Intercultural Pragmatics in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language accurately means more than simply mastering its linguistic structure, phonetics, vocabulary and idioms. It means learning also to see the world as native speakers of that language see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behaviour of their society. Learning a language, in fact, is indivisible from learning its culture; therefore a pragmatic component needs to be included in the curriculum design of a foreign language. We also have to widen the concept of sociocultural contents, these cannot only deal with the mere explanation on "uses and habits" of the countries nor with the so often simplified contextual information. Therefore, we have to deal with the use of language in specific communication situations. The learner of a foreign language has to be aware of cultural differences between his and the Metalanguage and be able to behave within a multicultural context.

Key words*:* Pragmatics, Interculturality, Communicative competence, Foreign language learning.

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Introduction

The present study is situated in the field of interlanguage pragmatics – the acquisition, comprehension and production of contextually appropriate language by foreign or second language learners – and hopes to shed some light on how the pragmatic competence is decisive in the mastering of a foreign language. According to Mey (2001: 6), Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.

In other words, the study of language from the point of view of its users, of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in communication. A FL learner may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but still have a communication problem - if he or she has not mastered the rules for social language known as pragmatics, we believe that in order to communicate successfully in a target language, pragmatic competence in FL must be reasonably well developed within the curriculum.
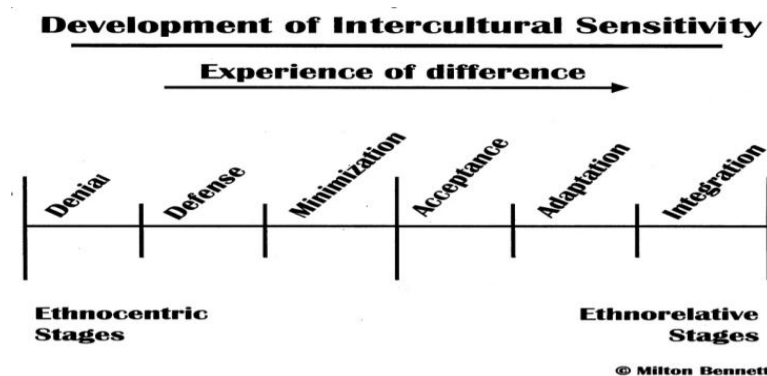
Intercultural communication competence

Raising pragmatic awareness can foster what Kramsch (1993: 236) calls 'intercultural competence', where speakers of other languages can become aware of what she terms "the third place", that is to say, the enriching process of creating new identity and new cultural space that is greater than the sum of individual cultures.

> "In foreign language education, there is an additional tension within language learners who are by definition performers of first language (L1) and a first culture (C1) and are becoming also performers of an L2 and C2. In both cases, there might be a conflict between the needs of the individual and the group, and the demands of the self and the other. It is to break out of these dualities – individual-social, self-other, native-nonnative speaker, C1-C2- that the concept of third culture was conceived."

According to Bennet et al. (2004: 149) intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts. The Bennett scale, shown below, also called the

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (from now on DMIS), describes the different ways in which people can react to cultural differences.

Organized into six "stages" of increasing sensitivity to difference, the DMIS identifies the underlying cognitive orientations individuals use to understand cultural difference. Each position along the continuum represents increasingly complex perceptual organizations of cultural difference, which in turn allow increasingly sophisticated experiences of other cultures. By identifying the underlying experience of cultural difference, predictions about behavior and attitudes can be made and education can be tailored to facilitate development along the continuum. The first three stages are ethnocentric as one sees his own culture as central to reality. Moving up the scale the individual develops a more and more ethnorelative point of view, meaning that you experience your own culture as in the context to other cultures. At the next stage these ethnocentric views are replaced by ethnorelative views.

A distinction has to be made between Pragmatics and Intercultural Communicative Competence (from now on ICC). Both ICC and pragmatic competence include attitudes, cultural knowledge and interpretation skills, and these can be neither taught nor assessed only by relying on traditional methods. Pragmatic competence is part of ICC. On the other hand, ICC is much broader than pragmatic competence.

