THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract- The aim of the study is to shed light on the importance of teaching pragmatic competence by means of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to foreign Language (FL) learners and teacher candidates. After the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in 1980s, today, at least in the last three decades, people in the field are in search of improving the shortcomings of CLT. Though a number of methods have been introduced on overcoming the limitations of CLT; such as Desuggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Silent Way and many others, they all serve to complement a very small area of the gap attributed to CLT. On the other hand, TBLT, introduced to language teaching market by Prabhu, embraces quite a large area that CLT has left behind. From this point of view, this study also focuses on the ways through which TBLT overcomes the shortcomings of (CLT). People in the field propose how TBLT scaffolds language learning through real life tasks and establishes form and function relationships. The tasks not only trigger language learners’ creativity but also bring forth enjoyable, communicative and functional classroom settings. Pragmatic competence covers appropriate language use in different circumstances. Therefore, TBLT addresses the needs of language learners in terms of meaningful language use in communicative understanding. This study puts emphasis on how to teach pragmatic competence to FL learners and FL teacher candidates through rapidly spreading field of “the teaching of pragmatic competence”.

Index Terms- Communicative Competence, Language Teaching, Language Learning, Pragmatic Competence Teaching Pragmatic Competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the foreign language teachers, at least in my country, Turkey, are very much stick to the course books, designed far from the real needs of learners. Thus, there is a need to modify course contents towards practical classroom applications to grasp the pragmatic competence (PC) in foreign language. What we language teachers are doing in classrooms is often the teaching of grammar rules, undeniably important but never ensure the teaching of effective communicative skills alone. Though, generally accepted in the related literature, pragmatics is “the study of invisible meaning”, pragmatics investigates and explores how people are able to accomplish matching their utterances with the always changing context. In course of time, the definition of communicative competence has undergone some other modifications. Lyle Bachman schematize language competence into two basic competence areas of organizational competence and pragmatic competence [1]. We, human beings, have the ability to use the language appropriately in rapidly changing situations in every minute of our social life. For this reason, teaching forms of a FL may not work in real life or outside the classroom with the ignorance of pragmatic competence. That is to say, background knowledge of learners (first language acquisition) can be utilized for the benefit of language learners. For this reason, the ultimate aim in a language classroom is to encourage learners to perform in the target language for communicative purposes. Many studies in the field suggests the inclusion of communicative activities such as role-plays, simulations, discussions, drama, observation tasks and some others to engage students in different social roles and speech events. Although many of the activities in the course books provide opportunities to practice the pragmatic skills, there is a need to help learners involve in classroom practices and modify activities and topics to teach and strengthen learners’ pragmatic competence.

After the adoption of the communicative language teaching, both Audio-lingual and classical classroom procedures have been thrown to dustbin and, primary importance have been attached to the achievement of functional abilities in language learning. As Thomas states, the final purpose of understanding and producing language that is appropriate to communicative situations in accordance with specific sociocultural parameters is of great significance. Failure to do so may cause misunderstandings and sometimes communication breakdowns as well as the stereotyping of the FL learners as insensitive, rude, or inept [2]. In the last three decades, there has been an increasing debate on the teachability of pragmatic competence, if possible, how and why to teach it to EFL and ELT students. Kasper states that there is a lack of a clear, widely accepted definition of the term though pragmatic competence has been recognized as one of the vital components of communicative competence [3]. He maintains that, in Bachman’s model, language competence is divided into two areas consisting of ‘organizational competence’ and ‘pragmatic competence’. Organizational competence comprises knowledge of linguistic units and the rules of joining them together at the levels of sentence (grammatical) competence and discourse (textual)
competence. Pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence, that is, knowledge of speech acts and speech functions, and sociolinguistic competence. ’Sociolinguistic competence’ entails the ability to use language appropriately according to context. It thus includes the ability to select communicative acts and appropriate strategies to implement them depending on the contextual features of the situation. In Bachman’s model, pragmatic competence is not subordinated to knowledge of grammar and text organization but is coordinated to formal linguistic and textual knowledge and interacts with ’organizational competence’ in complex ways [1].

An important question is whether learners need to be taught pragmatics. It can well be argued that pragmatic knowledge simply develops alongside lexical and grammatical knowledge, without requiring any pedagogic intervention. However, research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has demonstrated convincingly that the pragmatics of learners and native speakers are quite different [3]. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper report that; ’Even fairly advanced language learners’ communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value [4].’ Therefore, there is a need for FL instruction to focus on the pragmatics of the language, and researchers in this area generally point out the positive impact of instruction aimed at raising learners’ pragmatic awareness.

