Pragmatics and Language Competence in Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how a language teaching course can be structured to enhance learners' pragmatic competence through the integrated use of the four language skills in a communicative manner. Listening, writing, and reading do not function separately in communicative contexts. Therefore, competence involves the knowledge that learners acquire, develop, utilize, and may eventually forget. Language teachers should aim to offer learners diverse opportunities to experience language use in various socio-cultural contexts, employing language creatively and critically in different interaction patterns to become successful communicators in the target language.

Keywords: Context, Content Pragmatics, Discourse Pragmatic, Competence, Language Teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most contentious issues in linguistics to date is the concept of 'competence.' Various linguists have used 'competence' in different contexts to describe different types of knowledge. The term was originally introduced by the founder of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky. In his book "Aspects of the Theory of Syntax," he defines competence as: "Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker- listener in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance" (Chomsky 1965:3). Chomsky later distinguished between competence (the speaker's or hearer's knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language in specific situations). This distinction highlights the difference between knowledge and the application of that knowledge. However, Chomsky did not clarify whether this knowledge encompasses the concept of 'ability.' It appears that Chomsky equated 'competence' with 'knowledge,' without clearly differentiating between 'knowledge' and 'the ability to use this knowledge' for communication. When Chomsky first introduced the terms 'competence' and 'performance,' he presented a very limited viewpoint. Campbell and Wales (1970), in their article "The Study of Language Acquisition," discussed the strong and weak versions of Chomsky's definition of competence. According to them, language knowledge includes the ability to use it appropriately in various situations. This debate continued into the 1980s, as neither explanation fully captured the complete meaning of the term 'competence.'

These concepts were also explored by many linguists over time, with the term 'competence' being used to refer to different concepts in various contexts. By the 1980s, the focus had shifted towards 'pragmatic competence.' According to Crystal (1985:240), "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication." Crystal views pragmatics as the study of communicative actions within their sociocultural context. This suggests that individuals possess pragmatic competence, enabling them to use language effectively in different and specific situations across various contexts. Consequently, pragmatic competence is primarily examined at the social level, encompassing speech acts, social acts, and interactions. The scope of pragmatic competence can be studied in terms of: Sociolinguistic Competence and Discourse Competence.

There is no doubt that developing various types of competence depends on teachers providing opportunities for learners to use language in different contexts. To clarify this, the types of competence and their relationship with language teaching will be examined individually.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding the social significance of linguistic items and using language appropriately in social contexts for effective communication. As Savignon (1983:37) explains, "Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of socio-cultural rules of discourse and language. It requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of participants, the information they share, and the function of interacting." Savignon's statement suggests that sociolinguistic competence goes beyond merely using language appropriately; it encompasses the ability to interpret and act based on various contextual clues. This competence includes elements such as culture and interaction, reflecting the core aspects of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

2.1.1 Interactional Competence

Interactional competence refers to a person's communicative ability, encompassing knowledge of language structure, interaction rules, and principles within real-life social and cultural contexts. Some linguists also associate it with functional competence, which involves using language for various communicative purposes. Kramsch (1986:367), in her article "From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence," defines interaction as "negotiating intended meanings, adjusting one's speech to the intended effect on the listener, anticipating responses and misunderstandings, clarifying intentions, and aligning intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings." This suggests that interactional competence involves not only following structural language rules but also managing the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic functions that ensure mutual comprehension in conversations. Functional competence, therefore, includes the ability to connect questions and responses in real-life situations, recognize the speaker's intentions through body language, understand semiotic symbols, navigate types of social interactions (e.g., introductions, greetings, farewells), and use language appropriately in various contexts.

2.1.2 Cultural Competence

Before exploring cultural competence, it's crucial to understand the term 'culture' clearly. Lyons (1990:302) defines culture as "socially acquired knowledge: the understanding individuals gain by being part of a specific society." This understanding highlights that culture cannot be separated from its social context and value. Cultural competence, therefore, refers to the ability to use language in a way that is understood by members of a particular culture. Failure to achieve clear and appropriate cultural interaction through language can lead to misunderstandings. Cultural competence involves knowing both native and target cultures, including social structures, traditions, taboos, and beliefs, and understanding customary practices.

Le Page (1978:41) further explores competence: "When discussing 'competence,' we must ask: 'What does an individual need to know to function as a member of this society?' A society exists through the competence of its members to maintain its functioning; a language exists through the competence of its users." Le Page views competence as a dynamic social construct that enables shared social behaviors among society members.

2.1.3 Communicative Competence

H.G. Widdowson (1989:135) describes communicative competence as not simply knowing sentence composition rules and assembling expressions from scratch, but rather knowing pre-assembled patterns and frameworks, and being able to adjust them as needed in different contexts. He emphasizes that communicative competence involves adaptation rather than strict rule-following for language production. In this perspective, language is viewed as a tool for effective communication, where competence involves using language skillfully to convey intended messages.

Canale and Swain (1980:5) differentiate between 'communicative competence,' which encompasses knowledge of language use rules, and 'grammatical (or linguistic) competence,' which pertains to grammar rules. They argue that knowing grammar rules alone is insufficient if one lacks awareness of how language is actually used. They propose that communicative competence serves as a bridge between grammatical competence (knowledge of language rules) and sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of language use rules).

In summary, communicative competence involves using language effectively for communication purposes, integrating grammar rules with an understanding of how language is socially and contextually applied.

2.1.4 Strategic Competence

Strategic competence involves not just knowing language but using that knowledge effectively for communication purposes. It bridges the gap between language knowledge and practical application in various situations. For example, when someone uses a white lie to justify being late to a meeting, they are demonstrating strategic competence by adapting language to achieve a communicative goal.

