The Role of Pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Education

Ayşegül Takkaç Tulgar
Atatürk University- Turkey
School of Foreign Languages
aysegultakkac@hotmail.com

Abstract: Pragmatic competence has become, especially in the last few decades, one of the issues that attracted attention in the field as an essential part of language competence. The realization that having a good command of linguistic knowledge in target language would not be enough to master the language has created the need to investigate the value and effect of pragmatic competence in language education. This review is intended to provide a brief overview of pragmatics and pragmatic competence, the pedagogic significance of pragmatic competence highlighting the relevant theoretical components of pragmatics. For the purposes of this review, relevant literature covering definitions of pragmatics and pragmatic competence and research carried out on pragmatic competence is presented.

Keywords: *pragmatic competence, foreign language education, communicative competence, pragmatics instruction*

1. Introduction

Communication is an indispensable part of any community life in which people feel the need to interact with each other for certain reasons. It is through the concept of language that people can communicate with a number of interlocutors in a variety of settings. However, while interacting, people need to follow things beyond words. They need to know how to say something as well as when, where and to whom to say it. Therefore, communication is much more than putting some words in a linear order to form a set of items. Language users are supposed to follow some conventions according to which their conversation will be not only meaningful but also appropriate. This analysis of how to say things in appropriate ways and places is basically called pragmatics.

Pragmatics mainly deals with what is beyond the dictionary meanings of statements; in other words, it is about what is actually meant with an utterance based on the norms and conventions of a particular society, or context, in which conversation takes place. Therefore, having a good command of the conventions enables the speaker to establish and maintain effective and appropriate communication as well as understanding each other clearly (Yule, 1996) and this ability is generally referred as pragmatic competence.

Following the shift in which the emphasis in language pedagogy changed from the linguistic-based to communicative-based purposes, the impact and status of pragmatic competence has gradually increased in educational circles. Considering pragmatic competence as a crucial component of language education, this study is intended to be a review on the value and

place of pragmatic competence in general language competence and language education. For the purposes of this review, some core definitions proposed by prominent researchers about the term are presented followed by some studies, especially recent ones, investigating different factors affecting pragmatic competence and the significance of pragmatic competence in language education.

2. Literature Review

Before focusing on the significance of pragmatic competence, it would be better to provide some definitions of the term and its related concepts. Pragmatics generally underlines the connection between language use and the underlying factors like interpersonal or social dynamics that can possibly affect the usage of language. One of the earlier definitions of the term is suggested by Morris (1938) who regarded pragmatics as the analysis of how an interlocutor interprets the sign that the other interlocutor proposes. Another frequently cited definition belongs to Crystal (1985). He describes pragmatics as the study of language based on the perspectives of its users regarding their preferences, the impact of the interactional context and how utterances can influence other participants during or after the communication. Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983) also emphasize the influential nature of the context considering meaning making while proposing definitions of pragmatics.

Context is a crucial component in understanding the meanings and intentions of other interlocutors. That is why; pragmatic knowledge is essential in getting the intended meanings and maintaining conversations accordingly. Rose and Kasper (2001) comment that during any interaction, interlocutors "do not just need to get things done but must attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time" (p. 2). Garcia (2004) provides a comprehensive comment considering pragmatics as a discipline taking into account "the full complexity of social and individual human factors, latent psychological competencies, and linguistic features, expressions, and grammatical structures, while maintaining language within the context in which it was used" (p. 8). From these definitions, it can be concluded that communication is not just about using words after one another. Instead, a healthy and efficient interaction is based on a variety of factors ranging from the participants of the conversation to the context in which the interaction goes on as well as the social and cultural norms and conventions of the society and its language.

