



ENHANCING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN READING COMPREHENSION: CONTEXT OF HIGHER-EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to discuss whether deficient competence in reading comprehension correlates with frailty in pragmatic skills and, specifically, in the generation of referential and inferential skills. Besides, skills in reading comprehension and inferential skills are estimated taking into consideration the needs and objectives for the development of adult English language learners' pragmatic ability through interaction with texts and reading activities in foreign language education within higher-education context.

INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On approval of the state educational standard for a foreign language in the system of continuous education," adopted in May 2013, significant changes have occurred in foreign language education in the Republic of Uzbekistan. This marked a departure from the previous lack of formal goals in foreign language teaching. The current document emphasized communication competence and problem-solving skills, signaling a shift toward a communicative approach program. Moreover, State educational standards and other official documents, including regulations and curricula for teaching foreign languages, have applied a number of the most well-known practices and methodologies for teaching foreign languages.

The concept of communicative competence has evolved over time, and scientists have proposed various models to reveal its components. From Hymes's sociocultural and psycholinguistic dimensions to Canale and Swain's expansion to include strategic competence, these models have become the basis for the assessment of language and pedagogy [1; p.27-28.]. Subsequent work by Canale, Bachman, Celce-Murcia, and Littlewood further refined the understanding of communicative competence, emphasizing linguistic, sociocultural, and strategic competence.

As part of communicative competence, as well as a sign indicating the level of acquiring the skills, competences and abilities to effectively communicate in a foreign language,



pragmatic competence includes discourse competence and strategic competence in its structure, speaking in a foreign language, in the speech actions of those directly participating in the speech activity and the goal directed discourse is manifested as a set of the most important knowledge, skills and personal, linguistic and communicative (socially correct or appropriate for communication, situation) knowledge and skills in the construction and expression of speech.

Pragmatics has been prominent in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Interlanguage pragmatics, also known as second language (L2) pragmatics, has developed as a distinct subfield of second language acquisition whose main area of study is the language proficiency and social interaction of second language users. Second language pragmatics is directly related to models of communicative competence. In 1983, Thomas and Leach are famous for defining the difference between linguistic knowledge (pragmalinguistics) and sociocultural knowledge (sociopragmatics), recognizing the importance of the ability to use language in socially appropriate ways in addition to mastering linguistic forms.

For example, when asking someone for a favor, i.e. when making a request, in addition to knowing the forms and vocabulary necessary to fulfill the request (grammatical competence), users need to follow the local cultural norms of the request, specifically, they need to consider their language choices in terms of appropriateness of their characteristics – the situation, the request itself and who they are asking for help (pragmatic competence). According to Kasper and Rose, grammatical and pragmatic competence are closely related and require equal attention in the language learning process. However, over the years, it has become clear that in the classroom, grammatical competence is valued and little attention has been paid to the development of pragmatic knowledge. Although pragmatic rules often differ across cultures, scholars emphasize the need to develop this skill because specific instruction on pragmatics is rarely included in foreign language curricula, and commercial textbooks rarely cover the pragmatic features of the target language in depth.

Competency-based instruction in the light of cognitive-communicative growth of language learners and CEFR document have allowed learners of foreign and second languages to acquire languages through mixed and interactive approaches and via access to development of multiple language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and communication skills indispensable for personal, global and professional communications.

Pragmatic ability is very essential as a part of reading skills instruction and acquisition. Thus, English as a foreign language teachers and learners need to work collaboratively and effectively towards acquisition of foreign language in a congenial, free and authentic or simulated communicative environment. Being able to distinguish between texts, genres and engaging in reflective, individual, collaborative, critical, analytical and interactive reading activities through mixed language teaching and communicative methods and practical techniques allow EFL learners to take advantage of using English not only for academic literacy purposes but also for professional and communication, where they need to pragmatically convey messages beyond written and spoken texts and provide relevant response or socially appropriate feedback.



As for developing pragmatic ability of EFL learners through various linguistic and communication activities, pragmatic activities have much more impact on growing learners' or students' ability to comprehend and use specific language in particular context with the help of explicit and implicit instruction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Reading plays a pivotal role in the development of students' and learners' pragmatic ability to competently manage and appropriately engage in linguistically and socially diverse texts and conversations in communication.

Several theories have attempted to explain the underlying difficulties of deficient reading and text comprehension through models characterized by bottom-up, top-down, or interactive processes. In the bottom-up view, written text is conceived in a hierarchically organized structure in which low-level skills play a primary role: the automation and accuracy of decoding, lexical access, and syntactic representation skills provide access to higher levels of processing. In particular, according to the Theory of Verbal Efficiency (Perfetti) [3, p.96], this automation is necessary to free up attentional and working memory resources that can be employed in higher order processes, for syntactic and semantic processing and global meaning reconstruction.

Researchers, Schank (1978) and Smith (1971) have placed emphasis instead on top-down processes, centered on the active role of the reader, whereby comprehension of written text is seen as the product of a coordinated process, at every level, by the higher mental faculties of the cognitive system; the context and prior knowledge of the reader guide the reconstruction of meaning in a continuous and cyclical process of selection, semantic anticipation, hypothesis testing and integration of information, "a psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967). Then the reader uses his semantic and grammatical knowledge on the one hand and textual references on the other to reconstruct from context the meaning of unfamiliar words or to infer implicit information.

