

The Role of Speech Acts in Raising Pragmatic Competence Awareness among Students in EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Among different definitions about Pragmatics as a science, the following two were chosen on purpose. *Pragmatics* is the study of speaker meaning, (Yule, 1996). *Pragmalinguistics* refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings, (Leech, 1983).

This paper focuses on speech acts as crucial aspect of pragmatics. The main idea of the paper is to highlight the correlation between teaching speech acts and developing pragmatic competence of EFL students through classroom activities. As House (1996) stated, bringing together the ability to carry out speech acts and manage ongoing conversation, benefited instructional effects on pragmatic fluency - the extent to which students' conversational contributions are relevant, polite, and overall effective.

Given the explanation of all types of speech acts, students gain additional skills on expressing promises, requests, apologies, emotional and psychological states etc. These skills might be evident on their correct usage and understanding of language in contexts, clearly stated on the usage of mitigating devices, opening and closing remarks, discourse markers, apologetic formulae, intensifiers etc.

Keywords: *speech acts, pragmatic competence, language awareness, types of speech acts, implicature.*

Introduction

Due to historical, geographical, political, social (and many other) reasons, English language is nowadays widespread around the world. It has been interwoven with various aspects of people's lives. Meanwhile, communication has always been a necessity of human beings; and English language serves well to this purpose.

This paper is framed in English language teaching and learning, under the umbrella of pragmatics. The aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of teaching pragmatics and teaching English simultaneously. Raising students' language awareness can be done through pragmatic competence. Such competence is developed in children since early ages, as far as first language acquisition is concerned. When it comes to learning a second or foreign language, things do not seem that easy. Many psychologists stated their theories concerning SLA, which were a great help for methodologists in improving the FL teaching approaches and techniques.

Pragmatic competence is being considered as playing an important role in teaching and learning a foreign language. One of the various definitions of Pragmatics is: "Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning", (Yule, 1996:3). He further explains that pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener; it has to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean for themselves. One of the basic theories of Pragmatics is Speech Act Theory, which is also the focal point of this paper.

Speech Act Theory

It all started with John Austin. In his manuscript *How to Do Things with Words* (1962:7), he wrote the following:

"To name the ship *is* to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words 'I name, this...'. When I say, before the registrar or altar, 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it... What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, 'a performative'... The name is derived, of course, from 'perform', the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action -it is not normally thought of as just saying something."

Austin's intention above was to distinguish a statement from an utterance. He went further in his theory by classifying utterances into performatives and constatives ones. The main tenet was that speaking is acting and actions performed via utterances are called speech acts. Austin declared that different from constatives, performative utterances cannot be considered true or false, (the use of hereby in the utterance was linked to time and circumstances of the event, such as: I hereby promise...).

Not to speak of truth or falsity of performatives, Austin introduced the term felicity conditions. Austin (1962:14) suggested three categories of conditions which must be satisfied for a performative act to be felicitous, which he termed Felicity Conditions:

- a. There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect. The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.
- b. The procedure must be executed correctly and completely.
- c. The persons must have the requisite thoughts, feeling and intentions, as specified in the procedure and if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must so do.

Austin (1962:16) pointed out that the violations of the first two conditions result in what he calls misfires, when the intended action is not performed; whereas violations of the third conditions are only abuses, when the action is preformed but infelicitously or insincerely. Some of these conditions are verbal, they have to do with the uttering of certain conventional words; others are non-verbal, they have to do with the conventional procedure and the appropriate participants etc.

Working on performatives, Austin (1962:22-25) found out that the performative category covers a wide range of utterances, subsuming some which are not of the highly conventionalized type, but are used in ordinary language situations. Thus the uttering of the following sentences could also constitute the performing of the acts that are depicted by their performative verbs, i.e. promising and warning.

I promise that I shall be there.

I warn you that there is a bull in the field.

Austin drew a parallel distinction between explicit performatives which satisfy the linguistic form in the above sentences or others of this model, and implicit performatives which do not conform to that form although it is assumed and implicit, such as:

I shall be there.

There is a bull in the field.

The logical assumption above can generally apply to sentence-types which are common almost in every language; namely, the imperative, the interrogative and the declarative. Thus, we can assume that the imperative contains the performative verb (*I order you to...*), the interrogative (*I ask you whether...*), and the declarative (*I state to you that...*). These are implicit performatives. However, constatives can be considered

performatives this way, to utter "I state to you that..." is also to perform an act: that of stating.

