Research Paper Linguistics

Strategy to Investigate Pragmatic Awareness Among ESL Learners in New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Majority of senior secondary students, studying in public and govt. schools, in New Delhi, do well in their written tests but fail to communicate effectively with others in spoken English, even in a very simple conversation .After years of compulsory English language study, students can successfully pass the secondary and senior secondary English exam, but they cannot apply appropriate spoken English in required situation. These language learners have developed a large repertoire of lexical and grammatical knowledge, but are often unable to apply that knowledge in real communication, because they have limited pragmatic knowledge, let alone pragmatic competence. The development of the ability to use English appropriately in a given communicative situation is essential if language learners are to achieve communicative competence.
This research article provides strategy to investigate pragmatic awareness among ESL learner in New Delhi.

Keywords : pragmatic awareness, ESL Learners, New Delhi

Majority of senior secondary students, studying in public and govt. schools, in New Delhi, do well in their written tests but fail to communicate effectively with others in spoken English, even in a very simple conversation .After years of compulsory English language study, students can successfully pass the secondary and senior secondary English exam, but they cannot apply appropriate spoken English in required situation. These language learners have developed a large repertoire of lexical and grammatical knowledge, but are often unable to apply that knowledge in real communication, because they have limited pragmatic knowledge, let alone pragmatic competence. The development of the ability to use English appropriately in a given communicative situation is essential if language learners are to achieve communicative competence.

As a sub-theme of communicative competence ,pragmatic competence has been poorly taught in English learning and teaching in India, for Research on pragmatics has indicated that pragmatic competence plays a key role in developing communicative competence (Bachman,1990;Canale,1983;Chavarria & Bonany,2006), as the proper application of the language in corresponding contexts makes the communication continue smoothly .

Research Significance:
By seeking answer to the problems mentioned above, the study aims to provide a clear picture of pragmatic awareness among secondary and senior secondary, EFL students.

Research Objectives:
The purpose of the study is to investigate:

I. Are the secondary and senior secondary learners aware of pragmatic norms in English?
II. Can instruction bring about any positive changes in learners' pragmatic awareness?

Research Methodology:
Pragmatic and grammatical judgment task (Bardovi-Harlig&Dörnyei, 1998) can be adopted to explore the pragmatic awareness before the instruction. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to be conducted to assess the effects of the instruction.

Research Problem & Significance
Scene: A student opens the door of a teacher's office without any permission and asks for the following:

Student: Where is Madam Rashmi ?

Teacher: Well, I don't know. May be she is in the class.

Student: When is she coming?

Teacher: Well, I have no idea. Sorry.

Student: Okay. Bye.

In the above example, the student's grammar is correct, but when we judge his utterances considering the factors such as context, social distance and power, it is evident that the concerned student lacks pragmatic competence. The example is based on such real-life student-teacher interactions that happen so frequently. In fact, such kind of interaction implies that the majority of the students are not aware of the pragmatic feature of the English language.

However, it has been observed that the students of English medium private schools are more polite, in other words, demonstrate better pragmatic awareness than their government school counterparts. Unfortunately, there is dearth of empirical evidence as to investigating the pragmatic awareness among school going and adult ESL learners, and whether this awareness differs across different schools in Delhi.

By seeking answer to the problems mentioned above, the study aims to provide a clear picture of pragmatic awareness among secondary and senior secondary students. The study is also pedagogic in nature. Thus it is hoped that the findings would provide food for thought while developing future curriculum & assessment.

Literature Review
In order to be successful in communication, it is essential for second language learners to know not just grammar and text organization but also pragmatic aspects of the target language (Bachman 1990). 'Pragmatic competence' can be specifically defined as "knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to context" (Kasper 1997). Previous studies

in 'Interlanguage Pragmatics' (Kasper and Rose 1999; Cohen 1996; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993) have shown that differences and similarities exist in how to carry out communicative actions between language learners and native speakers of target languages.

The scope of this study is, however, limited to speech acts. Pragmatics studies try to find how people comprehend and produce a speech act in social situations, usually in conversation. These are examples of pragmatic failure that L2 learners encounter when they are involved in the act of communication. Trying to get the meaning across, they may simply translate speech acts from their mother tongues to the second language. Pragmatic failure, unlike grammatical errors, often passes unchecked by the teacher or, worse, it is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness.

