The Case for Instruction in Pragmatic Competence

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In this article, I will review the previous research on interlanguage pragmatics and attempt to make a case for instruction in pragmatic competence to foreign language learners. Firstly, the terminology "pragmatic competence" will be defined along with communicative competence of language. Then, I will review empirical studies of interlanguage pragmatics and discuss the issues involved with the instruction of pragmatic competence. Thirdly, the difficulties of teaching of pragmatics in English class in Japan will be examined. This article concludes by stressing the importance and necessity of instruction in English pragmatics to Japanese learners.

Pragmatic Competence

In his highly influential article, Hymes (1971) defined

communicative competence as the ability to form grammatically correct sentences and to know when, where, and to whom to use the sentences. He argued that the appropriate use of language in various sociocultural contexts should not be neglected in the study and teaching of language. Hyme's concept of communicative competence has served as the overall goal of communicative language teaching.

In the same vein, Canale and Swain (1980) proposed that communicative competence entails grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. The communicative ability of language has gained much attention in language instruction and testing as well as in the field of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics ever since.

Interlanguage pragmatics is the field that deals with language learners' use and acquisition of language in social or cultural interaction. Pragmatic competence or ability, which was formerly called sociolinguistic competence, of language learners is the focus of interlanguage pragmatics. During the last two decades, there has been a fast-growing literature on interlanguage pragmatics. Much research has investigated ways in which learners can differ from native-speakers in production and judgment or perception of contextually appropriate linguistic forms to convey intended meanings, especially "speech acts." Speech acts are defined by Yule (1996) as "action performed via utterances," such as apology, complaint, refusal, compliment, and request. Functions and forms are not in on-to-one correspondence and the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences does not necessarily equate with the ability to convey intended meanings in certain contexts.

Thomas (1983) divided pragmatic competence into two

components: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence.
Pragmalinguistic competence refers to the use of appropriate language
to convey communicative meanings or realize speech acts, whereas
sociopragmatic competence refers to the social appropriateness of
certain communicative actions. Sociopragmatic aspects of language
can differ not only according to languages but also according to age,
gender, socioeconomic status, or geographic regions among speakers
of the same language.

Pragmatic errors or deviations can cause embarrassment,
confusion, or helplessness, and even have a lot of potential for
emotional friction between interlocutors, such as anger and feeling
insulted. Pragmatic failures can be also distinguished between
pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic failures. Research on both
interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition provides
anecdotal or empirical evidence that shows language learners' failure
to assure successful communication because of pragmalinguistic and
sociolinguistic failures.

Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990) state that when
refusing a request, American speakers of English typically start out
with an initial adjunct expressing a positive opinion or feeling such
as "I'd love to...," while Japanese speakers of both Japanese and
English often omit a statement of positive feeling. Most Japanese
tend to express a positive feeling toward a request and invitation,
only after they explicitly refused it, which is quite disturbing for
American speakers of English. This phenomenon is the instance of
sociopragmatic failure.

Scovel (2001) discusses the example of paragmalinguistic
failure in which linguistic forms used are inappropriate. An

American professor, on arrival at her hotel in Tokyo, asked at the front desk for a wake-up call. When she answered the phone very early the next morning, she was alarmed by the Japanese-accented voice that said, "Professor X, your time has come," which means that it was time for her to die. To announce that her taxi or fax 'has come' would be totally appropriate for the hotel worker's intended meaning. However, the same linguistic forms used in the wake-up call had a totally different and devastating implication. This funny yet extremely disturbing story tells us how serious pragmalinguistic failures can be.

As can be seen in the above examples, pragmatic competence plays a major role in communication and pragmatic failures, either pramalinguistic or sociolinguistic, can cause serious problems on both interlocutors. Therefore, importance of pragmatic competence cannot be overly emphasized.

Empirical Studies on Interlanguage Pragmatics

An increasing body of interlanguage pragmatics research examines ways in which language learners can differ from native speakers in pragmatic competence. Non-native speakers may employ different speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartform, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain 1993; Cohen, 1996), may differ in the choice of semantic formulas (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), and may use different forms (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; House, 1996).

