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Developing ESP Learner L2 Pragmatic Awareness through Interviewing Native Speakers of English

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Abstract

The article proposes ways of developing foreign language learners’ pragmatic awareness in ESP settings through involving them in research on their own difficulties and pragmatic failures in communication with native speakers. It also discusses data obtained from an experiment undertaken by the author/teacher in co-operation with music students learning English as a foreign language at the Rachmaninov Institute of Music in Tambov, Russia.

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1. Introduction

It is in academic contexts that Russian undergraduates involved in ESP training courses so as to continue their study for a bachelor’s or a master’s degree at an international university face difficulties in professional communication and informal interaction with peers and teachers who are native speakers. These difficulties are most commonly associated with a mismatch of their statements with the context of communication.

The study of how language is used in specific contexts for specific purposes is now known as foreign-language (L2) pragmatics (Nunan 1993; Yule 1996; Bardovi-Harlig 2013). In language pedagogy, pragmatics has a specific meaning. The goal of L2 pragmatics teaching, or pragmatic awareness development, is to foster in foreign language learners the ability to find socially acceptable language for situations they arrive at (Bardovi-Harlig, & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 37). In this case, pragmatics encompasses speech acts, conversation structure, its implicature (what

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is implied), its management, the organization of discourse and sociolinguistic aspects of language use (e.g., choice of forms of address, etc.).

Pragmatic rules of language use are often subconscious and even native speakers are often unaware of their existence until they are violated (i.e. as long as nobody’s feelings are hurt or no one feels offended). Unfortunately, pragmatics, unlike other aspects of a foreign language, has not yet received due attention in language pedagogy in general and ESP teaching in particular. However, as shown by recent studies (Bardovi-Harlig, & Dörnyei 1998; Kasper, & Rose 1999; Gorodetskaya, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig, & Vellenga, 2012), the pragmatic rules of language use should not be “secret rules” for students and teachers alike.

This article is based on the data obtained in the study which aim was to describe the process that allows ESP learners to experience authentic oral interaction with native speakers and reflect on the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of oral discourse as they arise. Learners’ increased awareness of language in context in so doing was presumed to create confidence in their productive oral skills and increase their academic activities in a foreign language.

2. Research Design

2.1. Context

It is rather challenging to find an appropriate context for L2 learners to acquire pragmatic competence. Quite recently, study abroad and using film in the foreign language classroom have been discovered as fruitful contexts for interlanguage pragmatic development (Schauer, 2011) and L2 pragmatics teaching (Ittzes Abrams, 2014), respectively. In our case, students were invited to participate in a joint research project in which they were required to conduct interviews with native speakers, record them and then present their transcriptions in class in the form of an oral presentation. During the project, the students were actively involved in: (a) preparing for interviews; (b) assessing their recordings; (c) transcribing the spoken interviews with their teacher; and (d) presenting the processed data in class in the form of analysis of the language events in which they were actual participants.

Interestingly, the observation has shown an obvious pedagogical value of each stage of the cycle (interview, recording / transcription and presentation) in the development of the students’ oral productive and receptive skills. It has also revealed the importance of focusing special attention on the interactive nature of oral discourse in the classroom and that the above cycle may have the potential to improve the effectiveness of oral cross-cultural communication in academic contexts.

In teaching of a foreign language in general and in practising of academic listening and speaking skills in particular, attention is paid, to a greater extent, to students’ transactional rather than interactional communicative needs, i.e. to the implementation of information exchange rather than to the establishment and maintenance of a contact. Conventional methods of developing oral receptive and productive competence, used in EAP courses, typically include simulation activities which reproduce situations requiring the use of learning and research skills that students are likely to encounter in the future. Although the tasks in which students have to take notes while listening to a lecture or a seminar presentation provide useful exercise in transferring information from the spoken mode to the written one, they do not give them an opportunity to practice in interactional oral communication as an interlocutor’s reaction in a real life setting is oftentimes unpredictable and it is difficult for a foreign language learner to process it for several reasons that will become apparent later. Simulation exercises can not provide the entire range of socio-pragmatic information that is readily available in authentic communication.

