

Pragmatic Competence: how can it be developed in the foreign language classroom?

Competência Pragmática: como ela pode ser desenvolvida na sala de aula de língua estrangeira?

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Abstract: *This paper aims at bringing into account the possibility of developing pragmatic competence with students in the foreign language classroom. It also considers features of the task-based approach, a method of language teaching, which would enable pragmatic awareness raise. It suggests that it is possible to give a pragmatic focus to language learning through task-based materials in order to help learners develop culture-specific pragmatic features, due to common aspects between pragmatic competence development and methodology based on tasks.*

Key words: *pragmatic competence, task-based approach, language teaching.*

Resumo: *Este artigo busca discutir a possibilidade de desenvolver competência pragmática com alunos na sala de aula de língua estrangeira. São consideradas também características do task-based approach, método de ensino de línguas que possibilita o desenvolvimento da consciência pragmática. Sugerimos que é possível dar um foco pragmático à aprendizagem de língua através de materiais baseados em tarefas com o objetivo de auxiliar alunos a desenvolverem traços pragmáticos culturais específicos, devido aos aspectos semelhantes entre o desenvolvimento da competência pragmática e a metodologia baseada em tarefas.*

Palavras-chave: *competência pragmática, método baseado em tarefas, ensino de língua.*

1 Introduction

Over the last decades there have been a great number of language researchers worried about how language learning takes place and what may influence this process. This is a difficult task if we consider the fact that although there are some researchers such as Bates and MacWhinney² who have been studying this process, they do not apply this to education and language teaching. Anyways, what researchers have discovered is that there are many internal and also external factors that have to be taken into consideration when teaching a language to make learners able to use that successfully.

The internal factors would be related to the development of *linguistic competence* with the language learner. On the other hand, the external factors would concern the development of the *communicative competence* that would be not only the *linguistic competence*, but also the capacity

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² Elizabeth Bates, from the University of California, and Brian MacWhinney, from the Carnegie-Mellon University, study mechanisms of language acquisition, including variation across languages and mapping. However these studies are not applied to language teaching. They are focused, instead, on the process itself, what happens in the individual's mind during the acquisition.

to use this knowledge appropriately according to the context, being more related to the speakers' performance.

It is important, at this point, to differentiate *communicative competence* from *pragmatic competence*, which is the focus of this paper. *Communicative competence* has a broader scope and involves capacity to participate in communicative situations. *Pragmatic competence*, differently, is not only this capacity, but also the appropriateness of what is said by the speaker according to the context.

Therefore, *pragmatic competence* is a much more specific concept. It involves *linguistic competence*, *communicative competence* and also a notion of how the context is built and what it demands from the participants. Participants, status, age, situation, and other features make part of the context of a communicative situation.

This paper aims at bringing into discussion the importance of raising *pragmatic competence* in the language classroom with language learners. It also considers the possibility of doing that by using a *task-based approach* to language teaching as a basis for the classroom work.

The idea of discussing this issue originated from students' reports on difficulties they faced when trying to use the language to communicate in situations out of the classroom and from the necessity of finding a means of doing something as a language professional to better prepare learners for the situations they are going to face in everyday interactions.

In this paper, we will bring an account of what *pragmatic competence* is and some researchers' opinions on the possibility of raising that in the language classroom. In a sequence, we will discuss what a task-based language learning is, what it is based on and if and how it can help to develop learners' pragmatic competence. The questions we aim at answering are the following:

1. How can Pragmatic instruction help develop learners' Pragmatic awareness?
2. Is it possible to use the task-based approach as a tool to achieve Pragmatic Competence with language learners?

2 Pragmatics

Levinson (1983:5) defines *pragmatics* as "the study of language usage". As under his perspective this definition would be too simplistic, the author adds that pragmatics is "the study of language from a functional perspective, that is, that it attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes" (Levinson, 1983:7).

The author also says that "pragmatics should be concerned solely with principles of language usage, and have nothing to do with the description of linguistic structure" (Levinson, 1989:7).

Nevertheless, this definition does not always work, considering that things that are not explained by semantic theories go to the scope of pragmatics.

According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is the study of meaning communicated by the speaker rather than by the *utterance*³. It interprets what is said according to the influence of the context and tries to get what is inferred by the speaker which is, most of the times, much more than is said.

Considering this definition, it is possible to notice that only pragmatics takes the user of the language into the analysis of the intended meaning. It believes, therefore, that there is no language without users and that the same utterance may mean different things if said by distinct people in different circumstances.

