

## The Significance of Pragmatics

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### Abstract

The education of pragmatics is necessary and important in our globalized world. The reason is that English is currently used by people in the world for interaction and communication with each other in order to do international trade or participate in the academic conferences (McKay, 2002). For avoiding miscommunication caused by cultural difference, being familiar with diverse cultures and pragmatics is essential. Studies of Pragmatics emphasize the appropriateness in inter-cultural discourses. Through learning pragmatics, the English speakers' intercultural communication competence should be raised. Their Pragmatic Competence would be better because of knowing cultural differences and being aware of the significance in appropriate languages. In other words, the teaching and learning of pragmatics would release the difficulties of international communications for both native and non-native speakers.

**Keyword:** Pragmatic Competence, Mutual Comprehension, Linguistic Competence, Globalized World, Speech Acts

## INTRODUCTION

Kasper (1997) argues that a further aspect of students' pragmatic competence is their awareness of what is, and is not appropriate in the given contexts. About this point he has mentioned, pragmatics is a field of knowledge that makes people know how to appropriately achieve the mutual comprehension, and politely face the challenges, that are caused by the miscommunication and misunderstanding in international situations.

Truly, people in different cultures have a need of accomplishing the appropriateness and politeness in English as an International/English as a Foreign Language (EIL/EFL) communication. Therefore, in order to speak to people from different areas around the world effectively and politely, English native and non-native speakers have to be trained with pragmatics that involves diverse cultures and languages.

I believe that English speakers need to be not only proficient in linguistic competence, but also in pragmatics knowledge. They need to be informed with issues of cultural disagreements, which include issues of politeness, appropriateness, and speech act strategies in communication. In a word, the teachers should educate students to learn pragmatics in order to integrate themselves into different international environments and interact with foreigners appropriately in our

globalized world.

## PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: A SIGNIFICANT COMPONENT IN COMMUNICATIVE COMPATENCES

Many scholars explore the close relation between pragmatics competence and English proficiency in their researches and studies. For example, Crystal (1997) emphasizes that the pragmatics knowledge is necessary and useful in second language learning. He proposes that pragmatics is the study of language form and the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.

I think another way the pragmatics should be interpreted, is that pragmatics is a field of knowledge that can be recognized as a socio-cultural context study in intercultural communication. I mean that the pragmatics knowledge indicates that English native and non-native speakers need to have a broader focuses in their English interactions, including the focuses of grammar structure and vocabulary accuracy, the considerations of speech appropriateness, and the different cultural issues.

## SPEECH ACTS

From a perspective of functions in languages, communications for various particular purposes are categorized into many specific “speech acts”. According to Kasper and Rose (1999), communication action includes not only using speech acts such as apologizing, complaining, complimenting, and requesting, but also engaging in different types of discourse and participating in speech events of varying length and complexity.

Their statement actually means that the dissimilar types of functional languages can be created by concerning the language complexities from aspects of grammatical accuracy, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic communication competence. Therefore, for facing the challenges in the intercultural communications, English speakers need to learn techniques and strategies in speech acts in order to accomplish goals of establishing closer interpersonal relations and completing tasks efficiently through suitable languages.

## ADVANTAGE OF LEARNING PRAGMATICS

In fact, one of the advantages in learning pragmatics is that the learners can interpret the meanings of language from a broader intercultural aspect. Through established pragmatics foundation in mind,

EIL/EFL speakers will be more sensitive to people’s intentional meanings embedded in international interaction. They can also learn to be proficient in reacting to the EIL/EFL speakers’ interlocutions in an effective and comprehensive fashion.

## INTERCULTURAL INTER-ACTION

From the perspective of EIL/EFL interaction, there is not a cultural or a language which are better than the others. For this point, Rose and Kasper (2001) argue that the best thing pragmatists can do for English speakers is to operate with a different hypothesis rather than with a deficit hypothesis. I think that Rose and Kasper (2001) have pointed out that the non-native English speakers, and even native speakers should learn pragmatics by describing and explaining interlanguage communication from a universal and intercultural perspective, rather than stereotype the native-like English as a standard form of communication.

Accordingly, when learning pragmatics, there is no limitation of how many foreign cultures a learner should learn. I might say the more cultural learned the better, if a learner can absorb sufficient intercultural knowledge. Similarly, there is also no restraint of how many assumptions of intentional meanings a learner should make when interacting in international situations.