Considering language knowledge and production, Chomsky (1965) coins the terms competence and performance. The former refers to the mental capacity of a person considering language. Competence which mainly involves such linguistic knowledge as phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax enables a person to understand and produce the language. Performance, on the other hand, is the actual production of a language user. While competence is the linguistic input, performance can be considered as the linguistic output. In other words, competence is about knowing the language and performance is producing the language. Considering these two terms, however, Chomsky comments that performance is subject to certain external factors such as the language user and the interactional context. Therefore, he concludes that performance does not always reflect the full nature of competence and he favors competence over performance. There has been; however, a shift in language teaching pedagogy from linguistic to communicative competence starting from the introduction and development of communicative language teaching methods. This shift has required a through and in-depth analysis of the communicative and pragmatic aspects of the language (Trosborg, 1987). Therefore, communicative functions of the language naturally gained momentum. Different

models of communicative competence and different criteria for efficient communication have been proposed Hymes (1972); Canale and Swain (1980); Grice (1975); Bachman (1990); Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995). These models of communicative competence have been proposed partly as criticisms and reactions to the emphasis on linguistic competence in language education.

One of the first criticisms towards the dominance of linguistic competence over communicative one came from Hymes (1972). Hymes disapproves Chomsky's perspective of competence and performance by conducting an ethnographic examination of interactional competence known as ethnography of communication. Hymes comments that though linguistic knowledge is significant, communicative dimension of language use should not be undermined and to support his point of view, he maintains that "[t]here are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p. 278). Therefore, it can be stated that based on Hymes' critical view, there has been a crucial shift from the focus on grammar to the communicative aspects in language studies.

While making a review on pragmatic competence, it is important to refer to Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence. This communicative competence model, which is later built on by Canale (1983), consists of four main areas of knowledge and skills to possess for effective communication: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. The first is related to such general linguistic knowledge as the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language and it resembles Chomsky's term of language competence. Sociolinguistic competence enables interlocutors to use contextually appropriate language based on their grammatical knowledge. It, in a way, combines linguistic knowledge with contextual rules. Discourse competence is about the ability of the language user to follow cohesion and coherence in language production to maintain flow and unity. The last item, strategic competence, is related to both verbal and non-verbal hints that can make interaction more effective and hinder possible communication breakdowns. Hence, based on these brief definitions, one can infer that effective communication with little or no misunderstanding requires a successful combination of these four competencies. However, it is also significant that all the interlocutors maintaining interaction should possess these skills.

There has been a certain degree of criticism towards Chomsky's reliance on language competence undermining the value of language performance. Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980), with their notion of communicative competence, were among the pioneers considering the significance of appropriate language production. It was Bachman (1990) who proposed pragmatic competence as a separate unit of communicative competence. Bachman suggests that general language competence consists of two main parts: organizational competence and pragmatic competence.

The first category, organizational competence, includes a language user's linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary, morphology and syntax and this is called grammatical competence, which is similar to Chomsky's term of language competence and Canale and Swain's grammatical competence. Besides grammatical ability, organizational competence also includes textual competence which is about cohesion and coherence in interaction.

The second category, pragmatic competence, consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. The first component, illocutionary competence, involves four main functions: ideational function helps language users express their thoughts and feelings; manipulative function enables people to obtain what they want; heuristic function creates opportunities to learn new things and use language as a problem-solving tool; and imaginative function improves people's creativity. These four functions proposed by Bachman (1990)

resemble Halliday's (1975) seven functions (instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative and representational functions). The second component of pragmatic competence, which is sociolinguistic competence, is related to the level of sensitivity which is necessary for taking the variations in diverse communicative situations. Sociolinguistic competence entails sensitivity towards language variations based on social or regional diversities between interlocutors. It is natural that these variations influence the conventions of how the language is used. Therefore, it can be maintained that while illocutionary competence directs language users to perform certain language functions, sociolinguistic competence enables them to choose the appropriate conventions or strategies based on the nature of the context.

