Teaching Apologies in the EFL Classroom: A Speech Acts Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to investigate the teaching of apologizing as a speech act in EFL Classroom. For this purpose, the definition and the communicative function of apologies are explored, aiming at crystalizing the importance of apologies in EFL. The paper finally provides four speech acts awareness-promoting activities that incorporate the apology speech act into a set of explicit pragmatic instruction.

KEYWORDS

Apologies, pragmatics, speech acts, EFL classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Communicative use of language seems to give rise to an appealing area in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Apologies are the speech acts with high frequencies in our daily life. The communicative functions that apologies sever is commonly considers as a remedial action (Goffman, 1971) and an act of verbal redress, which is called for when social norms have been violated by a real or potential offence (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983:20). The speech act of apologies has also been studied cross-culturally and some similarities and differences have been sorted out between cultures in the use of apologies (Olshtain 1983; Garcia 1989; Suszcynska 1999; Cohen and Olshtain 1993; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984). The studies mentioned above have been carried out in second language learning situations. In EFL Classroom studies have been carried out by Erçetin (1995) and Tunçel (1999), which found out that the culture of the learners mainly contributes the differences. In the language classroom, these cultural values mean that teaching apologies is of crucial importance for the sake of effective communication since if little attention is paid to the role of that apologies played in various cultures, the ultimate goal of communication will be jeopardized. The present paper will provide background information on the important speech act and educational strategies for application in the EFL classroom to help the teachers arm their students with a vital tool to successful interactions. This paper also presents four speech acts awareness-promoting activities that incorporate the apology speech act into a set of explicit pragmatic instruction, entailing the account of apologies, current TV shows of English-speaking countries, discourse completion tasks and role plays.

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THE PRAGMATICS OF APOLOGIES

Even though there is no consensus on the exact definition of an apology, the all definitions being attempted generally clusters in two groups: the definition of remedial or restoring act and the definition of face-threatening act.

Goffman (1971) takes apology as a kind of remedial act and maintains that “an apology is a gesture through which some individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of the offence and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule” (Goffman, 1971: 112). Besides, Leech (1983) considers apology as a social interaction that is to remedy imbalanced social relation. In his “tact maxim”, Leech indicates that “apology is a convivial speech act whose goal coincides with the social goal of maintaining harmony between S (Speaker) and H (Hearer), and therefore, the realization of an apology provides benefit for the H and is to some degree at cost to the S” (Leech, 1983: 104). In addition, the act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to “set things right” as Olshtain puts it. (Olshtain 1983:235). Marquez-Reiter (2000: 44) even states an apology is a “compensatory action for an offense committed by the speaker which has affected the hearer.”

While on the other hand, Brown and Levinson (1987) define apology as a face threatening act that does harm in some degree the speaker’s positive face in that in doing it the speaker is well aware that a transgression has been done. At the same time, the speaker repays the debt caused by his or her inappropriate behavior by apologizing. Holmes (1990) takes apology as a speech act which is directed to the hearer’s face needs and designs to remedy an offence for which the speaker is responsible for, and hence to restore equilibrium between the speaker and the hearer. She goes further to argue that apology as an illocutionary act has some minimal felicity conditions to meet, that is: 1) an act has occurred; 2) the speaker takes the act as an offence to the hearer; 3) the speaker supposes himself or herself responsible for the act.

Although the categories of an apology has been classified by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) as 1) An expression of apology (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device IFID), including a) an expression of regret (e. g. I’m sorry), b) an offer of apology (e.g. I apologize), c) a request for forgiveness (e.g. excuse me, forgive me); 2) An offer of repair/redress (REPR) (e.g. I’ll pay for your damage); 3) An explanation of an account (EXPL) (e.g. I missed the bus); 4) Acknowledging responsibility for the offense (RESP) (e.g. It’s my fault); 5) A promise of forbearance (FORB) (e.g. I’ll never forget it again), we still have to realize that the actual form an apology takes, as with all the other speech acts, depends mainly on the context of the encounter (Ellis, 1994). Context involves the relationship of the people, the degree of imposition and the seriousness of the offence. For English as foreign language (EFL) learners, the competence to make an appropriate apology is very importance to fulfill the communicative task. Simple and formulaic as apologies may seem to be in their wording, they are culturally saturated speech acts that can decide ultimate success of the communication.