This competence also includes critical and creative thinking. It allows individuals to go beyond memorized language and generate new expressions based on their understanding and evaluation of information. Critical reflection, as described by Richards, involves consciously recalling and evaluating experiences to inform decision-making and planning in communication.

In summary, strategic competence enables speakers to plan and produce language effectively, whether by recalling memorized phrases or creating new ones, all while considering how best to achieve their communicative aims.

2.2 Discourse Competence

The primary objective of language learners is to connect different types of discourse effectively, thereby achieving both accuracy and fluency in the target language. Discourse competence involves the skill of organizing sentences into coherent structures. In Discourse Analysis, discourse competence is examined through the lens of conversational interaction, where language serves as a tool for successful communication. Such interactions can vary widely in form.

Akmajian (1997:369) illustrates this diversity: "There are many forms of discourse and talk exchanges. Letters, jokes, stories, lectures, sermons, speeches, and more are all types of discourse; arguments, interviews, business transactions, instructions, and conversations are types of talk exchanges. Conversations (and talk exchanges in general) typically involve structured interactions among multiple speakers." In discourse analysis, Akmajian's examples are explored across various contexts, focusing on openings, turn- taking, closings, speech acts, and authentic texts. Developing discourse competence not only enhances the ability to construct meaningful sentences but also enriches the language learner's understanding through exposure to diverse interactional patterns in different socio-cultural and physical environments.

2.3 Pragmatic Competence in Language Teaching and Learning

In previous sections, it was discussed how various types of competence are closely intertwined with the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These skills do not exist independently in communicative texts or activities. To cultivate strong pragmatic competence in language learners, the following factors should be considered.

The goals and objectives of a language course should be crafted to align with the needs of language learners, aiming to enhance and refine their communicative competence. The primary aim of learning a foreign language is to achieve fluency and accuracy in both written and spoken communication. Therefore, language teachers and learners should prioritize designing communicative activities that facilitate the development of communicative competence. According to Stern (1983:346), 'competence' in language teaching can be summarized as:

a. Intuitive mastery of language forms.

b. Intuitive mastery of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and sociocultural meanings conveyed through language forms.

c. Ability to use language with a focus on effective communication while minimizing attention to formal correctness.

d. Creative use of language.

These elements underscore the comprehensive nature of language competence, emphasizing not only the mastery of language structures but also the nuanced understanding and application of language in various contexts.

According to Stern, competence includes both linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge, as well as the ability to effectively use this knowledge for communication. Heath (1983:11) suggests that children learn language through socialization within their communities, influenced by family structures, community roles, and cultural

concepts of childhood. This upbringing shapes not only sociolinguistic competence but also individuals' ethno-identity and worldview.

The language teacher should design course materials that engage learners in using language pragmatically, coherently, and functionally for effective communication. Developing coherence and the ability to communicate across different contexts reflects the growth of grammatical and functional competence. Therefore, to succeed in using the target language, learners must develop strong pragmatic competence. This means grammar should not be taught in isolation from its application. Grammatical competence involves recognizing and using grammar structures and rules to communicate effectively and meaningfully. Learners should be able to apply their language knowledge in diverse communicative settings and situations.

Erton (1997:7) argues for the functional study of language, which examines how language is used and the specific purposes it serves. This includes understanding how language community members achieve and respond to these purposes through speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Thus, to foster effective pragmatic competence, the language curriculum should prioritize functional study of the target language. This approach not only helps learners participate actively in classroom discussions but also prepares them for real- life interactions and communication scenarios.

There are several activities beneficial for developing pragmatic skills in foreign language teaching. While some have been previously mentioned, activities aimed at increasing students' pragmatic awareness are equally important. Awareness-raising activities focus on developing socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic knowledge of language use.

For the pragmatic development of language learners, various tasks can be assigned to practice these skills. For example, students can be tasked with observing specific pragmatic features in spoken, written, or audiovisual contexts. Open observations, such as studying education in a village or observing interactions at a train station, expose learners to different contexts and discourse factors in the target language, thereby enhancing their socio- pragmatic competence.

Additionally, studying the contexts in which different language functions are employed helps students understand the interplay between socio-pragmatic and pragma- linguistic aspects in the target language. Reflecting on these observations helps learners connect pragmatic functions with linguistic forms and experience various social contexts and their cultural implications.

Mey (1993:185-6) asserts that linguistic behavior is inherently social, serving purposes ranging from casual interaction to serious endeavors like negotiation or problem- solving. Language, in this sense, acts as a tool for individuals to express themselves within specific societal frameworks defined by values, norms, rules, and conditions of life.

Ultimately, developing pragmatic competence enables learners to effectively communicate meaning in the target language. Thomas (1995:22) highlights that creating meaning is a dynamic process involving negotiation between speakers and listeners, shaped by the physical, social, and linguistic context of the utterance. This approach underscores the importance of context in fostering pragmatic competence in language learning.

3. CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning activities aim to empower students to become effective communicators in the target language. It's crucial for teachers and textbooks to emphasize that language consists of linguistic and lexical elements, as well as social contexts. Pragmatic competence should be a primary educational objective, integrating these elements. Engaging students in diverse social contexts and practicing language functions across various interactional patterns helps learners use language responsibly and encourages critical and creative thinking. Language learning is a socio-cultural process that requires applying linguistic rules in different contexts, audiences, and purposes. Developing pragmatic competence is indispensable in language teaching, as it influences individuals' perspectives and helps teachers understand students by considering interactional, psychological, social, and cultural factors in pedagogy.

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