After referring to a brief history of the concept of pragmatic competence including the shift in language teaching pedagogy, it would be appropriate to present some research on pragmatic competence to offer a clearer picture of the place of pragmatic competence and particularly its relation to different factors in language education. Relevant literature displays studies conducted on the effects of different factors on pragmatic competence. Some of those have focused on the impact of language proficiency on pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2011; Takahashi, 2005); some on the effects of instruction (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2010; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Martines-Flor & Soler, 2007; Takimoto, 2009); some on the effects of learning environment (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Schauer, 2006); and some on the impacts of length of residence (Bataller, 2010; Ren, 2013; Roever, 2012; Shively, 2011; Taguchi, 2014). Presenting the results of some of these studies would be helpful.

One of the issues of investigation has been whether language proficiency affects pragmatic competence. Based on this perspective, one of the seminal studies examined the effects of language proficiency on pragmatic competence. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) carried out a study with 173 ESL and 370 EFL learners who were asked to do a Discourse Completion Task in order to identify the grammatical and pragmatic infelicities in the given scenarios. The results of this study revealed that those participants with higher levels of language proficiency were more successful in identifying the mistakes compared to their peers. The results of this study were also supported by its replications (Schauer, 2006). Another study investigating the impact of language proficiency as well as the study abroad experience on pragmatic comprehension was conducted by Taguchi (2011). The results of the cross-sectional study including 25 native English speakers and 64 Japanese collage learners showed that those participants with higher language proficiency and with longer experiences of study abroad were quicker and better in comprehending the audios recorded in the target language. However, relevant literature also includes some studies presenting counter-argument to the positive impact of language proficiency on pragmatic competence (Matsumura, 2003; Scarcella, 1983; Schimidt, 1983). For example, Schmidt's (1983) famous Wes study revealed that although the participant did not have enough level of general language competence, he could maintain effective communication. Conducting a study with Japanese learners of English, Matsumura (2003) found that proficiency levels did not directly affect their sensitivity to pragmatic infelicities and the results of another study by Shardakova (2005) also supported that of Matsumura (2003) revealing a discrepancy between language proficiency and apology productions.

The impact of learning environment has also been one of the points of attention in the studies of pragmatic competence. The studies conducted on learning environment have generally focused on a comparison of ESL and EFL contexts for language learning. Most of these studies, though there are some presenting counter-evidence, have pointed at the positive effects of learning a target language in ESL contexts compared to EFL ones particularly in terms of the development of pragmatic competence. For example, the two studies mentioned in the previous

paragraph, i.e. that of Bardovi-Halig and Dörnyei's (1998) and its replication by Schauer (2006), point at the contributory nature of conducting language studies in ESL settings compared to EFL ones. The results of these studies revealed that the participants in the ESL context were better at identifying pragmatic infelicities as they were exposed to the appropriate usages of target forms in its natural setting. Referring to a personal experience of learning a target language in an EFL context, Cohen (1997) also reports that his level of pragmatic competence did not reach the desired levels due to the limitations stemming from the EFL setting.

Considering the context of language learning, the length of residence in the target language context has been another concern in the investigations of pragmatic development. Most of the studies aiming to investigate the impact of the length of residence showed the positive effects of staying in the target culture on the development of pragmatic competence. For instance, working with 31 non-native speakers of Spanish who stayed in Spain for a period of four months, Bataller (2010) found that there is a positive correlation between the length of residence and the development of some aspects of request strategies. The positive contribution of long periods of staying in the target culture is also supported by Ren (2013) who worked with 20 Chinese learners of English with study abroad experiences of over an academic year. The researcher found that this experience not only contributed to the development of the pragmatic performances but also raised the level of pragmatic awareness. The results of these studies are also maintained by Taguchi (2014) who found that studying abroad for a semester improved cross-cultural adaptability as well as developing appropriate language production.

Taking the different models of pragmatic competence and some studies on the issue into consideration, it can be stated that pragmatic competence is an essential component of general language competence if the aim of language is to communicate. Pragmatic competence enables language users to establish and maintain appropriate and effective interaction besides understanding and giving meaning to the messages based on contextual information. Without pragmatic competence, communication would eventually breakdown.

