Pragmatic Awareness in the Language Classroom

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An awareness approach can be an effective way to teach students how to make pragmatic choices without developing stereotypes. This paper describes activities for helping students become aware of the pragmatic function of words, the differences between their own speech acts and those of a native speaker, and their own beliefs about English and Japanese sociocultural differences.

語用論を指導する際、awareness approach を導入することにより、学習者がステレオタイプを形成することなく、場面に適切な言葉を選択できるよう効果的に指導できるであろう。本稿は、言葉の誤用論的機能、母国語話者と学習者との発話の違いを学習者に認識させ、さらに学習者自身が持つ英語と日本語の社会言語的相違点の信念を再認識させるのに有効なアクティビティーを紹介する。

There are many challenges in teaching pragmatics in the classroom. First, special care must be taken so that students understand that pragmatic rules are normative rather than prescriptive (Thomas, 1983). Unlike grammatical rules, pragmatic norms can differ depending on the speaker's age, sex, and personal preferences. Secondly, teaching pragmatics in a general way may degenerate into stereotypes, such as the belief that English speakers are direct while

Japanese speakers are indirect. Not only is this an oversimplification, it is also, particularly with reference to requests, not true (Rose 1996; Fukushima, 1996). An awareness approach can avoid these pitfalls. Through these lessons, I wanted the students to realize that words can have a pragmatic function and that there can be a difference between pragmatics in English and Japanese. However, I did not want to encourage students to overgeneralize about speakers of English.

I developed these lessons after observing the ideas my students already held about the difference between English and Japanese pragmatics. Many of my students accepted as fact the stereotype that English speakers are direct, but did not know what that might mean in practice. Many students also assumed that very direct and strong requests are acceptable for use with lower-status people, as in a service encounter. Therefore, I focused on requests to people of the same or lower status.

Video lessons

If authentic videos are used in the classroom, they can be used for pragmatic data. After watching the video (an episode of an American television comedy), I had students look through the transcript and find all the requests. This serves as a schemata-building exercise. Students were able to remember several ways of making a request in English and categorize them. This was followed by a productive exercise.

Practice with direct and indirect

I gave them a list of situations, such as asking a classmate for a pen, refusing a teacher's invitation, or telling a little boy to stop riding his bike in the street. The students had to pick situations in which they would use direct or indirect speech and write an example of what they would say. This was useful to check if students understood the concept of direct and indirect speech. The students also learned that their answers depended to some degree on personal choice.

For these lessons, I used what might be called a non-specialized definition of direct and indirect. That is, although a linguist might call a request such as, "I want you to open the window," indirect; to a layperson it would sound very strong, so in class we classified it as "direct."

Native speaker data

For the next exercise, I thought of three high-imposition request situations to people of the same or lower status:

> Your friend borrowed ten dollars from you when you went out shopping. You don't really need the money now, but you are worried s/he will forget it. Ask him/her for the money back.

You are at a restaurant and you order some food you have never eaten before. When it comes you notice that it has tomatoes in it. You are allergic to tomatoes and will get very sick if you eat them. Ask the waiter if you can get something else instead.

You usually drive a car, but it is having problems now and you have to take it to be fixed. Ask your friend if s/he can drive you to work next week.

I gave these to a native speaker of English and asked her to role-play what she would say in each situation. Her responses were as follows:

Remember that ten dollars you borrowed from me last Monday? When we went shopping? You bought that scarf; you didn't have enough money with you so I lent you the ten dollars? Do you think you could return it to me? I need to pay a bill and I could really use that ten dollars.

Excuse me? This dish has tomatoes in it, I didn't realize it would have tomatoes in it and I'm allergic to tomatoes. I get really sick. Do you think it would be possible to order something else?

My car has to go in for repairs next week, and I won't have a car, I was wondering if you could give me a ride next week?

It has been shown that when native speakers of English make requests, they tend to give reasons (Goldschmidt, 1998), and use two clauses, such as "do you think you could," or "I was wondering if you could," (Takahashi 1996, 2001). Although I gave the native speaker no guidance about how to perform the requests, her responses fit that pattern.

Student work

The students were then given the same situations and asked to make requests. The majority of the students used direct requests ("Please change this dish") or would/could questions. None of them used a two-clause request. However, the students' requests were like the native speaker's in that they used reasons, probably because the reason had been provided for them.

The students were then asked to state the differences between the requests that they had produced and the ones done by the native speaker. Interestingly, the fact that the native speaker had included a reason was the salient point for the students, even though the students themselves had almost always given reasons. (A similar result was found in Takahashi, 2001). With guidance, the students were also able to notice the two-clause

request form. Most of the students characterized the native speaker's requests as indirect, and their own as direct, so they were able to re-examine that stereotype. They also noticed that in the native speaker's speech polite forms were used for people of the same or lower status.

Takahashi (2001) points out that implicit instruction is not enough to make students acquire the target request form. To add explicit instruction, after the students had noticed the target (two clause) form in the native speaker's requests, we practiced "I was wondering if you could. . " and "Do you think you could. . " as chunks, with students making their own requests with that form.

Through these exercises, the students were able to notice some differences in English and Japanese pragmatics, acquire some pragmatic metalanguage in English, and examine their own ideas about English pragmatics, in addition to practicing a commonly used request form.

References

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