatics is through implicit instruction.

Current research in L2 pragmatics generally appears to support the noticing-understanding framework (Ishihara, 2010: 103) through explicit instruction. Explicit instruction for teaching pragmatics is the instruction which includes metapragmatic information, such as rules of use and examples. The advantage found for more explicit instruction is likely due to explicit instruction's greater efficiency in drawing students' attention to the target feature and thereby allowing them to focus on input containing it. This leads to more processing space being allocated to the exclusive processing of the target feature whereas implicit teaching does not direct attention as efficiently to the feature under investigation (Roever 2009: 567).

Responding on Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis, there have been some attempts to examine whether explicit instruction improves the learners' pragmatic development better than the implicit instruction does. Takimoto (2009) carried out a research to examine the effectiveness of instruction for teaching polite request to Japanese learners of English. The finding suggested that the treatment groups (those who received instruction) performed much better than the control group (those who did not receive any instructions). Similarly, Koike and Pearson (2005) looked at the use of suggestions and its mitigation with Spanish learners of English as the participants. The treatment group appeared to have more options to express suggestion and showed awareness of TL norms by the use of mitigators while the control groups utterance were much influenced by L1 as reflected in the form of their sentence choice (e.g. the use of statement and command to give suggestion).

### **Authenticity**

The authenticity of the learning material has been found as one of the most salient factor influencing language learners' pragmatic development, especially for EFL classrooms. Authentic material is believed to sufficiently compensate the absence of exposure and direct contact to TL community. Ishihara (2010:38) identifies that an authentic material is the material extracted from the naturally occurring conversations or written data which are prepared and

adapted for classroom use. However, the use of the writers' intuition in designing a language material often make textbook language 'unnatural' and 'stilted' (Ishihara op. cit.). Similarly, Bardovi-Harlig (2001:25) argued that teachers cannot count on textbook as a single reliable source of pragmatic input for classroom language learners. Textbooks often contain insufficient specific input or insufficient interpretation of language use. Often, due to an extensive adaptation, language textbook which is labeled as being based on authentic interaction, does not cover the linguistic forms which frequently occur in the TL real communication.

That weakness can be observed in the language material in Appendix 1. The *content* of the semantic formulas in the language material does not include the frequently occurring *content* of refusal in the TL. Bardovi-Harlig (2001:18) defines that while a *semantic formula* names the types of information given (e.g. an illocutionary force indicating device, an expression of gratitude, a comment on compliment, an explanation of refusal), *content* refers to the specific information given by a speaker in that formula. This may be different from one language to another. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia shared the same *semantic formula* to accept compliment: downgrading the value of the things being complimented. However, the *content* is different. Malaysian tend to downgrade the value of their possession by telling the price, Indonesian tend to do it by saying that the quality of their interlocutor's is better.

In Appendix 1, the *content* of the illocutionary force indicating devices in the refusal are all in negative sentence (*No, Not for now, I'm afraid I can't*) or the words showing contrast to the gratitude (*but, unfortunately*). Both of these contents make very obvious meaning to the listener that the offer is declined. However, reflecting on my own experience, in the authentic interaction, an offer is quite frequently declined by saying '*I'm fine. Thank you*'. This is usually used in the greeting and sounds positive. Consequently, it is highly possible for the Indonesian learners of English to perceive it as an acceptance. By relating it to the meaning 'I'm fine. Thank you' in the greeting reply, they have fairly good ground for assuming that the offer is accepted by the interlocutor as it sounds like '*I am okay with that*' in the context of declining/refusing offer.

## Negative Transfer

This wrong assumption is also caused by the negative pragmalinguistic transfer from L1 to L2. The word '*Terima kasih*', which is the equivalence of '*Thank you*' in the L1, literally means 'Accept gift'. Thus, it is usually used when accepting an offer in the L1 community as they might not have been exposed to this authentic expression (*I'm fine. Thank you.*).



