Algerian University Students' Pragmatic Failure when Speaking EFL: Teachers' Views and Strategies

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Abstract

The present study attempts to explore the reasons behind pragmatic failure among advanced EFL learners when trying to communicate orally in their classes as perceived by their teachers. Do Bejaia University BA students suffer from Pragmatic failure and fail to communicate orally through using English items to exactly and properly convey what they tend to communicate? This aim is achieved through interviewing seven teachers who teach or taught third year students of English at Bejaia University. This makes the study qualitative in nature since it is exploratory. Findings showed the majority of the students, according to the teachers' experience, do commit pragmatic errors when using English to communicate. Consequently, our informants' responses revealed a wealth of information that enabled us to determine a number of reasons behind Third Year Students' Pragmatic Failure when they communicate

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orally in the classroom. Moreover, to diminish this failure, our informants suggested a variety of teaching strategies that can be used in the foreign language classroom to diminish this kind of speaking deficiency at an advanced level and increase EFL learners' mastery of the appropriateness of English language use.

1. Introduction

Given the nature of the courses given in foreign language classes, they must be related to the four skills of the language. However, speaking in the classroom is what often makes students more concerned about reaching a native-like performance of the language. If we consider foreign language classes, focus is put on Communicative Language Learning (CLL). Such an approach put focus on language skills and linguistic competence is emphasized. This kind of competence includes both accuracy and appropriateness of language use. Language use is, then, not merely a matter of linguistics competence but has its communicative functions as well. In this concern, (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:161) say: "the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meanings." When dealing with communicative competence, many researchers developed other competences that reflect it. Apart from grammatical competence that makes a core element of communicative competence, Canale (1983) identified four dimensions of communicative competence; grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Additionally, Bachman (1990) requires pragmatic competence for appropriate language use. He considers that language competence consists of two components; organizational competence (grammatical and textual) and pragmatic competence (illocutionary, socio- linguistic). While adopting a Communicative language Teaching Approach (CLT), which is the case in the Algerian educational system, emphasis should be directed to appropriate language use and to the context in which the language is used. Language teachers have been persuaded for the overriding importance of pragmatic ability as an essential part of the whole pedagogic objective of language instruction which is communication. This competence has generally been taken to mean the ability to use language which is contextually appropriate. Moreover, the recent practice of communicative teaching methodology values the relevance of the appropriate language use. If students fail to use language appropriately, they are more likely to suffer from pragmatic failure. However, little research is available about pragmatics in EFL. Many researchers conducted cause/effect relationships between pragmatic competence and oral performance. Some of them considered its positive effect (Kasper, 1997; Nida, 1998); and negative effect (Thomas, 1983; and Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1997). Additionally, researchers argue that a lack of pragmatic competence in the classroom could adversely affect the learning process and outcome of ESL speakers (Johnson, 2005: 68).

Our research focuses oral communication and students' pragmatic failure. The present study attempts to explore the reasons behind pragmatic failure among advanced EFL learners when trying to communicate orally in their classes as perceived by their teachers at the University of Bejaia. Since such advanced learners are unable to communicate freely when asked to speak up in classroom discussions, we judge that they suffer from Pragmatic failure and fail to communicate orally through using English items to exactly properly convey what they tend to communicate.

2. Method

The study is based on an ethnographic research through participant observation of ten years experience teaching. Then, we used unstructured interviews with ten teachers (full-time, part-time and associate) who have taught or taught oral expression for third year students of English at Bejaia University. This makes the study ethnographic and qualitative in nature. Our participants can help in gathering data from a deep qualitative nature since their experiences can mirror out the reality of pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure among our third year students. Since we have no predetermined hypothesis, the research is exploratory. We tend to discover whether our ethnographic research that diagnosed the problem of pragmatic failure through observation is also perceived by other teachers or not. Hence, interviews will help in classifying reasons behind pragmatic failure if any in an Algerian higher education context.

The procedure for data collection has been successfully scheduled. We, first, asked the administrators in the department of English at Bejaia University to provide us with the list of teachers who teach or have taught third year students. I could have ten names; nine females and one male. Four of them were full time teachers; four of them were part-time teachers and two were associate teachers. Their teaching experiences vary between three years to 25 years of experience.

We contacted these colleagues individually to schedule the interviews according to their time-table. Interviews took about one month and each interview lasted for one hour. One can enquire about this long time, but it should be noted that these interviewees are also colleagues of the researcher and the topic touched their profession and their view they could share. Discussion was fruitful for the topic at hand.