One widely used model is the Simple View of Reading (SVR) developed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, at a particular historical moment in the United States and Canada when the research world was questioning the foundational components of the comprehension process because of the critical issues emerging from school results (Pearson, 2004). This model inserted itself as an arbiter in the ongoing linguistic debate, recognizing equal importance to both components (decoding and oral language comprehension skills) in the process of understanding a text. The latter would in fact be the balanced product of two broad pivots of skills: on the one hand, those related to decoding, which presuppose the maturation of the phonological competence of converting phonemes into graphemes; on the other hand, skills related to lexical, syntactic and semantic processing. The influence of either skill would depend on levels of reading proficiency and schooling (Gough et al., 1996).

Oakhill and Cain, in this regard, believe that the process of decoding and text comprehension can be clearly differentiated because they can be referred to autonomous but interdependent cognitive mechanisms, as evidenced by the developmental age disorders that allow their dissociation. Many researchers have investigated a wide variety with which text comprehension disorders are manifested, considering the interdependence evident during the



normal development of reading-writing skills between the processes of decoding and language comprehension; among the functions and abilities not directly considered in the SVR model, evidence has been gained on the role of both speed and accuracy in reading words and language chunks (Eason et al, 2013 in Clemens et al., 2016), as well as higher-order skills, including inferential processes, narrative organization and metacognitive skills, and working memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we would like to discuss a variety of methodological-instructional and practical techniques helping enhance EFL learners' and students' pragmatic competence in or through reading comprehension, where they could act as managers of textual communication and interactive communication through relevant knowledge and skills of developed and applied comprehension, appropriate language and behavior in order to successfully complete didactic as well as communication activities. By behavior we mean socially correct language, appropriate comprehension and proper interaction style.

To reconstruct the global coherence of the text, the reader must consider the text as a whole and integrate the information read with his or her own background [2; p.437.]; examples of global inferences are causal inferences, inferences from integration, and narrative inferences (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; Gygax, Garnham, & Oakhill, 2004). The class of causal inferences plays a major role in the process of reconstructing global coherence (Graesser, Millis, & Zwann, 1997) because, through their generation, the subject is able to establish cause and effect relationships between concepts and events expressed in the text or implied. The moment at which the subject establishes the cause-and-effect relationship allows one to distinguish retroactive inferences, which reconstruct the meaning of events and actions in the text during the narrative, from projective inferences, which concern hypotheses about future events and consequences with respect to what was learned from the text. Using the nature of the textual elements as a classification criterion, we can distinguish the following causal inferences (Bertolini, 2012), which are considered as follows:

Physical inferences establish relationships among information for the purpose of describing physical changes in objects or people (Marzano & Vegliante, 2014). This type of inference is involved in understanding physical change related to, for example, an environment for the change of seasons and the busy behavior of animals and then grasping the connection of these changes to bringing supplies to the den to face winter.

Motivational inferences describe the relationship between a goal and its consequence, capturing the (implicit) link between them (Marzano & Vegliante, 2014).

Psychological inferences establish links between an internal state and its consequences and leverage the background of prior experience or knowledge. Comprehension of the text, however, may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the proper retelling of a story.

According to Levorato (2000), the capacity for reenactment would depend on the maturation of a mental structure, a kind of schema of stories, which begins to form at an early age and constitutes the cognitive support for making inferences within a narrative schema. According to Kintsch (1998) and Levorato (2000), schemata are cognitive structures that contain the reader's mental representation of knowledge, e.g., phonological, semantic, syntactic, narrative; they are formed over time through the subject's repeated exposure to



meaningful knowledge experiences that are categorized, organized, stored, and reused as a guide in the interpretation of new events and texts (Kintsch, 1998).

Some researchers have also pointed out that the inferential fragility exhibited by individuals with difficulties in reading comprehension may also be influenced by individual differences regarding working memory and background knowledge possessed (Cain, Elbro & Buch-Iversen, 2013), the text mode (oral or written), and the format used to test text comprehension, depending on whether comprehension questions are presented at the end of the text or at specific times during the narrative. Presenting the story, gradually, interspersed with questions that involve generating inferences, can help language learners generate inferences of a local type, especially in the written text mode.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the development of communicative competence models has changed the practice of language teaching by emphasizing the development of communicative skills. By applying the principles of communicative language teaching, English teachers can equip students with the skills necessary to communicate effectively. In order to meet the changing needs of language learners in Uzbekistan, it is necessary to pay constant attention to teacher training and curriculum development. The introduction of models of communicative competence into the practice of language teaching has profound consequences. Teachers need extensive training to develop their communicative competence, including grammar, vocabulary and speaking skills.

While being aware of the complexity of the study of difficulties in reading comprehension, in this paper we consider a multicomponential, interactive and intentional comprehension process, similar to problem solving. The reader actively and consciously constructs meaning, through basic linguistic skills, higher-order and pragmatic skills, drawing on his or her own knowledge and strategies deemed most appropriate for the purpose. In addition, we suggest that curriculum development should prioritize communicative tasks and authentic materials which encourage meaningful real-world interaction and communication in a variety of contexts.

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