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***PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE – ESSENTIAL TO DEVELOPING
BUSINESS STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS***

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Abstract

Have you ever wondered what our students remember of all the topics that we discuss in class? How many of the concepts that we have them learn for tests stay with them? Whether they actually are better readers and better listeners due to the activities around which we center our classes? How can we make sure, that once they leave academic life they will be, at least theoretically, prepared for the “global village” we live in? It is the purpose of my paper to look at ways in which we can help our students to become pragmatically competent with whatever linguistic resources they have, because for a non-native speaker of English to be pragmatically incompetent in a business context may lead to professional failure.

Key-words: pragmatic competence, business pragmatic competence, speech acts, implicit and explicit teaching

This article is the first of a series meant to consider once more what it is that we, as Business English teachers should focus on, both in terms of teaching methodology and of materials and in-class activities in order to assist our students to become professionals in the ever-increasing competitive world of international business.

Over the past two years I have become increasingly dissatisfied with my activity in class, noticing that my students do not remember much from one semester to another or from one unit to another, that they have not become more skilled when it comes to business communication

skills, that speaking is not enough favoured within the timeframe of the seminar. All these have triggered many hours of reflection and research that will hopefully translate into better teaching methodology, increased satisfaction and of course more motivated and skilled students.

I also became preoccupied with the concept of pragmatic competence. In order to pinpoint exactly what I mean, I will briefly introduce and discuss two examples that are illustrative of my concern. When teaching meetings, we came across a task in the textbook *In company* (the unit related to Leading meetings) which required students to think how you can avoid upsetting people you disagree with. Students gave very few examples, most of which very direct and consequently fairly rude. The following task in the textbook was to match some diplomatic disagreement strategies to some examples which was solved without any difficulty. The problems occurred immediately afterwards, when I asked them to think of other examples for the respective strategies - which very few could do - and I provided some situations for them to shortly role-play using diplomatic disagreement strategies and also later on, when they had to role-play some meetings. Everything that we had discussed, all the examples that were pooled were rarely used, the only recurrent expression used was “Sorry, but I don’t agree”.

The other example refers to a controlled practice task from *The Business*, still related to meetings. Students listened to an inappropriate version of a meeting, had to write down examples of inappropriate language that we discussed briefly, then they listened to the appropriate version, completed the expressions used and then we discussed how these expressions fit into some categories of speech acts used in meetings (giving an opinion, asking for opinion, managing the discussion, disagreeing tactfully etc). The controlled practice task consisted in role-playing some situations (related to the topic of the unit we had been studying) based on a flow-chart which stated what speech acts they should use – the ones previously discussed. Most of my students were not able to perform appropriately.

These were unfortunately, just two of the many situations I have come across in class that added to my dissatisfaction and was followed by research which has proved extremely beneficial as it has helped me to give scientific shape to my concerns and to think of solutions that, in the end, will benefit my students.

What I have also realised is that not only students with a low level of English who do not have the linguistic resources to adapt to a diversity of situations but also students with a high level of language proficiency do not know and do not realize the importance of these speech acts, and are not able, more often than not, to choose appropriate linguistic resources. On the one

hand, I witness such a limited range of expressions - the fact that I provide lists of functions – speech acts and the phrases to realise them is virtually useless, students never learn them and rarely remember more than one or two. On the other hand, there is the problem of misuse and misunderstandings, which would not bother me so much as they provide room for discussion, but students need to be made aware of the consequences that these have, especially in a professional environment. Is it the students' fault though or is it something that I do not do (the use of I is intentional as I do not know whether this is just my problem or other colleagues share it)?

In conclusion, I have realised that most (of my) students lack pragmatic competence, that is 'the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context' (Thomas 1983:94)¹ and my observation is in fact consistent with a huge body of research in pragmatics, pragmatic competence, business pragmatic competence, cross-cultural pragmatics.

There are many researchers who have studied the transfer of various speech acts from a language to another and who all demonstrate that the way speech acts are realised varies across languages, that "frequently, neither the content nor the formula (the component parts) of speech acts can be felicitously transferred from one language to another, as House and Kasper 1981 and Takahashi and Beebe have shown for complaints and refusals, respectively. (...) Even greetings and leave-taking show differences. (Schmidt and Richards, 1980)². that learners need to be made aware of these differences. I will discuss later on how teachers might go about raising their students' awareness in the classroom.

