The relevance of pragmatics for language teaching

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Abstract:

This paper is a brief reflection about the relevance of pragmatics for language teaching. Therefore, it takes into account the fact that to use a language, a person needs much more than merely the knowledge about language structure. Instead, it is necessary to develop a pragmatic competence, with which it is possible to understand the interlocutor and the meanings behind the words he/she utters and as well as how to behave within specific communicative situations. The pragmatic competence makes someone able to interact in different specific situations, such as how to ask, to complain, to apologize, to compliment etc. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the relevance of a language pedagogical practice which provides an atmosphere to the development of the pragmatic competence. The relevance of this reflection is that it draws attention to the fact that language teachers need to know about how to approach pragmatics to teach a language, so that learners can benefit from it, upon achieving, as a result, the pragmatic competence.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Language Teaching; Relevance.

Resumo:

A relevância da pragmática para o ensino de línguas

Este artigo é uma breve reflexão sobre a relevância da pragmática para o ensino de línguas. Para tanto, leva em consideração o fato de que para usar uma língua, uma pessoa precisa muito mais do que meramente o conhecimento sobre a estrutura da língua, em vez disso, é necessário desenvolver uma competência pragmática, com a qual é possível entender o interlocutor e os sentidos por detrás das palavras afirmadas por ele, assim como se comportar em situações comunicativas específicas. A competência comunicativa possibilita que alguém seja capaz de interagir em diferentes situações específicas, tais como perguntar, reclamar, se desculpar, elogiar etc. O

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objetivo desse artigo é destacar a relevância de uma prática pedagógica de língua que promova uma atmosfera para o desenvolvimento da competência pragmática. A relevância desta reflexão é que ela chama atenção para o fato de que os professores de línguas precisam saber como abordar pragmática para ensinar uma língua, de modo que os aprendizes possam se beneficiar, alcançando, como resultado, a competência pragmática.

Palavras-chave: Pragmática; Ensino de Língua; Relevância.

Introduction

Teaching a language involves diverse knowledge on the part of the teachers. They should know the different dimensions of the teaching and learning process, such as the political, the ethical, the cultural, the emotive and the sociolinguistic one. Concerning the latter, language educators should learn how to approach the language in a way learners can develop the pragmatic competence. In order to develop it, one should focus on different abilities, that to be developed, should be approached in the light of pragmatics. Thus, learning about pragmatics is quite relevant, because learners, as speakers/writers of a language, need to know much more than merely the structure of it, it is necessary to know how to meet the demands of the contexts, how interlocutors mean what they want to and so on. In this sense is that Schepers (2014) argues that learning a second language involves a lot more than simply getting its vocabulary and grammar rules, the goal should the development of pragmatic abilities.

Cohen (2010) explains that the pragmatic ability involves different skills areas. As listeners, people to interpret what is said, as readers, we have to understand written messages, as writers, it is necessary to know how to write our messages intelligibly, and, as speakers, how to say what we want to. In this perspective, the choices, made by a speaker/writer, when using a certain language, taking into account the context, be-long to the realm of pragmatics. That is why it is an area interested in investigating and explaining the meaning interpretation, related with choices a speaker/writer makes when he/she has to use a certain language, what has to do with the ability to use the language as well, i.e. the pragmatic ability. In other terms, this ability deals with meanings communicated by a person to be interpreted by a listener/reader.

Thus, Cohen (2010) claims that the pragmatic ability encompasses the four main channels for communication, both the receptive, listening and reading, and the productive ones, speaking and writing. He emphasizes, in a nutshell, that as listeners, one needs to interpret what is said, but also what is not said, and what may be communicated non-verbally:

> Having pragmatic ability means being able to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed. (COHEN, 2010, p. 5)

On the other hand, Cohen (2010) argues that, as speakers, people need to know how to say what they want to say with the proper politeness, directness and formality. He offers as examples, when we have to perform in the role of boss, telling employees that they are being laid off; or in the role of teacher, telling students that their work is unacceptable. However, it is also important

to know what not to say at all and what to communicate non-verbally.

Cohen (2016) also argues that pragmatics operates in this line and includes acts of politeness/impoliteness, greetings, thanks, requests, compliments, apologies, complaints, conversational style, humor, sarcasm, teasing, cursing, discourse markers, conversational implicature and deixis. In this line of thought, it is possible to say that pragmatics is such a complex area, since it deals with contextual factors and word choices to take part in several communicative acts within different settings. Thus, pragmatics is complex because it can be applied to many different areas, such as cognitive pragmatics, neuropragmatics, computational pragmatics and even clinical pragmatics.

