

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Re-thinking pragmatics for the classroom: Promoting a deductive approach

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In recent years, the applied linguistics literature has reflected a growing interest in the area of pedagogical pragmatics – the interface between theoretical pragmatics and language teaching. This represents an important development that has served as a catalyst for change, helping move the teaching of speech acts forward into a more productive space than that occupied by other, largely formulaic approaches which, arguably, do little to nurture the kind of productivity that characterises underlying competence. This paper proposes that while, to date, pedagogical pragmatics has adopted a largely inductive approach to the development of learners' pragmatic competence, learners can simultaneously benefit from a deductive approach.

Without doubt, one of the most significant and enduring features of the communicative approach to language teaching is the recognition given to context and its crucial role in the expression and interpretation of meaning. Since the publication in 1972 of Hymes' seminal paper on communicative competence, the notions of appropriacy, context, and authenticity have, quite rightly, held great sway within the language teaching profession and remain to this day key factors in the design and delivery of courses and materials. While Hymes' reference to "the appropriate" was superseded in 1980 by Canale and Swain's notion of "sociolinguistic competence," and in 1990 by Bachman's "pragmatic competence," each of these scholars – and others – recognised the importance of context to the expression and interpretation of meaning, and the ability to present ourselves as competent native or native-like speakers of a language.



So, to adopt Bachman's label, what is pragmatic competence? We might define it as the ability to mediate between form and context, both in the production and reception of language, such that we are able, accurately and appropriately, to express and interpret intended meaning. It is our pragmatic competence that allows us to communicate in an effective and socially sanctioned fashion, and much hinges on our ability to do so; not only does it prevent obstacles to our getting things done but is also an important part of what oils the mechanisms of social interaction and enables us to establish and maintain relationships. Yet, despite its importance, Blum Kulka, House and Kasper note that:

Even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value [of utterances] (1989, p. 10).

Furthermore, according to Bardovi-Harlig, "...a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show concomitant pragmatic competence" (1996, p. 21), an observation that gives cause for concern in light of Crandall and Basturkmen's claim that people are more forgiving of grammatical mistakes than they are of pragmatic failure (2004, p. 38). A speaker who responds to the indirect request "Do you know how to operate this thing?" with the utterance "Yes, as a matter of fact I certainly do know how to operate it" will likely leave their interlocutor perplexed, and/or feeling awkward or irritated, no matter how well constructed their sentence.

What all this suggests, quite clearly, is that as language teachers we have a responsibility to ensure that we provide our learners with ample opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence. What precisely that should mean is the main focus of this paper. The good news is that a systematic focus on pragmatics in language instruction appears to pay dividends (see, for example, Morrow, 1995). With a sound approach, therefore, pedagogy that specifically targets this competence has the potential to reward both teachers and students alike.

Traditional approaches to developing pragmatic competence

While there are notable exceptions, there have been certain, clearly identifiable pedagogical trends evident in the way in which teachers and materials writers have dealt with the concerns of Hymes et al. regarding context and the development of learners' pragmatic competence. What is somewhat ironic is the fact that much of what has been done over the past 25-30 years in the name of the communicative approach in reality is something of a throwback to more behaviouristic models of learning and, in many cases, does little more than pay lip service to the notion of context and its centrality to meaning. Typically, two key elements can be identified in the pedagogy adopted/espoused. Firstly, learners are presented with what Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) refer to as "lists of useful expressions" that may be deployed in particular situations and which are often treated as interchangeable, despite subtle and sometimes significant differences of nuance. These expressions are often couched in formulaic terms of the kind "Expression X can be used

in situations 1, 2 and 3,” or “To perform function Y you can use expressions 1, 2 and 3.” Learners are then expected to memorise them and deploy them when faced with a real life situation which reflects that experienced in their learning. The second element consists of conversations and dialogues offering “pragmatically inaccurate models” (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996, p. 23-26). In other words, learners work with language that is often stilted, inauthentic and therefore, in Hymes’ terms, rarely attested.

