

Conceptual and Implementation Implications of Blended English Learning for First-entering Students

Phyllis Kaburise

University of Venda (South Africa)

phyllis.kaburise@univen.ac.za

Abstract

*There is a consensus among language teachers that knowing a language is a multifaceted endeavour. To claim to 'know' a language means one is fully aware of the varied skills inherent in the system 'language'. Language is not only a system of grammatical behaviours but is also a system which allows users to operate in the daily business of 'existing' in normal social environments. This has necessitated language teachers adopting a broader understanding of the notion of 'competence' and how it can be acquired. Language teaching and learning therefore has ceased to be straightforward, ritualised and theoretical, becoming rather, innovative, needs-oriented aimed at reclassifying language as an interactive tool controlled by interlocutors in the unpredictable world of communication events. This reclassification has meant attention being paid to the components of language competence and teachers' role in enhancing each component to create meaning in interactions. One component, pragmatic competence is an area not usually focused upon by teachers. The reason usually given is the lack of clear parameters of pragmatic as against the other components of language. Whereas structural knowledge of a language can be seen with different types of assessment, pragmatic competence does not lend itself so readily to conventional methods of evaluation. This is partly due to the fact that a person's pragmatic richness is demonstrated during unrehearsed, uncontrollable and situation-specific linguistic communication events; this make pragmatic teaching and assessment challenging. Despite these challenges pragmatic awareness is vital as it transforms learners into confident, appropriate users of the language, hence making it imperative for language teachers to recognise and instruct towards it. This paper examines pragmatics as a separate skill and discusses strategies in its enhancement as well as some practical challenges that can be encountered in pragmatic instruction in a context of the University of Venda (UNIVEN) in South Africa. The strategies focused upon were role-plays blended with e-learning using a computer programme, **MySkillslab**. Both strategies were seen to have conceptual and implementation challenges leading to the conclusion that pragmatic routines are not so readily enhanced with e-learning due to the spontaneity and unpredictability of communication interaction. But that, of course, should not be a deterrent to the inculcation of pragmatic awareness in an L2 classroom.*

Key words

Pragmatics, users, strategies, role-plays

1. Introduction

Linguistic philosophy recognise four areas within language studies or semiotics. Taylor 1998 [1] discusses these divisions as: phonology concerned with sounds; syntax concerned with the relations between linguistic constituents; semantics with meaning of expressions and the objects to which they refer; and pragmatics with the relations among expressions, the users and the contexts of the use of the expressions. Most language teachers would acknowledge the support in teaching most of these components from normal classroom resources but they would express their frustration in enhancing pragmatic competence, particularly in a second-language classroom. This is quite worrisome as pragmatic competence distinguishes interlocutors who have control and those who lack control over a language, be it first or subsequent ones. Of interest to this paper, therefore, is the inculcation of pragmatic competence, in second-language (L2) classrooms, like those in UNIVEN.

2. Theoretical framework

Attempts to formulate pragmatics as a distinct area in the theory of language, show the tentative and uninspiring beginnings of pragmatics. Definitions of pragmatics were originally quite elusive, with authors either confining themselves to linguistic definition or incorporating so many contextual and societal factors that the subject became vague, subjective and unwieldy (Kaburise, 2011 [2]). Pragmatics starts out from the conception of language as being 'used', or in relation to its 'users' (May, 1994 [3]).

The focus of this paper is on Kasper's 1994 [4] questions: ***Can pragmatic competence be taught and what type of instruction impacts on pragmatic awareness?*** Kasper responds by evoking the notion of pragmatic universals. These are universal routines which cut across most languages and L2 learners, it is assumed would not require any explicit instruction in them. For example, users of any language know that conversation follows particular organisational pattern, such as, participants take turns, you wait to be recognized before you participate; that certain internal structures are specific to certain intentions of speakers and that certain non-verbal behaviours correspond to certain intentions. L2 students also know that the nature of the interaction will vary with factors such as social status, social and psychological distance, the level of 'face saving' involved in the event and the amount of directness and indirectness wanted in the speech act. Pragmatic universal have also lead to questions on whether pragmatic competence does not develop naturally with general language competence and therefore whether direct or indirect instruction is unnecessary (Takimoto, 2008 [5]).

2.1 Role plays

Most literature demonstrate that L2 students do benefit from deliberate instruction to a certain degree (Kasper, 1997 [4]; Ulbegi, 2009[6]). One method of explicitly instructing in the classroom for pragmatic development is role plays where this teaching strategy would facilitate L2 students' movement from being learners to users of the language. Role-plays, are seen as ways of 'bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world' (Holden, 1983:89 [7]).