Three dimensions of Speech Acts

The main idea of Austin's theory was saying by doing, we do things with words. Austin preceded his theory with the proposal that there are three dimensions in a speech act. Austin (1962:100-102) suggested that a speaker can simultaneously perform three acts in issuing an utterance: the *locutionary* act is the act of saying something with a certain sense and reference; the *illocutionary* act is the act performed in saying something, i.e. the act named and identified by the explicit performative verb. The *perlocutionary* act is the act performed by, or as a consequence of, saying something.

He gave the following example: Shoot her!

Location: He said to me 'Shoot her!' meaning by 'shoot' shoot and referring by 'her' to *her*.

Illocution: He urged (or advised, ordered, etc.) me to shoot her.

Perlocution: He persuaded me to shoot her. He got me to (or made me) shoot her.

Yule (1996:48) comments on the three acts by saying that if one has difficulty in with forming the sounds and words to create a meaningful utterance, then one might fail to produce a locutionary act. If one understands the meaning of an utterance, but one does not understand the function of it, it means they failed to produce the illocutionary act.

On the three dimensions, the illocutionary act is the most discussed. The illocutionary act is performed via the communicative force of an utterance.

Illocution is the force of an utterance; it states what is meant by what is said. Yule (1996:49) brings up a point; the illocutionary force of an utterance is what it counts as. In the example: I'll see you later. (A)

Locution A can counts as more than one illocution: I predict that A – it counts as a prediction; I promise you that A – it counts as a promise; I warn you that A – it counts as a warning.

Thus, the same utterance can potentially have different illocutionary forces. How can speakers assume that the intended illocutionary force will be recognized by the hearer?

The most obvious device for indicating the illocutionary force (IFID) is an expression of the type I Vp you that...where there is a slot for a verb that explicitly names the illocutionary act being performed. (Vp is the performative verb). Yule (1996:49)

Towards the end of his book, Austin (1962:148 -164.) attempts a classification of illocutionary verbs using the explicit performative test and a concise dictionary. After a detailed survey of cases, conditions and examples, Austin proposes the following five general types of speech acts. Major parts of Austin's lectures on speech acts address the question under what circumstances a locutionary act will successfully and irrevocably cause an illocutionary act.

- i. *verdictives* (type assertion)
- ii. *exercitives* (type I urge you to do something)
- iii. *commissives* (type I promise to do something)
- iv. *behabitives* (all other social agreements)
- v. *expositives* (expressing emotion)

Searle's development of Speech Act Theory

Austin's early death left many questions hovering and doubts and discussions rising. Searle (1969) developed the theory to render it more systematic. He chooses to drop the separation of an utterance into locutionary and illocutionary acts and adopt a distinction between a proposition or propositional act and illocutionary force indicating devices (IFID), which mark the illocutionary force. These include the mood of the verb or the main sentence-types, intonation contours, explicit performatives ...etc. Searle (1965:42) suggests that all five utterances in express the same proposition: i.e. predicating the act of leaving the room though each of them can characteristically be used to perform a different illocutionary act of John:

- (a) Will John leave the room?
- (b) John will leave the room.
- (c) John leave the room!
- (d) Would that John left the room.
- (e) If John will leave the room, I will leave also.

A proposition is distinct from an assertion or the statement of that proposition. The proposition that John will leave the room is expressed in the utterance of all the sentences above, but only in the second one is that proposition asserted.

Searle claimed that there are exactly five illocutionary points. He listed them and added examples that are classed under the respective illocutionary point in S+V (Searle, 1965:179 – 190).

