PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: Basically, people produce an utterance as an action. It means that they can do anything through utterances such as requesting, commanding, asserting, apologizing, thanking, etc. To express the idea, people do not only produce utterances consisting grammatical structure, but also do an action via their utterances. This article looks critically how the pragmatic strategies used by the university students of Zainul Hasan Islamic Institute in realizing speech acts on English language teaching at the classroom. The design used in this article is descriptive research. The data of utterances were derived from 36 university students on English Education Department of Zainul Hasan Islamic Institute Genggong, Probolinggo. The results show that the university students employed almost the same pragmatic strategies in realizing speech acts of thanking, apologizing and refusing. Being culturally aware of the target language, it is expected that the students can achieve the goal of their communication successfully. Consequently, it is suggested that EFL learners provide the students with more opportunities in having English exposure, particularly in cultural differences in using the language.

Keywords: *pragmatic competence, EFL Learners, speech act*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a media to explore all ideas and the feeling of human beings. It is kind of idea or concept by people transferring and sharing information, emotions, experiences, knowledge, as well to understand, persuade, and convert the others. By using language, it can be achieved a certain effect and also consider that the communication will be successful to attain the purpose, as Sapir states that "Language is a purely human and non–instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (Poole, 1869:4).

Language is an important part of communication as a basic human activity. Language is not only seen as the object to be explored but also taken a vital function in many different aspects of life such as social, military, economic or even politic. Briefly, language is the chief means by which people communicate. The use of language from various purposes is governed by the conditions of society, in as much as these conditions determine the users' access to, and control of what the conversation means. It can be learned in Pragmatics.

Some linguists believe that language as an abstract system can be understood without depending on the context because the meaning can be taken from the sentence itself. They argue that every one of us has a mental construct about things (McCarthy, 2001). In other words, we have already had a concept about things that will help us in determining the language meaning as long as it is grammatically correct. To a certain extent, this claim might be true. But still, it seems that depending only on linguistic competence to negotiate meaning for a successful communication is inadequate.

Relevant to the issue raised above, pragmatics has come to the fore as one way to understand language better since it studies language use in context that combines the form and the function of language in negotiating meaning (FromkinBlair & Collins, 1999). Pragmatics attempts to fill the gap between the theoretical use of language and the functional one. That is why, it is suggested for English teachers to help EFL learners on how to communicate by considering the context rather than simply depending on the grammatical rules of the language or semantic meanings.

The fact is that, when traditional language-teaching approaches have focused on role memorization of grammatical and lexical components of language, these methods have largely been successful in accomplishing their goal to help language learners become effective language users (Savignon, 1997). The learners may be linguistically competent, but they do not know how to use the target language appropriately that somehow may lead them to a pragmatic failure because of having socio-cultural difference problems.

Pragmatic competence can be defined as the ability that the learners possess, develop, acquire, and use or lose in learning a language (Kasper & Rose, 2001). In other words, it is believed that the acquisition of pragmatic competence takes a natural process. It is closely related to English learners' pragmatic knowledge and understanding of the culture of the target language. It also affects the learners' performance in using the language. In addition, owing insufficient pragmatic knowledge, English learners can hardly avoid committing pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

Some experts believe that the issue on bringing the target culture to the classroom to raise the students' pragmatic awareness may help students understand the language better because of knowing cultural differences and being aware of the significance of using English appropriately. If the study on the university students has not been conducted, we, as lectures, will never realize how our English teaching and learning proceeds so far and what its implications are for our students' competence. We will have no chance in helping them develop their pragmatic earlier if we do not know their acquisition so far. Therefore, the study on pragmatic competence of the university students will contribute some notion on the importance of teaching pragmatic knowledge in the university students' classrooms. That is the reason why the researcher thinks that this article is necessary to carry out.

It is quite reasonable then to figure out how EFL university students realize illocutionary acts, in term of their production, as the representation of their pragmatic competence. Since pragmatic competence becomes one of the important components of communicative competence, it seems that its acquisition from the earlier period of learning language is much needed (Kasper, 2001).

METHOD

The design used in this article is descriptive research. The data of utterances were derived from 36 university students on English Education Department of Zainul Hasan Islamic Institute Genggong, Probolinggo.

