



Learners' Developing Pragmatic Competence as a common ground for Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Communicative competence (CC), as it was operationalized for language teaching in the 1980s, had for long been the ultimate goal for foreign language learning, taking the native speaker as a model. With more and more frequent intercultural encounters using English as a medium of communication and with research findings showing that nativelike competence is unachievable especially for adult EFL learners, the 'intercultural speaker', the term used to refer to interculturally competent users of the target language (TL), is suggested as an alternative to the native-like speaker as a model. However, given that language cannot be stripped of its sociocultural aspects, the present state-of-the-art article argues that the pragmatic aspects of the TL already being acquired, i.e. learners' pragmatic interlanguage, can be a common ground upon which interlocutors from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds rely in their interactional exchanges provided that they are aware of cultural differences and equipped with such attitudes as curiosity, empathy, openness and ambiguity tolerance which are necessary for successful intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, as English becomes an international language people from different cultures need to use to communicate for a variety of purposes, it is necessary that researchers rethink the way it is taught and English as foreign language (EFL) teachers reconsider their teaching practices in a context where EFL learners are not necessarily in contact with native speakers of the language; non-native speakers (henceforth NNS) of English may need to communicate with other NNS of the language from different cultures(s). Communicative competence (CC), as it had originally been conceptualized and operationalized to develop native-like speakers, has therefore been revisited to integrate the intercultural element to reach intercultural communicative competence.

The aim of this research work is to trace the developments in research on developing FL learners' pragmatic competence and examine how this fits within the intercultural context so that EFL learners become 'intercultural speakers' in Byram's (1997) words. The article argues that being aware of the pragmatic aspects of the target language and seeking native-like pragmatic competence would not prevent learners from becoming inter-culturally competent users of the language, given that pragmatic competence and intercultural competence are closely related. Rather, making use of the target language pragmatics already

acquired would serve as a common ground for intercultural communication encounters in which interlocutors can successfully manage interaction through a variety of conversational tactics provided that they are inquisitive, ambiguity tolerant, and open to the others' culture. Only then can they cooperatively construct meaning and prevent misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

2. ESL versus EFL contexts

From a socio-linguistic perspective, the distinction is usually made between two types of learning context: second language (SL) context and foreign language (FL) context. The former refers to the naturalistic environment where the target language is spoken both in and outside the classroom, and learners are in permanent contact with the native speakers of the language. The latter is the context in which learning a language other than one's native language (L1) is limited to the classroom outside which this language is not used in people's everyday encounters.

This distinction seems crucial for analysing learners' needs and expectations especially when it comes to the pragmatic aspects of the TL. As they interact with natives for communicative purposes, ESL learners' pragmatic competence develops more rapidly as they are in permanent contact with native speakers; they become aware of these aspects and, therefore, avoid any potential pragmatic failure. EFL learners,

on the other hand, deprived of such contacts, are usually unaware of the social conventions and cultural norms that govern the use of the target language. Therefore, they need to have their attention drawn to the pragmatics of the TL to develop their pragmatic competence concurrently with their linguistic competence.

3. Pragmatic competence

To know what to say and how to say it in which context are essential elements in determining one's CC. These elements relate to pragmatic competence (PC) which is defined as the ability to produce and interpret language in a way that is effective and appropriate to the context of use. It goes without saying that linguistic competence alone does not guarantee successful communication, for there are "rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless." Hymes (1971, p. 278). Communication breakdowns may occur due to the unintentional violation of the pragmatic norms of the target language.

Theoretically, PC, although not explicitly suggested as a component of CC in its own right, has always been present in the models of communicative competence (CC). that followed Hymes' introduction of the concept. Such models as Canale and Swain's (1980), Canale's (1983), and Celce-Murcia's (2007), among many others, all attempted to provide content specifications of CC, implicitly including PC, for teaching English to speakers of

other languages (TESOL) with the sociocultural aspects of the target language being considered. For instance, Canale and Swain (1980), elaborating on Hyme's (1972) CC which consists of only linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence, added strategic competence, a third component which compensates for deficiencies in language and communication. Canale (1983) added discourse competence, the ability to produce a coherently arranged sequence of sentences/utterances. Celce-Murcia (2007) included, in addition to the four above-mentioned components of CC, two other competences as shown in the figure below, with some alterations of content specifications. These are formulaic and interactional competences. The first is the repertoire of ready-made chunks of language while the second has three constituents: actional competence relative to the use of speech acts, conversational competence consisting in the know-how to open, maintain and close a conversation, and paralinguistic competence that has to do with non-verbal language.