II. EFL STUDENTS AND THE TEACHING OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Lyons states that PC can also be taught through raising awareness on the pragmatic aspects of foreign language, and in this process, the metalanguage, that is, “a language which is used to describe language”, can significantly be helpful. In teaching and learning of any language, metalanguage is essential, both in classroom interaction and within the teaching materials. In language instruction context, it helps the learners to understand the key elements of the FL and the major differences between the FL and the learner’s native language [5]. Kasper based on research, conducted by Wildner-Bassett and Tateyama, reports that pragmatic routines are teachable to beginning foreign language learners [6]. This finding is important in terms of curriculum and syllabus design because it dispels the myth that pragmatics can only be taught after students have developed a solid foundation in L2 grammar and vocabulary. As we know from un instructed first and second language acquisition research, most language development is function-driven - i.e., the need to understand and express messages propels the learning of linguistic form. Just as in un instructed acquisition, students can start out by learning pragmatic routines which they cannot yet analyze but which help them cope with recurrent, standardized communicative events right from the beginning. Then, from the early years of primary education to the final years of high school and oftentimes to prep-school of higher education, the teaching of PC should always be on the agenda of curriculum designers and course-book writers.

According to Aquino, there are two ways of teaching language: one is having meaning as the focus of the teaching, and the other is having form as the focus in the language classroom [7]. Considering language as meaning is not ignoring the importance of grammar in learning but it is considering vocabulary and understanding as central in communication. The task-based approach (TBA) is considered a communicative approach, once learning occurs through communication or use of the language. This approach provides students with the negotiation of meaning while they communicate and interact to try to accomplish the task. The interaction often makes students face new knowledge rather than only their prior knowledge of the language. When using the TBA, we focus on the completion of the task instead of focusing on the language used for doing so. Therefore, students use the language freely without worrying too much about form, which comes naturally. According to Larsen-Freeman, project work or task work “helps to bridge the gap between language study and language use”. The author also argues that “learning to communicate by communicating, rather than by preparing to do so through practicing the various pieces of language, is a different way to approach the goal of developing student’s communicative competence” [8]. There is an argument on whether or not learners profit from definite kinds of activities to develop L2 proficiency. One of the alternatives to help them do so is giving learners an opportunity to practice samples of language they are exposed to, and the means employed to do that are the tasks. A general view of task would be that a task is any kind of thing people do in their lives. In a pedagogical view, a task would be something more specific. According to Cameron, one way in which ’task’ entered language teaching was through work with adults, who needed to use the second language outside the classroom. For these learners, there was sometimes a marked contrast between the kinds of activities they did in classrooms and the kind of activities they needed English for in their lives outside the classroom, and tasks were adopted as a unit that would try to bring the classroom and ‘real’ life closer together. The goals and outcomes of tasks were to relate the real needs of learners such as reading bus timetables or buying cinema tickets. Some writers argued that materials used should be real and authentic too [9].
For David Nunan, a “task is a piece of meaning-focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language”. The author defines two kinds of tasks: the “real world” or “target” tasks and the pedagogic ones. Real world tasks are the ones which happen in real situations, things that speakers have to do in their daily lives, while the pedagogic tasks are the ones that happen in the classroom [6]. Nunan believes that once “classroom tasks are generally justified or rationalized in either ‘real-world’ or ‘pedagogic’ terms, tasks with a real-world rationale require learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviors required of them in the world beyond the classroom”. The author claims that, task-based language teaching rather than making the learner practice language for its own sake, gives him a real meaning for doing that, an objective for using language that is the aimed outcome of the task proposed. Regarding pragmatic competence, we believe that the real-world tasks can give the students an idea of what happens in everyday conversations and prepare them for that, although they might be adapted or modified to be used in the classroom.

Many studies show that textbooks rarely provide enough information for learners to successfully acquire pragmatic competence. Additionally, textbooks not always meet the requirements of every classroom dynamics for they are designed for a large population covering different countries. Thus, there is need to modify the task and activities according to the needs of learners. For example, in one of the units of a course book, on developing speaking and writing skills, is based on an idea of “organizing a festival”. The learning outcome of this three-hour-classroom is to make learners first discuss on a topic, take notes, write about how to make an organization and present it in the classroom. Three of the practicing teachers planned to teach offering and rejecting speech acts in their three-hour-class in the high school totally depending on the topic presented in the course-book. However, what the problem here is that the trainees are loyal to the topic Rio Carnival, presented in the book, that learners have no or little idea. Trainees just missed the idea that developing a talk on a very unfamiliar topic might turn to be an unproductive one. What trainees should keep in their minds is that they are not transferring world knowledge, that is, learning something about Rio Carnival, but using it as a tool for producing “offering”, “rejecting” and “accepting” speech acts. In other words, the expected outcome of studying on a topic as tool should entail what formulae are used, and what additional means of expressing functions are employed, such as expressing pleasure about the giver’s thoughtfulness or the received gift, asking questions about it, and so forth. Finally, by examining in which contexts the various ways of expressing gratitude are used, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects are combined. By focusing students’ attention on relevant features of the input, such observation tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings. Students are thus guided to notice the information they need in order to develop their pragmatic competence in L2 [13]. The observations made outside the classroom will be reported back to class, compared with those of other students, and perhaps commented and explained.


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III. ELT STUDENTS AND THE TEACHING OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

In an ELT context, trainees should be provided with both theoretical and practical pragmatic knowledge and be guided to attain on how to develop their PC teaching skills.