Is dealing with context in this fashion developing learners’ pragmatic competence? I would argue not. Competence, it seems to me, goes beyond simply knowing that something is the case – that “X is appropriate because it is more polite than Y,” for example – and necessitates some understanding of the principles that make it so. It implies the ability to make informed decisions about how to express and interpret meaning based on an appreciation of what one might term the social grammar that governs the association between language forms and their situations of use, and of its implications for the way in which meaning is realised. Without such understanding competence boils down to little more than a mechanical, formulaic process of memorization and application. As with traditional grammar which allows for infinite creativity once the “rules” are learned, understanding the pragmatic rules or principles according to which it operates liberates the user by not limiting him or her to only those instances of particular language use in particular contexts they have experienced in their learning. An understanding of social grammar, in other words, allows for generalisability, a fundamental part of what it means to be truly competent in a language.

Until relatively recently, then, it seems to me that the treatment of pragmatics in language teaching pedagogy has placed too little emphasis on what Bachman describes as an “examination of the pragmatic conditions that determine whether or not a given utterance is acceptable to other users of the language as an act, or the performance of an intended function” (1990, p. 89). Consequently, whatever learners glean of the relationship between form and function – between what is said and what is meant – its applicability is restricted to the particular instances of its use they have experienced in their learning. This in turn deprives them of the productivity that comes from an understanding of general principles and the process of discovery such understanding enables.

New approaches: The emergence of pedagogical pragmatics

The good news is that with the emergence of so-called pedagogical pragmatics, this situation is in the process of being addressed – in part at least. As its name suggests, pedagogical pragmatics is concerned with the ways in which insights generated within pragmatics might be brought into the classroom and applied productively in order to develop language learners’ ability to express and interpret meaning effectively and appropriately.

A survey of the literature on pedagogical pragmatics reveals a range of interesting and creative activities that offer useful contributions to the debate on how we might nurture this crucial ability in our students. Below is a list of what one typically finds:

- Focusing on speech acts that reflect learner needs or interests.
- Focusing on speech acts in the performance of which deviation from the L1 norm is most critical to meaning and interpersonal relations.
- Using authentic materials, where speech acts are presented within the broader discourse and original contexts of use.
- Engaging learners in discourse completion tasks.
- Having students translate speech acts from their own language into English and discuss the pragmatic norms of different speech communities.
- Encouraging learners to become their own ethnographers and to observe how speech acts are realised in the L2 and in particular contexts. This may involve collecting, analysing and reporting on data.
- Incorporating native-speaker role plays into classroom activities as a focus of student observation. Developing observation tasks around these and allowing learners to ask the native speakers questions etc.
- Providing opportunities for consideration and guided discussion of how speech acts function in the learners' own languages, and the consequences of inappropriately enacting those rules governing their performance.
- Using video as a vehicle for getting students to compare how speech acts are realised differently in different contexts.
- Having students choose a speech act they are interested in and observe it in naturalistic or rehearsed settings.

What is evident from this list is that, for the most part, rather than simply informing learners of how speech acts are realised in the target language in particular social and situational settings, these activities facilitate a process of discovery through awareness-raising (see Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). This is very much in sync with Bardovi-Harlig's notion that rather than focusing on the intricacies of individual speech acts, we should be making learners "more aware that pragmatic functions exist in language ... in order that they may be more aware of these functions as learners"; that learners should be encouraged to think for themselves about culturally appropriate ways to compliment a teacher as "a way of awakening their own lay abilities for pragmatic analysis" (1996, p. 31).

Yet there is another highly significant feature of these awareness-raising activities the recognition of which promises to offer a slightly different perspective on pedagogical pragmatics and make it a richer, more productive endeavour. They appear to be informed – intentionally or otherwise – by an inductive approach to learning, where the observation of particulars leads to an understanding of general principles. In other words, by regularly engaging in these kinds of activities and reflecting on the ways in which particular speech acts are realised in

the target language, the expectation is that, in time, learners will induce the broader principles that govern the linguistic choices we make in order to make ourselves understood as intended and to interpret others as they intend. What I should like to propose is that learners can simultaneously benefit from a deductive approach whereby through developing an awareness of general principles, we will be helping to ensure that they are better equipped to make sense of particular speech acts as and when they come across or are formally introduced to them. By “tuning in” learners to the kinds of factors that govern what we say, why and how we say it, when and to what effect, we effectively provide them with a vocabulary with which to read into those speech acts they come across in their interactions both inside and outside the classroom, and to talk about them. The fact is that while they understand these principles at a procedural level by virtue of having acquired their native language, they have likely never had to articulate and reflect on them, and as such have never acquired the means to do so.