Celci-Murcia's model of CC (2007)

It worth noting that the arrows show that the competences are interrelated, with discourse competence being the core. But where can PC be situated? Each of the six components contributes to the development of one's PC. Take the example of performing speech acts, i.e.

actional competence; Appropriate interpretation and production of speech acts involves knowledge of sociocultural norms that govern their use (sociocultural competence); aware of the sociocultural context, speakers can either choose the appropriate conventional form relying on their formulaic competence or formulate a non-conventional construction drawing on their linguistic competence. Strategic competence, such as interacting and paralinguistic strategies use, is the recourse if they find difficulties performing the intended act.

Another influential CC model whose focus is on pragmatic competence alone is Leech's (1983, 2014) in which the distinction, as detailed in the following sections, is made between two types of knowledge in pragmatics, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic. Yet, developing learners' pragmatic competence is not sufficiently integrated in communicative syllabi and teaching materials which emphasize linguistic forms to the detriment of language use, i.e. prioritizing the pragmalinguistics of the TL over its sociopragmatics.

a. Pragmalinguistic knowledge

Leech (1983, pp.10-11) posits that pragmalinguistics is the "linguistic end of pragmatics". It covers a whole repertoire of language resources comprising both formulaic expressions and novel constructions, conventional and non-

conventional, that serve to perform linguistic actions. Any of these speech acts can be performed in a variety of ways, with different language forms being used. Are these forms interchangeable? And if not, which is the case, what governs the use of such forms?

b. Sociopragmatic knowledge

For a given speech act to be performed appropriately, the speaker should be aware of the social and cultural aspects that influence the choice from the language forms available for use. These aspects that include, among others, the degree of the speaker's closeness to the hearer, differences in social status and the degree of imposition, are referred to as sociopragmatic knowledge, which determines how formal, direct and polite the speaker's language should be. It is then the context that governs the speaker's use of such forms to appropriately convey the message, and it is also that very context that helps the hearer to interpret the message as intended by the speaker. These sociopragmatic features vary from one culture to another, which may cause interlocutors from different cultures to misinterpret a message or inappropriately produce it.

c. Common teaching practices

To develop learner's pragmatic competence, the teacher's focus should be not only on the pragmalinguistic aspects but also on the sociopragmatic aspects of the

TL, which is not usually the case. Alcon-Soler & Martinez-Flor (2008, p. 3) notice that, 'either the sociopragmatic component is not taken into account or, when it is considered, general descriptions of the situational context are provided.' Most EFL teachers elicit and/or provide the different linguistic forms available to perform a speech act without any differentiations in terms of contextual use. Put differently, teachers' focus is usually on form-function mappings. However, since one language form can be used to express different functions, it is necessary to integrate the contextual factors and resort to form-function-context mappings to develop both learners' pragmalinguistic knowledge and sociopragmatic knowledge and enable them to use speech acts in an effective and appropriate way. There are reasons for which the pragmalinguistic aspects of the TL are prioritized. One possible reason is that it is difficult to integrate the cultural component in language teaching. Another reason for which culture is not fully integrated in English language teaching is the belief that, for this language to be internationally accepted as a medium of communication and to fit into any cultural context, it should be context-free and stripped of its cultural specifics. However, given that language and culture are intertwined and cannot be separated one from the other, the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic components should be

equally emphasized to develop learner's PC.

4. Intercultural competence

In today's globalized world, where English as a lingua franca (ELF) is the medium of intercultural communication, the majority of the language users are non-native speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, with native speakers of English only as a minority.

With more and more frequent intercultural encounters, EFL learners need to be develop their intercultural competence (IC) to become 'intercultural speakers' rather than native-like speakers (Byram, 1997). Defined by Johnson et al. (2006, p.530), intercultural competence is "an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad." IC, therefore, is the ability to successfully interact with people from different linguistic and cultural background usually using English as a common language.

Theoretical models of IC can be categorized in two main types, developmental and componential. The former emphasizes the processes involved in the development of one's IC from being an ethnocentric, who rejects the other's culture, into an ethnorelative, who accepts the other's culture to the extent of

integration. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is one of the most influential models in this category. It consists in a continuum of six developmental stages ranging from denial to integration, the ends of the continuum with defense, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation in-between. The latter, however, which is relevant to the present work, researches the constituents of IC that need emphasis to develop learners' ability to successfully engage in intercultural communication. One example of these componential models is Byram's (1997). It is of five dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovering and interacting, and critical cultural awareness. The scholar argues that to be interculturally competent, you need to know about your culture and the other's; you need to be flexible and open to others; you should also be able to interpret cultural events and relate them to those in your culture; you should be skilful in discovering about the others' cultures and interacting with them; in addition, you should be able to critically evaluate both your culture and the other's.