Harlig states that one of the practical ways of teaching the pragmatic competence is discourse completion tasks (DCTs) also known as closed role plays, providing aural and/or written scenarios to which individual participants respond orally [10]. Written DCTs are written production questionnaires which provide scenarios to which participants respond in writing. Kasper proposes that students can be given a variety of observation assignments outside the classroom. Such observation tasks can focus on sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic features [6]. Eisenstein and Bodman asserts that a sociopragmatic task could be to observe under what conditions native speakers of American English express gratitude - when, for what kinds of goods or services, and to whom [11]. Depending on the student population and available time, such observations may be open or structured. Open observations leave it to the students to detect what the important context factors may be. For structured observations, students are provided with an observation sheet which specifies the categories to look out for - for instance, speaker’s and hearer’s status and familiarity, the cost of the good or service to the giver, and the degree to which the giver is obliged to provide the good or service. A useful model for such an observation sheet is the one proposed by Rose for requests [12]. A pragmalinguistic task focuses on the and linguistic means by which requesting, thanking, warning, apologizing and any other functions are accomplished - what formulae are used, and what additional means of expressing functions are employed, such as expressing pleasure about the giver’s thoughtfulness or the received gift, asking questions about it, and so forth. Finally, by examining in which contexts the various ways of expressing gratitude are used, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects are combined. By focusing students’ attention on relevant features of the input, such observation tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings. Students are thus guided to notice the information they need in order to develop their pragmatic competence in L2 [13]. The observations made outside the classroom will be reported back to class, compared with those of other students, and perhaps commented and explained.
by the teacher. These discussion can take on any kind of small group of whole class format.

Depending on the background knowledge of students, studying both theoretical and practical aspects of speech acts may take two or three weeks. Nevertheless, lecture on a rather challenging issue may not ensure the complete comprehension of the matter. For this reason, creating student-researchers may well work to make them involve, grasp and depict abstract processes happening in the inner worlds of people. When students (1) are motivated to be a researcher, (2) create their own data collection tool, (3) carry out data collection process, and (4) present findings to the classroom for discussion, they probably reinforce the knowledge they had before and make use of it for their teaching purposes in the future. In other words, teachers and teacher candidates are in urgent need of the significance and the teaching knowledge of PC in their actual and future language classrooms. The following teaching procedure of PC has been used by the researcher for ten years for ELT students.

The Teaching of DCT procedures to students to create their own DCTs requires a long in-and-out classroom processes;

Step 1. (First Week) The instructor presents many examples of DCTs used by the researcher himself and other researchers in the world.

Throughout this early step, taking almost two weeks (six hours), ELT students have a chance to discuss and analyze how researchers create their data collection tools.

Step 2. (Second Week) Students write a sample scenario in the classroom to be asked to their classmates during the coming 3 hours.

After having an idea on what the DCT is, students write their own situations - a single scenario – to see their ability on writing situations. In the second hour, students collect data from their classmates through their situations. They go around in the classroom and reach as many as people, give instructions, namely, tell the subject “just say the first thing that comes to your mind”, read the situation and note down the respondents verbal reaction.

Step 3. Classroom discussion is conducted to make them realize how their situations work to collect data on speech acts as reactions to their situations.

Step 4. (Third week) Students write ten scenarios, sometime in the same week, covering different but limited illocutionary speech acts of “requesting”, “thanking”, “apologizing” and “complaining” in creating their own DCTs.

This limitation of speech acts seems to be necessary in order not to create a confusion on determining the functions by means of situations on the one hand and later let them discover tens of different speech acts serving functional use of the language. In the following weeks, students are asked to make a list of speech acts for their further studies and on average 50 different items can be found by learners.

Step 5. Students bring their DCTs to the classroom and employ it to see how it works (pilot application in the classroom for corrections). The one in the following is a student example:

“You drive to the shopping center and park your car in the parking lot. You come back to your car and you notice that it has been dented. You see a paper saying “I am sorry! Here is my phone number…” on the windshield. You call him for the damage as a calm person and say:” YOU:…………………………

(Written by 3rd year ELT student Merve Sekmen)

Step 6. (Fourth week) Final versions of DCTs are conducted by students to collect data.

Responses can be both recorded on mobile phones to be transcribed later or respondents may write their reactions on a dotted space provided below the situation.

Step 7. Students study the collected data and write their findings for each of their scenarios.

Because of the rich content and huge amount of data, the discussion sessions on the speech acts collected by students takes at least two or three weeks.

CONCLUSION

Though many people in the field define and describe pragmatics differently, 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 language learners. For this reason, as it is obvious from the preceding examples, we need to transform traditional forms of language teaching into pragmatic understanding one, focusing on communicative needs. That is to say, teaching forms of a foreign language may not work in real life or outside the classroom with the ignorance of pragmatic
competence. ELT learners who are would-be teachers not only need to develop PC but improve their teaching abilities on how to raise their future students’ awareness. EFL learners should be furnished with the PC that would enable them effective communicators. Language teachers, relying on their pragmatic knowledge, may well modify and enhance textbooks in consideration with the communicative needs of their learners. Curriculum designers and course book writers can benefit from PC studies and include practical procedures to raise language learners’ awareness.

REFERENCES