3. Results and Discussion

Findings showed the majority of the students, according to, first our observation in the ethnographic work we have done, and then, the teachers' experience. Results showed that our students do commit pragmatic errors when using English to communicate. Consequently, our informants' responses revealed a wealth of information that enabled us to determine a number of reasons behind Third Year Students' Pragmatic Failure when they communicate orally in the classroom.

Throughout our study, we have attempted to achieve two focal purposes. The first purpose is to affirm our claim that Third Year LMD Students at Bejaia University truly commit pragmatic errors in vocabulary when they communicate orally. The second one is to identify the reasons behind this P.F. That is we have tended to determine what hinders Third Year LMD Students from using English vocabulary appropriately according to the different contexts of their communications. Thus, through analyzing the Oral Expression Teachers' interviews, we could arrive at confirming that Third Year LMD Students –even at their advanced level- still commit a considerable number of pragmatic errors during their O.C. In fact, our informants have all agreed upon this claim. Moreover, through their responses, we have noticed that they do provide their students with opportunities to develop their P.C and oral proficiency in general. However, the time allotted for oral expression sessions is actually not enough. Consequently, the teachers' efforts remain insufficient. Additionally, the students should be given those opportunities from their First Year of ELL. In this concern, our informants have similarly recognized that "appropriateness of language use" is critical to communicate successfully and meaningfully. But they have added that since Third Year LMD Students' linguistic competence is still not satisfactory, they still emphasize more on improving this students' competence rather than their P.C in English. For that reason, students' O.C is negatively affected by their P.F. That is why they are generally not able to achieve their communicative purposes and satisfy their communicative needs which can vary from a communicative context to another. Generally,

students' communicative goals can be conveying their ideas, feelings and experiences, as well as expressing different attitudes.

In order to divide our respondents' answers, we can group their answers into themes.

3.1. Students' Classroom Participation

To begin with, all our informants judge that the majority of learners are active participants in the classroom discussion even though they depend on the topic they treat in the class (as advocated by three teachers). Teachers claim that they try to offer as much opportunities as possible to let the learner practice the target language. Some of them try to illustrate their position by being permissive and afford less attention to grammar but to the students' active participation and speaking instead. In this, one of the respondents said: "Because oral expression sessions are expected to be the sessions where students much practise their speaking and develop their oral proficiency, I prepare topics that may be close to my students and then encourage them to much speak".

All in all, from the answers of our participants, we can conclude that those teachers do provide their students with opportunities to practise English in the classroom, even in different ways and methods. However this does not mean that the opportunities given for students guarantee the student's expectations and respond to their needs.

3.2. Langue Use: Grammar and Vocabulary

All of the teachers shared the same view concerning their students' oral communication ability and many of them believe that it is not easy to find students efficiently speak English without making errors. Consequently, seven teachers out of seven claimed that committing so many errors by third year students when they communicate, and at their advanced level, seems truly a serious problem that should be investigated. In this, one teacher reveals: "I sincerely and objectively reveal that my students' level when they communicate orally is poor, and does not at all respond to the requirements of their advanced level, and I am responsible of what I am saying",

In fact, all of our interviewees have emphasized on vocabulary difficulties as one of third Year students' frequent errors when they communicate. Thus, this could clearly explain why we have focused our research problem on students' misuse of English vocabulary. One of our informants said: "Students often commit errors when they speak, including most frequently pronunciation, grammar, lack and misuse of vocabulary, and speech organization mistakes". All in all, third year students according to our experienced teachers is poor and the problem should be investigated. One participant put focus on the issue of their level and said: "Third year students are thought to be effective and successful communicators in English after three years of academic studies, however, their level is far away from this expectation, since it is insufficient and not acceptable".

3.3. Language Use: Communicative and Pragmatic Competence

Given that teachers confirmed the existence of linguistic deficiency in terms of grammar and errors, and that they have vocabulary gaps that hinder them from communication, our informants reveal that third year students meet a real problem since their communicative competence is poor. They relate this to the aforementioned problem (that is, grammar and vocabulary problems). Let us illustrate with this quote from a teacher: "My students' fluency is deficiently affected by

their lack of extensive vocabulary items; I mean here the ability to speak without pauses". Since our informants have revealed that the majority of students have merely a limited vocabulary, this leads us to conclude that they do neither possess, nor use the appropriate language to convey what they tend to communicate in different situations. In this concern, a teacher for instance stated: "it is rare for me to find a student who properly succeeds to make a logical link between what he wants to say and the vocabulary he uses to do so".

