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Short notes on discourse, interlanguage pragmatics and EFL teaching: where do we stand?

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Abstract

The present paper aims to shed light on the relation which exists between discourse, pragmatics, culture and the possibility of integrating these three components in the language classroom. It stresses the need for adopting a purely cross-cultural pragmatic approach to foreign language teaching. This need is paired to the equally important approach based on idealisation traditions. The paper ends up by teasing out two major issues: the problematic relationship between theory and practice and the future perspectives of pragmatics in the act of EFL learning in an era where English has become the dominant linguistic medium of international communication.

Keywords: Discourse, interlanguage pragmatics, culture, EFL teaching;

1. Introduction

Given the widespread use of English throughout the world, especially with the beginning of the new millennium, its mastery has become more than necessary. The ‘linguistic’ frustrations that most of us grew up with as foreign language learners have meanwhile become the concern of many applied linguists and foreign language teachers. There is both a growing emphasis on and an increasing interest in paying more attention to learners’ communicative ability than to their mastery of linguistic rules. New approaches to foreign language teaching have seen the light of day during the last four decades; new syllabi such as the notional/functional, the Threshold Level and ESP, to name only these, have been applied all highlighting the importance of dealing with language as discourse and not as a set of rules that once mastered, learners would be able to use them for communicative purposes. Even though, one key goal of these approaches remains the knowledge of how language works; however, this goal is wedded to the equally important aim of when and how to use it appropriately for conveying meaning. Communication from this perspective is seen as a referential act whereby every element constituting language has to be called upon to infer the proper/exact speaker’s intention. Hence, the argument goes on, identifying the internal properties of language is not the same as using them to engage in an indexical negotiation of meaning. One does not necessarily lead to the other. We have to use our extralinguistic reality to act upon what is both inert and stable: the formal abstract knowledge. It is the product of this activation that we refer to as discourse. How discourse yields significantly its own meaning in concrete contextual settings is the domain of pragmatics. Indeed, we do not experience language in a vacuum without any referential bearing. Language comes to life and breaths within us only when it takes place in a context in which speakers are able to shape their communication patterns (Hwang, 2008) and by the same token,

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becomes a valuable communicative and communal tool. It is only then that it ceases to be a text and becomes discourse.

The shift in status from language as a text - stripped of its exo-contextual references and reduced to both lexical and grammatical essentials - to discourse has given rise to several notions/models of communicative competence all bearing in mind the necessary competencies that a learner must possess in order to achieve proficiency in language use, namely the ability to use language that is contextually appropriate. New disciplines such as Pragmatics which covers much of the same ground as discourse analysis - they both share the same interest in context, discourse and function - have been introduced making the shift possible. Indeed, the introduction of this discipline as a specific area within linguistics led to an increased focus on interactional and contextual factors of the target language (TL). Researchers working on discourse have reached a converging point where they focused on the necessity to take into account not only the cognitive and structural dimension of language but also its sociocultural one. We move here from an interest (to use Chomsky's terms) in I-language to E-language; from potential sentences to actual utterances without lending any implication that the study of one is far more relevant to language teaching than the other.

2. Discourse

Discourse as such has been defined from two different views that I consider as being complementary: the formalist view and the functional one. Behind the former there is a rationale that the internal organisation of language is not impinged upon by any function language may have, be it social or cognitive. Language is thus studied, in an atomistic approach, as an autonomous system based on an idealised linguistic abstraction. Discourse analysis in this conception is simply a matter of extending the scope of grammar, i.e., an extension of formal linguistics. Functionalists, on the other hand, think that the internal organisation of language is influenced by external functions that language per se achieves, mainly the interpersonal and ideational. Grammar is seen as a set of interconnected systems with a network of options that are selected according to the communicative intent of the first person discourse producer to make language mean, or to put it differently, to realise its meaning potential. Hence, reference, force and effect are seen not as features of language but as communicative resources that help/enable the message initiator to express different kinds of meaning. This leads us from discourse properties in general to discourse functions and particularly to speech act theory. In fact, these functions can only realise their full illocutionary force when used in language as discourse whose exploration may force us to question some commonly preconceived beliefs about the forms and meanings of language. In the case of grammar, the focus on text and discourse can help us make evident some noteworthy aspects of usage which have previously gone unnoticed and untaught. Indeed, from a pedagogical point of view the better a text analyst the teacher can be, the better equipped his/her students are likely to be in using language appropriately (McCarthy, 1994, p.xii). There is no one to one relationship between form and function. One particular aspect of language use I feel more worthwhile to focus attention on is the instability and variability of discourse functions depending on context, purpose and audience involved in the communication. There is little point in knowing the structure of a sentence if one cannot decide which illocutionary force it actually serves. The same form of language can have different functions according to the contextual parameters where the same propositional content of an utterance is homed in. Central in Speech Act Theory is the understanding that the illocutionary force of an utterance is independent of its grammatical form or sentence type. Take the following fabricated dialogue:

Wife: Are you hungry?
Husband: Yes, please.

Obviously, the conversation flows here very smoothly and both interlocutors seem to converge on perfectly intending (by the addressee) then interpreting (by the addressee) the question to be meant as an offer for serving something to eat. But what proof do we have for that? Formal pedagogic grammar ‘prescribes’ that an answer to an interrogative sentence should be as follows:

Yes/No + Subject+ Auxiliary (be/do).
In the light of this, the husband’s reply in the above instance should normally be:

Yes, I am. / No I’m not.

However, relying on both what the wife says (the husband assumes that she is actually sincere and relevant) and the appropriate existing assumptions in the context, the husband draws the right intended illocutionary force and interprets the sentence as a proposal for serving something to eat. The very fact that he adds the word ‘please’ denotes that conversation was successful. How? Widdowson (1984) explains that this term when used in final position has a reparatory effect for a potential damage that would possibly be caused by the first speaker to the second hearer party and hence acts as a command softening. Indeed, why would the husband use this term, had he not known that his reply with the affirmative would entail causing some inconvenience for the wife (going to the kitchen and getting him something to eat)? ‘Yes, please.’ is both an answer to the question (him being hungry) and an acceptance of the wife’s covert unstated offer.

And thus, it would seem to follow that only some of the semantic meaning encoded in linguistic form is activated as contextually appropriate on a particular occasion. This actually serves as a bearing for the pragmatic fix of the utterance. Context, by its nature, is unstable and subject to a continual modification because of the interpersonal, variational and negotiable aspects of language in use. It is, in fact, this variability and negotiable process of interaction that narrow down meaning within a particular range then fine tune it till language users are able to interpret its ‘pragmatic significance’. Indeed, ongoing research on discourse analysis, pragmatic theories and corpus studies have not only added significantly to our understanding of actual language use but also opened up fascinating new dimension to the topic.

Overall, much space needs to be devoted to show how language code is informed by the external contextual factors to achieve the functions- in terms of speech acts- its users want them to assign to in the social process of communication, or to use a more traditional formulation, to realise the abstract linguistic knowledge as an actual linguistic behaviour. These issues and others are tightly interrelated, and the discussion of any one of them will necessary bring others in by implication.

3. On the teaching of interlanguage pragmatics

In my view, some versions of communicative language teaching give insufficient attention to some components of communicative competence, mainly sociopragmatics competence. The appropriateness of use is, I would argue, crucial in the actual processes of communication. It has to be taught and awareness of it raised. For this reason Gilmore (2007, p.11), among others, insists on authentic materials as they represent a variety of naturally occurring contexts. This is not, according to him, the sole benefit of using authentic materials and not their only relevance; there are other benefits associated with their use, other than their potential to motivate students:

They provide learners with a richer source of L2 input to work with, which has two advantages: a) It is more likely to meet the varying interlanguage needs of individual students within the class and; b) It is more likely to develop a range of communicative competencies in learners, particularly the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic ones.” (Emphasis added)

A lot of issues have to be dealt with when raising learners’ pragmatic awareness. There are three in particular which I should like to dwell upon. The first relates to the extent to which pragmatics can be taught. And if so, which systems do we teach then? The second what effects, if any, does instruction have on the development of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)? Finally, the third relates to the following question: Do EFL textbooks take into consideration the findings in the ILP field of inquiry and thus contribute in raising learners’ cross-cultural pragmatic awareness?

