

EXPLICIT PRAGMATIC INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning languages involve more than targeting grammatical and lexical knowledge. To achieve communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, EFL learners need to develop their pragmatic competence which is better taught explicitly in the classroom. This essay argues that while the implicit instruction is reasonably applicable, the explicit pragmatic instruction is more effective to facilitate EFL learners in developing their pragmatic competence.

Key words: pragmatic competence, explicit pragmatic instruction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence is the ability to communicate effectively that involves both grammatical and pragmatic knowledge (Thomas, 1983; Bachman, 1990). Considering the notability of appropriateness in target language use, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners need to have pragmatic competence. As a consequence, teaching pragmatic competence is an integral part of (EFL) learning process. Many research studies on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have revealed that pragmatic competence can be taught explicitly in EFL classroom (Alcon, 2005; Alcon & Guzman, 2010; Taguchi, 2011; Xiao-Le, 2011; Bu, 2012). However, teachers often feel unsure to include pragmatic learning into their classroom because it is not an easy task to develop communicative activities to raise learners' pragmatic competence in an EFL context.

Apparently, there are some activities that can be developed to bring up EFL learners' pragmatic awareness, such as contextualized language practice in given situations, constructed peer dialogues, and metapragmatic discussions. However,

there has been a long debate among SLA researchers on teaching approaches used in the instruction. This issue is particularly related to the productiveness of implicit and explicit instruction to enhance EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Thus, this essay argues that while the implicit instruction is reasonably applicable, the explicit pragmatic instruction is more effective to facilitate EFL learners to develop their pragmatic competence. It will then put forward some useful instructional materials that can be practically used for the development of EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

EXPLICIT vs. IMPLICIT PRAGMATIC INSTRUCTION

Explicit Pragmatic Instruction

Supporters of the explicit pragmatic instruction assert that the explicit pragmatic instruction can direct EFL learners' attention toward the target speech act forms in order to raise their pragmatic awareness. It confirms Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis with regard to promote learning pragmatic aspects by making the learners notice the focus of forms. Additionally, research has revealed that some pragmatic aspects cannot be automatically acquired by the learners until learners' focus are drawn to the pragmatic instruction (Alcon, 2005; Martinez-Flor & Alcon, 2007; Gholamia, & Aghaib, 2012). One of the pragmatic aspects, for example, is related to politeness strategies in request acts. The learners not only receive metapragmatic information by providing the description of speech act of request forms, but they will also get some explanation about to whom and how these acts are addressed politely. Then, the learners are expected to discuss the form of requests and practice them directly. As a result, after the learners are directly guided to the target forms by instruction, they can use the language appropriately based on the contexts.

Focusing on the exposure to EFL, the explicit pragmatic instruction is claimed to be able to provide more opportunities for learners to develop their pragmatic competence. In contrast, lack of exposure to EFL can slow down learners' pragmatic competence development since the learners have no interaction with native speakers of foreign language outside of the classroom. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), in order to provide opportunities for EFL learners to enhance their pragmatic performance, there are two main features that can be implemented in the classroom. They are the exposure to input and production of output by using the language, and planned instruction of pragmatic

acquisition. This claim supports the classroom-based studies discussed by Belz (2007). She reviewed how computer mediation in instruction developed EFL learners' pragmatic competence in some related research studies. She revealed that computer mediation, which develops instructional materials, had potential contributions to provide opportunities for learners to raise their pragmatic awareness. In the same line, Jernigan (2012) examined the effectiveness of one of instructional options, which is output-focused video-based instruction for EFL learners' pragmatic development. More specifically, he compared the effect of output-focused video-based instruction and comprehension-focused instruction on learners' perception of pragmatic appropriateness and production in written language. He found that the instructional treatment significantly contributed to learners' perception. Unfortunately, it did not give a clear picture of pragmalinguistic forms used in written form. Thus, the teacher should be able to create a classroom environment that support the learners to put the foreign language into practice since they lack activities which accommodate their pragmatic competence development.

Explicit pragmatic instruction has also been asserted to have a significant role for adult EFL learners. In the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this issue has been examined by some research which shows that adult learners prefer the explicit knowledge when they learn a new language by using certain strategies (Cohen, 2003). These EFL learning strategies normally attribute to particular techniques to meet the learning needs. For instance, when the adult learners learn how to give compliments in target language in certain situation, they analyse the situation given, try to put themselves, practice, and evaluate their progress in making the compliments.

Another research on the effect of explicit metapragmatic instruction on advanced EFL learners' speech act comprehension was conducted by Rasekh-Eslami, Rasekh-Eslami, and Fatahi (2004). The target forms were requests, apology, and complaining acts. They revealed that explicit metapragmatic instruction benefited the advanced EFL learners by giving them input enhancement of the targeted speech acts. In other words, the explicit instruction not only gained advanced EFL learners' awareness of input pragmatic features, but also enhanced their performance to produce the speech acts appropriately. Therefore, the role of explicit pragmatic instruction is relatively significant for adult learners.