Our informants emphasized this point and most of them confirm that pragmatic failure is part of our EFL classes at advanced levels. In this, one informant claimed: "The appropriate language use is, to a great deal, absent in my classes; my students do not use the appropriate vocabulary that suits each topic or communicative context, only when speaking about common, general and known subjects matters that they easily succeed to properly speak about",

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The problems our informants stated can be summarized in the following points:

- Students suffer from lack of social and cultural competence about English speaking countries.

- Lack of classroom opportunities to practise English due to crowded classes and insufficient time for speaking.

- Lack of diversity in terms of content and choice of the topics presented for students and by students. Hence, less English vocabulary repertoire is developed, less real-life situation context are presented; hence less socio-cultural exposure to correctly employ language use.

- Insufficient attention is given by oral expression teachers to improve their students' pragmatic competence. That is, they concentrate more on correcting students' grammar and pronunciation mistakes rather than developing their vocabulary. Hence, students focus more on avoiding grammar and pronunciation mistakes rather than focusing the communicative at itself.

- Little out-of-class English speaking, they do not use English outside the classroom.

- No exposure to native English since there is no contact with native speakers.

- There exists French interference on the students' English oral performance either in pronunciation and in vocabulary or in cultural thinking.

- Students possess a limited vocabulary that hinders them from keeping their communicative act on; they lack of English words and expressions.

- The students' desire to rapidly convey their communicative messages, and their lack of concentration on the language items they are using when they communicate.

to diminish this failure, our informants suggested a variety of teaching strategies that can be used in the foreign language classroom to diminish this kind of speaking deficiency at an advanced level and increase EFL learners' mastery of the appropriateness of English language use. Third Year LMD Students at Bejaia University proved to commit pragmatic errors in vocabulary when they communicate orally. In this concern, our informants have recognized that "appropriateness of language use" is critical to communicate successfully and meaningfully. Yet, they have added that since Third Year LMD Students' linguistic competence is still not satisfactory, they still emphasize more on improving this students' competence rather than their pragmatic competence in English. For that reason, students' oral communication is negatively affected by their pragmatic failure. In what follows, we shall suggest a number of recommendations to diminish this problem.

3.4. Pedagogical Implications

Our informants have suggested a number of classroom implications and possible solutions to increase students' pragmatic competence in the EFL classroom by teachers that we summarize in the following points:

- Providing students with a broader knowledge about socio-cultural knowledge of English speaking countries where English is appropriately used. This is to enable the students acquire the appropriate uses of English in a variety of real life communicative contexts.

- Teachers should change the nature of their instruction and update their activities. Their activities and tasks should respond to their learners' needs and interests.

- Instructors have to deeply and clearly explain the link between pragmatic competence, communicative competence and pragmatic failure. That is, they can help learners identify the negative influence of students' pragmatic failure on the way they carry out their communicative act.

- When evaluating their students' oral proficiency, teachers should also focus their attention on correcting their inappropriate uses of English items. This signifies that teachers should not only emphasize grammar and pronunciation, but try o give more importance to fluency. Teachers should make priorities on what to correct, when to correct and how to correct according to the context the communicative piece is produced by the learner.

- For each oral expression session, teachers should select one topic from a real-life situation from an English-

speaking context. Accordingly, they should provide their students with the appropriate terminologies and expressions related to that subject matter. This is for the sake of increasing students' mastery of "appropriateness of language use".

• Teachers should create diverse classroom settings with different communicative situations, and then ask their students to play roles of different communicators according to the requirements of each situation.

• Teachers should encourage their students to much listen to English native speakers by stating them the advantages of doing it. This is in a direction towards getting students improve their pragmatic competence.

• Teachers are invited to be merely guides and facilitators in the classroom; they should not be the dominant agent of the classroom discussions. This will provide students with many opportunities for students to practise English in different communicative contexts. That is, their teaching methodology in speaking should be based on learner-centeredness and communicative language teaching approaches.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, third year LMD students' pragmatic failure at Bejaia University hinders them from possessing an effective communicative proficiency in English. That is the ability to convey appropriately, accurately, fluently and successfully what they tend to communicate. Thus, developing students' pragmatic competence is the indispensable to develop it and help them satisfy their communicate needs. That is why; Oral Expression teachers are required to invest more of their time and efforts searching for more productive possibilities to improve their students' pragmatic competence. Consequently, the students' whole oral proficiency will be increased.

Since, this exploratory study revealed the existence of the problem of pragmatic failure among university students, students are generally unable to achieve their communicative purposes and satisfy their communicative needs when having to shift from a communicative context to another. Research should, then, direct its attention towards this issue and try to integrate courses on pragmatic competence development in curricula and develop teaching methodologies accordingly.

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