Leung et al. (2014) synthesize the characteristics of IC suggested in the existing models into three main content areas: (1) capabilities, (2) traits, and (3) attitudes and worldviews. These areas respectively refer to (1) what people can do such as noticing verbal and non-verbal

behaviour and positively responding to new situations, (2) the personal qualities of an interculturally competent individual such as openness, tolerance, curiosity and emotional resilience, and (3) ethnocentric view of the world, perceiving one's culture as one among many and behaving accordingly.

Rather than considering CC and IC two separate competences as Byram (1997) claims, IC should be one component of CC that EFL learners need to develop so that they can effectively communicate in intercultural contexts, including encounters with native speakers of the target language. This approach is suggested in Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor's (2006) model of CC, which consists of linguistic, pragmatic, strategic and intercultural competences.

5. Pragmatic competence versus intercultural competence

Research shows that these competences are significantly correlated (Cohen et al., 2005; Tagushi, 2015). It is evident, as illustrated in the previous sections, that both constructs emphasize the ability to interact in a way appropriate to the sociocultural context. Tagushi & Roever (2017, p.262) advance that Adaptability, i.e. the "ability to maneuver between different contexts with linguistic resources, is a key feature that links the competences." This presupposes that interlocutors who adapt their language to different contexts are receptive and ambiguity tolerant; they are aware of the

effect of sociocultural norms on language use and able to negotiate meaning to prevent pragmatic failure.

6. Interlanguage pragmatics versus intercultural pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics, as defined by Kasper and Schmidt (1996, p.150), is “the study of the development and use of strategies for linguistic action by nonnative speakers.” Put differently, it is the field of research concerned with the study of how non-native speakers develop their pragmatic competence, including speech acts use, in the course of internalizing a new linguistic system. Since interlanguage is a new, developing language system, it characterized by language transfer, i.e. both negative and positive native language influence, in terms of grammar and pragmatics. This is manifested not only in learners’ use of some L1 syntactic constructions but also in their reliance on the sociopragmatic aspects of L1 to perform language actions for instance.

If IP is concerned with the processes involved in learners’ development of their pragmatic competence, intercultural pragmatics deals with the way people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use a common language to achieve their communicative purposes; it is manifested in the intersection of ELF, usually used as a common language, and pragmatics. Interlocutors bring their L1 sociocultural norms to the interaction and,

through a variety of conversational tactics, prevent any potential communication failures.

7. A common ground for intercultural communication

Hymes’ (1971) CC applies to the native speaker’s acquisition of the language as it is clearly stated, “a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others.’ Hymes (1971, p.277). Subsequent models of CC all take nativelikeness as a target for learners to reach. However, research proves that it is unlikely, especially for adult FL learners, to develop their CC as perfectly as native speakers do. Still, in the process of learning a language other than their native one, learners develop a new linguistic system, referred to as interlanguage (Selinker,1972) which draws in some of its manifestations, not only linguistically but also pragmatically, on the learners’ native language system.

Varying from one learner to another, pragmatic interlanguage then is a developmental stage in the course of developing one’s PC in the TL. Given that PC and IC are similar in many respects and as EFL users, whatever their cultural background is, share some knowledge about the pragmatics of English, their developing pragmatic competence can be a common ground for intercultural communication. And potential

misunderstanding or pragmatic failure can be settled in the course of interaction making use of communication strategies on condition that they are aware of cultural differences, open to the other and able to negotiate meaning.

8. Conclusion

As an international medium of communication, English is no longer the possession of the native speaker alone as the majority of those who use it are non-natives. It is true that most EFL learners cannot behave both verbally and non-verbally like native speakers of the TL, given the multifaceted nature of the native speaker's CC. However, interlanguage, as a developing system combining different aspects of both L1 and the TL, can bridge the cultural gap in intercultural encounters through interactional exchange provided that interlocutors are aware of cultural differences and of the fact that no culture is better than another and show the 'intercultural speaker's attitudes of openness, respect and ambiguity tolerance which are prerequisites for any successful intercultural communication.

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