In this respect, pragmatics is of great relevance for language teaching as well, considering that language is contextual and it should be taught is this perspective to achieve successful outcome, supporting learners to achieve pragmatic ability. That is why a pragmatical approach, in the language teaching setting, is essential, because it deals with how, when and to whom to say something properly within a specific communicative situation. Besides that, it should be clear to all language teachers that the real world is engendered by different types of languages, and since languages are based on cultures and cultures have their own norms, teaching requires a pragmatic approach, which can support learners to figure out social norms from specific cultures, in order to develop, at the same time an intercultural identity, as a result of an intercultural communicative competence. About this, Limberg (2015) says that intercultural communicative competence is the main target of modern foreign language teach-

ing, which enables learners to communicate themselves culturally sensitive, following social norms, to maintain harmony and rapport with others.

Thereby, this paper intends to highlight the relevance of approaching language in a pragmatical perspective, as an alternative to meet the intercultural demands as well. Therefore, to understand pragmatics even better, it will be briefly introduced some concepts of pragmatics and how teachers can base themselves to teach language in this bias.

Defining pragmatics

Cohen (2010) states that the term 'pragmatics' has several meanings. He argues that when someone says a person is taking a "pragmatic approach" to something, this means that this person is being practical. However, the word has a more specialized meaning in applied linguistics. The word "pragmatics" originates from Greek '*pragmatikus*' and from Latin '*pragmaticu*' which means to be practical. According to Rueda (2006), the term 'pragmatics' was originally coined within the philosophy of language field, but later on it was absorbed by sociolinguistics and other subdisciplines.

Pragmatics can be defined as the study of the meaning interpretation (O'KEEFFE, CLANCY, ADOLPHS, 2011) or, as Deda (2013) states, as an area which studies language production based on the user's perspective, taking into account the different choices that speakers/writers are able to make when a certain language is used, depending on the social interaction. He claims that pragmatics is about the meaning through communication conveyed, including verbal and non-verbal elements, varying according to the settings, to the relationships between people and other social factors as well.

For Kasper and Rose (2001), pragmatics is the study of the communicative action in the sociocultural setting, which includes not only the speech acts, such as to greet, to request, to complain and to apologize, but the discussive choices in several and complex events as well. In this line of thought, O'Keeffe, Clancy and Adolphs (2011) claim that the pragmatical choices made by a person, during a conversation, can simultaneously indicate position, time, interpersonal and cultural indicators, such as power, status, genre and age.

Pragmatics can be considered as a subarea of the second language acquisition area and as such, it is in charge of investigating abilities a learner manages to perform, essentially taking into account the linguistic production within a specific setting. In other words, the choices made by a speaker, in a specific interaction moment, are of pragmatic area interest. What to say, when and how are aspects of the communicative act, which require of a speaker a pragmatical ability, that is to say, contextual.

Thus, the several choices a speaker is able to make, when using a certain target language, are conditioned upon the social interaction (KASPER, ROSE, 2001), the context of action and the linguistic production. However, pragmatics is also interested in explaining more than the linguistic production choices. It is also in charge of explaining the speaker's/writer's intentionality. As an example, if a speaker says "I have had headaches", pragmatics will offer basis to understand why and in which circumstance this was said, since it can literally mean something of a physiological order, because someone drank an alcoholic beverage or ate something indigestible, or even, in a metaphorical meaning, this person has had problems by any reason. Thus, the context will

be of paramount importance to identify the linguistic production meaning, beyond the literal use. That is why O'Keeffe, Clancy and Adolphs (2011) argue that in any language, what is said, is often quite different of what the speaker means. In other words, the form is often very different from the content. These authors assert:

> As such pragmatics does not assume a one-to-one relationship between language form and utterance function, but is concerned instead with accounting for the processes that give rise to a particular interpretation of an utterance that is used in a particular context.

(O'KEEFFE, CLANCY, ADOLPHS, 2011, p. 2)

For Kecskes (2014), pragmatics is related with two main questions: why do we choose to say what we say? and why do we understand things the way we do? For this researcher, pragmatics is about the use of language and its users. He considers that pragmatics is about how we use language in social contacts to manipulate and infer meaning, withing a certain social cultural setting. That way, for this author, pragmatics is centered in three elements: the code, the producers and the interpreters of this code and the social cultural context. Based on that, he claims that pragmatics should focus on how the meaning is shared and inferred during a social interaction.