Pragmatic Competence in Language Teaching

In EFL contexts, the goals of a language teaching should be designed to meet the needs of the language learners to help them develop and improve their communicative competence both spoken and written. In other words, the primary goal of learning a foreign language should provide fluency and accuracy in spoken and written modes of communication. Consequently, language teachers should provide the learners with two kinds of meaning: the semantic meanings of words and structures which can be found in dictionaries and grammars, and the pragmatic meaning which can be drawn beyond the grammatical structures.

Pragmatics, as the study of language use in context, offers an opportunity to understand better what is said beyond the language. Therefore, the language learners are required to have the ability to understand and use language appropriately according to the communicative situation (Yule, 1996)

Factors Determining L2 Pragmatic Competence

Considering the importance of pragmatic competence, the following factors are believed to have a direct influence on the acquisition of pragmatic competence namely availability of input, influence of instruction, level of proficiency, length of exposure, and transfer.

Firstly, the availability of input refers mainly to the pragmatic input in academic encounter and in the textbook. Here, teachers should provide the students with many activities as the pragmatic model for the students so that they can obtain realistic pragmatic input.

Secondly, instruction is believed to have an important role in providing pragmatic input. The instruction should emphasize on similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 so that the students will have confidence to speak the target language in the light the knowledge of cultural differences.

Thirdly, pragmatic competence may also be influenced by the learners' level of proficiency. It refers to the quality of the learners: how things can be understood differently by the learners. The assumption is that more proficient learners have enough control over the L2 at the pragmatic level. The low and high proficiency learners differ in the order and frequency of semantic formulas they used. Some studies found that lower proficiency leaners were also more direct than higher leaners in performing their acts (Takahashi and Bebe, 1993).

Then, the longer the learner interacts with L2 or is immersed in a community of speakers of the L2, the more pragmatically aware the learners become. That is to say, the amount of exposure to specific pragmatic features may have some effects on the learners' pragmatic awareness.

Another point is the transfer of L1 pragmatic knowledge to understand or carry out linguistic action in the L2. A positive or negative pragmatic transfer may occur, which leads the learners to a successful communication or pragmatic failure.

Pragmatic Transfer

Pragmatic transfer is considered one of the most important areas in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Research into pragmatic transfer has highlighted the impact of learners' first language pragmatic knowledge on that of their second or foreign language pragmatic knowledge (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Additionally, it can be derived that pragmatic transfer is the influence of the learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information.

The speaker's pragmatic competence in L1 can influence his or her communication in L2. Kasper and Rose (2002) argue that it is due to the fact that pragmatic competence in L1 and L2 is characterized by some common rules and knowledge. When the L2 learners can successfully transfer the rules and the knowledge from their mother tongue to be applied to their target language, they possess positive pragmatic transfer that indicates their understanding of the intended meaning of the utterances within a given context.

Pragmatic Failure

Regarding the lack of complete and appropriate knowledge of the social rules (pragmatic knowledge), the inability to understand what is meant by what is said which has grammatically correct utterances may lead to a pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic failure may cause great misunderstanding and set up barriers to a successful cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, there are two pragmatic failures proposed by Thomas (1983), namely pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Pragmalinguistic failures occur when the pragmatic strategies are inappropriately transferred from the speaker's mother tongue to the target language. While sociopragmatic failure occurs when the L2 learner violates pragmatic

norms because the learners do not know what can be said to whom in particular situations because of the different cultural background.

Interlanguage Pragmatic

Interlanguage, terminologically, can be defined as the type of language produced by second and foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. Moreover, in terms of language use, interlanguage pragmatics is introduced as the study to examine how nonnative speakers comprehend and produce action in a target language (Kasper & Rose, 2002). That is to say, interlanguage pragmatics tries to figure out the way how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform action in a target language.

Comprehension in interlanguage pragmatics is needed by L2 learners when they often fail to understand the non-literal meaning of utterances that are frequently influenced by their native culture. While production in interlanguage pragmatics refers to how L2 learners apply the strategies in performing various speech acts such as requests, apologies, and refusals.