Pragmatics, therefore, studies the relation between language contexts and users and the resulting grammatical forms. It claims that there is an association between grammar and context, that is, according to the context the speaker is in, he chooses different structures to mean what he wants.

In the case of a second and especially of a foreign language speaker, the choice has to be reflected on and it must be something practiced as well. However, in the case of a native speaker, this should be something more natural.

3 Pragmatic competence: what is it?

It is very common to hear about situations in which learners or language users could not get their meaning across. That also happens with native speakers of a language who are exposed to different social groups and cannot interact successfully. This is the pragmatics of a language which is the “ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation” (Garcia, 2004:1).

According to Celce-Murcia and Elise Olshtain (2000:3):

Human communication fulfills many different goals at the personal and social levels. We communicate information, ideas, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes to one another in our daily interactions, and we construct and maintain our positions within various social contexts by employing appropriate language forms and performing speech activities to ensure solidarity, harmony, and cooperation – or to express disagreement or displeasure, when called for. The acquisition of communication skills in one’s first language is a lifelong process, but the basic skills are acquired quite early in life. When learning another language, we have to add to, change, and reajust our native language strategies to fit the new language and culture.

³ The term *utterance* is used here instead of *sentence* because we are dealing with language in use.

That is how one can explain that fluent speakers of a particular language are not able to understand one another when interacting, even when they have a good knowledge about the structure of that language. When communicating, more than *linguistic competence* is necessary; the speakers must be aware about the way language is used in a specific culture, the norms of that people for communication in each context.

Garcia (2004) states that *linguistic competence* is distinct from *pragmatic competence*. The author also adds that as learners develop knowledge about language structures, they usually develop their pragmatic awareness, the ability to use the language they acquired in specific contexts, which does not mean that they will do that appropriately.

Linguistic competence would be the grammatical knowledge native speakers have about their language, in our case language learners, which rules the language as a system, while the *communicative competence*⁴ – here taken as *pragmatic competence* – would consider the cultural adequacy of this knowledge. It means the ability speakers have to react or respond to a specific situation in an expected way.

There are many aspects of communication which differ from culture to culture. The idea of *politeness*⁵, for example, is completely different in Portuguese spoken in Brazil and in English. What also changes is the way people address each other and the way they show consideration towards the other. In many cases, each people and culture have different structures to perform these *speech acts*⁶.

According to Lamb (2005:231), “sometimes there are expectations, and if we are not prepared for some responses or attitudes, (...) we may tend to interpret things in a different way than it was intended by the sender”.

It is intriguing that people misunderstand each other once they are using the same language and considering that they are all fluent and proficient speakers of that particular language. The fact is that meaning is not only in the language, it is a relation between language and reality.

Lamb claims that “developing conversational skills involves being able to decodify, infer and behave according to each society’s rules” (2005:237). The author believes that “everytime we don’t observe the norms of the target language culture, we run the risk of being misinterpreted”. Lamb also argues that “in second language acquisition, learners have already been socialized into the schematic knowledge associated with their mother tongue” therefore “when students confront uses

⁴ Communicative and pragmatic competences are used interchangeably by many authors. As we have defined before, our focus with this paper is on pragmatic competence, which has a more specific scope.

⁵ Brown & Levinson (1987) discuss the idea of politeness as a way to show consciousness about the other person’s face. They consider the necessity to protect the public self-image in interaction as something universal, although it is variable from culture to culture.

⁶ The concept of speech acts concerns the fact of doing things with words, it means that people perform acts and not only speak when they use specific verbs in the present tense. For more about speech acts see Searle (1980).

of foreign language, their natural inclination is to interpret them with reference to this established association, and rely on the foreign language as economically as possible” (2005:239).

In fact, this is one of the most common features found in foreign language learners: the tendency to transfer patterns from their first language to the target language. Sometimes, this process may appear successful, once the patterns for a specific communicative situation are the same in both languages. However, some patterns and aspects of communication are culturally determined and the transfer tends to cause a break in communication.

Although many teachers are worried about developing fluency with learners in language courses, being fluent is not enough to guarantee success in communication. It involves much more than language knowledge and there are several factors that can make speakers successful or not in the communicative situation they are involved: cultural knowledge is one of them.

3.1 How can we develop pragmatic competence? Can it be taught?

For communication to happen successfully, it is necessary that the speakers or interlocutors share some specific knowledge, which is culturally built. Therefore, inferencing is not possible if there is no shared *background knowledge*⁷. This kind of knowledge not always comes hand in hand with linguistic competence, and there lies the role of the language professionals in the classroom, to try to make the students aware of these cultural and contextual interferences in communication and make them more capable of using the language in the appropriate context.