In the definition and description of intercultural competence we have followed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002); the development of intercultural competence is closely linked to the concept of communicative competence and general competence.

For Ting-Toomey (1999: 261) transcultural communication competence (TCC) refers to an integrative theory-practice approach enabling us to mindfully apply the intercultural knowledge we have learned in a sensitive manner. Specifically, it refers to a transformation process connecting intercultural knowledge with competent practice. She describes transcultural competence through attributes and abilities as shown in table no (1).

ATTRIBUTES	ABILITIES
Tolerance for Ambiguity	To meet new situations with mindfulness
Open-mindedness	To respond in non-evaluative ways
Flexibility	To shift frame of reference
Respectfulness	To show respect & positive regard for others
Adaptability	To adapt appropriately to particular Situations
Sensitivity	To convey empathy verbally & nonverbally
Creativity	To engage in divergent thinking

Chen and Starosta (1998) conceive of intercultural communication competence as 'the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors to elicit a desired response in a specific environment'. This definition shows that competent persons must not only know how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and environment, but also know how to fulfill their own communication goals using this ability.

Mattiello (2005) considers that the foreign language that is thought at school and, afterwards, at university, is usually a neutral language referring to an abstract standard model and having merely educational goals. In his opinion, however, young people, and also students of English, often come across less neutral uses of the language, including slang, such as those found in rap song lyrics, film scripts and interviews to pop stars or football players, etc.

The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to

act in a foreign language in linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001). Rather, it is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which is "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer, 1991: 138).

As stated by Byram (1997: 42) the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the "the ability to decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior". The intercultural dimension in the teaching of foreign languages has become a special concern for teachers and researchers. Studies in the field of social psychology, as well as studies of intercultural communication (Wiseman & Koster, 1993) have provided insights into the linguistic and social skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations.

Regarding pragmatics, Crystal (1985: 240) describes it as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication". In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Communicative action includes not only speech acts - such as requesting, greeting, and so on - but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and sustaining interaction in complex speech events.

Yule (1996) emphasizes that Pragmatics is the study of language in use and explains it by discussing a variety of complex concepts, such as speaker meaning, i.e. how a speaker communicate his or her intentions and how these are interpreted by the hearer, contextual meaning, i.e. how context influences what is said as well as where, how and when an utterance is produced, inferences, i.e. how more is being communicated than what is said, and the expression of relative distance, i.e. how closeness, physical or social, affects a speaker's judgment of how elaborate an utterance needs to be (Yule, 1996: 3).

According to Schauer (2009: 5), linguistic pragmatics has its foundation in language philosophy and developed as a result of ideas concerning the functions and use of language by philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953 in Bach, 2011: 179) "don't look for the meaning, look for the use", Austin (1962), Searle (1969, 1975, 1976) and Grice (1968, 1975). The term pragmatics itself goes back to another philosopher, Peirce (1905), and his work on pragmatism. The first definition of pragmatics that is generally quoted was developed by Morris (1938: 6), who defined pragmatics as 'the study of the relation of signs to interpreters'. It has to be noted, however, that his definition was based on a semiotic view of pragmatics.

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For Bubblitz (2001: 27) linguistic pragmatics is the study of communication principles to which people adhere when they interact rationally and efficiently in social contexts. Speakers/writers follow these principles to imply additional meaning to a sentence, and hearer/readers follow these principles to infer the possible meaning of an utterance out of all available options in a given context. Pragmatics describes the linguistic forms, action patterns and strategies that are used to imply and interpret, which enable interlocutors to comprehend the intended, but not uttered meaning.

Many foreign language students rely on a false assumption of the existence of universal pragmatic conventions. Kasper & Rose (2002) suggest that some knowledge of politeness and pragmatics is universal:

> "Universal pragmatic competence minimally comprises implicit knowledge and ability to use (…) [e.g.] specific communicative acts such as (…) requests (….) [and] politeness as a mutually face-saving strategy (…)".