All the studies done to investigate the teachability of pragmatic knowledge of L2 in classrooms such as Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Fukuya et al.,1998; Rose and Kasper, 2001 have shown that interlanguage pragmatics
is teachable not only to advanced learners but also to beginners. This should be very encouraging to teachers particularly in foreign language settings, where learners do not have as many opportunities to interact with NSs of the target language, as it is the case in Algeria for instance. The importance and necessity for the teaching of pragmatics have also been recognised (Rose and Kasper, 2001; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Raising learners’ awareness of the pragmatic choices they can make has become recently a key issue in pedagogical circles. However, two main problems encounter this issue of teachability, if I can say so. The first problem is to decide on the pragmatic systems to be taught. The dominance of English all over the world has not only given rise to several English but also made the notion of native speaker redundant/obsolete. The choice of one type of English at the expense of another is more dictated by both political and economical considerations rather than by pedagogical concerns. British English is often relegated to a secondary position for historical, mainly colonial reasons in the Arab world, where the preference leans more to American English than to any other variety. Furthermore, and because of a pertinent risk of assimilation into the Anglo-Saxon cultures, not all EFL learners set the native pragmatic behaviour as their main target (Washburn, 2001), especially in countries with high nationalistic feelings (the case of China and Vietnam for instance).

The second difficulty that puts constraints on the teaching of pragmatics has to do with testing. Indeed, the absence of valid testing methods is a crucial argument that is given by some teachers. Despite a sustained and consistent body of work done since 1981, particularly at Hawaii University, drawing attention to the importance of terms of speech acts, implicatures, routines and rules of appropriateness. All testing material cannot be designed without reference to the norms of the NS culture. There appears to be no alternative to the standard of the NS variety. A better standard, if any, has yet to emerge. Meanwhile, studies are necessary to investigate the variability of NSs and the effect of this variability on testing pragmatic competence as a whole. Another point which is of crucial importance when testing this competence, and which I see it as specific to Algeria and most probably to other countries where English has the official status of a second foreign language (FL2) - French claiming first position (FL1)- resides in the absence of any NS model in correcting the discourse completion task (DCT). The NS model will be very helpful when getting the appropriate responses and then grading learners’ performances accordingly. However, a point that might mare this issue is which NS culture norms to use? I said that the expansion of English outside its ancestral lands and its adoption by other nations has made the notion of native speaker so elusive that on reflection, one wonders if it exists at all (cf. Carter and McCarthy, 2003). With its massive expansion across the globe, English has somehow been de-nationalised, cut off from its cultural roots and adapted to suit new surroundings: diverse sociolinguistic histories, multicultural identities, multiple norms of use and distinct contexts of functions giving rise to ‘derivative versions’, excellent no doubt in their way, but they lack the ‘Englishness’/ ‘Americaness’ that a large majority of foreign learners hope to adorn their oral performance with. This absence of an appropriate model to refer to looms large on developing learners’ ILP competence as our teachers are themselves non-native speakers (NNSs). All they can do is to rely on their intuitions and experience with NSs. However, this intuition and this experience in themselves are very limited in scope and thus not enough.

In spite of these problems a lot of researchers have stressed the need for instruction on ILP in order to develop learners ability to communicate appropriately in the TL, particularly in foreign language (FL) contexts (Kasper, 1997 a, 2001a/b; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper and Rose, 2002). In fact, in comparison to second language contexts where learners have more rich exposure to the TL and ample opportunities to use it for real-life purposes, in a FL environment learners lack the chances to engage in genuine communications with NSs. This urges educationalists to pay more attention to the role of instruction on learners’ pragmatic competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. As a result, a growing body of investigation on the effects of instruction now exists as illustrated by the collections of studies provided by Rose and Kasper, 2001, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003. Still, a lot has to be done.
Another issue that has been raised so far as instruction in ILP is concerned is that of explicit versus implicit instruction. Researchers have found more benefits for the explicit condition (House and Kasper, 1981; House, 1996; Tateyama et al, 1997). In contrast, implicit instruction was found to be characterised by a lack of those metapragmatic discussions where input is not accompanied by any kind of explanations.