In my students' case this translates in lack of pragmalinguistic competence described as the appropriate language to accomplish a speech act, and by Leech (1983)³ as the ability to use linguistic resources available to perform pragmatic functions. Pragmalinguistic competence comprises the knowledge and ability for use of conventions of means (such as the strategies for realizing speech acts) and conventions of form (such as the linguistic forms implementing speech act strategies).

¹ As cited by Vittoria Grossi

² As cited by **K. Bardovi-Harlig, B. A. S. Hartford, R. Mahan-Taylor, M. J. Morgan, and D. W. Reynolds**

³ as cited by Ya Sun

Researchers also mention another component of pragmatic competence: sociopragmatic competence described as the ability to achieve appropriate use of linguistic resources in a given cultural context or the appropriateness of a speech act in a particular context. According to Kasper and Roever (2005)⁴, sociopragmatic competence encompasses knowledge of the relationships between communicative action and power, social distance, and the imposition associated with a past or future event, knowledge of mutual rights and obligations, taboos, and conventional practices, or the social conditions and consequences of “what you do, when and to whom”. In the classroom, teachers should develop both types of competences.

There are also researchers who have conducted studies involving non-native speakers versus native speakers and comparing their use of various speech acts such as: **requests** (Romina Ariana Marazita), **refusals** (Lingli Duan), **compliments and compliment responses** (Vittoria Grossi), **closing a conversation** (K. Bardovi-Harlig, B.A.S. Hartford, R.Mahan-Taylor, M.J. Morgan, D.W. Reynolds) and many others. What they all noticed was that non-native speakers do not possess sufficient pragmatic competence and that even high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence.

To add to the complexity of the issue, I have to briefly refer to the concept of business pragmatic competence, as this is actually the kind of competence we want to develop in our students. While all teachers of English as a second or foreign language want their students to become pragmatically competent users of the language, this is even more so when it comes to business English. And that is because the stakes are higher, business interactions are related to critical notions such as success, the attainment of business and interpersonal goals, building and maintaining fruitful relationships. In business discourse, defined as the way “people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done” (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2007, p. 3)⁵ “language plays a subtle role in negotiating human relationships, and hence, the outcomes of a transaction” (Kong, 2009, p.241)⁶, *idem*). Therefore, everything that we do to develop our students’ pragmatic competence will be related to the specific constraints/within the framework of business contexts.

⁴ as cited in Lingli Duan

⁵ as cited by Ya Sun

⁶ *idem*

Students need to be made aware that pragmatic misunderstandings are considered much more serious than lexical or grammatical mistakes because the latter two will be attributed by listeners to the speaker's attempt to learn the language, whereas the former create a subconscious negative reflection of the speaker. "It is of particular importance in non-native speakers' (NNS) high stakes conversations to consider how different ways of speaking and understanding become judgments of character or ability. What is involved, for example, in interpreting a job candidate's failure to give specific examples as substantiation of an unmotivated or even unreliable personality?" (Kerry Louw). Moreover, in accordance with Thomas (1983)⁷ "native speakers often forgive the phonological, syntactic and lexical errors made by L2 speakers but usually interpret pragmatic errors negatively as rudeness, impoliteness or unfriendliness" with a negative impact on the professional level.

However, can students be made aware of the importance of something they have probably never heard of? Let me go back to researchers and mention that many have carried out their studies having in mind the teaching implications, their ultimate purpose being that of increasing second language or foreign language learners' pragmatic or business pragmatic competence. In these researchers' articles I have encountered many useful teaching suggestions that I will discuss further on. In fact, in an article written by Yi Young Yung "Issues in acquisitional pragmatics", he argues that there is encouraging evidence for the teachability of pragmatics. He mentions that "a number of studies have reported that L2 pragmatic development profits from instruction in various areas: speech acts (Billmyer, 1990; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), conversational implicatures (Bouton, 1994a), conversational management (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Wildner-Bassett, 1984, 1986, 1994), and pragmatic fluency (House, 1996)". He categorizes the studies that address pedagogical interventions for teaching pragmatics into two general teaching approaches: explicit vs. implicit teaching. As a matter of fact, explicit and implicit teaching methods are not new in second language acquisition (SLA). Many definitions can be easily found. Early in the 1990s, Stern (1992) noted that "the explicit-implicit dimension is just whether the learner should be taught to approach the learning task consciously as an intellectual exercise, or whether he should be encouraged to avoid thinking about the language and absorb it intuitively" (p.327)⁸