Role-plays have assumed some importance as teachers need to ensure, additionally, that learners are confident and versatile users outside the classroom. The ideal situation would be for practices to be set-up in different linguistic locations; that not being possible, the next best thing is to 'create' these locations and use role players to give practice in the different socio-linguistic occasions. Ladousse (2004:7[8]) categorises role-play as "perhaps the most flexible technique in the range" of communicative strategies". Stern (1983 [9]) notes that role-playing helps the individual student to become more flexible; to develop a sense of mastery in many language situations and be able to apply, such mastery to new situations. For the shy and less advanced students, role-play helps by providing a mask, where learners with usage difficulties are liberated. Role-plays require imagination and offer positive challenges as they are unpredictable since the initial scenario can literally go in any direction.

2.2 Challenges with role plays

Although the advantages of role plays have been identified quite extensively in literature, (Jarvis, Odell & Troiano, 2002 [10]) this does not, negate the challenges that have also been articulated. Ironically, most of these challenges, can be addressed by well-planned role-plays. For example, concerns about lack of resources, difficulty in creating a real atmosphere and too much preparation time stem from teachers not creating multi-tasked role-plays.

Teachers in under-resourced classrooms should make each role-play as multi-tasked as possible, being exploited for a variety of pragmatic skills. An advantage of multi-tasked role-plays is that they are more true to life. It is unrealistic and communicatively flawed to instruct in one routine using a role-play. Communication events are not structured around single speech acts. The ability to be inclusive and to exploit the unpredictability of speech events, as happens in real life, is the central strength of the approach. However, the leeway for teachers to allow the on-folding drama to take its natural direction is usually curtailed by certain limitations inherent in non-urban schools and teacher background. This results in role-plays appearing as a drilling exercise of one speech act and preventing the activity from being stimulating or echoing real life situations.

The complaint of the activity being dominated by fluent students can be partially overcome by some props such as some scripted dialogue to set the activity going and as students become confident the scripted dialogue is reduced. This should not be seen as a problem as that situation is a replica of real communication interactions. Teachers and even advanced students can take advantage of lulls in the play to enforce pragmatic routines like turn-taking, politeness and face-saving phrases, ice-breakers, ways of ensuring inclusiveness, all aimed at transforming a theory-dominated classroom into an interactive pragmatic one. Although role-plays should not be seen as undisciplined non-lessons, the need to include realism into the activity necessitates some relaxation of class rules, for example it might be necessary to allow to some degree, colloquialisms, slangs, some non-verbal behaviours which normally a teacher would frown upon. A fine line however must be drawn between a lesson incorporating pragmatic realism and an out-of-control classroom.



The comment that not all language topics can be role-played also needs to be addressed. Role-playing is just one of the language pedagogies recommended in the curricula. Topics such as structural arrangement of sentences, socio-stylistic requirements in written discourse creation, truth-conditional semantics, philosophical differences between direct and indirect speech acts need theoretical treatment prior to including aspects of them in a role-play. And certainly it is not expected that role-plays become the dominate form of pedagogy to ensure language acquisition, pragmatically. Of course, part of the teachers' concern comes from the realization that textbooks do not offer opportunities adequate for learning authentic language (Vellenga, 2004 [11]). Language textbooks are usually prescribed either nationally, or provincially or at district levels and hence may be de-personalised and not needs –oriented to schools. In pragmatic-friendly textbooks, students would be required to learn and use language structures in communication events and teachers would be assisted to assess appropriately (Nguyen, 2011 [12]).

In certain teaching environments, where very strict nationally - prescribed curriculum and assessment have dominance, it is quite challenging for teachers to infuse the spontaneous element of role-plays (Ishihara, 2011 [13]). This point focuses the discussion on teacher training. Quite often, a major in English language with language acquisition and sociolinguistic components plus classroom practicals are assumed to equip teachers with the ability to devise explicit, implicit and pragmatic instructional strategies on their own (Vasquez and Shapeless, 2009 [14]). In most countries, South Africa included, it is not clear, in teacher training courses whether general and interlanguage pragmatics are focused upon (Hagiwara, 2010 [15]; Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh (2008 [16])

2.3 Computer programme: *MySkillslab*

Another attempt to create 'virtual' situations for pragmatic enhancement was through the use of a remedial computer programme, *MySkillslab*. Through a series of interactive activities students were exposed to pragmatic routines in the form of suggestions, apologies, compliments and complaints.