Failures that may and often occur in communication between native and non-native speakers in academic contexts are often the result of their mutual inability to establish the pragmatic content of a message. For example, by the end of the master class held by Dr. Sarah Bassingthwaighte, a composer and professor of music at the University of Washington (Seattle, USA), during the International Music Courses in memory of S. V. Rachmaninov in Tambov (Russia) and attended by students from different countries, a Russian participant, Katya, failed to recognize the intention (pragmatic meaning) of the remark addressed to her by an American peer: ‘Katya, YOU haven't said much.’ (Note: the tonic accent is on the word YOU. A low falling tone of the rest of the statement gives it an illocutionary force of friendly motivation / invitation whereas a high tone and / or a rising intonation would rather imply criticism). Katya smiled, thereby showing that she understood what had been said, but did not reply
because she found it inappropriate to justify her silence. Later, she admitted that she had taken the remark for “an unpleasant comment” about her lack of activity and could not have imagined that the American student had just wanted to invite her to join in the discussion without any deliberate criticism. Subsequently, the conversation with the native speaker, who had also smiled then, helped uncover that she, in turn, did not realise that a serious misunderstanding had happened exactly on a pragmatic level. And this is only one of the many examples of socio-pragmatic failures that frequently occur in interactions between foreign language learners and native speakers.

From a pedagogical angle, to deal with such cross-cultural misunderstandings at various levels – from socio-cultural and pragmatic to purely linguistic – it is necessary to develop in students appropriate strategies. In the above example, the communicative failure was caused by the Russian girl’s lack of pragmatic awareness. On a surface level, Katya certainly understood every word addressed to her but misinterpreted the meaning of the message, taking it for criticism of her conduct during the master class.

However, misunderstandings also occur on a surface (phonological/lexical) level. In the following example, two Russian students who want to politely ask a stranger for an interview hear and record his answer as follows: ‘OK. Not long and be quick!’, whereas the man actually said: ‘OK. As long as you’re quick.’ What the students wrongly perceived as something sharp, if not rude, led to feeling kind of a nationalist motive in the response. The misunderstanding came to light only in the process of listening to the recording in class when the teacher and other students found a discrepancy between the transcript and the original words. The teacher then analyzed the intonation of the revised utterance, which helped reveal the speaker’s intention to show friendliness, willingness to help as well as a sense of humour. Indeed, some of the students noticed this prosodic subtlety.

These two examples point to a more general problem of misunderstanding that oftentimes crops up when native speakers and foreign language learners interact verbally in a particular academic setting. And that was the focus of the previously mentioned joint research project. After discussing some details of this study, the article will propose a model of learning and teaching aimed at raising students’ awareness of potential difficulties in communication at three different levels of language use: (1) socio-pragmatic, (2) linguistic pragmatic, and (3) linguistic. Thus, there is a need to teach students to communicate cross-culturally at different levels of language use.

2.2. Subjects

The project employed 15 undergraduates at Intermediate level.

2.3. Method

Responding to a questionnaire designed to analyze the needs of English-language learners before starting an ESP course at the Rachmaninov Institute in Tambov, the students noted “communication with native speakers in professional and academic contexts” as their most important need. In order to form their own view of the nature of difficulties in verbal communication, the students were to collect their own data. This means they were to record their conversations with native speakers participating in the International Music Courses. It was agreed that the format of such conversations would be an interview because this intercultural ethnographic method not only has already proven itself in the practice of foreign language learning but also allows students themselves to offer a topic and provides an opportunity to have control over the answers. Students were to choose to conduct interviews on their own or in pairs. They were also free to choose the topics they wanted to touch and the questions to ask. Below are the topics/questions chosen and used by the students in interviewing native speakers:

- Do you think crossover will rescue classical music?
- What feelings do you have about Jacqueline du Pré?
- Why are T. A. T. u. so popular with young people all over the world?
- Are you in favour of turning classical pieces into pop? Do you think Vanessa-Mae has succeeded in reconciling tradition and innovation?
- Do you think it is certain that musical education must begin young in order for someone to have a chance of entering the profession?
2.4. Results and discussion

The diverse character of the responses received was quite unexpected and, therefore, interesting to all the participants.

Having achieved an acceptable quality of recording, the students carried out a preliminary transcription of their interviews. In the classroom, they were able to share their impressions of what they had already done and consult with the teacher and other students on the interpretation of the text, allowing them to listen to it. Naturally, they had to continue transcribing their recordings out of class. Herein the students found it reasonable to follow their teacher’s advice to work with a partner who would act as a technical assistant because controlling the Dictaphone and transcribing at a time could plunge into despair anyone preferring to work on their own. When a more or less acceptable version of the whole or part of the interview was ready, they could offer their transcripts to other students in the classroom in the form of presentation. The audience, including the teacher, turned their attention to different linguistic features of the texts such as a variety of lexical, grammatical and phonological means.

2.4.1. Pedagogical value

Now let us consider the pedagogical value of the three stages outlined above.