⁷ as cited by Vittoria Grossi

⁸ as cited by Lingli Duan

Implicit Teaching

Implicit learning is “learning without conscious attention or awareness” (Brown, 2007, p.291)⁹. In addition, implicit learning occurs “without intention to learn and without awareness of what has been learned” (Brown, 2007, p. 292)¹⁰. Implicit learning is a passive process, where students are exposed to information, and acquire knowledge of that information simply through that exposure. Some **synonyms of implicit learning** are: passive, unintentional, inductive, intuitive, automatic, subconscious acquisition, unreflective, behaviorism, mimicry and memory, exposure to language in use.

The underlying assumption of the implicit teaching approach is that if learners are encouraged to think for themselves about culturally appropriate ways to perform speech acts, then these learners will become aware of “their own lay abilities for pragmatic analysis” (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1996, p. 325; Carel, 1999; Rose, 1994, 1997)¹¹. Therefore, in the implicit teaching of pragmatics, the success of instruction may depend on how well it raises the learners’ awareness of the rules for appropriate L2 use (Clennell, 1999; Tanaka, 1997)¹².

Explicit teaching

Explicit learning is a “conscious awareness and intention” (Brown, 2007, p.291) to learn. In addition, explicit learning involves “input processing to find out whether the input information contains regularities, and if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured” (Brown, 2007, p.291). Explicit learning is an active process where students seek out the structure of information that is presented to them. Some **synonyms of explicit learning** are: active, intentional, deductive, rational, formal, intellectual, conscious, monitoring, problem-solving, analysis, abstract, metacognitive, inferencing, and systemic study. “Explicit teaching generally involves providing explicit metapragmatic information about L2 rules through explanations” (Billmyer, 1990; Bouton,

⁹ As cited by Vitale, Sarah J

¹⁰ idem

¹¹ As cited by Ji-Young Jung

¹² As cited by Lingli Duan

1994a; House, 1996; LoCastro, 2001), “metacognitive discussions” (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), and “corrective feedback” (Bouton, 1994b)¹³.

In recent years, there have been countless studies, which have examined the differential effects of these two approaches. On the one hand there are researchers who claim that they found no difference between their explicit ESL group that received metapragmatic presentations and their implicit group that received input enhancement on their use of mitigators in requesting (Fukuya and Clark (cited in Kasper, 2001a as cited Lingli Duan). However, most studies suggest that an explicit approach is in fact more conducive to learning. For example, Rose and Ng (2001) (as cited in Lingli Duan) examined the differential effects of inductive (pragmatic analysis activities for self-discovery) versus deductive teaching (metapragmatic information through explicit instruction) on Cantonese-speaking EFL learners’ acquisition of compliments and compliment responses. Their results indicated that only the deductive group showed progress in the use of appropriate compliment-responses. “Koike and Pearson (2005) found the rate of acquisition of pragmatic competence was faster when English-speaking learners of Spanish received explicit instruction and feedback. Alcón Soler (2005) compared two groups of Spanish high-school students and found that the group that received explicit instruction showed a greater speed of acquisition in how to give suggestions in English. Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) conducted a study in which one of the tasks consisted of noticing and repairing the speech act of apologizing. The authors reported that explicit classroom instruction can benefit ESL learners from different backgrounds even if more advanced learners may develop awareness without instruction” (as cited by Vittoria Grossi). Claire Ann Minze cites “Billmyer (cited in King and Silver 1993) who tested students to find if direct teaching of speech act rules for complementing behavior had an effect in students’ production of compliments and found the learners to have improved in the number of compliments used, the lexicon of adjectives used and the spontaneity. The study also found that higher level learners showed more effects of instruction than lower levels. There is a third category of researchers who consider that the best teaching solutions come from a combination of the two teaching approaches and, as matter of fact, I totally agree with them.