Andersen (1990:3) states that second language researchers “have found that while many aspects of communicative competence may be acquired quite early by young first language learners, many aspects may be late-acquired or never acquired at all”. The author adds that these researchers have been studying how these aspects of communicative competence, that show to be culture specific, can be acquired by second language learners.

But how can the teacher deal with such a need in the language classroom considering that our context includes foreign language learners that have very little contact with culture-specific knowledge?

When learners are acquiring a new language, they are exposed to the culture of that specific people. On the other hand, if we consider the learning of a foreign language, in which learners sometimes do not have any real contact with the people and their culture, it is much more difficult for them to understand some patterns and costumes. Thus, there lies the importance of working with those issues in the language classroom.

⁷ background knowledge is here taken as shared information and common reference.

Teachers easily notice that it is necessary to teach their students linguistic aspects about the foreign language, while they avoid considering the importance of discussing and analyzing sociocultural aspects of the language with them.

Scarcella (1990), reports results of research where she found language difficulties presented by language speakers when they acquire “inadequate” conversational rules. These difficulties caused by the lack of conversational rules may lead to failures, misunderstandings, etc.

The author states that “communication difficulties may also result in psychological discomfort, a strong *affective filter*⁸, which also means less acquisition of the target language” (1990:284).

Scarcella highlights the role of the classroom in motivating students to continue acquiring language and language patterns even when having conversational problems and in helping them see those problems as something natural. For the author, “providing exposure to successful interactional styles and emphasizing real communication in the classroom may help students in formal classes develop conversational competence” (1990:184).

Authors such as Vellenga (2004), Kasper (1997) and Lo Castro (2006) argue that it can only be done with the use of authentic material, which can show a little about a particular people, differently from adapted materials for Brazilian language learners that change language and use common situations for our people as to make learners understand conversations better.

It is part of the teacher’s role in the classroom to make the students aware about the fact that, even when having linguistic knowledge, they may face some difficulties involving understanding of the messages and metamessages intended by the speaker. Here lies the importance of trying to focus on these messages in conversations held in the classroom rather than on the form only.

If the students learn to see linguistic forms not as the focus of the learning process, but as a tool or means to permit inferencing, it will be easier for them to notice certain aspects of communication and to understand what the speakers are trying to convey with certain constructions.

There are arguments about the possibility of teaching pragmatic competence to language learners. However, research made by Rasekh, Rasekh & Fatahi (2004) has shown that the more class work focuses on pragmatic development, the more the students will be aware of such aspects of communication.

There are two ways in which pragmatic competence can be taught: through direct and indirect instruction. Kasper (2004) suggests that adult learners of a second or foreign language can acquire a great number of pragmatic features without instruction considering the fact that some of these pragmatic features are universal. There is also the possible transference or mapping between

⁸ For more about the affective filter hypothesis, see Krashen (1985).

L1 and L2⁹, which provides important background for language learners. However, some pragmatic knowledge is not transferable and when it is, it may cause a break in communication.

Rasekh, Rasekh and Fatahi (2004) state that learners of foreign language encounter pragmatic failure when involved in communication. They say that when the students want to take part in communication, they may simply translate or transfer speech acts from their first language to the target one. According to the authors, “pragmatic failure, unlike grammatical errors, often passes unchecked by the teacher or, worse, it is attributed to some other cause, such as rudeness” (RASEKH, RASEKH and FATAHI 2004: 2).

The same authors say that “making contextualized, pragmatically appropriate language input available to learners in an EFL context in which they don’t have the chance to encounter this input outside the classroom is pedagogically necessary and politically right” (RASEKH, RASEKH and FATAHI 2004:10).

Considering that, it is possible to say that in a natural environment, as in second language learning contexts, indirect instruction seems to be efficient, once the learner will be exposed to the culture and the language outside the classroom. On the other hand, when we deal with a foreign language instruction context, a need for explicit instruction appears.

Kasper (1997:5) believes that “Without a pragmatic focus, foreign language teaching raises students’ metalinguistic awareness, but it does not contribute much to develop their metapragmatic consciousness in L2”.

Lo Castro (2006:329) argues that “the study leads educators to consider the greater need for explicit teaching and exposure to linguistic and nonlinguistic input for learners to expand their pragmatic competence in the L2 or dominant language”.

Results of research tests carried out by Eslami-Rasekh and Fatahi (2004) suggest that direct pragmatic instruction can not only make the learners aware of certain pragmatic features, but also facilitate the development of pragmatic competence and engage them in class activities with very fruitful outcomes.