3. Why to Teach Pragmatics

Pragmatic competence is crucial for healthy communication because the lack of it can result in communication breakdowns which can even have severe consequences in some cases (Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Shi, 2014). The situation in which a language user cannot maintain effective communication because of the inability to appropriately use the language and the incapability to understand the intended meanings is described as pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). That is why; ESL and particularly EFL curriculum should cover teaching pragmatics if the main purpose of language learning is to communicate.

However, although there has been a great interest concerning the value of pragmatic competence, there is still some deficiencies in terms of including pragmatics instruction in language education (Eisenchlas, 2011). What is commonly stated by these researchers is that language instruction still focuses on teaching the linguistic and lexical features of the target language while ignoring the pragmatic aspects (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). Despite the introduction of and growing awareness towards communicative competence and approaches to develop it, there have not been enough attempts to teach and especially assess pragmatic competence. The possible reasons for the lack of pragmatic instruction are proposed as follows: instructional materials, limited instructional time, artificiality of the activities, teachers' inadequacies in terms of language competences or instructional skills and the attitudes towards

teaching pragmatics (Einsenchlas, 2011). Whatever the probable reasons are, it is stated by different researchers that pragmatic instruction does not get the necessary attention it deserves.

Considering the inadequacy of pragmatic instruction, some researchers also explain that the heavy emphasis on teaching linguistic features may result in a good command of grammatical competence. However, having a high level of linguistic competence does not guarantee a high level of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Blum-Kulka& House, 1989; Celce-Murcia, et al., 1995). It is commonly stated that even advanced learners experience pragmatic failures regardless of their levels of linguistic competence. It is also possible that learners who are not well developed in terms of pragmatic skills may adopt transfers between L1 and L2 as a strategy to deal with communicative cases. However, the transfers at pragmatic levels may not be as healthy as those at other levels. This naturally results in problems in communicative situations and can negatively affect the language development of the learner as well as the self-confidence in language learning.

Regarding the frequency of experiencing communicative situations, it is essential to develop pragmatic competence; thus, including pragmatic competence as a significant part of language instruction is crucial (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2010; Fordyce, 2014; Halenko & Jones, 2011; Ifantidou, 2013; Kasper, 1996; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Nguyen, Pham & Pham, 2012; Rajabi & Farahian, 2013; Takimoto, 2008; van Compernolle, 2011). In order to highlight the significant nature of teaching pragmatics, Kasper (1996) maintains that what should be discussed should not be whether to teach pragmatics, the focus of attention should be how to teach it in language classes. Providing learners with instruction means providing them with the necessary input they can utilize. Accordingly, language input offers learners not only the linguistic knowledge but also the knowledge of appropriate ways of using the language to promote effective interaction and to advance pragmatic abilities (Li, 2012). Input provided through instruction can be considered as a stimulating factor in language learning. In order to underline the significance of providing instruction for the development of pragmatic competence, presenting some studies would be more helpful.

A great percentage of the studies on the effects of, either explicit or implicit, instruction revealed the positive impacts of instruction on pragmatic development. For example, in three studies conducted successively one year after the other, Takimoto (2007; 2008; 2009) found that providing learners with instruction and input in different sorts would yield positive contributions in the learning process. Takimoto (2007) aimed to examine the effectiveness of structured input tasks accompanied by explicit information, structured input tasks without explicit information and problem-solving tasks. The results revealed that the group that received structured input tasks accompanied by explicit information performed better than the group without explicit information. Based on these results, Takimoto (2008) conducted another study to investigate the impact of deductive and inductive instruction on the development of pragmatic competence. In this experimental study with 60 Japanese learners of English, there were three treatment groups receiving deductive and inductive instruction with problem solving tasks and one control group. The results of the pre-test, post-test and follow-up tests pointed at the positive contributions of any treatment types compared to no instruction. The results of these two studies were also supported by another study by Takimoto (2009). Examining the effectiveness of structured input instruction, comprehension-based instruction and structured input instruction, Takimoto (2009) found that, though there are some differences between the treatment groups, those receiving instruction outperformed the others in the control group.

