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Research Article

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AS A STRUTURAL COMPONENT OF STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is as an essential aspect of communicative competence. Does environment have an effect on developing pragmatic competence? Do levels of pragmatic competence differ between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students? Most studies have shown greater pragmatic awareness among ESL students than EFL students, indicating that the target language (TL) environment has a positive influence on the appropriate use of sociopragmatics. This review of the literature finds that input alone is insufficient for pragmatic competence: learners must notice linguistic forms in their use.

KEYWORDS

Pragmatic competence, second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL), sociopragmatic, pragmalinguistic, pragmatic transfer.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the goal of most second language (L2) learning has been to become communicatively competent and use the language necessary for a given social context (Hymes, 1972). The construct of pragmatics has

been recognized as an essential aspect of communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), especially as it is tied to grammatical knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Only recently, however, has pragmatics

been recognized as a distinct construct worthy of research and assessment in its own right to discover implied meaning through the use of contextual, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and rhetorical factors (Purpura, 2004). Attempts to define pragmatic competence require a definition of pragmatics as a whole, a task that has been difficult because of the inherently fluid nature of this construct that is context-dependent (Grabowski, 2009). Perhaps the clearest and most concise is an oft-cited definition from Crystal (1985) that focuses on the interactional nature of this construct: Pragmatics is 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. (p. 240) Based on this social definition, pragmatic competence can then be defined as knowledge of how to use language to achieve goals in language interaction, or rather, competence of language interaction in a sociocultural context (Kasper, 1997). As pragmatic competence entails whether or not an utterance is acceptable and appropriate to other users of the language in conveying the speaker's intended meaning, it can be further divided into pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic components. According to Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic resources needed for communicative acts (e.g., strategies and routines) and pragmalinguistic failure, therefore, refers to simply using inappropriate linguistic forms. Sociopragmatics, on the other hand, comprises

the sociological realm of pragmatics and refers to proper social behavior in the target language where learners must become aware of the consequence of their pragmatic choices. Sociopragmatic failure is then regarded as more difficult to overcome than pragmalinguistic failure because of the need for awareness. The consequences of pragmatic failure (both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic) can be serious in a variety of spheres from formal international politics (e.g., translation errors that impede diplomacy) to interpersonal relationships (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, p. 133). If pragmatic competence is then essential to successful communicative language ability, what is the effect of environment on developing pragmatic competence? In particular, do levels of pragmatic competence differ between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students? To date, most studies have shown greater pragmatic awareness among ESL students than EFL students (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Schauer, 2006; Tagashira, Yamato, & Isoda, 2011), thus indicating that the TL environment has a positive influence on the appropriate use of sociopragmatics. ESL learners invariably receive more pragmatic input through their daily lives if they are motivated to interact with the TL community and have positive social interactions. The classroom also provides a setting for pragmatics instruction as teachers model and demonstrate how to perform tasks. In addition, questions about language use in context naturally arise in the ESL classroom when students bring in their outside experiences, for example, and ask why something happened to

them in a particular way when communicating with a native speaker (NS) or if a word or phrase could be used to convey alternative meanings. Some studies, however, have yielded a very different outcome (e.g., Niezgoda and Röver, 2001; Taguchi, 2008) that not only challenges previous research, but defies the common-sense assumption that living in the TL environment with exposure to authentic input would better help pragmatic competence flourish in ESL learners than in their EFL peers. These studies shed light on the notion of individual differences, such as motivation and pragmatic transfer, as factors in overcoming the burden of environment and contribute to existing research on the effect of positive attitude in acquiring language (Schumann, 1986). The purpose of this paper is to investigate what role the ESL and EFL environment plays in L2 learners' pragmatic competence and whether individual differences can have a more effective influence than the constraints of the language-learning environment itself. First, the effect of the environment on developing pragmatic competence will be addressed with regards to the role of pragmatic transfer. The effect of motivation on pragmatic knowledge will then be discussed, followed by a discussion of the findings and methodological issues in measuring pragmatic competence in ESL and EFL settings. Finally, recommendations for future research as well as important sociological considerations with regards to NS norms will be addressed.

