Evaluation of the EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence of Using Speech Acts: A Case Study

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Abstract

Inter-cultural communication presents different challenges one, of which is the need to show awareness to understand speech acts in differing cultures. Since pragmatic competence is an important issue in the framework of communicative competence, it is necessary to evaluate this aspect to see whether our students are aware of this fact.

Thus, a test is conducted to evaluate the learner's ability to perform two speech acts, requests and refusing invitations or offers in different situations. The test was particularly conducted to test patterns of these two speech acts in the performance of third year students of English Dept. at the college of languages. The number of students are 20. The students would write the utterances in their native language (Kurdish) and English. The situations of requesting and refusing are composed for the students and they are asked to provide the potential utterances to provide these speech acts.

The results of the analysis show that our students use simple utterances and often transfer their L1 speech acts to the (TL)(FL) domain. The study further supports the point that EFL learners lack pragmatic competence and this in turn would hinder communication across cultures.

Pragmatic Competence

Since language learning is not just memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules (Canale 1983), it is necessary to study what other factors contribute to this learning. One of these factors is pragmatic competence, it is generally defined as "the Knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions that has to be followed in various situations" (Edwards and Csizér 2001). It is considered as the backbone of the learner's communicative competence (Kasper 1997).

Pragmatic competence is also defined as knowledge of speech acts, speech functions and socio-linguistic competence. Socio-linguistic competence "entails the ability to use language appropriately according to context" (Eslami-Rasekh 2005: 200). Accordingly, one may ask whether pragmatic competence can be taught to our students? Perhaps, "this pragmatic knowledge develops alongside the lexical and grammatical knowledge without any pedagogic intervene" (Eslami-Rasekh 2005:200).

However, research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learnes has shown that the pragmatics of natives and learners are quite different. (Kasper 1997).

Thus, it is important to raise the pragmatic awareness of students in every potential capacity of language teaching areas. Thomas (1983:96) proposes that students be equipped with the necessary knowledge to make their decisions about how to use the target language. Bardovi – Harlig (1996) suggests that teachers encourage learners to think about how a particular speech act differs in their own language. And hence teachers can construct exercises that show how the natives use such speech acts.

Raising Pragmatic Awareness

As the socio – cultural and pragmatic rules of language use is very important for language learning, it has been stressed that to understand and create language that is appropriate to diferent interacting situations is a must. Learning the grammar of a language and its lexical items do not guarantee pragmatic development (Bardovi – Harlig and Dornyei 1997).

Pragmatic competence is not quite developed in the classroom. Speakers of English often face difficulties in various situations due to their lack of awareness of the pragmatic competence. This competence is very important since lacking it results in being un-cooperative. Thus "speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing un-cooperative at the least, or more seriously , rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence" (Bardovi – Harlig et al. 1991:4). That is why the responsibility of teaching pragmatic competence falls on teachers. But there are many obstacles in the way i.e. teachers' lack of adequate material of training which is the result of lack of emphasis on pragmatic issues in ESL courses (Eslami-Rasekh 2005:199).

Awareness of Speech Acts

Although speech acts are considered universal, researchers show how they manifest in differing cultures. Studies of cross – cultural pragmatics report that speech acts are realized differently across languages (Grossi 2009: 53) and this difference can sometimes cause misunderstanding which is called pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure is defined as "… the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (Thomas 1983:91). The pragmatic failure occurs when learners transfer this L1 rules into L2 (second language) domains and this transfer may often lead to misunderstanding or speakers would be perceived as being rude or un-cooperative. But how to teach pragmatics? It has been maintained that one of the approaches that can be used for teaching pragmatics is awareness- raising. For example, by using active video- viewing activities with an approach using pragmatic consciousness raising (Kondo 2004: 50). Kasper (1997) and Rose and Kasper (2001) discuss the results of previous studies on pragmatic constructions and conclude that pragmatics can be taught (Kondo 2004: 49).

Speech Acts of Refusal and Requests

Speech acts play an important role in an effective communicative interaction. A speech act is defined as a functional unit in communication (Cohen 2004: 302). Speech acts are important since they allow us to perform a wide range of functions. They enable us to compliment, apologize, request, refuse, complain etc.

Refusal is a respond negatively to an invitation or offer. Refusal occur in all languages. However different cultures refuse in different ways. In many societies how one says (no) is a task that needs special skills. The speakers must know how to use the appropriate form of the speech act. Speech acts of refusals are considered face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987), since they contradict the inviters expectations and restrict their freedom to act according to their will.

The speech act of requesting is very important since it has been also regarded as an act of the most threatening speech acts since it is imtrinsically threatens the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson 1987). And hence an inappropriate refusal or request may also risk the interpersonal relations of the speakers. Accordingly, speakers need a high level of pragmatic awareness as what to use in such situations. These situations where speakers are asked to perform speech acts of request or refusal present challenges for adult learners of English since they are grown up in a different culture speaking a different language. They are not aware of what forms are used to soften a request or refusal. There are different strategies used by speakers in their first language but these are different from those commonly used in English.