However, it is necessary to design a didactic alternative to provide learners with this instruction. We suggest that the task-based approach would meet the needs and create adequate situations for that. From this point on, we will try to establish connections between the focus on pragmatic awareness raise and the intended outcome of an approach based on tasks. It seems that these two ideas may coexist and help one another.

⁹ L1 refers to the first language of the individual while L2, in this paper, refers to both second or foreign language. Second language is the one acquired in natural environments in an immersion experience, differently from foreign language, which is usually learned in instructional environment and in which the learner has few or no contact with native speakers as well as the culture attached to the target language. In the case of this discussion, we take into consideration the second kind of environment.

4 Task-based language teaching

There are two ways of teaching language: one is having meaning as the focus of the teaching, and the other is having form as the focus in the language classroom. Considering language as meaning is not ignoring the importance of grammar in learning but it is considering vocabulary and understanding as central in communication.

The task-based approach, from now on TBA, is considered a communicative approach, once learning occurs through communication or use of the language. This approach provides students with the negotiation of meaning while they communicate and interact to try to accomplish the task. The interaction often makes students face new knowledge rather than only their prior knowledge of the language.

When using the Task-based approach, we focus on the completion of the task instead of focusing on the language used for doing so. Therefore, students use the language freely without worrying too much about form, which comes naturally.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000:150), project work or task work “helps to bridge the gap between language study and language use”. The author also argues that “learning to communicate by communicating, rather than by preparing to do so through practicing the various pieces of language, is a different way to approach the goal of developing student’s communicative competence” (2000:155).

4.1 Task

There is an argument on whether or not learners profit from definite kinds of activities to develop L2 proficiency. One of the alternatives to help them do so is giving learners an opportunity to practice samples of language they are exposed to, and the means employed to do that are the *tasks*.

A general view of task would be that a *task* is any kind of thing people do in their lives. In a pedagogical view, a *task* would be something more specific. According to Cameron (2001:30):

one way in which ‘*task*’ entered language teaching was through work with adults, who needed to use the second language outside the classroom. For these learners, there was sometimes a marked contrast between the kinds of activities they did in classrooms and the kind of activities they needed English for in their lives outside the classroom, and tasks were adopted as a unit that would try to bring the classroom and ‘real’ life closer together. The goals and outcomes of tasks were to relate the real needs of learners such

as reading bus timetables or buying cinema tickets. Some writers argued that materials used should be real and authentic too.

The word '*task*' includes the idea of meaning as primary, the need for an outcome with its completion and the interaction involved in the process. It is the focus on meaning and communication for the completion of the task that makes it more likely for the students to increase their fluency.

Ellis (2004:3) states that "a task requires participants to function primarily as 'language users' in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities. Thus, any learning that takes place is incidental".

Richards, Platt and Weber (In: Nunan, 1993:6) believe that, in a pedagogical view, a task is

an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as a successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative (...) since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

For Nunan (1993:10), a communicative task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". According to the author, "a task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right".

This is to say that a *task* is an activity whose completion necessarily involves language. Tasks are designed to imitate real-world activities and, therefore, learners are expected to act as language users while they try to accomplish those.

4.2 What characterizes a task?

A *task* has verbal and non-verbal data, although its completion always involves the use of language. For accomplishing the task, learners have to negotiate meaning and focus on it rather than on the form employed to say things. It does not mean that form is not important or that it does not matter for the meaning of what is said, but it is not the primary focus of the process.

For David Nunan (1993:11), a “task is a piece of meaning-focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language”. The author defines two kinds of tasks: the “real world” or “target” tasks and the pedagogic ones. Real world tasks are the ones which happen in real situations, things that speakers have to do in their daily lives, while the pedagogic tasks are the ones that happen in the classroom.

Nunan (1993: 40) believes that once “classroom tasks are generally justified or rationalized in either ‘real-world’ or ‘pedagogic’ terms, tasks with a real-world rationale require learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom”. The author claims that, task-based language teaching rather than making the learner practice language for its own sake, gives him a real meaning for doing that, an objective for using language that is the aimed outcome of the task proposed.

Regarding pragmatic competence, we believe that the real-world tasks can give the students an idea of what happens in everyday conversations and prepare them for that, although they might be adapted or modified to be used in the classroom.

5 What connections are there between the TBA and the pragmatic awareness raise?

The idea of introducing task-based language teaching as a means to develop *pragmatic competence* with language learners comes from the belief that authentic material can bring a sense of what really happens in a determined culture in terms of language. The aim is to make the TBA a tool to raise the awareness about these differences with learners.

