

Empowering English teachers with Pragmatics for Better Teaching

Nury Supriyanti
supriyanti_nury@uny.ac.id
UNY

English learners today have a higher demand for learning. They do not want to learn the language for simply learning it at school to be forgotten as just a school subject. They want to reach some level of mastery so that they can get the advantage of mastering a language for other real life needs such as for business, studies or getting easy access to technology. This in turn put higher demand to the human resources in the world of English teaching. It requires teachers to always find ways that their teaching may result in the mastery which fulfills the communication needs of the learners. In order to teach as required, teachers today need to be well equipped with knowledge on language as recently viewed by the linguists. Although the awareness of including the study on language use started in the 1970s, it has not yet widely understood by teachers so it has not been widely practiced in their English classes. Most teachers still hold a vague understanding on how language is used for communication. Therefore, their teaching mostly still reflects such an understanding. This information can be easily seen from observing the process of the in service teacher training of PLPG which has been conducted by the government. Teachers need to know how to include the pragmatic elements of the language in every aspect of their teaching with enough understanding. By having such understanding, they can develop the curriculum (or mastering the effective and already existing one), design the syllabus, write the lesson plans, develop the materials and evaluation and choosing the most effective teaching media. This paper puts forward how to equip teachers with knowledge on pragmatics through several ways.

Nury Supriyanti, a lecturer in English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University, a graduate from IKIP Yogyakarta and Macquarie University Australia. The subjects she teaches are Pragmatics, English language Teaching, English for Young Learners

Introduction

English learners today have a higher demand for learning. They do not want to learn the language for simply learning it at school to be forgotten as just a school subject. They want to reach some level of mastery so that they can get the advantage of mastering a language for other real life needs such as for business, studies or getting easy access to technology.

This, in turn, put higher demand to the human resources in the world of English teaching. It requires teachers to always find ways that their teaching may result in the mastery which fulfills the communication needs of the learners. In order to teach as required, teachers today need to be well equipped with knowledge on language as recently viewed by the linguists.

Although the awareness of including the study on language use started in the 1970s, it has not yet widely understood by teachers so it has not been widely practiced in their English classes. Most teachers still hold a vague understanding on how language is used for communication. Therefore, their teaching mostly still reflects such an understanding.

This information can be easily seen from observing the process of the in service teacher training of PLPG which has been conducted by the government. Teachers need to know how to include the pragmatic elements of the language in every aspect of their teaching with enough understanding. By having such understanding, they can develop the curriculum (or mastering the effective and already existing one), design the syllabus, write the lesson plans, develop the materials and evaluation and choosing the most effective teaching media.

In order to be successful in their teaching teachers need to be made aware of what it means to teach language communicatively and what it counts

Why pragmatics?

Case 1.

A test item from the TOEFL test

A woman's voice : Do you have fifty dollar change?

A man's voice : Fifty dollars? I dont even have a cent!

The narrator : What does the man imply?

Case 2

I overheard a short exchange between two Indonesians speaking English

First Man : Where do you come from?

Second man : I come from the toilet.

It is disgusting to know that someone's place of origin can be as unlikely as such a place. I then learned that there has been something missing with the way how they learn English. Obviously they have already had some mastery of the English linguistic forms but not its social dimension.

Case 3

Once, we had an American colleague who told us about her experience . one morning, a student came up up to her and started talking about a lot of things. Rather bewildered, she said with a smile: "Do I know you?" the student said innocently : 'Of course, I'm your student, you are my teacher; She did not know what to say next . It was an awkward situation for both of them. The student did not recognize that my American colleague asked him to introduce himself.

All the cases above are evidence of how knowledge on sounds, grammar and more vocabulary are not enough to make people function well in a language. There are other things language learners and teachers to be aware of so that they can pay attention to them in order to be a functional speaker of a language. It should be understood by language learners that there is something else that they need to learn, that is the aspect of use as agreed by the native speakers of the language such as the fact that English people use "Where are you from?" and "Where do you come from?" for asking about someone's place of origin. They do not pay attention to the fact that for such an occasion they should use "Where have you been?" instead.

The question needs to be asked then is how the learner will learn? This will be the teacher's job obviously. Therefore, due to the difficulty of the study which is known to be abstract and it is regarded only as belonging to the scientist of language (the linguist), English teachers are not well equipped with such knowledge which is adequate enough to make their learners easily recognize such an element. This paper does not propose the teaching of pragmatics the way the linguists do. The idea is to provide some kind of a "user-friendly" discussion of one more aspect of language known as pragmatics.

