
**EXPLICIT SPEECH ACT INSTRUCTION FOR DEVELOPING EFL
STUDENTS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE**

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ABSTRACT: *EFL learners' pragmatic competence has been the focus of second language (L2) acquisition in the field of pragmatics. Pragmatic competence concerns the appropriate and effective use of language in social-cultural communicative contexts. However, there are often pragmatic failures occurring in cross-cultural communication due to the lack of pragmatic knowledge. Speech act and the ability to perform speech acts largely overlap with students' pragmatic competence. Thus, speech act instruction is crucial for EFL students' pragmatic competence. Based on the theories of speech act and pragmatic instruction, the present study advocates an explicit way of speech act instruction for developing students' pragmatic competence in EFL teaching. And possible suggestions are put forward for speech act instruction including increasing speech act input and strategies, teaching speech acts in contexts, providing classroom settings for practice and employing explicit approach throughout speech act instruction. In this way can EFL students improve their pragmatic competence comprehensively.*

KEYWORDS: EFL teaching, pragmatic competence, explicit speech, act instruction

INTRODUCTION

Communicating effectively and efficiently in any given language requires more than just linguistic knowledge. The ability to employ linguistic knowledge appropriately in certain sociocultural context is more essential and that is concerned with one's pragmatic knowledge. EFL learners' pragmatic competence has been the focus of second language (L2) acquisition in the field of pragmatics. In order to develop EFL students' pragmatic competence, it is important to master the ability to perform speech acts, to convey and interpret non-literal meaning, to perform politeness and discourse functions, to use cultural knowledge and so on. Among these, speech acts play a big part since speech act along with the ability to perform speech acts, to a large extent, overlap with pragmatic competence.

Numerous studies have showed that the ability to select appropriate linguistic forms or utterances to perform speech acts is a major component of pragmatic competence.

Rintell (1979:98) asserted that “pragmatics is the study of speech acts”, arguing that EFL students’ pragmatic ability is reflected in how they produce utterances to communicate “specific intentions,” and conversely, how they interpret the intentions which these utterances convey. Fraser (1983:30) describes pragmatic competence as the knowledge of determining what to say and how to say in order to make intended illocutionary force conveyed and understood. Jung (2002) pointed out that it was necessary for students to master the ability to produce speech acts, to express and explain nonverbal language, to be appropriate, to complete discourse and to use cultural knowledge.

However, most EFL students lack strategies for performing speech acts and thus turn out to be a main cause of pragmatic failure. In response to this need for more research on pragmatic competence under SLA context, the present study attempts to demonstrate two means for fostering EFL students’ pragmatic competence. Measures are suggested to be taken by imparting pragmatic knowledge and implementing speech act instruction. Furthermore, the present study aims to identify suggestions that have been revealed to play a role in speech act instruction. Firstly, it is necessary to increase speech act input and strategies for language input takes the first step in EFL teaching. Secondly, teaching speech acts in contexts is of great value. Speech acts are context-sensitive and instruction combined with contexts may contribute to beneficial and meaningful teaching effects. Thirdly, speech acts performance in classroom gives students opportunities to intake pragmatic knowledge and thus output what they have been instructed. Lastly, explicit speech act instruction throughout EFL teaching will exert more positive influence on pragmatic competence development.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Speech Act theory

Speech act theory was proposed by John Austin and was further developed by his student John Searle. According to Austin, people do things with words and may perform three types of speech acts simultaneously when producing an utterance, that are locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Locutionary act refers to the act of uttering words, phrases, clauses and sentences. It is an act of expressing literal meaning by means of syntax and phonology. Illocutionary act illustrates the speaker’s intention on producing that utterance. While perlocutionary act is the influence on the hearers achieved by that utterance. Speech act is performed in context and features itself as context-sensitive, especially the illocutionary act. In communication, it is the illocutionary that reveals the speaker’s intention and even determines the success of a conversation. Taking the utterance “It’s so cold here.” as an example, it may convey a

statement (the temperature is low), a complaint (the heating system is so bad), or an indirect request (please close the door) depending on the specific situation. Thus, the comprehension and interpretation of speech acts are closely associated with contexts.

Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is the ability to understand and use language effectively and appropriately in order to maximize speech efficiency and ultimately achieve the expected purpose. Hymes (1972) stated that pragmatic competence is concerned with the knowledge of “when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where and in what manner”. Chomsky (1980:206) considered pragmatic competence as the ability to place language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes. He pointed out that linguistic competence includes grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. According to Leech (1983), pragmatic competence consists of pragma-linguistic competence and socio-pragmatic competence. The former refers to the competence of using respective language patterns and habits to understand the language correctly, properly and effectively in stating their intention. The latter refers to the ability to use language in an appropriate way according to respective culture. (Wang, 2019). Bachman (1990) subdivided pragmatic competence into illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence refers to the ability to carry out speech acts and to send and receive intended meaning, while sociolinguistic competence includes the ability to select communicative acts and appropriate strategies to implement them (Shi, 2006). Ran (2006:198) pointed out that the main purpose of language learning and foreign language teaching is to cultivate and improve learners’ actual use of language towards the target language, especially pragmatic competence. From the above definitions of pragmatic competence, we can see that to communicate well, it is vital to employ appropriate pragmatic strategies.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS’ PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Imparting pragmatic knowledge

In order to develop EFL students’ pragmatic competence, it is vital to input pragmatic knowledge. In terms of pragmatic knowledge, there are three components covering pragma-linguistic knowledge, socio-pragmatic knowledge and cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge. In respect of pragma-linguistic knowledge, language forms should be analyzed under pragmatic contexts. Thus, students may understand pragmatic functions instead of the isolated grammatical rules and structures. As for socio-linguistic knowledge, the social and cultural factors behind language use should be systematically introduced, along with the rules and principles of language use in the socio-pragmatic

context. This includes the appropriate use of conversational strategies, conversational modes, polite language in various fields of society. With regard to cross-cultural pragmatic knowledge, interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds have diverged language codes and reveal various linguistic features. Pragmatic comparisons are needed to illustrate cross-cultural differences among different languages in a systematic way.

Pragmatic knowledge is an indispensable part of pragmatic competence. However, pragmatic knowledge alone cannot guarantee a high pragmatic competence. The pragmatic development of EFL learners is influenced by various factors, such as, language proficiency, pragmatic transfer, target language input, learning environment, classroom instruction and learners' individual factors (age, gender, motivation and psychosocial distance) and so on (Ellis, 1999). Speech act illustrates how to do things by means of words. This is a key point in pragmatic competence since many pragmatic failures can be traced back to the inappropriate use of words. The ability to perform speech acts, to a large extent, overlaps with pragmatic competence. Thus, speech acts instruction also plays a big part in developing EFL students' pragmatic competence during the process of EFL teaching.

Implementing speech act instruction

Speech Act Instruction (SAI) suggests that in EFL teaching, English speech acts need to be taught and learnt in classroom practice, so that EFL students can be trained to perform speech acts in a motivated way (Shi, 2006). Rintell asserted that pragmatics was the study of speech acts, arguing that EFL students' pragmatic competence was reflected in how they produced utterances to convey "specific intentions," and conversely, how they interpreted the intentions which these utterances conveyed (Rintell, 1979:98). Ellis (1999:719) holds that pragmatic competence consists of the knowledge that the speaker or the hearer uses in order to engage in communication, including how speech acts are successfully performed. Furthermore, Jung (2002) pointed out that it was necessary for students to master the ability to produce speech acts, to express and explain nonverbal language, to be appropriate, to complete discourse and to use cultural knowledge. Searle also stated that all language communication involved speech acts because speech acts were the fundamental unit of language use (Duan, 1988).

Speech act is an essential component of pragmatic competence. The basic process of second language acquisition (SLA) follows the sequence of input, apperception, comprehension, intake, integration and output. Language learning includes not only language input, but also the intake and output of language knowledge. Therefore, to develop EFL students' pragmatic competence, it is crucial to understand the basic

features of speech acts, increase the input of speech acts and especially enhance the practice of speech acts in classroom settings.

Pragmatic features of speech acts

In order to raise students' awareness of the role speech act plays in their EFL learning, it is vital to know the pragmatic features constitutive of speech act. The first pragmatic feature of speech act is context-sensitive. Speech act is highly correlated with contexts and there are three aspects that are worth noticing in speech act instruction.

First, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the surface forms of an utterance and the communicative functions behind that utterance. Mastering the language form of a speech act does not guarantee a corresponding grasp of its pragmatic function. In other words, language competence does not equal to pragmatic competence and the latter raise a higher demand on learners. Second, there is an important distinction between implicit and explicit speech act, which are divided by whether there is a performative verb in the utterance. For EFL students, the ability to recognize the illocutionary point of an implicit speech act is more demanding. Third, the discrimination of direct and indirect speech act is of vital importance. The directness of language is related to its cultural backgrounds. Hall (1976) divided culture into low-context culture and high-context culture. In high-context culture, language is highly context-dependent, and the way of communication is indirect and implicit. Thus, the inference of conversational implicature is a frequent occurrence. On the contrary, in low-context culture, meaning is expressed clearly through language, and the way of communication is direct and frank. Searle (1975) put forward that indirect speech acts are cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another and the speaker communicates more than what he actually says. For example, the speaker may use question to convey a request. Thus, cultural factors should be taken into consideration during speech act instruction and it is a crucial ability for EFL students to figure out the implied meaning of an indirect speech act and the way it makes use of.

Strategies for speech act instruction

Liu (2003) pointed out that there were some problems in EFL Teaching in China, such as emphasizing language competence while neglecting pragmatic competence, lacking cultural input, and mistaking communication as culture. Therefore, it is important to improve students' pragmatic competence in classroom instruction. First, arousing students' awareness of pragmatic knowledge and increasing speech act input along with the strategies to perform speech acts. Second, teaching in contexts. It is vital to enhance

students' sensitivity to contexts in speech act instruction. Third, providing more classroom settings for performing speech acts. Pragmatic performance may foster students' intake of pragmatic knowledge and further enhance their output in communication. Last, adopting explicit instruction approach to strengthen students' pragmatic competence.

Increasing speech act input

language input is the first step for foreign language learning. To improve students' pragmatic competence, it is urgent to enrich authentic input of speech acts. Thus, in speech acts instruction, it is necessary to provide students with opportunities to observe native English speakers' pragmatic behavior in the performance of speech acts. Besides, as an important input, speech act strategies are necessary for EFL students to enhance their pragmatic competence.

When teaching a certain kind of speech act, firstly, teachers should introduce authentic speech acts occurring in real life as many as possible. Secondly, it is necessary to teach the corresponding strategies to perform that kind of speech act. Thirdly, presenting sample conversations between interlocutors may be of great importance. Before presenting the sample of a speech act, teachers should guide students to associate that kind of speech act with their life experience and create situations for performance by themselves.

Teaching in contexts

Context plays a vital part in the field of pragmatics and it determines the occurrence of a conversation. Therefore, pragmatic instruction should arouse students' awareness of the importance of context and increase their sensitivity to context. In order to develop students' pragmatic competence, teachers should create opportunities for students to use language freely and practice what they have learned in context. Teaching in context features itself as vividness, associativity and restriction. Vividness refers to the combination of classroom instruction with real life communication. Associativity means that students receive and apply language knowledge in communicative situations, which will provide students with clues to remember these language knowledges, such as scenes, interlocutors, emotions, etc. While restriction refers to the fact that context generally limits the content of language activities, the choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. For example, in a context of greeting, words used mainly carry out the phatic function. Words conveying the intention of requesting or complaining are not taken as appropriate expressions under that scenario.

In teaching in contexts, three aspects of practice need being paid due attention. First, students are guided to imagine the specific context under which an utterance occurs and

infer the intention of that utterance. Second, students are encouraged to make inference of the contexts. Teachers provide students with utterances along with the conveyed meanings. Students are asked to infer the possible contexts of those utterances and complement those utterances to create integrated conversations. Third, students are required to be familiar with the collocation of contexts. Teachers give students utterances of certain kinds of speech acts, which convey similar or the same meaning. Moreover, teachers also offer totally different contexts. Students need to select and match the utterances with their correct and appropriate contexts. This can improve students' recognition of speech acts and illocutionary points. Last, students should have a comprehensive understanding of contexts. This may cover the mastering of adjacency pair, conversational implicature, cooperative principle and so on.

The above methods offer students chances to make judgement and inference in communication, so that they can gain a deeper and comprehensive understanding of context in speech act instruction.

Classroom settings for practice

Practice fosters language output. Compared with native speakers, EFL learners lack the exposure to target language environment. Classroom instruction serves as a main way of language input and provides students with chances to intake and output what they have learned. Thus, to some extent, classroom instruction can increase pragmatic input, strengthen learners' pragmatic awareness and improve their pragmatic performance. Traditional classroom lacks classroom participation and interaction. Teachers dominate classroom instruction and make all the decisions about who will speak and when. Students learn in a passive way, and they always receive what teachers say without thinking critically. In this kind of cramming and mechanical learning pattern, students are hard to be active.