Stage 1. Interview: preparation for it and subsequent analysis as an opportunity to develop socio-pragmatic awareness. At this stage the focus was on the sociocultural context of the situation in which the students could directly experience what is termed as “socio-pragmatic” level of language in use, i.e. social conditions of language use: what one can talk about, when and where (O’Grady, & Millen, 1994). As the students were to conduct their own interviews, they had a vested interest in establishing contacts and maintaining conversations. The teacher’s task was to help them prepare for the interviews by bringing attention to cases where they might encounter an unexpected switch to a different topic or fail to understand what the interlocutor means. This provides an opportunity to discuss discursive strategies, which are sometimes called communication strategies (Astafurova, 1997; Kuz’menkova, 2001), for example: what to say and what to do when someone speaks too fast; how to avoid unnecessary complex grammatical structures in conversation; what to say when you can not remember the exact word. One can get prepared for this in good time or take notice of this for future use. On a cultural level, it was equally important for the students to be able to decide beforehand what is more or less appropriate to say or how to act in a certain situation, so they were invited to discuss interviewing techniques with the teacher and peers. At this point, it is desirable that the teacher take on the task of improving their cultural awareness and encourage the discussion of appropriate topics such as (a) how to approach and address a stranger (e.g., students should not use ‘Mister’ or ‘Miss’ when addressing a native speaker of their age); (b) different ways of polite request for an interview; (c) the various ways of starting an interview; (d) how to retire discreetly if your invitation has been declined. Then students will be able to take notice of the cultural expectations that underlie the established order. For example: Can you imagine what could an ordinary Englishman (American, Australian) feel when asked for an interview in this way? What strategies would be appropriate for the acceptance or rejection of such a request in your culture?

Thanks to the interview, the teacher was in a more comfortable position to assess the effectiveness of the initial training and the extent to which the students’ actual experience answered their expectations. In this project, the generalized data on the students’ responses to the questionnaire adapted from Charles Clennell (1999:91) provided useful feedback, i.e. information about the interviewing process, and provoked a lively discussion of the cooperation shown by the native speakers they had chosen to be interviewed (see Table 1). In all such cases, you can get valuable insights into cross-cultural verbal communication, e.g.: (a) attitude to pauses (What pause duration is considered tolerable?) b) politeness issues (Are we expected to express regret when we finish?) c) forms of address (How do you address a woman when you do not know whether she is married or not?).
Table 1. Nature of difficulties experienced by students while interviewing native speakers

| No. | Nature of trouble                                                                 | Total | Rating |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|
| 1   | An easy feeling when you stop a person and ask for an interview                 | 27    | 9      |
| 2   | Difficult to explain why I want to take his / her interview                     | 34    | 8      |
| 3   | Difficult to find a form of polite address necessary to create a friendly atmosphere when interviewing | 15    | 11     |
| 4   | Sometimes it is difficult to read and ask a question simultaneously              | 42    | 2      |
| 5   | Sometimes it is difficult to understand whether the interviewee has finished answering the question | 21    | 10     |

Communication per se

| No. | Nature of trouble                                                                 | Total | Rating |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|
| 1   | It was sometimes difficult to understand native speakers because they spoke a lot faster than I expected | 37    | 7      |
| 2   | It was difficult to follow their answers, because they often used unfamiliar idioms and expressions | 41    | 3–4    |
| 3   | I have discovered that I cease to understand what they say because I think about the next question that I want to ask | 51    | 1      |
| 4   | I was not quite sure that I could comprehend correctly what I heard, especially words containing important information | 41    | 3–4    |
| 5   | I often wanted to interrupt the interlocutor and ask him / her to repeat what had been said but did not do so, as I felt awkward because of lack of understanding | 40    | 5–6    |
| 6   | It seemed to me that I would have time to think before saying if I used fillers (erm, well, perhaps, so, etc.) | 40    | 5–6    |

The questionnaire provides an opportunity for students not only to get an idea of obvious differences between an English-speaking country’s culture (e.g.: British, American, Australian or other one) and their own culture but also to see cultural differences between Russian students, i.e. intra-cultural, interpersonal differences. Even more so, as experience shows, it can result in lively discussion out of class and informal entries of reflective character in a diary or language portfolio.

**Stage 2. Interview transcribing (transcript preparation):** Practising listening skills as a way of linguistic pragmatic awareness development. After the students have conducted interviews, they work with their texts, this time as outside observers capable of looking impartially at how the interviews were actually going on, yet remaining well-informed about the context and content of the discourse. Here the teacher learns about their experiences and, if necessary, gives advice and makes suggestions. In this regard, it was noticed that sometimes it is useful to provide students with an opportunity for reflection whenever something new is found. For example, thanks to scrutinising the case of a speaker’s intonation as a marker of her / his intention, the students’ awareness of this phenomenon was thus raised, which is probably enough for them to learn it. Experience shows that students need to feel that they have come to discoveries through their own efforts, and a subsequent class devoted to discourse prosody could be the best way of making a discovery of something hidden as an acquired skill (Clennell 1999:87).

