

From saying it right to doing it right: a model of pragmatic competence development

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Abstract

This article discusses the need for the explicit pragmatic instruction and proposes a pentaphasic model of pragmatic competence development designed for learners of different language backgrounds and social groups. The model includes five steps of free and guided analysis and production with specific goals and tasks. The aim of the model is to develop a student's agency as a learner and to raise their metapragmatic awareness by guided discovery procedures, explicit discussions and self-assessment. It was tested on a group of Italian language learners in order to understand their motivational and cognitive demands when approaching speech act focused instruction. Although they were actively engaged into guided discussions, the learner-centred procedure and raising awareness activities prove to be unfamiliar for learners who are used to more traditional form-focused learning sessions. Despite these difficulties, the model provides a flexible framework that can bridge the gap between research considerations and teaching experiences.

Keywords: *Pragmatic awareness; sociopragmatic assessment; pragmalinguistic tools, pragmatic competence development.*

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the communicative competence includes the ability to engage in conversational exchanges motivated by personal, career or educational aspirations. A large number of courses and textbooks offers goal-oriented samples of linguistic behaviour based on different communicative situations. However, it has already been explained elsewhere that the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in various communicative settings is challenging for teaching given the intrinsic variability of sociopragmatic tendencies. In fact, pragmatics as the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 2005) reinforces the need to analyse interactional principles and to recognise sociocultural and contextual variation when making conversational choices.

After a brief state of art, in this paper we are going to present a teaching model of pragmatic competence development which can be used with students of different language backgrounds and social groups. Finally, we will describe a pilot testing of the model with a group of Italian language learners followed by some preliminary results. We believe that the proposed model can be adopted for different speech act sets and can be integrated into a successful learning process.

2. Theoretical underpinnings of pragmatic teaching

To begin with, empirical and corpora-based studies, which stem from the contrastive tradition of cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), prove the existence of norms and standards of what is appropriate and acceptable in a certain socio-cultural context. Since one's native sociopragmatic habits are mostly taken for granted, the only exposure to the research data or to the L2 input is not always sufficient for a successful acquisition. In order to avoid pragmatic failures, misconceptions and misunderstandings, the guided instruction on functional aspects is highly recommended.

According to the noticing hypothesis of Schmidt (1993), the central place of pragmatic teaching is occupied by joint reflection on the link between linguistic form and pragmatic function needed for a specific communicative situation (Martinez-Flor & Usò-Juan, 2010). Moreover, the zone of proximal development of Vygotsky (1978) prompts a significant role of explicit instructions and guided discovery procedures in raising learners' awareness of a contextual variation and perlocutionary effects of pragmalinguistic choices (Alcon Soler & Martinez-Flor, 2008; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010; Cohen, 2020). In such a way, both social and cognitive perspectives of the learner are exploited for a significant learning experience which can be delivered within a specifically designed teaching model.

3. Pentaphasic model of pragmatic competence development

After having analysed L2 acquisition models for pragmatic competence development (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991; Judd, 1999; Tatsuki & Houch, 2010) we decided to propose a new pentaphasic model for pragmatic teaching and learning (Trubnikova, Garofolin 2020). It can be used in a wide range of formal teaching settings and be adjusted to the needs of different age groups.

The aim of the model is to develop a student's agency as a learner and to raise their metapragmatic awareness by guided discovery procedures, explicit discussions and self-assessment. Followed by the motivational boost, both reflection and production phases lead the learner to become a researcher of communication experiences while guided by both implicit (recasts and input enhancement) and explicit feedbacks of the teacher. The sociopragmatic assessment is at the core of the learning progress enhanced by the use of authentic materials only.

The model provides the guidelines for teachers who are welcomed to create and accommodate the tasks to the personal needs and characteristics of their students. The Table 1 specifies the goals of each phase and provides some examples of teaching techniques and tasks that can be used for each specific purpose.

Table 1. Pentaphasic model of pragmatic competence development

Phase	Goals	Tasks
1. Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce and contextualise the topic; - activate existing knowledge; - anticipate the following steps. 	Brainstorming, group discussion, concept cloud making.
2. Free analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identify speech act sets and their functions; - analyse the context. 	Matching, true or false questions, grid compilation.
3. Guided production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - put into practice pragmalinguistic recourses; - use different social variables. 	Discourse completion task, role-making.
4. Guided analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - compose form and function mappings; - manipulate pragmatic variables (power, social distance, costs and benefits, rights and obligations); - carry out cross-cultural analysis. 	Cloze, gap filling, grid compilation.
5. Free production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - produce extended speech units; - self-assess pragmatic appropriateness. 	Role-play, notes taking of real life conversations.

4. Pilot testing of the model

In order to apply the designed model in a classroom setting, a group of non native Italian speakers was recruited for an interview on their learning experiences followed by an experimental speech act related lesson.