Thus, it should be taken into account that what we speak can mean more than simply what we say with the words we use. Let us take as an example a context in which two people are in a room, where there is a window. When it starts to rain, one of them, next to the window, who was wet first, says: "it is raining". Although the sentence may express it started to rain, in truth, it is an invitation to leave the place they are. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze beyond the linguistic production.

That is why, when dealing with the pragmatical aspects, we also have to take into account it is not merely a matter of linguistic choice, but of intentions as well. This concerns 'indirect speech", which occurs when the words used by a speaker/writer do not determine the illocutionary force of the same utterance, there is no such correspondence between form and function (O'KEEFFE, CLANCY, ADOLPHS, 2011). Therefore, pragmatics is also related with the speaker's intent. Concerning this point, Cohen (2010) poses a question: why are messages not communicated straightforwardly? And he argues that, in many situations, conveying a message, in a direct way, might sound inappropriate or even rude for a speech community. That is why the sociocultural setting is relevant to be taken into account.

That way, pragmatics can be understood as an area that studies the communicative act within a social setting (DEDA, 2013), but that takes into account the linguistic production purpose as well as the context. Thus, pragmatics is in charge of studying the action of communication, such as how people do to express themselves, taking into account both the linguistic statement and any other extralinguistic element, the verbal and non-verbal ones and also the intent, the purpose of what one says.

The objective of pragmatics studies is to understand what is communicated at a given moment, but considering the context of production and the intentionality as determinants for that. About this aspect, Rajagopalan (2021) points out that pragmatics is sensible to the context of use as well to who speaks for whom on which occasion and under which specific circumstances. It starts from the premise that the words we say are only the tip of a big iceberg.

Teaching through a pragmatic approach

Pragmatics is very important in communicative language teaching (FARINDE, OYEDOKUN-ALLI, 2020), because of its huge applicability in the language classroom (SCHEPERS, 2014). Pragmatics has this relevance because, in fact, everything we do is related with it. That is why it is recommended to make a language pragmatical approach, considering as well that researches have already shown that learners are benefited when they are aware about what to say, where, to whom and how (COHEN, 2018). In this respect, Kasper and Rose (2001) argue that, in recent years, curricula and materials have been developed to support many second and foreign language teaching contexts, and they include a strong pragmatic component or even adopt a pragmatic approach as their organizing principle. They also raise the fact that several empirical pragmatic studies have been the base for a number of proposals for language teaching. However, in practical terms, language teaching practices have not always been aligned with *bona fide* pragmatics. That is why Murray (2012, p. 320) complains:

> For all intents and purposes, the teaching of pragmatics has amounted to little more than presenting students with 'lists of useful expressions' and conversations and dialogues offering pragmatically inaccurate models which they then memorize and drill, be it in authentic contexts of use.

This claim is coherent and in order to overcome it, teachers should know how to work with pragmatics properly. For this purpose, teachers should view the learning of pragmatics as a cognitive process as well as a social phenomenon. About this aspect, Cohen (2010) recommends language

teachers to have specific guidance in how to teach and assess if they want to work with pragmatics. Thus, he lists pragmatical areas which deserves attention in the language classroom: i. how to be polite and impolite as well, ii. how to make requests, how to apologize, how to compliment and answer to compliments, how to complain, how to criticize people, how to forgive someone, how to greet and to express gratitude, iii. how to realize humor, sarcasm, provocation and how to provoke, how to be well-humored and sarcastic, iv. how to express emotions through language, v. how to manage conversations (how to keep turn and give proper answers), both in conversations and written messages, to know and make use of discourse markers, such as "well", "I think that", "on the other hand", "as matter of fact", vi. how to detect conversation implicit meaning and vii. how to interpret words and phrases such as "there", "this/that", "his/her" and "you" within a context.

These areas are also the bases for what Austin (1962) called 'speech acts'. For him, to say something is also to do something. This is what is conventionally called 'performative acts' and it is evident in acts such as to greet someone. We do not only do this with words, but we perform the act with our bodies as well. When we use words to ask for something to somebody, we also can make somebody do that for us.

Cohen (2018) argues that speech acts regard the oral and written languages which play a function in communication. He mentions that we perform a speech act when, for instance, we greet someone, express gratitude, when we request something, when we complain, invite, make compliment or when we refuse a invitation. These acts are data of the pragmatic performance and, therefore, its object of study. About this, Tagushi

and Li (2020) highlight that the pragmatical performance data collection and the scrutinization of this performance are the main practice of the pragmatic area. However, to figure out this pragmatic universe it is necessary two elements. Tagushi and Li (2020) mention that the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatic knowledge structure the pragmatic knowledge. They explain that the pragmalinguistic knowledge are the linguistic source needed to perform the communicative act, such as the use of informal greetings (hi! what's up?). While the former is about the proper choices, concerning the linguistic forms, to be used in a certain context, what has to do with social conventions and rules of interaction, the latter deals with what is acceptable as a topic, taking into account the rules of a speech community. Thus, Cohen (2018) mentions, as examples, whether it is proper to ask how much someone earns monthly or whether a person is trying to get pregnant.