The reason is that adequate assump-

tions made through a more complete pragmatics knowledge foundation would attribute to a correct judgment of the intentional meanings in intercultural communications. To conclude, one significant issue of pragmatics is that there are no classical and standard patterns in each speech act of English. Therefore, the EFL/EIL speakers have to raise their consciousness about various types of speech acts which are based on a structure and convention paragon of another different culture.

For this point, Rose (2001) in one of his studies argues that “pragmatics consciousness raising is basically an inductive approach to develop a general awareness of how language forms are used appropriately in context” (p. 171). Accordingly, the goal of pragmatic learning that Rose points out is that English speakers must be familiar with different suitable forms based on intercultural knowledge, but not transform the speaking into a certain standard type of language.

In other words, Rose (2001) reveals that pragmatics is a study, which makes the learners comprehend that language varieties do exist in various speech acts of EIL/EFL communications. Pragmatics is also a study, which makes the learners accommodate to diverse kinds of flexible colloquies in EFL/EIL communication.

## FOR AVOIDING MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISCOMMUNICATION

From views of House, Kasper, and Rose (2003), the pragmatics is a type of knowledge that makes people detect the intercultural interaction structures and speech act strategies in order to resolve problems of misunderstanding encountered in the international social settings. Through pragmatics training, English speakers should be able to perceive different interpretations of cross-cultural languages, and get accustomed to assorted conventions, structures, and forms in speech acts in the other cultures.

We all know that different customs of dialogues patterns sometimes would cause confusions or embarrassment. Misunderstanding and miscommunication caused from cultural gaps actually can be avoided by sufficient knowledge of pragmatics. Therefore, the teachability of pragmatics is more and more noticed these years. Through being informed about the cultural alternatives, language learners would be capable in dealing with cultural diversities and in making compromise when talking with people from different language backgrounds.

Indeed, the English speakers’ construction of their pragmatics knowledge is a significant factor why they can interact and communicate effectively and appropriately in their social life. In reality, for participat-

ing international activities as a decent and polite member in the current globalized society, the English speakers need to constitute a concept of interaction structures and speech act strategies in cross-cultural interaction. Then, they can work, and cooperate with foreigners politely and efficiently.

## HOW PRAGMATICS MIGHT BE TAUGHT

Since the pragmatics is a significant field of second language learning, many researchers have provided language teachers and learners' different approaches, methods, and strategies for pragmatics education. As I see it, demonstrating the culture differences through dialogue examples, comparing and contrasting the different strategies that different cultures apply, and learning with scenarios and role play are three effective approaches of teaching pragmatics.

Additionally, I believe that the pragmatics training should start at the beginning of a learner's English learning, because pragmatics education is a significant factor why a person can apply English in cross-culture communication in a polite attitude, even though the learner can only interact and communicate in a basic level of English proficiency.

### **Demonstration through Examples**

Firstly, learning from the examples is a method that teachers and students can apply to learn the intercultural differences, and

various strategies of speech acts. Actually, everyone is able to provide misunderstanding examples of pragmatics that indicate the politeness and appropriateness issues in communication of his/her original cultures (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Since cultural contradictions do exist in different countries, everyone is an expert of his/her own language and culture.

According to Bardovi-Harlig (1996), everyone who works with a second or foreign language, whether learners, teachers, or researchers, knows some interesting stories of miscommunication and misunderstanding in cross-cultural situations.

Therefore, through referring to the examples of miscommunication aroused by cultural difference, English speakers might be able to avoid the rude or ineffective languages from perspectives of the other cultures. Furthermore, many examples that demonstrate the cross cultural miscommunication are actually very interesting, which attributes to stimulating the learner's motivation for learning pragmatics.

### **Hint Strategy of Request Speech Act**

According to Weizman (1985), pragmatics can be taught through speech act strategies in different cultures. For example, for teaching "request" speech act in pragmatics, the "hint" strategy needs to be introduced to the learners. The reason is that, the "hint" strategy is applied in many countries as a conventional method, for example, countries in Asia.