The students were four female Russian native speakers based in Italy, learners of Italian L2 at the Dante Alighieri Association courses being self-assessed at A2-B1 competence level. During the preliminary talk they admitted that they were never explicitly instructed on how to communicate appropriately and efficiently. They were also surprised that the proposed session was not form-based and we were not going to tackle any grammatical aspect. The last observation of one of the students was about a more traditional model of language teaching that she expected, with a central role of the teacher and explicit grammar rules explanations followed by drill exercises. Unfortunately, according to these comments, we can testify that a rigid grammar-translation method is still widely applied in the Russian academic setting the students are from.

The classroom talk during the lesson on the request speech act was recorded, transcribed and analysed in order to verify the following learners' aspects:

- socio-psychological dimension;
- cognitive dimension.

We are going to briefly illustrate them below.

4.1. Socio-psychological dimension

We can infer that the learners were little motivated to work with functional aspects of the language. In fact, they felt confident using a certain number of pragmalinguistic recourses such as conditional mood and modal verbs to convey a request. During the guided analysis they associated the highest rate of mitigation devices to “good manners” proving to be unaware of a strategic nature of politeness. Moreover, the learners felt uncomfortable during the raising awareness procedures as they claimed no need to tailor their requests for different settings and interlocutors (“I don’t use all of these potreste at home with my husband”).

4.2. Cognitive dimension

One of the difficulties a teacher might encounter while applying the guided discovery procedure is the need to reconcile their own expectations and experiences and the learners' attention and motivation towards functional features. For example, the learners don't seem to recognise the need to focus their attention on a speech act and prefer to fix grammatical aspects. However, the learners use compensation strategies and apply fixed unanalysed expressions that they just “heard somewhere” when it comes to interactional needs. In other words, pragmalinguistic means they use don't receive a sociopragmatic assessment. It's

needless to say that the reflection on interpretation keys and pragmatic strategies is a very delicate activity, especially because the memorization of fixed formulas is a more familiar cognitive task for this group of language learners.

However, metapragmatic reflection was triggered when unequal encounters were analysed. During the guided analysis the learners noticed that:

- Politeness marker of please is more frequent in Russian than in Italian;
- Modal verbs want and can are both modifiers of the illocutionary force;
- Request is often supported by external moves such as apologies or explanations.

We transcribed and translated from Italian the discussion that took place between the teacher (V.T.) and two learners (V. and A.) during the free analysis when the learners were asked to match an appropriate expression with a picture. The excerpt below is about a service encounter at the restaurant:

V.T. – You chose “Bring me a glass, come on”! So if the waiter doesn’t bring you a glass, could you express your request this way?

V. – Yes, but it depends on the restaurant, here the restaurants are not so much restaurants, how could I say. I’ve been here once, so they are not as they are in Russia, where they are beautiful, there are lights, carpets, and here there was this huge table and that was it.

V.T. – So does it mean that if the setting is not posh you can express your request directly?

V. – Yes, because it’s their job. And I heard that they can say it like that, bring me a glass, they are informal.

A. – Indeed, at the supermarket they say “give me 200 grams of ham”, while I try to be polite and to say at least “please”.

V.T. ... ok, it seems though that this waiter is older than you are, would you say it in the same way?

V. – Ok, here I would say “could you bring”, I’m an educated person, with elderly people I’m on formal terms.

First of all, we can notice the importance of physical setting (“it depends on the restaurant”) and the exclusion of interpersonal considerations during social encounters (“it’s their job”). Secondly, the sociolinguistic dimension (“with elderly people I am on formal terms”) is more easily brought into discussion than pragmatic variables, such as face needs or cost and benefits considerations which were not mentioned here. Finally, a typical native speaker behaviour is stereotyped (“they are informal”), paving the way towards prejudice reinforcements and pragmatic failures.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm at the beginning, at the end of the session the learners were able to describe their pragmatic choices in strategic terms and expressed the need for explicit instructions on how to diversify their verbal behaviour.

5. Conclusion

As far as this particular classroom experiment is concerned, the learners, previously exposed only to a traditional form-focused instruction, struggle to understand the usefulness of pragmatic awareness. Considering this drawback, the pentaphasic model of pragmatic competence development should be integrated with the grammar content delivery in order to gradually familiarise the students with interactional strategies.

We can conclude that the model can be applied in a classroom setting if preliminary interviews on learners' previous experiences and expectations are conducted. Although the utterances are judged mostly along formal and informal scale, it only proves the need to introduce more pragmatic variables through reflection procedures and raising awareness activities. We believe that the memorisation of unanalysed chunks and imitation of native like models should be abandoned in favour of the understanding of sociopragmatic principles and pragmalinguistic tools expansion. We also believe that the importance of cognitive and psychological aspects of learners is at the centre of the acquisition process, so the teaching sessions should be tailored to the motivational needs of students. Despite the difficulties that can be encountered, the model proves to be a flexible framework being able to bridge the gap between research considerations and teaching experiences.

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