Some research finding show that L2 learners often use different strategies to realize certain speech acts than native speakers do. Learners may perform certain speech acts more or less directly and in terms of acquisition even L2 learners with high level of grammatical or linguistic competence sometimes attain only a relatively low level of pragmatic competence. In fact, the major problem of interlanguage pragmatics is the issue of native-speaker norm (Kasper &Schmidt, 1996) such as sociolinguistic variation within the target language. L2 learners may not want to conform to L2 pragmatic norms because it means giving up their cultural identity.

Speech Acts

Pragmatics includes the study about the speech acts. The term speech acts do not refer simply to the act of speaking, but to the whole communicative situation including the context of the utterance which may contribute to the meaning of the interaction. Speech acts are utterances that do not talk about a state of affairs, but are meant to perform an act. Speech acts are parts of language behaviour. Speech acts refer to actions being performed by speakers via the utterances they produce. Speech acts is the actions performed in the actual situations of language use, as Searle (1969:16) states that "to take the token as a message is to take it as a produced or issued token…. [S]peech acts…..are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication."

Speech acts concern with what people say through the language by looking at the context. It is not only about the meaning of the utterance by what the speakers produce, but it also performs some acts behind those utterances.

The speech act theory begins with Austin's theory. Austin (in Levinson, 1983:236) states three kinds of acts as follows:

1. Locutionary act: the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference.
2. Illocutionary act: the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. In uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase).
3. Perlocutionary act: the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstance of utterance.

Searle (1969:16) states that" speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on". The speech acts performed in the utterance of a sentence are used in general function of the sentence meaning. As Levinson (1986:243) argues that:

"all utterances not only serve to express propositions, but also perform action. In uttering some linguistic expressions, a speaker was doing something, there is one privileged level of action that can be called the illocutionary act or simpler, the speech act".

Shortly, speech acts are the acts of communication; it is a technical term being used in linguistics and with speech acts, the speakers can make requests, ask questions, give orders, make promises, give thanks, offer, apologies, and so on.

Speech Acts Set: Thanking

Thanking is an illocutionary act performed by a speaker which is based on a past act performed by the hearer. The speaker feels grateful or appreciative, and makes a statement which counts as an expression of gratitude. Thanking is also recognized as one of the most important social acts because it conveys warm feelings and solidarity among interlocutors. Thanking is a speech act which can be realized in various ways.

The following are examples of thanking strategies utilized by the university students of the research.

1. Thank you, friend.

(A response to situation 1: You are preparing yourself for a presentation. Your friend lends you his laptop to help in presenting the material).

2. Thank you so much.

(A response to Situation 2: You hold a wedding party and you invite your classmates. All your friends come and bring you a present)

Speect Acts Set: Apology

An apology is the speech act used when a behavioral norm is broken. Apology falls under expressive speech acts in which speakers attempt to indicate their state or attitude. When someone's action or utterance makes another offended, an apology is needed.

The following are examples of apologizing strategies utilized by the university students:

1. I'm really sorry

(A response to situation: You are in a hurry walking through the university gate. Unintentionally, you hit some girls and drop one of the girl's watches. You make it broken. Seemingly, the watch is her favorite.)

2. Sorry, I think we have to cancel our plan today.

(A response to situation: You plan to go to the cinema together with your friend. On the way, your motorcycle runs out of petrol, so it can't work. The petrol station is quite far. You decide to cancel the plan to watch the movie till tomorrow).

3. Sorry sir, I forget to do my homework.

(A response to situation: You forget doing your homework and it must be submitted today. This is the first time you miss your homework).

Speect Acts Set: Request

Request is an utterance of the speaker's expectation to the hearer to do an act in which the speaker believes that the hearer is able to do the act. Requesting act may consist of pre-request, request core (head act) and post-request. The main utterance which performs the function of requesting can be used as its own without any modifier in order to convey the request.

The following are examples of requesting strategies utilized by the university students:

1. I really need you to install the English software, Mr. Beny

(A response to situation: You need your friend's help to install an English software to your laptop because you couldn't do it by yourself).

2. Sir, I need to talk about my non-academic problem, please!

(A response to situation: You want to see your academic advisor for asking her/his advice related to the non-academic problem you face. You really need her/his help. Unluckily, your academic advisor looks busy handling some university students).