- ✓ Assertives (assert, claim, affirm, state, deny, disclaim, assure, argue, rebut, inform, notify, remind, object, predict, report, suggest insist, conjecture, hypothesize, guess, swear, testify, admit, confess, accuse, blame, criticize, praise, complain, boast, lament)
- ✓ Commissives (commit, promise, threaten, vow, pledge, swear, accept, consent, refuse, offer, bid, assure, guarantee, warrant, contract, covenant, bet)
- ✓ Directives (direct, request, ask¹, ask², urge, tell, require, demand, command, order, forbid, prohibit, enjoin, permit, suggest, insist, warn, advise, recommend, beg, supplicate, entreat, beseech, implore, pray)
- ✓ Declaratives (declare, resign, adjourn, appoint, nominate, approve, confirm, disapprove, endorse, renounce, disclaim, denounce, repudiate, bless, curse, excommunicate, consecrate, christen, abbreviate, name, call)
- ✓ Expressives (apologize, thank, condole, congratulate, complain, lament, protest, deplore, boast, compliment, praise, welcome, greet)

Austin's theory started with the essential distinction of performatives and constatives. Being a member of the School of Oxford, Austin followed the ordinary language philosophy, where he stated that uttering is performing, in other words uttering is acting out the truth value of the words being uttered. However, Austin's theory on truth value of propositions raised strong debates especially in an era of 'modern Pragmatics'.

According to Ambrose (2010:4), Austin's theory of speech acts is a radical conventionalist account of speech highlighting the ritual practices to which speaking contributes and revealing two specific acts (illocutionary and perlocutionary) that arise in linguistic exchanges. This way, it reveals the revolutionary fact that speaking does change the course of events.

Meanwhile, Searle's theory on speech acts improved not only the speech acts categorization, but also the rules regarding the truth paradigm. The Austinian notion of felicity conditions was not enough to compensate for the insincerity and unfaithfulness of speakers toward their utterances.

As Ambrose explained (2010:5), to perform a speech act is thus to generate a propositional content linked to an illocutionary force. But to generate an illocutionary force one has to follow several kinds of semantic

rules (corresponding to the Austinian felicity conditions): the *preparatory* conditions, the *sincerity* condition and the *essential* condition.

Eckardt (2009:4) also states on her manuscript that one gets the feeling that these classes were more defined by phenotype than by the internal structure of speech acts, that the labels are more a convenient way to refer to homogeneous subtypes of speech acts than an ultimate categorization.

Searle's speech act analysis was based on logic assumptions; differently from Austin, he took into account the intention of the speaker. Ambroise (2010:7-9) listed the distinctions between Austin's and Searle's analyses of speech acts. He wrote that the first important aspect of Searle's account of speech act is the rigid distinction he introduces between the content and the force of it (something which was absent from Austin's analysis). As a second distinction, Ambroise stated that his analysis depends on an intentional or mentalist view which implies that the speaker's intentions – and their recognition – are essential to the realization of a speech act (whereas for Austin one cannot perform an act by making an appeal to intention).

Finally, Ambroise points out that according to Searle, one can perform a speech act only if one manifests one's intention to do it by using such a sentence and if one manifests one's intention to undertake all the commitments of the speech act one intends to perform (2010:7).

Can speech acts be taught?

No matter the controversies on Speech Act Theory, such a term represents a basic concept in performing an action. There is available evidence in the works of various linguists (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Kasper, 1989; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989) for the importance of speech acts' teaching in second language acquisition. One may raise the question of why should speech acts be taught. The main reason is language awareness.

Nowadays, communicative approach is the most successful teaching method in SLA. The prime point of this method is naturally raising the communicative competence. However, the work in this approach is intermingled with the development of skills such as: pragmatic competence, grammar competence, social competence etc. pragmatic competence seems to play a crucial role in raising language awareness among FL students. Among the difficulties they encounter, it can be mentioned the lack of the proficiency to communicate fluently, the ability

to maintain an appropriate dialogue, the difficulty in communicating with native speakers. Apart the feature represented in the communicative approach, doing things with the language acquired is something to be taken into account. It means that students are able to perform speech acts like thanking, apologizing, complimenting, asking, etc. but this is easily said than done, because we encounter a lot of examples where students fail to do this. In most of the cases, the problem does not seem to be the lack of lexicon, but the inability to adopt the lexicon, therefore it is not a question of speaking but of communicating and understanding each – others' intentions. As Thomas (1981:91) writes: I have given the term 'pragmatic failure' to the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said'.

Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993:12) discussed three major approaches to the study of pragmatic failure: 1) micro sociolinguistic analysis ascertains conversational style differences and identifies instances where such differences become problematic, but does not usually inquire into the origin of different conversational styles; 2) contrastive pragmatics, involving the crosscultural and cross-linguistic comparison of speech act realization patterns through identifying similarities and differences between the pairs or groups of languages studied. 3) interlanguage pragmatics can study the relationship between learners' prior knowledge and pragmatic performance.