An adult learner of an L2 can thus build on a large amount of prior knowledge when trying to develop his or her L2 competence. However, many language learners are unaware of the fact that there can be significant cultural differences when it comes to

the realization of central speech acts (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986). Some knowledge is culture specific, and even adult learners have to acquire at least some new pragmatic conventions.

On numerous occasions, the lack of cultural knowledge may make understanding difficult. The importance of the knowledge of both cultures, the source and the target language, is sometimes underestimated both by the L2 learner as well as by society in general.

As stated by Valverde (1997: 247) the contact with the second language daily life, its customs and traditions is a need for a foreign language learner, in order to avoid important misunderstandings, when encountered to sentences like, «our porter kicked the bucket last week», translated literally into Spanish it would mean, «nuestro portero/a le dio una patada al cubo la semana pasada», when it should be translated into «nuestro portero estiró la pata la semana pasada».

Nowadays, expressions like «Full House», can only be translated if we have some understanding of determining cultural factors that native speakers have, they know that the real meaning in Spanish is not «casa completa», but «localidades agotadas».
It is used in cinemas or theatres when there are no tickets left.

«That's too bad» (literally, in Spanish, «eso es demasiado malo»), «¡Que lastima!), «¡Qué mala suerte!», expressing regret.
«Good for you!» (literally, «bueno para ti»), «¡Me alegro por ti!», used to congratulate people.
«Free house» (literally, «casa libre»), it means that the choice of beer is not limited by a single brand in British pubs.
«Take care!», (literally, «¡Ten cuidado!»), replaces «so long!, «goodbye!», «you should take more care of yourself», used in farewells. In Spanish, «¡Cuidate!».
«Two/Four Star», used in Gas Stations to designate different qualities and kinds of petrol: «gasolina extra, super».
«Merging traffic», (literally in Spanish, «tráfico convergente»), it refers to a traffic sign that means «cruce».
«Hold on», used on the telephone instead of «wait» because it's a social convention.

«Mind the door» (British), Watch the door (American), means that you have to be very careful because the door is low.

The American expression «Please, bus your tray», used in notices in some American restaurants, in Spanish «por favor, retire la bandeja», clear away dishes.

Face negotiation activity

At present, the development of L2 pragmatic competence among students has become a highly relevant issue for EFL learning that has to be coped with, as if a learner lacks knowledge of a culture's politeness norms and conventions this can cause severe misunderstanding, misinterpretation and miscommunication between the speaker and the hearer, which in turn lead to a breakdown in communication. This breakdown often occurs due to differences in the means of expressing politeness in different cultures. According to Aridah (2001) although there are some universals in language usage concerning politeness, there are still some specific politeness phenomena across culture. These phenomena are potential sources of pragmatic failure especially for those who learn English as a foreign language.

As we have seen, the lack of pragmatic competence on the part of L2 students can lead to pragmatic failure and, more importantly, to a complete communication breakdown. Thomas (1983: 91) defines pragmatic failure as "the inability to understand ´what is meant by what is said´".

In our view, since pragmatic failure closely relates to foreign language learners' lack of pragmatic knowledge and understanding of the target country culture, in order to improve their pragmatic and communicative competence, more introductions to pragmatic knowledge and cultural information should be incorporated into the L2 teaching.

As can be seen, pragmatic failures not only affect language production but also understanding. A non-native speaker can interpret foreign language conversations following his or her own cultural norms, and will wrongly think that native speakers are being rude in situations where they are acting appropriately according to their linguistic community norms.

Although we cannot teach our students all L1 and L2 differences, we can, however, sensitise them to expect cross-cultural differences and, this way, they will have more open minds. In this sense, Dash (2004: 12) affirms: "Openness to different pragmatic interpretations consistent to sensitivities of various cultures and social groups would be something to keep in mind as well as an approach free of stereotypical judgments".