There are some aspects of the *task-based approach* that can make the *pragmatic competence* development easier, being one of them that meaning is primary. For *the task-based approach*, linguistic forms are secondary and come naturally as a result of what the speaker wants to mean or imply. When a speaker is pragmatically competent, the choices are also natural and dependent on the communicative situation. According to *The Universal Pragmatics Principle*¹⁰, pragmatics precedes language and pragmatic competence must be already developed to allow appropriate use of linguistic forms.

Another important feature of the TBA is that it gives preference to authentic material in order to give the learner real accounts about how language works in everyday situations and to make him able to respond to such situations. To develop pragmatic awareness in the classroom, it is necessary to provide the learners with samples of original language in real situations, especially for showing

¹⁰ For more about *The Universal Pragmatics Principle*, see Kasper & Rose. *Pragmatic Development in a Second Language*. Language Learning Monograph Series. Richard Young Series Editor, 2002.

pragmatic features that are culturally determined. It is only having examples of how people from a particular culture behave in specific situations that the learner can have an idea of what is expected from him in that context.

In a research and analysis of chunk words brought by EFL textbooks, Koprowski (2005) discusses the difficulty coursebook writers have in selecting the most useful lexical phrases. He argues that sometimes this selection seems to be arbitrary and to rely only on the intuition the writer has about the use of the language.

The author claims that 'frequency' and 'range' are considered the most important measures when choosing a word or phrase to be included in a textbook. It means that what must be present in a textbook are the items learners are likely to encounter in real life outside the classroom.

Range would be the greatest variety of linguistic contexts where the lexical item can be found. Very specialized terms, which are restricted to specific situations, are not really useful for learners if compared to the ones which appear in several text types.

For EFL textbooks to provide authentic material and examples of real occurrences of language they can count on *Corpus Linguistics* and its word banks. The banks of words used by *Corpus Linguistics*, which is not the focus of our discussion, are based on spoken and written language of native speakers and show users how many times certain structures appear in the total amount of occurrences that word has. This way, it is possible to see in which context words are common, what precedes and follows them, etc.

6 Final remarks

The aim of this article was to discuss the possibility of developing pragmatic competence in the foreign language classroom and to consider aspects of the task-based approach as a means of doing so. The questions we wanted to answer were: 1. how can pragmatic instruction help developing learners pragmatic awareness? and 2. Is it possible to use the task-based approach as a tool to achieve pragmatic competence with language learners?

As for the first question, we believe that pragmatic instruction in the classroom must be direct to call students' attention to (social) pragmatic features that do not belong to their culture and may be faced by them when trying to interact with people from a different culture using the target language.

It is also possible to say that language cannot be dissociated from culture in the same way that form in language cannot be dissociated from meaning. Form is just a result of choices speakers make in order to mean different things when they put language in use.

Taking into account traditional language teaching and teaching materials¹¹, it is possible to say that, in a way, these resources even prevent students from acquiring pragmatic features of a new culture and language. The activities they offer do not cater for student talking time and focus on grammatical accuracy instead of focusing on communication.

Another important positive aspect of teaching pragmatic competence in a foreign language classroom is that learners open their eyes to their own culture and habits. Speakers do not usually pay attention to habits pertaining to their own culture. The work with social pragmatic differences in the classroom calls for a conscious effort to show how different people are and behave – linguistically – according to their background.

Another important positive aspect of teaching pragmatic competence is that learners open their eyes to their own culture and habits. Speakers do not usually pay attention to habits pertaining to their own culture. The fact that meaning comes before form for the task based approach may help learners notice that form comes as a result of the meaning intended and that different people choose forms differently to imply when they put language in use.

We suggest that it is possible to develop pragmatic competence in the language classroom and to help learners to be better users of the target language; however, it requires the effort of language professionals and coursebook writers to focus on this aspect of language learning when they are planning a syllabus.

It was also possible to see a series of confluent aspects between the task-based approach and pragmatics such as focus on meaning rather than form only, priority to production of language instead of reproduction of grammar structures and the belief that authentic material is essential for showing real uses of language. We believe those common aspects to be the answer for our second question.

Moreover, this study has a series of pedagogical implications such as careful selection of materials by coursebook designers and teachers' better formation and awareness development about their role in the classroom when choosing materials and planning classes. This paper also suggests further researches about the issue including learners' and language professionals' participation and the design of a more efficient methodology for making pragmatics part of the curriculum in formal environments.

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¹¹ This article was based on a final paper for a specialization course, text in which the author had the chance to analyze and compare two different kinds of materials, one believed to be task-based and the other not.

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