But according to Blum-Kulka (1993:7), other factors intervene: a lack of L2 pragmalinguistic sophistication, combined with negative transfer of sociopragmatic norms from LI or nonnative perceptions of L2 sociopragmatic norms, or even purposeful loyalty to LI cultural patterns, may yield deviations from native use at high proficiency levels as well.

One may purely ask if learning pragmatics is conscious or unconscious. According to Gleason & Perlmann (1985:102), unlike the acquisition of syntax, semantics, and even some sociolinguistic rules, when it comes to speaking politely adults do not leave it to the child to construct the rules on his or her own. Here, they take an active, even energetic part in directly instructing their children in the use of the various politeness devices.

Schmidt (1993:36) explains that simple exposure to sociolinguistically appropriate input is unlikely to be sufficient for second language acquisition of pragmatic and discoursal knowledge because the linguistic realizations of pragmatic functions are sometimes opaque to language learners and because the relevant contextual factors to be noticed are likely to be defined differently or may be nonsalient for the learner.

It is likely that there is a stronger relationship between motivation, acculturation and other affective factors in the development of pragmatic

and discursal ability than in other aspects of language learning, such as syntax (Schmidt, 1983). Those who are concerned with establishing relationships with target language speakers are more likely to pay close attention to the pragmatic aspects of input and to struggle to understand than those who are not so motivated.

As stated above, first pragmatic acquisition is unconscious and easily grasped along the child's growth. Meanwhile second pragmatic acquisition becomes difficult due to the transfer from the first acquisition, being conscious of acts, and motivation.

What skills can be included in pragmatic competence? Bialystok (1993:43) wrote that pragmatic competence entails a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in contexts. It includes speakers' ability to use language for different purposes—to request, to instruct, to effect change. It includes listeners' ability to get past the language and understand the speaker's real intentions, especially when these intentions are not directly conveyed in the forms—indirect requests, irony and sarcasm are some examples. It includes command of the rules by which utterances are strung together to create discourse. This apparently simple achievement to produce coherent speech itself has several components: turn taking, cooperation, cohesion.

Due to the involvement of many linguistic issues, it seems that pragmatic competence should be part of proficient users of FL. Research reveals that even proficient users of FL might lack the pragmatic competence; what is more, this competence should be taught since the first stages of the acquisition of FL.

Tannen (1984) lists eight levels of differences in the ways speakers signal what they mean: when to talk, what to say, pacing and pairing, intonation, formularity, indirectness, cohesion, and coherence; and these eight may lead to differential ways in which conversational partners tend to assess others' intentions as a basis for making their responses.

As House (1986: 164) states this is due to the fact that indirectness lies at the heart of many if not most misresponses and misunderstandings in talk, and such alignment failures are of course much more likely to occur in talk between people from different cultural backgrounds, where indirectness and politeness conventions often diverge.

Some case studies of Speech Acts

Some acts, verbal and nonverbal, may count to the "face wants" of speaker or hearer and are considered "face-threatening acts". Brown and Levinson

(1987:13) categorize expressing thanks as a face-threatening act in which the speaker acknowledges a debt to the hearer, thus threatening the speaker's negative face.

Eisenstein and Bodman (1993:65) listed the following points of view regarding gratitude in English language: Searle (1969) defines thanking positively as an illocutionary act performed by a speaker based on a past act performed by the hearer that was beneficial; Leech (1983) describes thanking as a convivial function whose goal of stating appreciation helps maintain a polite and friendly social atmosphere.

Thanking as a speech act is not an easy task to be performed, due to the emotional attitude of S (preparatory rule) and the indebtedness of the case (sincerity rule). The difficulty arises in cases when the thanking involves speakers of different cultures. Thomas (1983) notes that misunderstandings can arise not only from language limitations (pragmalinguistic failure) but also from inadequate utilization of social conventions and values in the target culture (sociopragmatic failure). Coulmas (1981) posits a useful distinction between thanks that entail indebtedness to the addressee and thanks that imply no indebtedness.