The kinds of general principles to which I refer might be conceptualised as parameters and include the speed and fluency of speech, the directness or indirectness with which we express ourselves, the relevance of what we say and its connectedness to the discourse, how much or how little we say, the register we use, and supra-segmental features such as pausing, stress and intonation. These parameters background all languages; however, their settings are language specific and so too, therefore, is what they signify; as such language learners’ need to learn them if they are to make themselves understood and correctly understand the illocutionary force of others’ utterances in the L2. Once they

start reflecting on the communicative significance of these parameters and considering examples of their realisation in actual language use, they will also come to appreciate the variation that exists between different languages and the importance, therefore, of coming to grips with this critical element of communication. And once learners have grasped the significance of what they are learning, they are typically more motivated to engage with it. Furthermore, it is certainly my experience that this whole area of speech act realisation, and in particular its cross-cultural dimension, is inherently interesting to students and one to which they consequently respond enthusiastically and animatedly in the classroom. Video/DVD can support this approach particularly well and, with multi-lingual groups in particular, can provide a very fertile environment for discovery, contrastive analysis and discussion.

An example will perhaps serve to illustrate the approach I am suggesting here. Take the following exchange which actually took place in Japan between a Japanese lady and her American neighbour:

J: Oh, I feel very sorry for you.

A: Why?

J: Your baby must have kept you up all night with its crying.

It transpired, through a mutual acquaintance, that the speech act being performed here (the illocutionary force of the Japanese lady’s utterance) was that of a complaint. The message the lady was intending to convey – very indirectly – was that the baby had in fact been keeping *her* awake all night. It was, therefore, also simultaneously a request

to take the matter in hand! This kind of exchange can be usefully deconstructed in the classroom, with the teacher, for example, eliciting from their students some of the reasons *why* we are sometimes indirect in the way in which we communicate our messages: the desire to save face, not impose etc. This in turn can lead on to a consideration of *how* we are indirect. The above example is one case in point; here are some others:

A: My pen's run out of ink.

B: Here, use mine.

A: What do you think of my new dress?

B: I absolutely love the shoes!

A: I've an interview tomorrow.

B: It might be an idea to wear a suit and tie.

The teacher might then encourage students to consider other instances of indirectness as well as of speech acts which are frequently expressed indirectly. This might extend to students identifying and bringing in their own examples (perhaps as a homework activity) and /or the teacher showing extracts from TV/film.

As I have suggested, deconstructing discourse in this way lends itself to a contrastive approach by encouraging learners to think about and discuss how indirectness, for example, is manifested in their respective languages and how any differences may lead to misunderstanding or even offence, the results of which may be highly significant:

the breakdown of a relationship (the American neighbour does nothing to address the issue of her crying baby) or perhaps the failure to secure a contract (the businessman fails to realise that their potential client was not in fact requesting but *requiring* that the specifications of the product be changed). One lesser consequence may simply be irritation on the part of the receiver who may feel that their interlocutor is being deliberately and/or unnecessarily obtuse.

Conclusion

Through consistently analysing situations of language use by adopting a deductive approach to speech act analysis of the kind proposed here, in parallel with the kind of inductive approach more commonly used, conditions are created that promise to help enable learners to gradually fine-tune their understanding of the relationship between form, context and meaning in the L2, and to minimise the risk of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983) while simultaneously enhancing their sense of the intercultural.

Personal experience indicates strongly that learners are inherently interested in pragmatics and the complexities that background what we do with language and why. They are fascinated by sociolinguistic differences in this regard and engage keenly in classroom discussion. Given that pragmatic competence is a crucial part of successful communication, as teachers we would be missing an opportunity and failing in our duty if we were not to capitalise on this natural sense of curiosity.

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