Hence, English speakers need to be informed for learning different strategies of request speech acts of the other cultures and learn to raise their awareness of the hidden request functions in the languages. In other words, if the speakers do not previously learn the pragmatics, some request speech act might sound like gossips to them. That is to say, without learning pragmatics, people might refuse the others without knowing they just reject to offer people who need their aid.

As a matter of fact, traditional forms of request speech act in another country can not be easily distinguished without pragmatics education. Hence, the strategies of speech act need to be taught with examples that demonstrate various types of request forms in order to raise students' awareness of intentional request meanings produced by the speakers.

#### **Demonstrating by Video Tape**

Besides explicit strategies and examples, another way to facilitate the learners' ability to find socially appropriateness in English communication is through implicit video demonstration. According to Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay, and Thananart (1997), the implicit video demonstration is a more effective way of displaying language expressions. I totally agree that designing the video watching into the English learning curriculum is very necessary since the films that audibly and visibly offer target language learners the "rules" and "strategies" of dif-

ferent cultures do make language learner gain their opportunity of distinguishing different types of appropriate and polite context.

If these conventional forms and expressions of various cultures can be displayed by the implicit video demonstration to the English learners, they might be able to review the explicit illustrations and explanations learned from the teachers and apply the rules learned in classroom in the real situations, especially in international situations.

#### **Demonstration through Comparison and Contrast**

What's important, many scholars agreed that the successful pragmatics teaching and learning can be achieved by comparing and contrasting examples of different cultures. Through comparing the similarities and contrasting the differences between target language speakers' and non-native speakers' speech acts and language productions, the non-native speakers can be very clear about what are the native-like forms and what are the intercultural forms (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 1999).

In an empirical study of Rose (2001), he reveals that "Hong Kong English bilinguals, especially in direct request contexts that would be inappropriate to people in the United States" (p. 173). As a Chinese/English bilingual myself, I believe that most of the Chinese English speaker would tend to avoid miscommunication if they had

a chance to learn about intercultural diversity. I think that most of the misunderstandings are caused by lack of pragmatics education.

Because of the exist of invisible cultural differences in our global village, as an English educator as well as a Pragmatics researcher, I strongly suggest that the language trainers have to develop the learners' pragmatic knowledge, and clarify for them what is appropriate and inappropriate in request speech through contrasting the differences between the target language forms and the intercultural language forms in different speech acts.

#### **Demonstrating Speeches Created by People from Different Backgrounds**

Inspired by the comparing and contrasting methods, I think that the different types of speech forms according to different social status and different speaker and hearer orientations in request speech act can be learned. For example, the appropriate language used by people in their high or low social statuses can be displayed. The input offered by teachers to contrast the two statuses should be taught.

Teacher might tell the student that the indirect form, such as "Could you please ...?" is for low status people to request the higher status people. And, the direct form, such as "Can you ...?" is for high status people to request the lower status people. Additionally, the different perspectives used to make requests form can be dis-

played and contrasted as well. For example, the teacher might show the different orientations of speakers and learners and tell the students that saying "Can I...?" is from the perspective of the speaker and "Can you...?" is from the perspective of the hearer.

#### **Teaching through Role Play**

Beside the pedagogies mentioned above, teaching pragmatics through scenarios and role-plays is also an applicable technique. Actually, a Japanese researcher, Takahashi (2001) displayed several situations that the students can use to discuss the appropriate speech act languages. They are request situations like making an appointment with professor, extending the paper submit due date, makeup exam for a course, and requesting the professor to revise papers. He believed that through the situational variables, the request dialogues can be written according to students' selected roles. In the role-play with scenarios, students can practice to use the appropriate language that conveys their intended meanings and expressions of request. Besides gaining an opportunity of practicing what had been learned in class, I think that the role play is a relaxing way of learning that stimulates students' learning motivations for pragmatics.

## **IMPORTANTCE OF PRAGMATICS**

In fact, although many pedagogies of

teaching pragmatics have been provided and discussed, the importance of pragmatics has not been emphasized in a level that it needs to be emphasized. According to Kasper (2001), pragmatics has played a considerable role in first and second language classroom research, but classroom research has played only a minor role in Interlanguage pragmatics thus far.

From my perspectives, I believe that the pragmatics needs to be taught from the very first year that language learners study a target language. Especially, the issues of politeness and appropriateness need to be taught. My reason is that the language learners need not only to learn the language itself, but also need to notice the importance of politeness and appropriateness.