Eisenstein and Bodman (1993:75-76) carried out four experiments on how native and non-native users of English express gratitude. They revealed some interesting facts. They state that it was evident that even advanced non-native learners of English had difficulty in expressing gratitude. They needed information such as what to say, how to express it. Many times they used simply *Thank you* instead of *Thank you, you're the best husband in the world*. They were not able to prolong thanking with proper expressions. Eisenstein and Bodman (1993:75-76) recommend learners to observe the use of pragmatic functions in social interaction; it may be useful for them to compare English model to their own speech in order to enhance their awareness of the pragmalinguistic rules of English.

In a nutshell, the analysis above is an evident case that speech acts can be taught. Thanking seems an easy utterance, but when conveyed into an act becomes complicated. The role of the teacher is important even in this apparently easy task. Through role-plays, students can be involved in practicing various original cases. The teacher should help them with their pragmatic transfer as well.

Borkin and Reinhart (1978:61) define apologies as compensatory action to an offense in the doing of which S was causally involved and which is costly to H. According to them, the function of "excuse me" is "a formula to remedy a past or immediately forthcoming breach of etiquette or other light infraction of a social rule". "I'm sorry," in their analysis, is used in a

wider range of contexts, especially "in remedial interchanges when a speaker's main concern is about a violation of another person's right or damage to another person's feelings".

Bergman and Kasper (1993:90-100) analyzed the speech act of apologizing with British, German and Thai students. According to their results, students were more prone to explicitly express responsibility for the offense the closer the relationship between the offender and the offended person. They noticed pragmatic transfer especially with Thai students. Their findings were consistent with House's observation (1987) that non-natives tend to do 'too much of a good thing'. They stated that the non-natives oversupplied nonconventionalized speech act strategies.

According to Olshtain and Weinbach (1993: 108), in the speech act of complaining, the speaker expresses displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to a past or ongoing action, the consequences of which are perceived by S as affecting her unfavorably.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1993:120) confirmed that two general interlanguage features of speech act performance are length of utterance and variability. Learners at the intermediate to advanced level of second language acquisition tend to be verbose and use more words than native speakers,

more than they themselves would use in their own language, in order to negotiate the intentions of their speech acts in the new language. They tend to use of intensifiers, softeners, number of moves, etc. can be seen from the consistently larger standard derivations exhibited by learners.

Takahashi and Beebe (1993:153) uncovered a number of patterns in the speech act of correction analyzing it with American and Japanese students. First, they demonstrated that it is a typically American pattern to use a positive remark such as "That was a great account" before saying "but" and making a correction when speaking to a person of lower status.

It is the Japanese using Japanese whose style shifting shows the greatest frequency in certain situations. Americans, in the same situations, show much more use of softeners, whether they are speaking to someone of higher or lower status. The style-shifting patterns are important because they are sociolinguistic evidence of a significant aspect of Japanese and American cultures.

To sum up the assumptions made on the above case analyses on speech act realization, it can be stated a list of important features: even advanced learners tend to have less control over the conventions of forms and means used by native speakers in the performance of linguistic action; differences between learners' and native speakers' sociopragmatic perceptions of

comparable speech events are systematically related to differences in their speech act performance; transfer at the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic level persists at higher levels of proficiency; learners produce more speech than native speakers when the task is less demanding on their control skills.

Language proficiency, then, is considered in terms of *the fit* between the processing abilities of the learner and the task demands imposed by a specific language use situation. Where the two are congruent, learners will perform well; where the task demands are excessive relative to the learner's ability, learners will struggle.

In a nutshell, nonnative speech act behavior can deviate from native behavior: in strategy selection, in utterance length, in the consideration of social and pragmatic features, in carrying out or opting out from performing a speech act, and in varying the degree of external and internal modification.

Theories and definitions mentioned in the first part of this paper help us explain the empirical state of pragmatics and speech acts as a crucial moment of such science. The second part presented some concrete work done by various linguists on the speech acts of thanking, apologizing and complaining. Apart the interesting and valuable results revealed, the aim of this paper was to search if speech acts can be taught and if there is a reason to do so. In the end we can say that there is enough reason to teach students speech acts, in order to develop their pragmatic competence. It is also assumed that this can be done by using original material of English models and making use of role-play. We can also say that a non-native teacher can help them to compare and contrast the original models with those derived from their mother tongue. This can make them conscious of the pragmatic transfer phenomenon.

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