What is pragmatics?

Crystal (1997) and Mey (2001) define pragmatics as the study of language in use. Earlier Levinson (1983) includes the incorporation of the context factors in discourse in the study. The physical setting in which the discourse takes place and the relationship between the participants belong to the discussion of context factors in a pragmatic investigation. Brown and Levinson (1987) elaborate the relationship into relative power, degree of imposition and social distance. The social and contextual dimension to the study of language is provided by the study of pragmatics. It implies that a learner of certain language needs to have some knowledge on the society in which the language is spoken.

In relation to the above statement Roever (2009) states that pragmatic competence should be taught as seriously as grammar. It can be inferred from the statement

“The important role played by pragmatic competence as part of communicative competence should translate into pragmatics receiving pedagogical attention equal to grammar or vocabulary”

What is pragmatics competence?

In order to provide English teachers and learners with some practical knowledge on pragmatics, it is necessary for us to examine what it is meant by pragmatic competence. Leech (1983) puts forward a distinction between knowledge of sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. Sociopragmatic knowledge covers the social rule of language use which include knowledge of appropriateness, the meaning of situational and interlocutor factors, social conventions and taboo. It implies that learning sociopragmatics will mean learning habits, customs, culture or ways of lives of the people speaking the language.

The pragmalinguistic knowledge, on the other hand, includes that of the linguistic tools necessary for implementing speech intentions. This knowledge represents the mastery of pronunciation (punctuation in writing), grammar and vocabulary.

Learning Pragmatics and the Structure of Pragmatic Competence

Learning pragmatics is complicated because the learners need to learn non-linguistic rules of social conduct and social relationship. This learning needs the learners to go beyond language, that is the culture of the target language but Roever (2009) it should have the similar conditions as that of learning second language in general and should follow the same steps.

Low proficiency learners might get difficulty in the process because they might not be sensitive to specific features in the input. On the other hand it is also widely believed that they will easily be familiar with non-linguistic input about norms of interaction of the language such as physical proximity, touch, bowing, handshaking, especially those which are universally accepted. Though we need to remember those should be visually presented. Roever (2009) proposed a model of pragmatic learning in the following steps

1. Sociopragmatic input and general linguistic input are provided through interaction, interpersonal contact, and observation
2. The input need to involve language use in interaction and the modelling of language use associated with relevant social roles
3. On the pragmatic side, learners need to pay attention to features of the input
4. Noticing the feature and processing them then will lead them to intake
5. Allowing learners to construct theories and how context influences language use
6. Knowing or being aware of the sociopragmatic knowledge in the target language will help learners to attend to input as pragmatic input.
7. There are three types of intake namely English sociopragmatic knowledge, English pragmalinguistic knowledge and English general knowledge learners need to have which can be supported by the learners' awareness of the similar types of knowledge in Javanese or bahasa Indonesia in our case

How to teach pragmatics to our English teachers

According to Yule (1998) pragmatics is interesting because it studies how people understand each other linguistically but it can also be frustrating since it might be viewed as irregular and unpredictable. On the other hand, it is also found that there is some kind of regularity in the language users behave linguistically. Yule (1998) argues that the regularity comes from the fact that language users are from the similar speech community who share the same values, beliefs and habits. Therefore, they recognize what others may want from them when they express things in certain phrases or utterances,

Teaching pragmatics of English through the teachers' own culture

1. Raising the teachers' awareness through some pragmatic phenomena in their own language and culture

The most interesting topics of pragmatics is speech acts. It is in line with what most of pragmaticians agree that speech acts are the most vigorously investigated topics in pragmatics. Many interesting speech acting phenomena are found in Javanese.

a. Javanese greeting through “yes question”

Experience 1

An Indonesian friend with Javanese background came to live with an Australian lady in Sydney. She was doing her masters degree in Macquarie University. In the first week when I met her she always looked unhappy. When I asked her what was wrong she said that she could not start the relationship with the landlady. In her opinion she felt that the landlady was not friendly to her because every morning when they met and she greeted her, she responded unexpectedly. Curiously I asked her how she greeted her, what was the actual utterance. Innocently she said that every morning they met around the bathroom they shared and exactly like in her Javanese way of greeting she asked the landlady, only that this is in English “Are you going to take a bath?” In Javanese this would be the most appropriate greeting in that context (Badhe siram, bu? Apakah ibu mau mandi?). Greeted with the same expression every morning, the landlady responded with the question :’Are you going to take a bath, too” The friend was not prepared with the response and in a rather confused way answered:’ No, I have taken mine.” She had the feeling that she wanted to use the bathroom and to have the first turn.