However, reflecting on my teaching, there are several problems to be discussed: the focus on oral business communication skills within the time frame of one semester and of each

¹³ As cited by Lingli Duan

class, the way I usually teach oral business communication skills, the materials and textbooks that I use. I usually focus on one oral business communication skill per semester, starting with job interviews, moving on to presentations, followed by meetings and finally negotiations. I rarely focus on socializing or telephoning, although they represent important skills that our students will definitely need, a need they (we) rarely acknowledge. Most textbooks that we use, such as *Market Leader*, *The Business*, *Intelligent Business*, only comprise a rather thin slice related to the career skills that students will need (resolving conflict, active listening, putting people at ease, reaching agreement – *Market Leader* upper-intermediate, Dealing with problems by phone, negotiations – diplomacy – *The Business*) but which, if not placed in the larger puzzle of the respective business communication discourse genre (be it meetings or negotiations or presentations) risk to be treated with shallowness by students. Therefore, within the actual teaching process, I grant three or more seminars to the actual teaching stage. During the lead-in phase I try to draw on the students' knowledge and experience, both of which are rather limited and consequently, so is their input. I attempt to raise their awareness as to the importance of these skills for their professional lives and sometimes to cultural elements but the way I do that is in an inductive, implicit manner, trying to get them to think of concepts, ideas – face, politeness, culture, business contexts – that they have probably never thought of in their own language, related to their own culture.

Next there is the input part in which I try to increase their knowledge regarding different aspects related to the respective genre, through reading texts, listening to professionals. The third part consists in explaining the structure, the functions and the language which is usually done either directly, by providing lists with functions (speech acts) and corresponding phrases or through a variety of vocabulary or listening activities which result in the same lists. By the end of these seminars, students are usually bored with so many details, so many phrases, that practice, instead of motivating them, usually becomes a very tedious activity. The whole process is followed by a production task, students having to prepare a presentation or to prepare for a job interview, a meeting or a negotiation. The outcome is usually not satisfactory at all, as I have mentioned before, as most students have incorporated very few ideas, concepts, phrases introduced during the input stage. I cannot say that I do not pay any attention to pragmatic competence, but I have to admit that I rely mostly on whatever tasks and activities the textbooks I choose provide. Moreover, I have never considered textbooks and materials that I use focusing on how good they are at developing business pragmatic competence. Only after reading about

these issues have I started considering them from this perspective and I haven't had the time to analyze them thoroughly. What I have noticed after a rapid review is that they do provide metapragmatic information – directing students' attention to inappropriate behaviour, polite/impolite; formal/informal, directness/indirectness, conflict avoidance but these are not discussed as part of a teaching approach with a direct view at developing pragmatic competence. This would call for a dramatic shift in focus in relation to everything that goes on in the classroom. The teachers's role becomes thus all the more important. How well we are prepared to foster a classroom environment favorable to the development of business pragmatic competence is the issue that should concern us. How we can do that is another concern that I will deal with further on.

How could we actually go about developing our students' (business) pragmatic competence?

First, let me refer to our role as teachers. Although pragmatic competence is complex and difficult to improve, as business English instructors we owe it to our students to gain an understanding of intercultural language use and learn more about developing their awareness of pragmatics. To facilitate pragmatic competence in others, instructors need to learn about their own subconscious use of the language – so much of which is intuitive. This can be an intimidating task given the broad range of the language, contexts, and purposes used in business communication. Teachers can help the learners “unpack” what happens in a situation, discuss how misunderstandings can be handled, and generalize to other situations. Hence, that requires a re- training of business English teachers themselves. Next, teachers will be faced with another challenging task, that of finding ingenious ways of explaining and translating theoretical pragmatic concepts – pragmatics, pragmatic competence and business pragmatic competence, face, politeness strategies, speech acts-speech events into words and ideas that students can understand, through explicit input but also through well-chosen examples.

Thus, I think it would be valuable to make use of their subconscious pragmatic knowledge in relation to everyday life, to their use of their mother tongue and to their cultural assumptions as Romanians. They should be encouraged to do research on their own – to pay attention to everyday situations – conversations with friends, colleagues, family, teachers, sales assistants, but also movies, television shows, reality-shows and to find examples of phrases used

to realize certain speech acts, to ponder on their appropriateness in those contexts. Encouraging students to think how a speech act functions in their language and culture gives students not only a basis of comparison, but also the opportunity to share a speech act. Through guided discussion, students become aware of the pragmatic rules governing their native language and the ramifications of enacting such rules appropriately or inappropriately. The awareness of communication goals that this activity generates can then be applied to the target language in the instructional setting.