That is, learning both the “language” and the nice “attitude” of communication should benefit the language learners, because language learners can achieve their communicative goal and fulfill their plan in international occasion only when they are able to interact in an appropriate manner and apply understandable language.

## EXAMPLE OF SPEECH ACT IN REQUEST AND RECEIVE

Speeches acts of requesting and receiving might clearly and completely manifest several pragmatics issues, including the cultural gap, language difference among various social statuses, and different ways of

showing politeness. I think another reason why this topic of request is important is because it is not easy for us to request the others and achieve mutual benefits for both the requesters and the listeners. The speakers might have to learn how to request in various cultures, and then they can depend on the situation and select a proper request form.

In fact, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) also raise the awareness for the listeners and the speakers about the face-threatening to both the requester and the recipient in his study. He believes that the recipient might feel that the request is an intrusion on his/her freedom of action or even a power play. Accordingly, the English learners need to learn how to be polite and appropriate when requesting the others. English learners need to save the face for both sides according to their social positions.

Since a wrong form of request error obstructs good communication between speakers, makes the speaker appear to be abrupt or brusque in social interactions, and makes the speaker appear discourteous or apathetic. Therefore, the learning of request speech act is very necessary, because being outside the rules of language use or making a pragmatic mistake may have various consequences. The following indicates the possible situations in request speech act.

Actually, the relation strategy is a significant issue in social context of language.



A requester has to create the appropriate request sentences according to the language intimate, friends/acquaintances, and stranger situations. For example, the direct request sentence such as “Hey, bring me a cup of hot tea. I feel so cold now” can be employed when talking to the requesters’ friends, acquaintances, but not to a stranger or a new friend.

Indeed, various types of opacity in request speech actually raised the complexity of request strategies. Without learning how to clarify the opacity, some request intention will not be figure out the listener. On the other hand, a person who made a request without using hint strategy may be considered to be a disrespectful individual.

## CRUCIAL ELEMENTS TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION IN SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST AND RECEIVE

Besides the strategies of request have been mentioned above, face, status, position, and imposition issues were also elements that need to be taken in to consider when we make a request. First of all, the face-threatening is an element that maintains the confidence for both speakers and listeners. Secondly, the considerations of the social status and position are also factors of a successful and polite request. Thirdly, the status and position that attribute to the power of language and the lis-

teners’ impositions of doing things are also significant elements of a decent request.

All in all, a pragmatic learner’s familiar level on the issues and strategies of pragmatics accords with his/her intercultural ability. When a person is able to practice the strategies and issues of request learned, we can judge him as a person who can interpret the intentions of a request speech and interact with an acceptable attitude in the intercultural situations without problem.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, learning pragmatics can be a very interesting and challenging experience. The students can learn a lot of expressions and interpretations of various types of inter-cultural speeches. English learners might feel interested in seeing many different types of conventions, strategies, and issues in different languages, places and peoples.

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# 語用學之重要性

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## 摘 要

本文強調「語用學」的英語教育，在此全球化急遽加速的世代是無可避免的。原因是因為近年來，農、工、商業界與各類學術界之國際會議的與會人士們，皆是使用單一語言—「英語」來交談。為了避免因文化差異所引起的種種誤會，學習「多元文化」及「語用學」在第二個千禧年剛剛過不久後的今天，變得刻不容緩。「語用學」使我們了解到，甚麼樣的對話才算是合宜的跨文化交流。本文中、明道大學應用英語系助理教授林慧菁，特別大聲呼籲，「英語教育者，對於提升學習者之跨文化交流能力一事，應該要感覺到責無旁貸。尤其是成年的語言學習者，一定要知道有關各國、文化、種族之間，表達方式及語言意涵上的暗示性與差別性，進而懂得如何運用恰當且禮貌的語言。」換言之，筆者認為「語用學」的英語課程綱要，有必要被具體地設計與真正落實，因為，唯有深入地理解及體諒「文化差異」，才能幫助「母語者」與「非母語者」，於國際友人間的跨文化互動中，避免因彼此語言認知上的差異而引起的溝通誤解及障礙。

**關鍵詞：**語用學能力，雙向理解，語言學，全球化，話語的行為