To change this phenomenon, there are two points need being noticed. First, providing authentic and meaningful contexts for appropriate language use in classroom. Pragmatic input is to increase students' knowledge and teach students how to deal with different contexts in communication. The input includes pragma-linguistic knowledge and socio-pragmatic knowledge. The former is closely related to language structure, mainly language forms with certain pragmatic functions; while the latter is concerned with various contextual factors, including principles to be followed in various social cultures and occasions. Second, offering students chances for communication and language output. Teachers create opportunities and conditions for students to use language freely in communication and practice in context. Classroom settings are more student-centered and may develop independent students. Teachers can organize

classroom instruction by creating different communicative tasks, choosing corresponding topics and types of activities according to the teaching objectives, and designing various classroom activities. Before the activity, teachers should provide the communicative context and tasks to students. After that, teachers explain the content of the task and give them time to prepare. Students may discuss in pairs or groups. At last, teachers organize students to carry out various activities based on the objective and characteristics of different teaching tasks. In this way can students deepen their pragmatic knowledge and be more familiar with various expressions.

Employing explicit instruction approach

The pragmatic competence may be fostered in EFL teaching, and instruction will be beneficial to students' development since instruction itself may arouse learners' attention, ("noticing" in Second Language Acquisition). Different types and features of instructions will catch different angles of the pragmatic characteristics, and then lead to divergent effects accordingly. There are generally two approaches in instruction, that are explicit approach and implicit approach named by DeKeyser. The latter requires learners to discover and summarize rules by themselves through a variety of classroom teaching activities.

Explicit instruction refers to direct instruction providing learners with explicit information about the target of the instruction, often together with opportunities to practice the target. Teacher's explicit explanation of the grammatical rules is covered in teaching content and students are required to summarize metapragmatic rules. Apart from rules, explicit instruction also includes classroom interaction, communicative activities and corrective feedback.

Dale and Lynn (2005) examined the effectiveness of teaching pragmatic information by way of explicit or implicit pre-instruction, and explicit or implicit feedback. They found that learners learn pragmatic material and develop their pragmatic competence more effectively when they experience instruction, responses before doing exercises and receive feedback after instruction. Explicit instruction and feedback are effective in helping learners understand pragmatic elements and contexts. Zhu (2008) explored the roles that explicit instruction plays in enhancing learners' pragmatic competence through teaching speech acts to a group of Chinese EFL learners and to compare the relative effects of explicit and implicit instruction. Her research turned out that classroom instruction has a positive effect on students' pragmatic competence. Besides, explicit instruction is superior to the implicit one in the acquisition and retention of pragmatic knowledge and ability.

In explicit instruction timely assessment and feedback from teacher scaffolding and peer assistance are of great importance. Timely feedback is beneficial to reduce pragmatic fossilization. The forms of feedback mainly include corrective feedback (request for confirmation, request for clarification, explicit correction etc.) and classroom discussion. Teachers may choose the appropriate form of feedback according to learners' language proficiency, their familiarity with the feedback, the content of feedback and the possible effects.

Above all, explicit instruction should be adopted to improve students' pragmatic competence, which turns to be more demanding for teachers. They not only need to prepare authentic and interesting learning materials and carefully design classroom activities, but also try their best to arouse students' pragmatic awareness, create opportunities to stimulate their motivation and provide correct feedback and guidance as much as possible.

CONCLUSION

In EFL teaching, students' development of language and pragmatic competence has been discussed a lot. While pragmatic competence is indispensable from speech act since speech act features as a basic unit of conversation. The ability to perform speech acts largely overlaps with pragmatic competence. Based on speech act theory and pragmatic competence, the present study has discussed the strategies for developing EFL students' pragmatic competence from the perspective of speech act instruction, which cover the imparting of pragmatic knowledge and speech acts. In speech act instruction, there are needs to introduce the contextual features of speech acts before teaching speech act strategies. As for speech act strategies, following the cognitive process of second language acquisition(from language input to output) it is necessary to increase speech act input, implement instruction combined with contexts and provide more chances for practice to enhance students' pragmatic performance in classroom. Throughout EFL instruction the explicit approach may be of great importance.

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