The following stage refers to what all researchers admit that it is of utmost importance, and that is to observe authentic discourse and become aware with the help of explicit instruction what is and what is not considered appropriate in a given context; and to practice to put the new discourse strategies into use. “Authentic native speaker input is indispensable for pragmatic learning” (p. 10) as Kasper (1997a) explained (as cited in Kerry Louw’s study). Moreover, as Hanford (2002)¹⁴ explains, “awareness-raising involves gaining cultural knowledge and background information” and it is the teachers’ job to find appropriate materials to provide relevant input.

Next, realizing similarities and differences between their L1 and L2 would help students gain pragmatic understanding of the L2. “Celce Murcia and Olshtain (2000) express concern that learners need to be aware of discourse differences between their L1 and the L2 in order to acquire pragmatic competence.”¹⁵ Teachers should not forget that “second language acquisition is second culture acquisition” (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996).¹⁶ “In order to help the learners to communicate effectively in the L2, they need to acquire the strategies which are used most frequently by native speakers as well as the rules for implementing these strategies. This can be done with the help of the teachers’ designing task-based activities which expose learners to ample pragmatic input and elicit learners’ appropriate output. Additionally, the differences in content of the semantic formulas suggest that the learners do not have enough socio-cultural knowledge of the target community. Therefore, the socio-cultural information should be incorporated into language curriculum or textbooks” (Ya Sun).

What we, as teachers of (business) English need to do is to equip our students with the necessary knowledge to make their own decisions about how to use the target language. Teaching pragmatics empowers students to experience and experiment with the language at a

¹⁴ as cited in Ya Sun

¹⁵ as cited in Yi Young Yung

¹⁶ idem

deeper level, develops their critical-thinking skills, and thus helps them to realize that words are not just words. When we approach the language class as an opportunity for learners to expand their communication skills across cultural boundaries, we, as teachers have the responsibility to equip them with not only the structural aspects of language but with the pragmatics as well, that is the right words to say at the proper time.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to bring into focus an area of great importance for the teaching of English as a foreign language, in general and for the teaching of business English in particular, that of (business) pragmatic competence. I have briefly discussed the problem of the realisation of speech acts, as I have noticed the problems my students are confronted with when involved in communicative activities. I have also discussed two approaches to teaching pragmatic competence and I have argued that a combination of both is the best solution, and finally I have tried to suggest some teaching activities that could be used in the classroom in order to develop pragmatic competence.

I am fully aware that given the total classroom time available for foreign language teaching, limited as it is, a clear choice should be made regarding what can reasonably be achieved in the time available. I think that truly realistic (and honest) objectives should be formulated. There is obviously not enough time to teach all possible speech acts that our students might need in their professional lives. However, I am confident that once students become used to explicitly taught pragmatic concepts, once they understand how important every word is in constructing meaning, in building relationships, in achieving goals, they will be able to apply these concepts to all speech acts, speech events and business genres.

In deciding whether a student is “successful” or not, we continue to use near-native and even native speaker norms in teaching. And this, given the time constraint, seems like a highly unrealistic objective and an unfair evaluation criterion. Therefore, choices will also have to be made regarding what is most relevant to the target group (business English as a lingua franca, at non-native competence levels) and to the practical situations the target groups are most likely to function in once they leave university.

Time constraints will also mean that we have to make choices regarding other aspects of business English course content. A limited subset of relevant recurrent communication activities or business genres, as well as a subset of relevant types of communicative action within those

genres, should be selected as a focus for courses, as there is not enough time to incorporate all genres that might be relevant to the discourse community our students aspire to.

Finally, I want to say that the aspects discussed in the present article have opened the way to a number of issues that I intend to subsequently explore: carrying out small-scale research by applying the guidelines that I have suggested to my own students and analyzing the results, an in-depth analysis of the textbooks that we currently use with a view to identifying their efficacy in fostering business pragmatic competence, finding ways to teach oral business communication skills with a focus on pragmatic competence development, focus on how to develop business pragmatic competence of students with different levels of language proficiency, finding ways to teach several pragmatic concepts such as politeness strategies, and face.

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