Additional to our concern regarding the importance of instruction to develop learners’ cross-cultural pragmatic competence, we also need to focus on the cultural dimension of language. Teachers must rethink their relationships to language learning and the issue of culture in the process of foreign language acquisition. Its inclusion in the EFL syllabi as a list of isolated facts idealising British/American cultures and values and often taught from the angle of language reduces it to fragmented information that may lead to stereotypes which are fixed and not open to change over time with our experiences (Clark and Clark, 1990). I hence argue that we should rather replace these ‘prescribed’, nomenclature cultural facts and behaviours that are, in most cases, informed by no pedagogic principles and considered goals in themselves, by an intercultural approach that makes evident the disparities between L1 and L2 cultures and use these disparities as a tool which instead of hindering pragmatic awareness and communicative competence fosters them. This is what I would term intercultural communicative competence, a ‘savoir faire’ that would allow students to approach new cultures in a similar way to ethnographers, searching for the hidden rules behind the new behaviours they encounter. The aim is not to drive one culture out of the picture and replace it by another, nor to favour one at the expense of the other, but to familiarise what is unfamiliar and make it accessible for pedagogical purposes. In a sense, EFL discourse should acknowledge the cultural diversity of the world and incorporate it in its syllabus. In so doing, learners would be able to negotiate and reflect upon their identities and those of others in a respectful and open manner that would allow them later, to play a mediating role between cultures and identify themselves as citizens of the world; a notion that should lie at the very heart of EFL philosophy. In other words, EFL teaching should give learners ample opportunities to experience what Byram, 1989 and Doyé, 2008 in Byram (2009, p.198) call ‘tertiary socialisation’, i.e., the ability to live harmoniously in a multicultural world.

4. So, where do we stand now?

Two main points, which I should like now to pursue, emerge from the discussion above: the relation between theory and practice and the future perspectives of pragmatics in foreign language teaching. No matter how aware textbooks designers are of the importance of cross-pragmatic references in the act of learning a foreign language, we have ample evidence (Vellenga, 2004; Neddar, 2010) to affirm that EFL textbooks (especially those designed for pragmatics as an essential component in the textbook design is concerned. This, I would argue, has to do more with a lack of knowledge in its methodological implementation than with a denial of its effectiveness in inducing learning.

A perpetual controversy has surrounded the relationship of applied linguistics and language teaching. A relationship that is most often fraught with inexplicable distrusts, tensions and suspicions. The rift between the applied linguist and his research and the language teacher and his pedagogical practice is still intense, though both should have a complementary interest and concern. The former’s concerns are thought to be- from the teacher’s standpoint- at a remote from the reality of the foreign language classroom. Most often language teachers cringe at the’ idealistic’ theories of applied linguists. The applied linguists on the other hand, think that their mediating efforts (between linguistics and language teaching) are of pedagogical value only if carried through in the classroom and their practical relevance justified rather than taken on trust. For them (and this is understandable) language teachers are those who should be concerned with the actualisation and testing out of linguistic theories in genuine classrooms to see the extent of their usefulness potential for language learning. They harbour the suspicion that most teachers refuse, to quote Widdowson (1990), ‘to be beset’ by any recommendations/advices coming from a bunch of applied linguists hunched over their computers in cramped university offices with much theory and less contact with real classrooms teaching’. Both of them seem, wrongly, to have little to say to each other.
This being said, the necessity for teaching a foreign language from a pragmatic perspective need not be asserted and its valuable significance outside the classroom world need not be commented upon. This is, I would argue, a well entrenched belief. What seems to me at stake and a bone of contention are ways of implementing a fully cross-cultural pragmatic approach to language teaching, and time and place that should be allocated-within the textbook and in the classroom session- to all aspects of pragmatics, bearing in mind that this whole operation should give no endorsement for the neglect of other levels of language analysis (formal and lexical). These remain, whatever one might think, essential elements for proficiency in the act of language learning. The multi-billion EFL industry has, in fact, proven that grammar still sells well. Future research, if sustained by a careful process of documentation and an in-depth analysis, may also reveal to us what tenets of pragmatics are of more benefits to our learners and nudge our thinking forward concerning this issue. For several nations, English (that alien language) has become theirs. It would be hard, at the face of it, to see these nations behaving pragmatically the way the Anglo-Americans do.

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