This stage allows students to experience the speech event again as it was but with three important additional benefits such as (a) knowledge of the exact context of the situation; (b) possibility to reproduce from memory a particular manifestation of verbal interaction as the event unfolded; c) use of equipment that allows stopping and repeating a stream of speech where necessary.

At this stage, the focus is on a linguistic pragmatic level of language use, in other words, an understanding of what the speaker is trying to do with language, which is essential in choosing linguistic means (Thomas 1983:91). The teacher’s task is to raise the student’s awareness of the implications of such choice in terms of pragmatics. At this level the teacher guides and encourages the students’ search for and further establishing of the speaker’s intended (pragmatic) meaning, and the understanding of the reasons of his / her choice (Polyakov 2007). The following example illustrates a case in which they would have required assistance from the teacher. The students were to look more closely at intonation patterns in a native speaker’s speech, take notice of how prosodic information is used to denote its illocutionary force. This is how the abovementioned master-class leader from the
United States reacted to the question asked by a Russian student about how to perform the introductory part of the composition: ‘You COULD play it that way, but there may be...’

Primarily, students should be asked to suggest various possible meanings contained in utterances like the above. Such discussions help clarify numerous discursive functions of pitch and tone as well as lexical syntactic configurations. Eventually, the teacher would have been able to guide them to the most appropriate interpretation due to the context with which they were already familiar. Thus, the above answer can be interpreted as a veiled criticism, not as a real suggestion as some of the participants originally thought. Returning to the earlier example, the students’ attention could have been directed in a similar way to Katya’s inability to understand the implied meaning of the utterance ‘Katya, YOU haven't said much’ as an invitation to talk rather than a remark on her disposition. Like any other “useful” mistakes, this clear communicative failure can give the teacher a valuable opportunity to pay serious attention to prosodic problems associated with discursive strategies. It can also give students the opportunity to improve their understanding of socio-cultural circumstances stipulate our choice of linguistic resources.

Stage 3. Presentation of transcript in class: exercise in linguistic analysis and productive language practice. When the transcribing has been completed, students can submit their texts to the whole group as a presentation at a training workshop, which in itself is useful practice in using conversational skills in an academic context. One possible way is that the audience are exposed to a PowerPoint presentation of the transcript while listening to the recorded data. At this stage, support is given and further suggestions made by other students and the teacher on how to decipher and revise the importance of specific elements in the text which might have escaped the speakers’ notice or confused them. Then they can move on to the text level and consider specific lexical, grammatical and phonological means of its construction as techniques to ensure its cohesion and coherence such as discourse markers ‘well, then’, ‘thus’ or ‘whereas’.

This can only become clear when you finally come to realize and recognize the persistent problem of perception or grammatical simplification. A striking example is the transcript, initially made by one of the students, of an interview mentioning the talented and bold violinist Vanessa-Mae known for performing classical compositions as pop music. This transcript revealed the interviewer’s difficulty in perceiving a group of sounds. The student did not hear the sounds [n] and [v] framing the word ‘nerve’ and, instead of voiced dental fricative [ð] and alveolar [d], heard whistling [z], thus putting down ‘She has er to play a techno jam on Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons...’; whereas, while listening repeatedly, some of the students managed to hear what the native speaker was actually saying: ‘She had the nerve to play a techno jam on Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons...’ It is likely that the stumbling block was the interviewer’s ignorance of idioms. In fact, the student did not know the meaning of the idiom ‘have the nerve’ and perceived its components taken separately as something absurd.

In the earlier example, the students did not hear the linking phrase ‘as long as’, which is very important for understanding. They heard: ‘OK. Not long and be quick’, whereas the speaker actually said: ‘OK. As long as you’re quick’. There were other mistakes of this kind occurring throughout this lesson. If they were not noticed by other students, they were immediately explained by the teacher. Additionally, remedial work could be planned to overcome listening difficulties, e.g. individual lessons dedicated to the phonological interference of the mother tongue.

3. Conclusion

There are four important pedagogical conditions which characterize this particular experience and explain its rich potential as a learning and teaching model. Firstly, students have their own texts and, therefore, are affectively involved and personally interested in their subsequent analysis and the outcome of their learning activities. Secondly, having their own texts gets the students concentrated and can make them follow the mechanism of linguistic choice by selectively focusing on specific aspects of the text at different levels of cultural and linguistic complexity. This sharpened focus can be crucial in the acquisition of a foreign language. Thirdly, cooperation plays a significant role both in creating the text and its subsequent assessment by other students and the teacher. Since all the texts are the result of joint “production”, such collaboration once again confirms that cooperation is of primary importance when it is necessary to overcome obstacles in the seeking of meanings. Finally, the fourth condition is associated with the role of a researcher. Each student is expected to shoulder the responsibility for the study of their own communication difficulties and share it with the teacher and other students.
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