In our view, teachers should provide students with the necessary tools to make adequate pragmatic decisions in the L2. Students must learn that the codification of a certain message is subject to the conventions of use and these can vary from one linguistic community to another. Often, what comes naturally to people from one culture may not seem an appropriate communication style to people from another one. Culture, self-image or "face" is the image of an individual, or that of a group, that society sees and evaluates based on cultural norms and values. Face can also be defined as "the claimed sense of favorable social self-worth and/or projected other-worth in a public situation" (Ting-Toomey & Kurogie, 1998). Face negotiation theory proposed by Ting-Toomey (1985) can be an effective and necessary tool in developing intercultural communication competence. Following is an example of a face negotiation activity we developed in the last year of Upper Secondary Education. The two pictures shown below were given separately to two different Spanish groups aged 18-19 with a B1 English level.

When they were shown the first one, they were asked the following questions as shown in table no (2).

1. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE FIRST PICTURE?	A MAN IS WALKING WITH HIS DOG. A BOY IS IN THE WATER. HE IS DROWNING. HE IS SHOUTING FOR HELP. THE MAN CANNOT HEAR THE BOY.
2. What is happening to the boy?	He fell into the water and cannot swim.
3. What is the man's reaction?	He cannot help the boy. The man cannot see the boy. He is blind.
4. Why isn't the man helping the boy?	He cannot swim. He is wearing smart clothes and doesn't want to spoil them. There is some traffic and he cannot hear the boy. The boy tried to mug him before, then he

	fell into the water.
5. What would your reaction be?	I would throw myself into the water to rescue the boy. (General answer)

Someone said: "there's some traffic noise and he cannot hear the boy". When students were told to look at the man's gesture with his hand, as indicating that he did not care about what was happening, students answered that the man was wearing smart clothes and did not want to get wet, another one said that the man could not swim few of them said that the man could not hear the boy, then they were told to watch at the life belt which was next to the man, they were shocked and could not find an answer. Someone said that the man did not want to help because the boy tried to mug him before, then he fell into the water. A girl said that the man was of high class and did not want to be bothered; this suggestion was accepted by two other boys who agreed with the girl justifying their comments based, in their opinion, on social inequality. Finally after 15 minutes talk and leaving them to debate in small groups, they were unable to find a reasonable answer.

In the second group, a girl, finally, said that the boy did not ask in the right way, to what the rest of the class started to laugh at that remark.

When they were all shown the second picture, they all admitted their mistakes and accepted the fact that there was a cultural misunderstanding that they were never told about in their previous years of EFL.

Then they were confronted by questions like,

Teacher: Imagine you do not have a watch; you pass by a lady in the street. What would you say?

One student said: "*pues, hola qué hora es?*"

Teacher: "and in English?"

 Student: "hello, what time is it?"

However, after having debated over the pictures, the rest of the group corrected him by saying, "no, in English you'll have to say in a different way, *excuse me madam, could you tell me the time, please?*

Conclusion

As we have described, one important issue of pragmatics for second language learners is that they must be aware of the pragmatic expressions and interpretations as well as the reactions to the expressions that differ between their own native language and the foreign language. It is possible that a learner knows vocabulary and grammar of the target language, but is unable to communicate intentions at the moment of speaking. It is also possible that, as a listener, the learner understands the speaker's intentions but cannot find the most appropriate way to respond to what has just been said. The most typical assumption by second language learners is that they can just transfer how they say and understand language functions from their native language to the target language. This assumption often causes difficulties in the communication in the L2. Although what the learner says may be grammatically correct, it may not be pragmatically acceptable.

Finally, in our opinion language learners must be able to evaluate personal feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions in order to understand another culture and use that experience to reflect on their own life and surroundings.

In order to communicate successfully, language learners must be able to relate appropriately to their audience. They should be able to react and respond appropriately to their own personal feelings, attitudes, and perceptions as well as those of people of other cultures.

Reflecting on experiences in which they interact with others of different cultures helps the learners analyze and learn from each experience. Intercultural experiences provide the most meaningful opportunities for developing capacity in a language.

In our view, pragmatic competence constitutes an integral part of a speaker's overall communicative competence, and consequently, learning how to use the language appropriately can be considered as a key goal of ELT.

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