## Output Task

Noticing and understanding through supported explicit instruction are not sufficient conditions for learners in order to be able to produce L2 forms. Ishihara (2010: 103) claimed that language learners understanding on L2 pragmatic forms does not necessarily lead them to the ability to produce those forms in interaction. She further suggested that output and interactional task also play an important role in the acquisition of L2 pragmatic. In this task, 'learners encounter a difficulty producing language, they may notice *gaps* in their language system and turn to input for relevant resources in order to articulate their message. Output tasks might facilitate learners' noticing of certain forms that they are lacking while they attempt to communicate their intended meaning in the L2'.

In addition to that, during an interactional task, learners get the opportunity to attend their utterances while at the same time paying attention to their interlocutor's utterance and responding appropriately at the real time, as in real communication. In the interaction, they may modify their utterances in terms of linguistic forms, conversational structure and content of the conversation. This enhances automaticity in recalling the forms and thus increases fluency.

In Appendix 2, it can be observed that there is room for interactional practice. In fact, the interactional practice is usually done in a very traditional way, which is acting out a given conversation script in front of the classroom. While this practice makes learners very fluent in expressing the targeted forms of speech act in the script and know well the context in which they are used, the chance to be fluent in using the other forms which are not on the conversation script is very low.

## D. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Bardovi-Harlig & Taylor (2003) recommend three key pedagogical practices in the teaching of pragmatics, they are (1) the use of authentic materials, (2) input first followed by interpretation and production, and (3) feedback. This will be the framework based on which I will describe the proposed solutions to the challenges of the current practice of teaching pragmatics in Indonesian classrooms.

### The use of authentic materials

As some studies have found that textbooks are not sufficient enough to provide pragmatic awareness-raising activities that equip learners with the contextual information, a range of

linguistic forms, and in-depth cultural information necessary to make correct pragmalinguistic (the range of forms available) and sociopragmatic (the right form for the right situation) choices (Vellenga 2004), language teachers need to prepare additional materials. Perhaps the most recent and useful proposal to solve the problem of authenticity comes from Bardovi-Harlig et al (2014), who outline the stages to develop corpus-based materials. Those stages involve selecting a corpus, identifying expressions, extracting conversation excerpts, preparing excerpts for teaching, and focused noticing and production. The availability of online corpora makes it possible for language teachers to access authentic language in use and to extract them into teaching material (Ishihara & Cohen 2010).

### **Input and Production**

To let language learners notice and thus understand the input, awareness-raising activities need to be designed. This observation task will focus on sociopragmatics or pragmalinguistic features. The sociopragmatic task, to refuse an offer for example, will be a task to observe with what reasons TL speakers refuse an invitation to a party. This can be done using observation sheet as proposed by Rose (1994) and finally followed by a discussion of metalinguistic information. The pragmalinguistic task focuses on the range of linguistic forms by which declining and accepting an invitation are accomplished. This can be done by exposing the language learners with the list of useful expressions.

Besides the use of printed material as input for learning, audio or video material will also be incorporated into the language classroom activities. Tateyama (2001:220-221) found that it is very effective to use video in the EFL classroom. The finding of his study reveals that the use of videos in teaching speech act can increase learners' fluency in producing chunks and routines. Similarly, Ishihara (2010:247-248) argued that videos are rich input for teaching pragmatics because they offer verbal and non-verbal information which both affect the pragmatics of communication (e.g. intonation, pauses, hedges, gestures, and space).

Considering the advantages of interactional practice as have been mentioned earlier, the production task will include role-play activities to supplement the previous written activities. This will be done by giving learners a very clear description on what role they are going to act out prior to the practice. Kasper (2001:513) argued that while role-play can provide learner an opportunity to practice as in real communication, this can also be ineffective if the learners are not supported by sufficient context prior to the practice. When the context is not clear, role plays can be quite taxing because learners have to create an ongoing context while participating in the communication.