Speech Acts Set: Refusal

The speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says not to a request or invitation. Refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener/requestor/inviter because it contradicts his or her expectations, and is often realized through indirect strategies. Thus, it requires a high level of pragmatic competence.

The following are examples of refusal strategies utilized by the university students:

1. I'm so sorry sir that I can't teach at the excellent program.

(A response to situation: Your lecture asks you to teach at the excellent program. At the same time, you join some programs at the Islamic boarding at Zainul Hasan institution).

2. I'm so sorry. I have another plan.

(A response to situation: Your friend plan to spend the next holiday in Bromo Mountain. Unfortunately, you must help your father at the traditional market).

DISCUSSION

The first focus in this present study is the speech act of thanking. Thanking belongs to an expressive speech act since through it the addressee knows the speaker's attitude. In thanking, the speaker expresses gratitude for the hearer's participation in a prior action that was beneficial to the speaker. The direct strategy functioned to realize the thanking for the purpose of creating warm feeling and solidarity to Hs and showing the appreciation for a favor/gift. By utilizing direct thanking, the students were likely to perform native-like production which was also influenced by Indonesian culture to verbalize the appreciation, both in student-student relationship and student-teacher relationship. The speaker tried create a friendly and polite atmosphere to maintain a good relationship with their interlocutors.

Apology is the next concern in this present study. Apology is under expressive speech acts in which speakers attempt to indicate their state or attitude when a behavioral norm is broken.

The next focus is the speech act of request. Request is defined as the speakers' desire for their hearers to perform a specified action. Without making requests appropriately, the desired goal of the speakers may not be achieved and the hearers may feel embarrassed and the interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors may be damaged. In other words, the choice of strategies in making a request is regarded as an essential role in order to reach the intended goal.

The next concern is the speech act of refusal. The speech act of refusal is a function that allows speakers to deny the engagement of an action which is suggested by the Hs. In other words, the speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says "No" to a request or invitation. The university students frequently employed combination strategies, particularly combining the direct refusal and indirect refusal, regret/reason, together in their refusal realization. The university students in this article preferred to utter 'sorry' first and then followed by explaining their excuses, and sometimes followed by explicit refusal expression. The strategy was believed to strengthen the refusal realization and make it more sincere, both in student-student relationship and students-teacher relationship.

Different cultures have different ways to realize speech acts. Those differences may lead to misunderstanding or pragmatic failure when the learners from different cultures interact with each other. To avoid the cross-cultural misunderstanding, it is crucial then for EFL teachers to enhance the students'' knowledge or competence of appropriate use of language in realizing the target language speech acts. That is to say, teaching foreign language means teaching foreign culture as well.

To help out university students achieve optimal pragmatic success, teachers and lectures need to make students aware of specific speech act sets and the accompanying linguistic features that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received speech acts. Non-native speaker, especially those with little opportunity for interaction, may not have knowledge of the routine of semantic formulae, or may not have internalized such rules to adequately produce them in spontaneous speech and textbooks are generally not a good source of input for university students when studying pragmatic function.

CONCLUSIONS

It was found that the students employed almost the same pragmatic strategies in realizing thanking, requesting, and refusing, which means that they were in the same level of competence. Next, this article revealed that the students employed appropriate pragmatic strategies to respond to the speech act of thanking, and requesting in native-like production. Whereas, they utilized appropriate pragmatic competence strategies to respond to the speech acts of apology and refusal in native-like production. It was believed that the students in this study were influenced by the Indonesian culture in responding to the tasks. When the students were influenced by their native language and culture, oftentimes, a negative pragmatic transfer occurred, which would lead to pragmatic failure both at pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic level in a cross-culture communication.

Since the students' strategy preferences in realizing their speech acts were influenced by their native language and culture, it can be assumed that the students emphasized intimacy, informality, closeness, solidarity, and the need for being polite for the purpose of maintaining the relationship to their interlocutors. Therefore, for EFL teachers and lectures who are the facilitators in teaching and learning process, it is suggested that they provide the students with more opportunities in having English exposure, particularly in cultural differences. It aims to make the students culturally aware of the differences.

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