KEY CONCEPTS: PRAGMATICS

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Note: This a brief introduction to the concept. For more detail, please see the Recommended Further Reading list.

Pragmatics has long been part of the study of both the English language and English language teaching. As a constituent of descriptive linguistics, it explains how morphology, syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology are deployed in human language to make sense. Although correct usage of pragmatics requires mastery of skills frequently taught in English language courses, such as lexicon, syntax, and organization, which are frequently taught in English language courses, pragmatics itself is often omitted from curricula. However, as our students are increasingly using English for travelling or working within an environments populated by proficient English speakers, awareness of the pragmatic aspects of language is becoming more important to avoid miscommunication.

As an example, Halenko and Jones (2011), researching the pragmatic awareness of Chinese EAP learners in the UK, noted that their students struggled with simple tasks like requesting information from a lecturer. Pragmatic failure can therefore cause greater misunderstanding than grammatical failure and may even lead to communication breakdown (Thomas, 1983).

DISCUSSION

The field of pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics and semiotics (signs and meaning-making) and explains how language users avoid ambiguity and show intent. Basing their seminal research on Hymes' (1972) definition of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) applied linguistic theory to language teaching to ensure that linguist assessment encompassed grammar of rules (linguistic competence) as well as grammar of usage (linguistic performance). Research in pragmatics often draws upon other theories such as Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969).

Expanding upon the communicative competence definition by Hymes (1972), Bachman (1990) defines pragmatic knowledge as knowing how words and utterances can be assigned specific meanings in context and function according to the user's intentions. Unlike semantics, which focuses on the literal meaning of words, pragmatics focuses on inferred meaning perceived by the speaker and listener, who use manner, place, and time of an utterance to create meaning.

The field of pragmatics involves implicatures; that is, things that are communicated although not explicitly expressed. For this reason, language that has a pragmatic function may often be idiomatic or metaphorical.

KEY TERMS

Utterance vs. sentence: A sentence is a string of words isolated from context. It therefore has no intrinsic meaning. If the meaning of a sentence can be inferred through the listener's knowledge of both the linguistic and non-linguistic contexts, it is an utterance. Leech (1983) suggests using the word sentence for grammatical structures, and the term utterance for instances of these, identified by their use in a particular circumstance. For example, "It's small" is a sentence; however, until placed within a context, it is full of ambiguity. What is "it"? Why was this said? What is the implied meaning? Who said it? To whom? For what reason?

Speech acts: These are utterances that have a performative function; that is, they perform the action they describe. Types of speech acts are promising, requesting, ordering, greeting, warning, inviting, and congratulating (Searle, 1969).

These are classified into:

• locutionary act: what was literally said (e.g., "Phew, it's hot in here")
• illocutionary act: the implied meaning (e.g., "Please open the window")
• perlocutionary act: the effect of the utterance (e.g., the listener asks if the window should be opened / opens the window)

Pragmatic competence: This is related to communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and is defined by Thomas (1983) as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (p. 96). In the example above, if the speaker says, "It's hot in here" and the listener replies, "Would you like me to open a window?", then pragmatic competence has been achieved. The listener, through the speaker's utterance, has understood the illocutionary act and has inferred that a request has been made. Studies of this phenomenon have occurred both within the academic context (Halenko & Jones, 2011) and

in areas such as medicine (Hull, 2016).

Pragmatic failure: According to Thomas (1983), this is a combination of pragmalinguistic failure related to grammatical error, or when a learner transfers L1 speech act strategies to L2, and sociopragmatic failure, which involves the learner's lack of use of appropriate strategies related to the social conditions of the target language. An example of pragmalinguistic failure given by Thomas (1983, p. 101) is students responding, 'No I wouldn't', in response to the question, "X, would you like to read?". The learners failed to recognize the speech act was a request. The above example is from Russian classrooms, but the same situation can be experienced in China. In relation to Chinese L1 speakers, a common related research area has been the speech act of compliment giving and receiving (Cheng, 2011; Yu, 2011). For example, one explanation found for the pragmalinguistic differences between compliment receiving in L1 (Mandarin) and L2 (American English) was thought to be the transfer of cultural practices such as a show of modesty by the downgrading of compliments (Cheng, 2011).

Pragmatic development: This is the theory of how pragmatic competence occurs and includes research on how to foster this in the classroom (Chang, 2010).

RELEVANCE FOR TEACHING

Pragmatics has much significance for the language classroom within all language skill areas. The pragmatic focus and teaching method adopted will depend on students' reasons for learning English and curriculum restrictions. Those who are about to live and work overseas will have different pragmatic mastery needs than those learning English as part of their core curriculum for a particular degree.

Two main approaches have been used for teaching pragmatics: a general raising of awareness and explicit teaching. Yu (2011), noting that "socio-cultural conventions are so deeply ingrained in every individual..." (p. 1144), suggests that the teaching focus should be aiming to raise awareness to create learners who are more flexible and tolerant of pragmatic-related responses from other cultures. Opportunities for reflection on L1 and L2 differences can be achieved by providing more

opportunities for social interaction in an L2 environment (Timpe-Laughlin, 2016).

These opportunities can be created by teaching learners both speech acts in the target language and the motivation or intent of these acts, which involves noticing elements of time, person and performance (Blum-Kulka, 1982). It also requires correction of incorrect forms resulting from L1 pragmatic transfer. Limberg (2015) recommends a combination of these approaches along with progressive scaffolding of pragmatic development. Such considerations include gaining expertise, raising awareness, drawing conclusions, exploring speech acts, combining pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, creating variability, integrating different language skills, and practising speech acts within sequential structures.

In sum, regardless of whether the teacher aims to develop learners' pragmatic skills in a particular speech act, or focus only on raising awareness, pragmatically-aware language users will more likely be "enabled to avoid appearing impolite, hypocritical, or ironical [sic] and also make less biased judgement of others" (Sifianou, 1992, p. 208, as cited in Yu, 2011, p. 1144). ▷

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Handbooks

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