Pragmatic comprehension can also differ noticeably between non-native and native speakers. In a study of perceptions of English

requests, Takahashi (1996) found that Japanese learners of English misjudged functional equivalent relations between Japanese request and English request formula Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) found differences in the perceptions of seriousness of grammatical and pragmatic errors between non-native and native speakers. Non-native speakers, both teachers and learners, tend to view grammatical errors more serious than pragmatic errors, which was not the case with native-speakers.

Since it is quite obvious from research evidence that language learners have different pragmatic competence system from native learners, another issue to be explored is the reasons and factors behind this contrast. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) examines 5 factors in determining second language pragmatic competence: input; instruction, proficiency, length of exposure, and transfer from the first language.

In an EFL context such as English learning and teaching in Japan, input from textbooks and teachers are sometimes the only resource learners can have. Many Japanese learners of English are exposed to English only in the classrooms. It is quite reasonable to conclude from this fact that both input and instruction have a major role in developing or not developing language learners' pragmatic competence as well as their language proficiency in itself.

It is also clear from research findings that instruction may also have an impact on learners' pragmatic development. There is ample research that shows the effectiveness of instruction in pragmatic competence (Bouton, 1994; House, 1996).

Tateyama et al. (1997) conducted a study on the teaching of pragmatics with 14 undergraduate students in Japanese class in an

American university in Hawaii. The material included three functions of the routine formula "sumimasen" and the students received explicit explanations according to a social context and saw video clips from a Japanese television. Compared with another group of participants, who only saw the television programs, the students who were explained the functions of the routine formula with handouts received higher ratings for the role-plays. Explicit instruction was effective.

Rose (1999) offers some techniques for pragmatic consciousness-raising focusing on requests with students in Hong Kong. Pragmatic consciousness-raising is defined as an inductive approach to developing awareness of how language forms are used appropriately in context. From his data, it was concluded that the students actually learned about conventionally indirect requests. The aim of pragmatic consciousness-raising that Rose proposed is not to teach explicitly but rather to expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (both first and second languages) and provide them with the analytical tools concerning contextually appropriate language use.

Like other aspects of pedagogical options, how to teach pragmatic skills effectively is still an unanswered question. But interlanguage research is also done in this area and it will provide language teachers with various teaching techniques or pedagogical options to improve students' pragmatic competence.

Issues in the Instruction in Pragmatic Competence

I will discuss the two factors that are closely related to the issues in the development of pragmatic competence of English learners

in Japan, namely, input and instruction. It is generally recognized that input from textbooks and teachers and instruction or pedagogical intervention have a major impact on language learners' pragmatic skills but there are also concerns that input and instruction do not serve as a facilitator of pragmatic development. Empirical research in interlanguage pragmatics also shows that the state of affairs can be working negatively for learners' pragmatic competence.

Input in classrooms may sometimes work negatively for the development of linguistic skills including pragmatic competence. Wolfson (1989) stresses the inadequacy of intuition native speakers have about what they should say, and reveals the fact that the textbooks and curriculum materials are frequently based on the intuitions of the authors, and therefore often both artificial and misleading. In addition, those materials necessarily tend to be old, and do not reflect the present situation of the ever-changing language.

LoCastro (1997) analyzed 17 senior high-school EFL textbooks and found that the textbooks were lacking in politeness markers of requests. When the use of modals or style-shifting in requests were presented, they were without explanations of their communicative function. LoCastro concludes that the lack of input from the textbooks and instruction are the reasons that Japanese learners of English sound less polite in requests to native speakers of English, in expressions such as "I want you to do X." In the formal English education in Japan, the expression "want somebody to do X" is introduced quite early in the curriculum and this rude request formula can often be the only one available to low-proficient or young Japanese learners of English.

Likewise, Bouton (1996) showed that one ESL textbook did not reflect the actual usage of invitation forms. The form of invitation used in the textbooks was not frequently employed in a corpus on native-speakers' invitations. As Wolfson (1989) states, what native speakers think they say can deviate from what they actually say.