## Feedback

Pragmatic instruction is particularly important in EFL classroom because the two areas of pragmatic competence, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatics, appear to be particularly difficult to grasp for EFL learners. The fact that they have very little or no contact with the TL community makes them insensitive to TL sociocultural values. Consequently, pragmatic error is not seen as a priority by the students because they use the TL only in the classroom and hence the opportunity for conflict is low since attention is focused more on grammatical accuracy than pragmatic appropriateness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei (1998). Therefore, it is important for language teachers to give feedback when learners make inappropriate utterances. For example, when learners make overly direct request (e.g. *I want to borrow your book*), the teacher should alert them to a more indirect request (e.g. *Can I borrow your book?*). This encourages learners' intuition and awareness of the appropriate linguistic forms.

## E. CONCLUSION

To conclude with, the main challenges of teaching pragmatics in Indonesian classrooms have been related to the use of less authentic material, the inadequate metapragmatic explanation, negative pragmatic transfer, and less interactional output practice. Informed by the findings from the previous studies, those challenges seem to be potentially solved. The problem of authentic materials is answered by the corpus-based material development. The problem with inadequate pragmatic explanation and negative pragmatic transfer can be dealt with giving explicit instruction and awareness-raising activities to support *noticing* and *understanding* process. The output practice has to be made more interactional to let the learners use the TL as closely as possible to real communication. Finally, it is very important for language learners to keep updated with the pragmatic research trend in order that they can be well-informed with the current solution of teaching pragmatics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### USEFUL EXPRESSION FOR OFFERING, ACCEPTING, AND DECLINING SOMETHING

##### 1. Offering Things

Offering things in English is important for every time we want to be polite, host people at your home or work, etc. We can use the phrases below which are about how to accept offers graciously if we want to treat our guests generously.

Here are some of the most important phrases used to offer something :

' Can I get you some...?

' Would you like some..?

' May I offer you some...?

' Would you like me to get you some..?

Informal:

' How about some?

' What about some?

' What do you say about some?

' Are you up for some?

NOTE: Always use 'some' word when offering someone something

##### 2. EXAMPLES OF OFFERING SOMETHING

Formal Dialogue

Person 1: Can I get you something to drink?

Person 2: Yes, that would be nice, Thank you

Person 1: May I offer you some tea?

Person 2: Thank you. Informal Dialogue

Person 1: Are you up for some dinner?

Person 2: Hey, thanks. What's on the menu?

Person 1: What about something to drink?

Person 2: Sure, do you have any coffee?

##### 3 . Accepting Offers

Accepting offers is as important as we offer something. We have to make sure to thank our host to show our politeness. The following phrases are commonly used when accepting an offer:

' Thank you.

' Yes, please.

' I'd like it very much.

' Thank you, I would.

' That would be very nice.

##### EXAMPLES OF ACCEPTING OFFERS

Person 1: May I get you some to drink?

Person 2: Yes, I'd love to get some tea.

Person 1: Would you like me to get you some food?

Person 2: That would be nice. Thank you.

#### 4. Declining Something

If we don't want to accept an offer, be sure to politely refuse. Offering an excuse is also a good idea in order not to offend your kind host. Politely refusing offers :

' No, thanks.

' Thank you, but I'm afraid I can't.

' That's very kind of you, but no thanks.

' I really want to, unfortunately I have to work tomorrow.

' Thank you, but I'm on a diet.

' Not for now. Thanks.

#### EXAMPLES OF DECLINING OFFERS

Person 1: Would you like some cookies?

Person 2: Thank you, but I'm on a diet.

Person 1: How about a cup of tea?

Person 2: I'd like to. Unfortunately, I'm late for a meeting.

## Appendix 2

*Give responses to the offers given. Notice that a refusal is usually accompanied by a reason. Do like the example.*

Example:

Offer : Would you like to sit down?

Acceptance : That's very kind of you.

Refusal : No, thanks. I'd rather stretch my legs a bit.

1. If you like, I'll fix your computer tomorrow.

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2. May I offer you a soft drink?

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3. How about seeing the movie tonight?

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4. Let's have some ice cream.

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5. Do you want me to carry your suitcase?

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