The role of pragmatic transfer . One factor in developing pragmatic competence in an L2 is

pragmatic transfer, the "influence of the learners' knowledge of other languages and cultures on their pragmatic use and development on the use of the L2," (Kasper, 1992, as cited in Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 78). While some pragmatic knowledge is strictly tied to individual languages and thus can lead to overgeneralizations and pragmatic failure, some pragmatic knowledge is universal (Ochs, 1996), and some can be transferred from learners' first language (L1) (Kasper, 1997). One of the earliest investigations into the differences in pragmatic awareness between ESL and EFL populations was Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) qualitative study among Japanese L2 learners of English. The researchers sought to find evidence of pragmatic transfer (ie., transfer of L1 sociocultural norms in L2 communication) while investigating the effects of L2 proficiency levels and environments. Two main questions guided this research: 1) Will there be evidence of pragmatic transfer in both learning contexts (EFL and ESL) and at both proficiency levels (low and high)? and 2) Will there be a difference in the amount of transfer according to the different learning environments and proficiency levels? The researchers analyzed the written refusals of Japanese ESL and EFL learners, compared to Japanese and American NSS' respective refusals. All of the participants completed a discourse completion test (DCT) where participants had to insert a refusal to interlocutors of different statuses in the following categories: requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. After examining the typical order of formulas for Japanese NSS and American English NSS, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) compared the

refusal data of the ESL and EFL participants, finding evidence of pragmatic transfer in both the ESL and EFL contexts, as well as at both proficiency levels. In particular, there was more evidence of pragmatic transfer in the EFL context than in the ESL context, in spite of the EFL learners' higher average proficiency. Therefore, the tendency toward pragmatic transfer may be explained by the EFL learners having fewer opportunities for authentic input, causing them to rely more heavily on their L1. Alternatively, as the ESL population was more direct in their refusals and thus more TL-like, this could be explained by their lower proficiency and lack of knowledge of less direct, more complicated expressions. Nonetheless, the EFL learners appeared less pragmatically competent than their ESL peers because they used their more advanced L2 skills to convey L1 expressions and sentiments. Yamagashira (2001) researched pragmatic transfer in 9 Japanese ESL learners without an EFL component. He used a DCT and a follow-up interview to study how his participants reacted to refusals and to determine if pragmatic transfer occurs when Japanese speakers refuse in English, if time spent in the TL community affects pragmatic transfer, and if explicit metapragmatic instruction has an effect as well. Like Takahashi and Beebe (1987), lower proficiency participants tended to transfer more often than their higher proficiency peers. However, results also indicated that increased time spent in the TL environment caused participants to respond in a more TL-like fashion, thus indicating that the length of exposure in the environment has an effect on transfer. In addition, explicit instruction in

pragmatics whether in a formal classroom setting or through interactions with NSS-allowed participants who took advantage of such instruction to become more pragmatically competent. Barron (2003) investigated the effect of a prolonged stay in the TL community on the development of L2 pragmatic competence without a comparison to a foreign language group. She focused on a group of 33 advanced Irish L2 learners of German over a ten-month study- abroad period in Germany. Her research questions were: 1) Is there evidence of changes in learners' L2 pragmatic competence towards or away from the L2 norm over time spent in the TL community? 2) Does pragmatic transfer increase or decrease with time in the TL culture? 3) What implications do any changes or lack of changes in learners' L2 pragmatic competence have for our understanding of the development of L2 pragmatic competence? 4) Can one speak of stages of acquisition of L2 pragmatic competence? She performed a quantitative analysis in the form of production questionnaires administered before and after the study-abroad experience, as well as a qualitative analysis focusing on retrospective interviews. Data was elicited three times over the year abroad and was compared to L2 data gathered from 34 German NSS and L1 data from 27 Irish English NSS. The study showed that exposure to L2 input helped many participants achieve more TL- like pragmatic competence. The Irish learners' increased use of pragmatic routines indicated an increase in fluency, efficiency in communication, and the potential for membership into the L2 speech community. The NS norm, however, was

rarely reached. Data revealed that many of the learners "associate language use with an individual's personality and identity rather than with the foreign language itself," (Barron, 2003, p. 349). As the participants felt secure in their own personalities, they did not see any reason to change their L1 preferences of language use and transferred (either consciously or not) their L1 sentiments into the L2. Therefore, pragmatic transfer had a mostly negative effect on these participants, who, in addition, may not have taken full advantage of the study-abroad experience by not establishing deep relationships with NSs, thus failing to either notice, or be motivated to change their speech. chose to study the development of L2 pragmatic competence on a language other than English. He investigated compliment responses of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) and second language (JSL) learners by administering oral DCTs because of the more natural and spontaneous nature of speech production than written DCTs. The oral DCTs were analyzed for compliment response strategies, patterns of semantic formulas, and lexical/phrasal characteristics to determine adherence to Japanese pragmatic norms. Shimizu (2009) found that although JSL and JFL participants differed from Japanese NSS in their use of positive and negative strategies, the JSL group was still closer to more TL-like responses. As only the JSL participants used TL-like avoidance strategies, the JSL learners used more pragmatically appropriate and TL-like avoidances in compliment responses, while the JFL learners emphasized negation at all three levels. Interestingly, Shimizu found that unlikel

Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) Japanese ESL and EFL data, the JSL and JFL responses differed significantly from the American NSS' own English responses, thus implying that L1 transfer alone does not account for their divergences in Japanese. Instead, he implied that it was "transfer of training" that could account for the emphasis on negation strategies. Classroom instruction, he contends, emphasizes the "modesty maxim" in Japanese culture, thus leading to an overuse of unnatural or inauthentic strategies. In fact, Shimizu found that the textbooks employed in his study encouraged learners to use rejection strategies above all others. Therefore, it is likely that the L2 participants learned that rejection is the only appropriate response to compliments. Follow-up participant interviews confirmed his assumption and revealed that the JFL tendency toward negation may have stemmed from their textbooks (i.e., transfer of training), rather than L1 transfer. Importantly, it is possible that the JSL learners' interactions with NSS gave them opportunities to modify the knowledge gained from textbooks. In line with both Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Schmidt's (1993) Noticing Hypothesis, the JSL participants noticed that Japanese NSs used positive and avoidance strategies more frequently than had been taught in JSL classes. This account has clear pedagogical implications for teachers to use more authentic, real-life examples of language use and not rely on textbooks to provide accurate pragmatic instruction, as textbooks often include gross oversimplifications in terms of pragmatic instruction. Shimizu added that this is especially true for EFL learners who have "little opportunity

to engage in authentic interaction and revise their hypothesis about the target pragmatic norms formed through transfer of training" (p. 187). Finding that environment has a definite but complex role to play in the acquisition of pragmatic competence, set out to determine if there are differences in the development of speedy and accurate comprehension of implied speaker intentions between learners in ESL and EFL environments. Her study included 60 Japanese EFL learners and 57 ESL learners in the U.S., all enrolled in college and between the ages of 18-28. Importantly, three of the EFL students had 9-11 months prior residency in a TL country, thus making them unique in comparison to the EFL participants in previous comparison studies. Nonetheless, both participant groups had beginning level proficiencies based on TOEFL scores administered at the start of the study, thereby eliminating proficiency as a factor in this study. Taguchi (2008) administered a computerized listening task that measured the ability to comprehend indirect refusals (eg, providing an excuse to a request without explicitly denying said request) and indirect opinions (eg, expressing a negative opinion of a movie by saying, "I'm glad when it was over.") and analyzed the results for speed and accuracy to provide a developmental account of pragmatic comprehension. The task was administered to each group twice, before and after approximately 120-130 hours of classroom instruction. Results indicated that the EFL learners made many more gains in accuracy than speed, while the ESL learners greatly improved their speed, but only minimally improved their accuracy. In particular,

the EFL group made significantly greater improvement than the ESL group in the accurate comprehension of indirect refusals, but not of indirect opinions. This could be a general issue of second language acquisition where refusals are learned before opinions, but it may also be an instance of pragmatic transfer. Both Japanese and English share certain patterns of refusal (e.g., provide a reason for refusing an invitation), but not of indirect opinions. Based on the EFL learners' wide gains over their ESL peers in the realm of indirect refusals, it seems that pragmatic transfer had more of an effect on developing pragmatic competence than the environment itself. "The actual environment of learning may thus be of secondary importance as long as it affords sufficient instruction and practice to promote general listening skills," (Taguchi, 2008, p. 443). Therefore, Taguchi argues that length of residence itself is an insufficient variable to developing pragmatic competence. In addition, as there were greater pragmatic gains among the EFL participants, it is important to note that these students were studying in an English immersion program in Japan. Thus, the EFL students chose this institution because of their strong motivation to study English at an advanced level. The results of these studies that investigate the effect of transfer on pragmatic competence demonstrate that failure to acquire L2 pragmatic competence cannot be fully accounted for by proficiency, length of stay, etc. Most importantly, the level of motivation to actively notice pragmatic transfer or explicit instruction remains unclear, necessitating qualitative research with more participants over a prolonged period of time.

Conclusion While ESL environments generally afford more opportunities for pragmatic development than EFL settings, the dynamic relationships between environment, motivation, and pragmatic transfer all indicate that individual differences have a greater role to play than just exposure in the TL community. Thus, theory, research and, most importantly, language pedagogy must evolve to address the complexity and difficulty of developing and assessing pragmatic competence. As pragmatic competence "containing cultural aspects and features of social context and conventions cannot be conceptualized without a target language and culture in mind", future research should also make explicit how the TL features to be measured are tied to the TL culture at hand and what effect deviations from the pragmatic norm have on overall communicative competence, as well as their relationship to both pragmatic transfer and motivation.

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