As for the effect of instruction in pragmatic competence, it is generally agreed that instruction has some positive impact on pragmatic competence. However, there are also concerns as to whether instruction alone can warrant success in improving learners' pragmatic competence. Regarding the effectiveness of classroom instruction, there are a number of studies that pose questions and doubts.

House (1996) examined the effectiveness of teaching metapragmatic information explicitly with a population of advanced foreign language learners. Whereas the group that received instruction in routines profited more from the course, they did not show much improvement in offering appropriate responses. Likewise, in a study of teaching implicature, while Bouton (1994) reported the effect of explicit instruction, he also noticed that the students did not improve in the comprehension of a certain type of implicature. It is hoped more interlanguage pragmatics research will explore the factors which affect the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of specific pedagogical options or techniques.

Pragmatic Instruction in EFL class in Japan

Now I would like to address some comments specifically on the issues in teaching pragmatics to Japanese learners of English in Japan.

According to research, length of stay in an English speaking country is a factor in pragmatic development (Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Bouton, 1992). However, unlike learners in an English-speaking environment, Japanese students lack exposure to English in a natural context. Therefore, they are less likely to encounter situations where they notice the gap in pragmatic competence between native and non-native speakers. This situation makes input and instruction all the more important and necessary for foreign language learners in Japan.

Mastery over the pragmatic rules of the target language should be aimed in the language classroom because communication can be impeded when pragmatic deviations occur between interlocutors. According to interlaguage pragmatics research, without instruction, nonnative speakers can have pragmatic systems very different from the target-like norms. As mentioned above, instruction sometimes does not improve language learners' pragmatic ability, but not providing any instruction does not serve learners in any way.

Miscommunication caused by pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic failures can cause not only misunderstandings, but also disturbance, uneasiness, or sometimes anger. Therefore, foreign language teachers should be informed on the current research on interlanguage pragmatics, which is still a rapidly developing area of study and new research findings are reported annually. Unlike instruction in grammatical competence of English, which can be done with the help of grammar textbooks, pragmatics "textbooks" are not yet available to language English teachers. In addition, unfortunately, research tells us that textbooks, either EFL or ESL, cannot serve as a reliable source of instruction in pragmatic competence for language learners.

English teachers and learners in Japan need to be aware that their pragmatic knowledge can deviate drastically from the native-speakers' norm. They should also have to bear in mind that they must be careful not only with what to say, but also, to when to say, where to say it, and to whom to say it. Frictions or disturbance caused by pragmatic failures would be more serious if the interlocutor is a fluent speaker of the language. Therefore, it is hoped that both language teachers and learners aim to develop both their linguistic and pragmatic competence.

The state of affairs is not a bright and hopeful one for English teachers in Japan, without enough information and research findings on what constitutes pragmatic competence and how to teach pragmatic skills. However, that cannot and should not be the reason to neglect pragmatic skills in language teaching.

Even though pragmatic competence is not the highest priority in second language teaching and learning (Judd 1999), it should not be the case because pragmatic skills can be more important than grammatical skills in real-life communication. In giving instruction in pragmatic competence, as is the case of grammatical skills, we might as well focus on major rules of linguistic skills. Interlanguage pragmatic research tells us about major and distinct differences and deviations in pragmatic competence between learners of English and native speakers of English.

In addition, I would like to stress the importance of avoiding pragmalinguistic failures. Sociopragmatic competence can vary among native speakers of English according to age, region, social status and so on. But the same language speakers generally have the similar system of pragmalinguistic competence.

I recognize the difficulties in the classroom that English teachers in Japan face when teaching pragmatic skills to students. However, for most Japanese learners of English, input is available to them only in the language classroom. They rarely have an opportunity to be exposed to English outside class in the natural situations. Pragmatically appropriate language teaching is very important for those EFL learners in Japan. Research on interlanguage pragmatics is a useful source of information for English teachers who want to explore pedagogical techniques and develop lessons that aim to improve learners' pragmatic competence in English classroom.

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