LEARNER DIVERGENCE: USING AWARENESS-RAISING TASKS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Being an indispensable part of language ability, pragmatic competence holds an important place in the accuracy of the language produced by L2 speakers whenever they engage in conversation both with natives and non-natives. That is to say, it exerts an influence on how the delivered message is understood by the listener. When non-native speakers engage in conversation, their pragmatic behavior does not follow the same pattern with the natives, even if they are advanced in their L2. It is mostly due to incompetent pragmatic ability or overlooking the significance of pragmatics in language learning. The article is aimed to explore some of the causes of learner divergence which is common phenomenon among the learners who have not immersed enough authentic use of language. The Uzbek context, EFL learners are chosen to exemplify the situation. Although enhancing pragmatic ability is quite challenging in EFL context, in most cases learners do not strive to acquire native like pragmatic ability due to cultural and social differences. At this point, appropriately chosen classroom tasks and activities come helpful to avoid pragmatic failure of the student. This paper presents some practical activities to raise learners' pragmatic and socio-cultural awareness.

Keywords: pragmatics, pragmatic norms, learner divergence, pragma-linguistic awareness, socio-pragmatic focus, awareness-raising tasks.

Pragmatic ability is a broad term that encompasses both pragma-linguistic, which is defined as the ability to use necessary language skills for delivering the intended message, and socio-pragmatic knowledge that is the appropriateness of the used language to the social and cultural situation (Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic failure or learners' divergence from pragmatic norms of the target language is a common consequence of insufficient pragmatic competence. As Ishihara and Cohen (2015) mentioned, learners at times produce divergent forms of the language owing to their incompetent language and pragmatic abilities, and they described five possible causes of learner divergences: 1. Pragmatic norms of the target language will be transferred negatively; 2. Insufficient knowledge of L2 grammar. 3. Pragmatic norms of the target

language are sometimes overgeneralized like linguistic rules. 4. Instructions and instructional materials can often be an influential factor of divergence. 5. The last factor is the choice of the learners, in other words, their resistance toward the L2 rules and norms.

In my own experience, Uzbek EFL learners are primarily influenced by negative transfer of the target language norms and their limited grammar ability that hinder them to become pragmatically competent in their target language. Kasper (1992) described positive and negative types of pragmatic transfer that are closely connected with the relationship between native and target languages, cultures and languages. If the pragmatic norms and rules of the L1 are applicable and appropriate in L2, it is called positive transfer while negative transfer occurs whenever rely on their native cultural and pragmatic norms that influence the development of the target language. The outcomes of the study conducted by Lo Castro (2012) showed that in most cases learners use the pragmatic norms of their native language to compensate for the gaps in L2 pragmatics. Uzbek and English languages are two different languages whose pragmatic and cultural norms are various which lead to misunderstanding and awkwardness in communication when they rely on their knowledge in Uzbek while speaking in English. In the Uzbek context, the majority of the learners are not aware of the culture of the English that impedes their development on pragmatic strategies. As a language instructor, we should help our learners to enhance their cultural and pragmatic knowledge that in turn will impact overall language ability and accuracy in communication.

Another factor, which is common among ESL/EFL learners, is the lack of grammatical knowledge in the target language that causes divergence. As Ishihara & Cohen (2015) pointed out, due to limited grammar knowledge learners fail to understand the intended meaning of the speaker and will not be able to deliver their message to the listener that leads to the breakdown of the communication. Claiming the importance of teaching grammar, Azar (2007) ascertained that by learning the grammar of the target language, learners will be able to understand the underlying concepts of different grammar structures, meaning, form and use of them. Actually, language is a tool that we employ to deliver our intended message and grammar is the fundamental of that language which is usually employed to deliver other different meanings. If L2 learners know a wide range of grammar structures and their meanings, they get a clear picture of what the interlocutor meant. In the Uzbek context, I experienced such problems with grammar in teaching English as a Second Language. When learners engaged in communicative activities, some learners with limited grammar ability failed to deliver their intended message or got their interlocutors wrong. Then I

realized how the grammar of the target language is important and the consequences of limited grammar knowledge. Ishihara & Cohen (2015) recommended language instructors to include grammar-focused tasks in order to enhance not only language skills but also cultural and pragmatic competencies.