Research Goal

The goal of this research is to explore to what extent our students are aware of the pragmatic competence of the target language, i.e. English. To achieve this goal, the researcher has conducted a test for using the potential utterances to refuse invitations or offers and utterances for requesting in English.

Since using translation as an activity for pragmatic awareness raising can be intriguing for students, there was a need to use translation as a strategy for this test. Hence students realize how culture and language interrelate and that some of the linguistic strategies conveying the intended speech act in their L1 cannot be translated into target language, i.e. English.

Results and Discussion
Refusals:

Analyzing the students' answers of refusals in different conversation situations, we find out that the students are somehow good in providing the Kurdish utterances and often translate them into English.

For the first situation (see table 1, p-5), the students were good in Kurdish but for English, most of the answers were either rude or wrong; one student used the word "rain check" which was strange and this explains the point that our students do not know how to refuse an invitation to a party politely.

In the second situation (see table 1, p-5), half of the answers were translations; some students even gave very short answers and some others did not understand the situations, for example, some students say 'I like help you but I can't because I

am busy. Here the student is in need not the professor. This is also true in situation number three, when some students would agree to the request not refusing to lend the book, so they give answers such as 'It's OK., with pleasure, certainly etc.'.

Another point is that, sometimes they use words from literature persee which is not common in real communications as in "Alas, I didn't take my salary this month".

In many situations the answers in English are only in appropriate translations as in 'نيتم راوهسته تا سـهرى مـانگ', 'I don't have, wait till the end of the month' which sounds very rigid. Most often they give very rude answers as in situation number five for refusing to lend 100$ to your sister, they would say: ha ha ha, I won't give you , I don't have it , here even in Kurdish it sounds very rude.

For refusing in English, specific speech acts are used; but after conducting this test, we find out that our students are not aware of these acts. They really need to be exposed to authentic situations of refusal in conversation classes.

Requests:

Analyzing the students' answers of request, the researcher found out that the students are good in providing the Kurdish utterances but often translate them into English which is wrong as the speech acts are quite different in both languages. For example in situation 8, for the Kurdish, the students say مـاجالت هتيـة لـؤم راست كةيـةوة ئـةتو راثؤرتة. Which is translated into English as: 'Do you have time to correct this report with me'. It is mere translation without abiding by any politeness principle. Again, their English utterances look like what actors say in T.V. series. On other situations, they would give only one or two examples in Kurdish and English, which explains that their pragmatic competence is very weak, as in: "Why don't you close the window?". Another problem is related to their comprehension, they do not understand context of the speech acts for example, in situation no. 7 (you want to borrow a friend's cell phone, a student instead of asking for a cell phone , actually answered the request as, زۆر بەدلنيابيەوه , yes , certainly.

Another point is related to pragmatic differences as to how you request in both languages; in Kurdish, it is acceptable for friends to use the imperative for requests like, مۆبايلەكـەم بدەرێ ئيشـم پێيـەتى, give me your cell phone I am in need of it, without using the word 'please'. This is dangerous, it causes clash in conversation when the students use such translation with native speakers of English. It will sound rude and imposing.

The beginning of the utterance is not appropriate, since often the students use the word 'sorry'. This is, again, a translation from the word (ببوره), used in requests in Kurdish.

As mentioned previously, they do not recognize the meaning of the phrasal verb 'clean up', some students change it to 'arrange' or 'tidy up' The students have problems even with phrasal verbs.

The students are better with requests than with providing refusals; however, the only way possible to provide requests is by using 'can' and 'could' and sometimes, without even the magic word 'please'. Consider these utterances: 'Hey take care of my words and correct it see it there is any false and made it right'; 'can I make a call

with your cell phones'; 'could you please tide up the room'; 'can you clean the room'; 'please close the window!'. In all these, one finds the translation of the speech act of Kurdish and often using bold-on record which is not the case in English. They need to be exposed to appropriate utterances used in such contexts.

Table 1 Students' Answers of Refusal

Conversation situations	Utterances in Kurdish	Utterances in English
1) What would you say when an invitation to a party is given but you don't want to go.	19 appropriate 1 inappropriate	10 appropriate 10 inappropriate
2) Your professor wants you to come to his/her office to help you with your report, but you have no time because you are busy or have work.	17 appropriate 3 inappropriate	10 appropriate 10 inappropriate
3) A class mate from the department asks you to lend him a book.	16 appropriate 4 inappropriate	13 appropriate 7 inappropriate
4) Your neighbor asks you to take care of her children	13 appropriate 7 inappropriate	4 appropriate 16 inappropriate
5) Your sister asks you to lend her 100$	18 appropriate 2 inappropriate	6 appropriate 14 inappropriate