In a recently-conducted experimental study with 26 Chinese learners of English, Halenko and Jones (2011) found that explicit instruction helped the participants improve their pragmatic

abilities in terms of identifying and producing pragmatically appropriate language forms. In another experimental research which differed from the previous one in that it also included implicit instruction in the study, Nguyen, et al. (2012) aimed to investigate the impact of explicit and implicit instruction on pragmatic development. 69 Vietnamese participants were divided into explicit, implicit and control groups. The results of the study revealed that, though the group receiving explicit treatment was better than the implicit one, both explicit and implicit groups were more successful than the control group with the help of the positive effects of instruction. A different type of instruction was provided by Rajabi and Farahian (2013) with the aim of identifying the effectiveness of instruction on pragmatic competence. 34 Persian learners of English were divided into experimental and control groups the experimental one was provided with awareness-raising instruction. The results showed that pragmatic productions of the group receiving treatment were significantly better than the control group. The results of these studies are also in line with those of Fordyce (2014). Both the explicit and implicit groups were better at pragmatic performances than the control group. On the other hand, the group receiving explicit instruction outperformed the implicit group considering immediate and long term productions. Another recently conducted experimental study belongs to Farshi and Baghbani (2015). The results of the study revealed that those groups that received instruction outperformed the control group. The researchers concluded that instruction has positive contributions on pragmatic production in foreign language settings.

Based on the above-mentioned studies, one can infer that instruction, implicit or explicit, in pragmatics is beneficial. Most of the studies in the relevant literature revealed that pragmatic instruction is much more contributory in nature than no instruction as it provides learners with the necessary input they can utilize in the process of developing their language abilities. However, presenting mere instruction out of appropriate and meaningful context would also not yield the desired and expected results. As pragmatic instruction has an undeniable significance in language development, it is essential to provide learners the type of instruction which is integrated with other language activities to raise learners' awareness and attention towards the appropriate ways of using the language. It is clear that mere exposure to a huge amount of input is not effective for pragmatic development (Matsumura, 2003). Instead, language input should be incorporated with other activities in different contexts increasing the meaningfulness of the learning process. In order to highlight the significance of designing and planning lessons, Solak and Bayar (2015) suggest that language lessons should be organized according to a practice-based orientation instead of a traditional theory-based orientation. In such meaningful and practical contexts, learners can have the chance of practicing language beyond memorizing or mastering the linguistic forms without the ability to apply them in interactional contexts.

Integrating pragmatic features in language instruction is especially vital in EFL contexts as learners in these educational settings do not have much chance of learning and practicing the target language outside the classroom environment. The learners have limited opportunities for interaction in and exposure to the target language in communicative contexts. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2010) suggest the integration of pragmatic instruction in language curriculum explaining that exposure to pragmatics promotes learners' perceptions of the target language and its speakers.

4. Conclusion

Pragmatic competence should be considered as an inseparable component of language competence. Therefore, pragmatic features of the target language should be incorporated in

language instruction as well as linguistic features. In order to equip learners with the essential pragmatic knowledge, it can be suggested that, first of all, the importance of pragmatic competence should be internalized. Then the perspectives should be re-shaped with the purpose of providing learners with the best opportunities to expose to the pragmatic features and practice them in a variety of contexts. In addition, language teachers should possess a good command of the target language including a satisfactory level of pragmatic knowledge so that they can convey what they know to their learners. In order to teach their learners these pragmatic aspects, teachers should also have the necessary teaching skills enabling them to adopt different teaching strategies during their instruction.

To sum up, pragmatic competence is one of the building blocks of language instruction. If the aim of language education is to teach learners how a language should be appropriately and effectively used in different interactional settings, it is important to raise learners' pragmatic awareness as well as furnishing them with some beneficial strategies they can utilize to sustain successful communication in diverse settings with different interlocutors. Therefore, pragmatic competence should be an integral part of language curriculum. In order to accomplish this, however, there is still some need for further research aiming to raise much more awareness considering the significance of pragmatic competence and to come up with better and more productive suggestions and solutions.

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