2.4 Challenges with *MySkillslab*

Conceptual challenges with *MySkillslab* were based on such activities lacking spontaneity and unpredictability which are characteristic of normal communication and essential for pragmatic development. Practical challenges include the fact that not all students could be accommodated on the programme due to financial restrictions. There were only 35 computers for 305 students, in addition most of the students were non-residential students, with no internet facilities in their homes, hence their only chance of practice was during the day, during their free moments; this limited their exposure to the programme. Some students obviously did not fully internalise some concepts as some students showed less than the 75% required mastery, a problem which can be solved by students getting a longer exposure to the programme, maybe for two or three years. This, of course, had financial implications as enrolment onto the programme was valid for a year and further access would require resources from the students themselves or from the University; both did not prove possible.

The students on the project quickly realized that the project was of a remedial nature and this initially de-motivated them but their interest was rekindled as some talked about their immediate application of the learnt skills. This shows that the nature of student engagement with on-line remedial instruction is highly dependent on the approach that support staff follows. Student engagement must be underpinned by students' self-realisation that they must take responsibility for their learning and work autonomously based on lecturer or self-evaluation. Poor engagement with the concept of on-line support caused, initially, high rates of absenteeism and although this was partially offset by some lecturers including the grades from the tasks as part of students' semester assessment, this necessitated close monitoring of students making it imperative for supervision. This, of course, negated the inculcation of self-development and flexibility of the programme. This was rather disappointing as intrinsic self-actualization and development took a second place to students' desire for immediate better grades. The final point from all this is that the nature of student engagement with blended instruction has to well approached and strategized by staff and students.

Attendance was also low initially as students could not see that their poor performance can be improved by these tasks. This brings up the earlier point made about the need to pay attention to the quality of student engagement with on-line support. There is a need for clear and succinct explanation of the overall purpose of on-line activities to maintain students' interest and for them to see the relevance and direction of such exercises.



An obvious but pertinent point is that students need rudimentary computer skills before e-learning can be attempted. 90% of the students were not familiar with computers so time was devoted to helping the students manoeuvre their way through the intricacies of a computer. This naturally, prevented students from fully exploiting the programme.

3. Conclusion

Both strategies were seen to have conceptual and implementation challenges since pragmatic routines are not so readily enhanced with e-learning due to the spontaneity and unpredictability of communication interaction. Pragmatic development however, responds to explicit instruction, as seen in role-plays.

References

- [1] Taylor, T.J. 1998. Pragmatics. Encyclopaedia Americana Vol.2. Connecticut: Grolier Incorporated.
- [2] Kaburise, P. 2011. Speech act theory and communication: a Univen study. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- [3] Mey, J. 1994. Pragmatics: an introduction. Blackwell Cambridge.
- [4] Kasper, G., 1997. Can pragmatics competence be taught? (Network 2)
- [5] Takimoto, M., 2006. The effects of explicit feedback and form-meaning processing on the development of pragmatic proficiency in conscious-raising tasks. Systems 34(4) 601 – 614
- [6] Ulbeji, E., 2009. Pragmatics. XX11(2) 327 – 356.
- [7] Holden, S, 1983. Role-play and simulation. Second Selection from Modern English
- [8] Ladousse GP, 2004. Role Play. Oxford: OUP
- [9] Stern, H. 1983. Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching. Oxford: OUP
- [10] Jarvis, L., Odell, K. and Troiano, M. 2002. Role-playing as a teaching strategy.
- [11] Vellenga, H. 2010. Learning L2 pragmatics from ESL and EFL textbooks: how likely? TESL-EJ, 8(2).
- [12] Nguyen, M., 2011. Learning to communicate in a globalized world: to what extent do school textbooks facilitate development of intercultural pragmatics? RELC Journal
- [13] Ishihara, N. 2011. Co-constructing pragmatic awareness: Instructional pragmatics in EFL teacher Development in Japan. TESL EJ15 (2)
- [14] Vasquez, C and Shapeless D. 2010. The role of pragmatics in the master's TESOL curriculum. TESOL quarterly 43 (1), 5-28.
- [15] Hagiwara, A., 2010. Journal watch. Pragmatic matters, 11(1) 3-4
- [16] Eslami, Z R., Eslami –Rasekh A. 2008. Enhancing the pragmatic competence of non-native English –speaking teacher-candidates. Bristol, UK: Multilingual matters 178 – 197