TEACHING APOLOGY PRAGMATICS

For most of the language learners, the most difficult thing is act like the native speakers in the particular situation. Therefore, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor
holds that “The chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learner’s pragmatic awareness and give them choice about their interactions in the target language” (2003:38). That is to say, teachers have to equip the learners with as many choices as possible in a wide range of contexts so that the learners can develop a host of potential options in command when they are in the real communicative situations. With certain knowledge of the most helpful apology routines and the variety of situation one might encounter, learners can start to make their own choices and generate their own routines, moving closer to communicative competence. The following four awareness-promoting activities are to provide input and a context for interpreting the communicative act.

The account of apologies

Asking learners to keep an account of apologies they experience in both Chinese and English prompts their awareness to the communicative function of apologies. In the lead-in part of a class, the awareness-promoting questions are raised to direct the learners’ attention to the important points of the apology speech act which helps the learners to relate to and reflect on their own experience and knowledge. The question can be designed like this:

1) Who are the people you have apologized to recently?
2) What expressions have you used to start the conversation (IFID)?
3) Why do you have to apologize to certain people differently from others?

Questions like these can prompt learners to discuss the differences of apologies they have experienced or witnessed with both native English speakers and with Chinese speakers in authentic exchange. Besides, comparisons have to be made on the phrases and expressions between the real-life exchange and those they have learned from their English textbooks. Contextualization of the phrases and expressions by providing some situations would help learners gain awareness of available patterns and routines of apologies.

Current TV shows of English-speaking countries

TV shows presents a mixed variety of apologizing situations. One series can be used in Chinese EFL classroom is the American comedy-drama Desperate Housewives, which aired on ABC from 2004 to 2012 and follows the lives of a group of women as seen through the eyes of their late friend and neighbor. The seventh of this series is used in my classroom since apologies in that season appeared with high frequency in 259 altogether, and almost all types of apologies can be discussed by watching parts of an episode, such as IFIDs, REPRs, EXPLs, RESPs and FORBs. The reasons for each type of apologies applied are discussed to draw learners’ awareness to the corresponding situation to enhance their pragmatic awareness. At the same time, it is a better way to address what is inferred from the way something is said than just rendering the words and grammar of the sentences.

Discourse completion tasks

A DCT is a form-oriented activity which provides learners a favorable circumstance to record language learned from textbooks in a contextual format. A typical DCT can be used for focusing attention on the given speech act or even, and
triggering the learners to fill in or select the language that is appropriate for the interaction since it will name the participants and the situation involved. Different apologizing contexts should be provided first and then divide the learners into several groups to let them decide the most appropriate language to employ in each given context. The following are just three scenarios used in my classroom.

1) You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after xeroxing a chapter. You held onto it for almost two weeks. Your classmate felt upset since she needed it to prepare for last week’s class.
   You:

2) You accidentally bump into a well-dressed young lady at a campus store, causing her to spill her belongings all over the floor and her foot being hurt, too.
   You:

3) At a friend’s apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her.
   You:

Role plays

With a thorough understanding of apologies as a speech act, the learners are directed to role play activities which will challenge them to respond properly in situations with verbal communication. This practical activity completes and supports the above mentioned DCTs. The role plays can be first in Chinese and then in English for the sake of self-reflection and the different cultural values, be it language or custom.

CONCLUSION

As far as apologies are concerned, a useful way to get students prepared for what will happen outside classroom is via explicit pragmatic instruction. The awareness-promoting activities described in this paper can not only ensure that the students will receive the explicit pragmatic instruction but also enhance their communicative competence.

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