Table 2 Students' Answers of Request

Conversation situations	Utterances in Kurdish	Utterances in English
1) You want to turn your room mate's T.V.	14 appropriate 6 inappropriate	10 appropriate 10 inappropriate
2) You want to borrow a friend's cell phone	17 appropriate 2 inappropriate 1 (no answer)	7 appropriate 13 inappropriate
3) How would you ask your teacher or colleague to correct your report	16 appropriate 3 inappropriate 1 (no answer)	8 appropriate 8 inappropriate 2 (no answer) 2 (vague answers)
4) You ask a friend to close the window	19 appropriate 1 inappropriate	10 appropriate 8 inappropriate 2 (vague answers)
5) You ask your room mate to clean up the room	17 appropriate 2 inappropriate 1 (wrong and not clear)	5 appropriate 15 inappropriate

Conclusion

To raise the students' pragmatic awareness, I started this research evaluating the role of speech acts of the EFL learners at English department by using translation strategy for conveying speech acts of request and refusal. The students would offer the speech acts in Kurdish and English respectively. The students' use of speech acts depict that their L1 translation are conveyed to their TL (FL) and this would entail that they are not aware of how to use the proper forms of utterances to convey the particular speech act.

In providing utterances of both requests and refusals, translations make them seem rude and rigid since they are not abiding by any politeness principle. Therefore as a recommendation, we suggest that EFL teaching materials should benefit more from the concept of speech acts and employ them more frequently and be incorporated in the texts. This will raise the learners' awareness about the strategies used in performing the speech acts.

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هەڵسەنگاندنی کارامەی پراکماتیکی فێرخوازی زمانی بێگانه (EFL) لەبەکارهێنانی کردەی ئاخاوتن داواکردن و رەت کردنەوە

ئاخاوتنی نێو کلتوری بەرەنگاربوونەوەی جیاواز دێنیته کایەوه وه یەکێک لە مانەش دیارکردنی شارەزایی تێگەیشتنی کردەی ئاخاوتنه لەکەلتوری جیاوازدا.

کارامەی پراگماتیکی مەسەلەیەکی گرنگ لەچوارچێوەی توانای ئاخاوتن، بۆیه پێویست بوو که هەڵسەنگاندنی بۆ بکرێ بۆ ئەوەی بزانین ئاخۆ قوتابیەکانمان شارەزاییان هەیه لەو سەرباسه لەبەر ئەمه تاقیکردنەوەکمان ئەنجام دا بۆ هەڵسەنگاندنی توانای فێرخوازەکان بۆ نواندنی دوو کردەی ئاخاوتن: دەربرینی داواکاری وه رەت کردنەوەی داوەت یان پێشکەش لەمەیدانی جیاوازدا وه بۆ ئەم مەبەسته (20) قوتابی لەبەشی زمانی ئینگلیزی له کۆلێژی زمان بەشداریان کرد بۆ بەکارهێنانی شێوازی جیا بۆ دەربرینی، ئەم کرده ئاخاوتنه.

قوتابیەکان ئەم کرده ئاخاوتنانه بەزمانی کوردی وه پاشان بەئینگلیزی دەنووسن وەلەهەمان کاتدا دەوروبەندی کردەی داواکردن و رەت کردنەوه دارێژراوه بۆیان وه داوایان لێکراوه که چەند دەربرینی شیاو بخەنه روو بۆ ئەم کرده ئاخاوتنانه.

ئەنجامی شیکردنەوه پیشان دەدات که قوتابیەکانمان دەربرینی ساده بەکاردەهێنن وه زۆر جاریش کردەی ئاخاوتن زگماکی (زمانی دایك) دەگوازنەوه بۆ مەودای زمانی دووەم، وەلێکۆڵینەوەکه زیاتر پاڵپشتی ئەوه دەکات که فێرخوازی زمانی بێگانه (EFL) شارەزایی کارامەی پراکماتیکی یان کەمه ئەمەش دەبێتە هۆی دواخستن یان راگرتنی ئاخاوتن له نێوان کەلتوری جیاوازدا.

المستخلص

تواصل التداخل الثقافي يقدم تحديات مختلفة من ضمنها الحاجة لبيان الوعي لفهم احداث الكلام في ثقافات مختلفة. الكفاءة التداولية مسألة مهمة في إطار التواصل التداولي. لذلك قمنا بإختبار قدرات أداء الطلبة لاحداث كلام الطلب والرفض في مختلف الحالات.

تم إختيار عشرون طالباً في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية اللغات/جامعة صلاح الدين – اربيل للمشاركة في هذا الإختبار. قام الطلاب بكتابة أحداث الكلام عن الطلب والرفض باللغتين الكوردية والإنكليزية، وقد نظم إطار الحالات لجمل أحداث الكلام وتعين على الطلاب أن يزودوا أحداث كلام ممكنة في هذا المجال.

نتائج التحليل يبين بأن الطلبة يستخدمون جملاً بسيطة وكثيراً ما ينقلون أحداث الكلام من لغة الأم (L1) إلى ميدان اللغة الثانية (L2). الدراسة تدعم فكرة أن متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية يفتقرون إلى الكفاءة التداولية وهذا يعوق التواصل بين الثقافات.