Further claim is that the explicit pragmatic instruction can address certain EFL learners' repeated mistakes in their speech act production due to negative pragmatic transfer. For example, when Indonesian EFL learners get a compliment from their friend about their appearance or performance in English, they tend to respond it by saying '*Oh, that's okay!*' It can lead to breakdowns and confusion in interaction with native speakers. Since negative pragmatic transfer results in confusion in EFL learners' communication, the teacher should directly clarify the negative transfers from the first language (L1) to the target language (L2). Otherwise, this makes EFL learners keep repeating the same mistakes. However, it should be noted that the teacher should use a good strategy to give direct correction in order not to make the EFL learners stressful and shy when they want to speak up. Some research studies have investigated the effect of explicit and implicit teaching by involving corrective feedbacks into the instruction (Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Nipaspong, & Chinokul, 2010). By giving feedbacks in the explicit instruction, the EFL learners find it useful since the teacher explicitly correct the mistakes they make while they are using the language. Hence, the explicit instruction can facilitate the teacher to correct EFL learners' mistakes in their language production.

Implicit Pragmatic Instruction

In contrast, some studies have also been conducted to show how the implicit instruction can be operationalised on pragmatic learning to focus on speech act forms (Fukuya, 1998; Fukuya and Clark, 2001; and Martinez-Flor, 2004). Fukuya (1998) investigated the use of recasts as implicit feedback on EFL learners' request acts production. The author implemented a technique of interaction enhancement, such as demonstrating a smiley face to reflect a correct response and a sad face to show an error response to some pragmatic elements like pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors. Besides showing a sad face to show an error response, this technique also included repetition of learners' inappropriate sentences with rising intonation. The results revealed that this technique was useful even though it was not significantly effective. In similar fashion, Fukuya and Clark (2001) applied a technique of input enhancement to get EFL learners' attention to the target forms of speech act. While explicit group learners received the explicit instruction on sociopragmatic elements of request mitigators, the request mitigator enhancements was provided to implicit group learners. The findings did not

indicate any significant differences between the two groups in EFL learners' pragmatic competence. On the other hand, Martinez-Flor (2004) combined two implicit techniques, which were input enhancements and recasts, to examine the effect of implicit and explicit teaching on the speech act of suggestions. Her study found that the implicit and explicit instruction did not illustrate any significance differences on EFL learners' performance of suggestion production. Briefly, these three studies have tried to show empirical evidence of the effect of implicit and explicit instructions that positively contributed to ELF learners' pragmatic ability. More specifically, implicit pragmatic instruction affects EFL learners' pragmatic competence development despite the insignificant result compared to the explicit instruction.

Regarding whether the explicit instruction more effectively contributes to adult EFL learners than the implicit instruction does, Lichtman (2012), however, found that there was no significant different between child and adult EFL learners when they received implicit and explicit instruction. As he conducted his two comprised empirical studies, he compared the performance of child and adult EFL learners in two different treatments. The first treatment was on a story-listening-and-rewriting task, which adopted implicit knowledge, and a verb conjugation task which adopted explicit knowledge. In the second one, he manipulated the instruction in which the artificial mini-language was taught explicitly and explicitly for child and adult EFL learners. Based on the findings, he contended that the shift from implicit learning in the childhood to explicit learning in adulthood was not necessarily caused by age factor only. Rather, both implicit and explicit instructions are able to affect any age to some extent. Thus, either child or adult EFL learners can get benefits from implicit and explicit instruction on EFL learning contexts.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Having discussed aforementioned studies, it can be seen that the instruction is an essential aspect in raising EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and developing their pragmatic performance. The instructional materials either using implicit or explicit approach are able to influence the development of EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Since the pragmatic competence attributes both linguistics and sociocultural features in communicative speech acts, the teachers should pay close

attention to main features of pragmatic such as, social context, functional language use, and interaction, when they want to design and develop pragmatic teaching materials (Taguchi, 2011). Some materials and activities, such as: receptive-skill tasks (e.g. listening to video or audio with pragmatic features) and productive-skills tasks (e.g. structured conversations and Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) are practically useful for teaching pragmatics. These tasks are available in textbooks focusing on the pragmatic skill development.

Furthermore, technology tools recently have provided interesting materials for pragmatic teaching. This might be due to the main instructional features provided by technology tools (e.g. multimedia environment, interactive input and simulation) which support the process of pragmatic teaching and learning in the classroom. For instance, implementing the feature of Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), Ward et al. (2007) developed a computer application for Arabic learners to record their utterances, and this application then analysed the timing and the frequency of recorded utterances and gave corrective feedbacks. Similarly, Utashiro and Kawai (2009) designed a computer-based course called 'DiscourseWare' and explored its effect on Japanese reactive tokens learning or backchannel signals, such as *sodesuka* ('I see') and *honto* ('really'). The results of these two CALL studies showed significant effects on learners' receptive and productive skills. Moreover, web sites that provide interactive multimedia lessons are also useful because EFL learners can watch video clips of conversations containing oral speech acts explanations, some cultural tips, and exercises.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, even though implicit instruction is more practical to draw EFL learners' initial attention to pragmatic features, the explicit pragmatic instruction is significantly more effective in both raising EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and developing their pragmatic performance. Some accessible potential instructional resources and materials are also available for teaching pragmatics in the classroom. Therefore, developing materials and activities to improve the learners' pragmatic performance is not a problem as long as the teachers are concerned on some key elements of pragmatic competence.

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