Awareness-raising tasks

Activity 1 *(Awareness raising task with linguistic focus)*

Target learners of the task are intermediate EFL learners whose ages range from 15 to 17. All of the learners are the students of Academic lyceum which is specialized for science.

Language objectives: SWBAT:

- Practice exclamatory sentences in giving compliments;
- Use correct phrases in responding to compliments

Pragmatic objectives:

- To raise learners' awareness of compliments in different situations
- Students will be able to compare the pragmatics of L1 and L2.

Linguistic focus: Exclamatory sentences, what + (a/an) + Adj. + Noun, Noun Phrase + To be/ look + (intensifier) + Adj., Thank you, I really appreciate ….

Recourses: Sample Dialogues, Papers, Highlighters

Outline: Inductive approach of teaching is chosen to conduct the lesson as it aimed to develop learners' pragmatic awareness and noticing skills. At the beginning of the activity, the teacher gives a few questions related to complimenting and students will provide their questions. After that teacher divides learners into two groups and hands two dialogue scripts out. Students' task will be to analyze the dialogues' language and aim. They can highlight the phrases that they found essential and construct their own dialogues on the provided situations. (Handout 1). After that, the groups should form a structure of giving and responding compliments relying on the dialogue samples after which the whole group with the help of the teacher form key phrases and structures of compliments. The last step of the lesson is the formal instruction of the teacher on the target language structure on the chosen speech act. This activity will be helpful for learners to practice compliments by using certain structures because they themselves notice and practice it rather than traditional explicit teacher instruction.

Activity 2 *(Awareness raising task with socio-pragmatic focus)*

Target learners of the task are B2 level EFL learners whose ages range from 20 to 25. They are second-year students of the university whose major is teaching ESL/EFL.

Language objectives: SWBAT:

- Compare the structure of complaints;
- Choose appropriate word and phrases for complaining

Pragmatic objectives: SWBAT:

- Compare complaints of L1 and L2.
- Notice inappropriate responses in transferring the complaints from L1 to L2

Recourses: Learner worksheets (Appendix B), Papers, Highlighters

Outline: The activity starts with short answer questions about complaints and the teacher asks students to speak about the complaint that they have used in their first language recently. After that learners form three small groups by counting and the teacher distributes worksheets in which a situation for complaints is given (Appendix B). The learner should first write the complaint on their first language and directly translate it to the target language. This type of activity was suggested by Limberg (2015) who claimed that if learners compare the speech acts in their native and target languages, their pragmatic awareness would be raised. After completing the worksheets, the groups exchange their papers. The groups evaluate the peers' responses and discuss the elements of negative transfer according to the discussion questions:

Whether the complaints are appropriate in terms of politeness in both languages or not?   Does the level formality vary in providing complaints in your L1 and L1? How does the language change in addressing the complaints to your friend, children, and supervisor?   Can we directly translate complaints from L1 to L2? Why?

The activity is helpful to prevent learner divergence in the target language as it deals with one of the possible reasons of negative transfer in pragmatics.

Activity 3 *(Awareness raising task with socio-pragmatic focus)*

Target learners: Adult ESL learners (25-30 years old).

Language objectives: SWBAT:

- Put into play learned structures on the chosen speech act;
- Develop communicative skills together with pragmatics.

Pragmatic objectives: SWBAT:

- Practice at least two types of speech act at the same time;
- Evaluate the speech acts in terms of formality, directness and social distance of the speakers.

Recourses: Role Play Situations, Learner worksheets Stickers.

Outline: Eslami – Rasekh (2005) pointed out that activities chosen for classroom assignments should prepare the students to be flexible in the selection of the language as the real-world communication demands them to be as flexible as possible. Role-plays are found to be an appropriate task that is close to real-world communication. Taking this point into consideration, role play is chosen as an awareness-raising activity for teaching pragmatics in the chosen population. It works well as a revision activity after the introduction of all speech acts. In this activity, learners work in four small groups and act out the situations provided by the teacher. The given situations demand using at least two speech acts at the same time (Appendix C). While one group presenting their role play, the rest of the students complete the worksheets by evaluating their interaction in terms of formality, directness, and social distance of the speakers. At the end of the activity, the whole group briefly discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the presented role plays and the effectiveness of the evaluation task.

The role-play and evaluation tasks are recommended by Ishihara & Cohen (2015) to be effective in raising learners' pragmatic awareness and they serve the function of stimulation for learners' real communication.

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