It was not easy for the Indonesian or Javanese to go through the experiences. They want to be friendly so that they will be accepted in their new surrounding but since they are not aware of the pragmatic aspect of the language they have been learning, they have to go through such an experience.

- b. Another friend went to the uni post office to post a letter to Indonesia. His wife gave her a fifty dollar note, but the lady in the post office who served him insisted that the note given to him was a twenty dollar. He then called his wife at home who told him again and again that it was a fifty dollar. When the cashier’s box was checked there was no twenty dollar note. This friend had the feeling that he had the right to be angry. But the problem was that he could not express his anger appropriately due to his limited sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistic competence. He just hit the table but he was not happy with that either because he would look uncivilized then. In Bahasa Indonesia what he needed to say was : Gimana sih ibu ini? (gimana is colloquial bagaimana) with certain stresses. If he had to literally translate it in English it would be “How are you?” which was a greeting. Accordingly, it should be responded with : “Fine, thank you”

c. The Act of swearing in Javanese

For the act of swearing, the Javanese has some ways.

The first way is by saying the name of all animals in the zoo with certain stresses accompanied by the appropriate body language

The second is by constructing the following utterances

- a. Your _____ (parts of the body) + certain stresses
- b. Your _____ (your older family members) + certain stresses

Explaining ways how people do things with language as above (greeting, swearing, expressing anger) and how those acts are then put into words and in turn the saying of the words are interpreted as such by the hearers in a particular language is expected to make teachers realize that it is crucial that for them to have the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence.

d. Giving examples the English equivalents

The case of speech act, that is performing action via language (Yule, 1998) needs to be well understood by English teachers in Indonesia.

Understanding the notion of speech acts helps teacher to work with language functions. It is necessary for them to be familiar with the concept of speech acts because it will make them learn about language functions due to the fact that the syllabus designs used by most English coursebooks today are based on the concept of language functions. Even in the standard of content of our effective competency based curriculum (KTSP) include the materials formulated in language functions.

In order to make the teachers understand language functions in English it is necessary to provide them with some understanding of how people do things with language. After recognizing the fact that people use language by considering also the social rules derived from the culture of the speech community, teachers are expected to look at language in a different way and in turn, they will know how to learn it and accordingly how to teach it. Speech acts or language functions are part of the language that they need to learn, for example looking at how things are done in other languages

e. Providing user friendly theoretical bases

It is encouraged for teachers to have some knowledge on the pragmatic concepts so that they know by introducing the terms after good living examples are provided for example for the notion of speech act. Through examples which are familiar to the teachers' daily lives, it is expected that they will understand the concepts easily by comparing the phenomenon of the two languages, English and the mother tongue.

Conclusion

It has already been agreed by experts that pragmatics can be taught and it should be done explicitly. English teaching today has required teachers to be able to teach for communication. Therefore, we need to always find way to teach teachers the pragmatic aspect of language effectively and efficiently whether it is in the teacher pre-service training or in the in service training.

The competence on pragmatics are classified into sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. Both need to be taught explicitly even for the beginners. They need to be helped by providing them with models which include the pragmatic aspect presented visually.

In order to equip teachers with pragmatic awareness and pragmatic concepts, it can be done through examining pragmatic phenomena in the teachers' language, comparing with the similar phenomena in English and providing them with simple theoretical explanation.

References

- Horn, Laurence R and Ward, Gregory. 2006. *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Malden: Blackwell
- Mey, J (2001) *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Roever, C (2009) *Teaching and Testing Pragmatics*. In Michael H.Long and Catherine J.Doherty (eds) , *The Handbook of Language Teaching* (pp. 560-577)
- Rowe, Bruce M and Levine, Diane P. (2006) *A Concise Introduction to Linguistics* Boston : Pearson
- Yule, George. 1996. *Pragmatics*. Oxford : Oxford University press