Current research on L2 learners' pragmatic awareness (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig&Dornyei, 1998; Niezgoda& Rover, 2001; Schauer, 2006) have demonstrated that many factors will affect L2 learners' pragmatic awareness, such as instructional contexts, length of stay in the target environment, and language proficiency. Their results revealed that EFL learners are more likely to develop a solid grammatical competence and perceive grammatical infelicities as more serious than pragmatic ones (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig&Dornyei, 1998; Schauer, 2006). However, studies have also indicated that grammar learning does not necessarily enhance the development of L2 learners' pragmatic awareness. Many advanced learners fail to communicate properly with native speakers because they lack pragmatic understanding in various contexts (e.g., Blum-Kulka& Kasper, 1989)

One of the controversial questions is whether 'pragmatics' can be taught in the language classroom, especially in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. As pragmatic competence has a close relationship with sociocultural values and beliefs of the country or the community where the target language is spoken, ESL (English as a Second Language) learners certainly have an advantage in acquiring this knowledge. ESL learners have a better chance of having adequate and abundant input than EFL learners. Kasper (1997) and Rose and Kasper (2001) extensively discuss results of previous studies on pragmatic instruction and concludes that pragmatics can indeed be taught. In other words, instruction can bring positive change in learners' pragmatic awareness.

Since the number of developmental studies of EFL and ESL learners' pragmatic awareness is rare; therefore, Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei's (1998) study is of particular importance for this research area. Their major research question is focused on if the instructional environment would influence pragmatic awareness between EFL and ESL learners. The results revealed that there were significant differences between two groups that the EFL learners significantly recognized more grammatical errors than pragmatic errors and also perceived grammatical infelicities as more serious than pragmatic ones. On the contrary, the ESL learners identified more pragmatic errors and perceive them as more serious than grammatical ones.

Schauer (2006) replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei's (1998) study with ESL learners in England and EFL learners in Germany. She used the same video and questionnaire that had been used from the original study. The results are consistent with the original findings. However, in contrast to the above two studies, Niezgoda and Rover (2001) also replicated the study but with the different results. Their research questions focused on if L2 learners' language proficiency could affect their pragmatic awareness. Surprisingly, the results revealed that their EFL learners in Czech were more aware of pragmatic errors than those ESL learners in the U.S. and also perceived them as more serious than grammatical ones. The authors attributed the different results to their sampling because their participants were highly selected and they had passed many rigorous language tests before joining the program. One finding is in agreement with the previous studies which indicated that their ESL learners also considered pragmatic errors as more important than grammatical ones.

Research Methodology

Based on the above findings, the study seeks to present a picture of how secondary, senior secondary and adult learners perceive their pragmatic awareness in English as a second language (ESL) environment. The study aims to select students from two different medium of instruction schools: English medium private school and Hindi medium government school. Students in each school can be divided into two groups: experiment and control.

The study can be conducted in three stages. In the first stage, learners' pragmatic awareness will be measured. The instrument for data elicitation, at this stage, will be the pragmatic and grammatical judgment task, adopted from Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyer's (1998) study. The task will be developed bearing in mind the different school environment.

Participants will be asked to do the Pragmatic and Grammatical Judgment Task first.

Each test item will appear in the following format:

John: Good afternoon, Helen.

!Helen: Good night, John.

Was the last part appropriate/ correct? Yes: □ No: □

If there was a problem, how bad do you think it was?

Not bad at all __1___:__2___:__3___:__4___:__5___:__6 ___Very bad

Participants will be asked to read each conversation very carefully and to evaluate the last utterance with an exclamation mark and decide if it is appropriate or correct (pragmatic and grammatical error recognition). If the answer is no, they had to put an X in the box marked No in the answer sheet. After this, they had to decide how serious the mistake is by using the Likert Scale from "not bad at all" to "very bad" (pragmatic and grammatical severity ratings). If there is a minor mistake, they had to circle 1, 2, or 3; if there is a severe mistake, they had to circle 5 or 6. However, if the answer is "Yes", they will just ignore it and go to the next question.

In the second stage of the study, learners will be given instruction to make them aware of pragmatic norms in English. In terms of instruction, studies have been done to investigate the effectiveness of implicit and explicit instruction. Although the effectiveness mostly favors explicit instruction, results are not consistent. In the present study, explicit instruction will be adopted. Instruction will focus on awareness raising activities, pragmalinguistic resources, such as the semantic formulas for speech events, and discussion of cross-cultural differences, especially by pointing out events when pragmatic rules are not universal.

In the third and final stage, students will take Discourse Completion Task (DCT). This will be the post-test session for the students. The aim of this session will be to find out the effects of instruction on students' pragmatic awareness.

Date collected during the first and third stage will be put to statistical analysis to get a reliable picture of pragmatic awareness among the learners

Test	Group	N	Mean	Median	SIG
Pre	Explicit Control				
post	Explicit Control				

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