Tagushi and Li (2020) also emphasize that the knowledge of both elements support the performance of the communicative act properly and efficiently during a situation. This proper and efficient way, in other terms, can be called 'pragmatic ability', what Cohen (2018) defined as the ability to copy with the meaning communicated by a speaker or by someone who writes something and it is interpreted by a listener and reader and also to interpret the intended meanings by people, their assumptions, purposes, goals and the type of actions they are performing when they speak or write something. Besides that, Cohen (2018) points out that pragmatic is related to politeness or impoliteness, with the conversational turn, with the interactional competence, with humor, sarcasm, with the use of discursive markers, with speech acts, among other elements.

In the same token, Schepers (2014) argues that in spite of the fact that not all aspects of pragmatics are easily applied in classroom, teachers can approach many of them, such as matters of polite and impolite, the use of formal and informal language in different settings, direct and indirect speech, requests, forms of addressing, greetings, vague language and so on. She alerts about the importance of instruction in pragmatics, within classroom, which can prevent learners from making pragmatic failures, during communicative acts.

Regarding the communicative acts, Kasper and Rose (2001) point out the greetings, requests, offers, suggestions, invitations, refusals, apologies, complaints and gratitude expressions as models of such acts. In this universe, teachers should be interested in all pragmatic elements which can makes it possible to learn/acquire a language. In this perspective, researchers have payed attention to the pragmatic aspects, since it is already apparent that the pragmatic teaching can produce better results in the language development abilities. But why are these results positive? In what should teachers be based on to join and adopt this approach of language? The answer is simple: pragmatic is primarily concerned with the language effectively used in real life (RAJAGOPALAN, 2021).

Therefore, there are competences which are the base for the pragmatic competence, which need to be developed in classroom to achieve the pragmatic competence in a language. In this line of thought, Limberg (2015) mentions that the 'universal pragmatic competence' should be developed as a result of the knowledge and ability one should develop to be variable and flexible in linguistic choices and actions:

Flexibility in one's choice of words and adaptability towards given situational constraints are important aspects of learners' pragmatic competence. To achieve these, input examples should reflect a variety of choices and constraints and, at the same time, offer tasks in which learners explore, practice, and reflect upon apologies. (LIMBERG, 2015, p. 282).

In this perspective, O'Keeffe, Clancy and Adolphs (2011) mention that the pragmatic competence is related with a set of internalized rules about how to use a certain language properly within a socialcultural context, taking into account the context features. This competence is of paramount importance to develop because several social behaviors may differ from culture to culture, so we cannot simply transfer our acquired norms when interacting with different cultures (LIMBERG, 2015). For Cohen (2010), people need to learn pragmatics to be pragmatically appropriate in the L2 culture, by learning how social norms work within a specific community, in order to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings. However, Rueda (2006) emphasizes that language learners can use a specie of universal pragmatic knowledge to acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge and even they can act using some kind of transference from their first language.

In this line of thought, Deda (2013) states that pragmatics is about culture, communication, and concerning second languages, about intercultural communication. He also puts that to acquire pragmatic competence, one needs to acquire cultural understanding and communication skills. For him, people have a kind of pragmatic competence, what allows them to choose to use the language in several contexts and, that is why, this competence has been studied in the social field, in the threshold of the speech acts and of the social interactions.

But which are the abilities that are the base for pragmatic competence? Deda (2013) points out that pragmatic competence is based on other competences: the sociolinguistic, the interactional, the cultural, the communicative and the strategic one. In a nutshell, the sociolinguistic works as a kind of capacity to interpret the social meaning of a linguistic item and to decide about its use or not, taking into account the purpose of communication in a specific setting. The interactional competence is about the capacity to negotiate with intended meanings in any act. The cultural is about as the ability an individual has to figure out and to use a language so that he can be understood by members of another culture. The communicative competence is about the ability to know the language for communicative goals. For Deda (2013), this competence takes language as a tool used for communication. At last, the strategic competence is about the ability to choose and use the language properly within a context.

Final remarks

No one can communicate without being pragmatical. Pragmatics is a *sine qua non* condition to set up communication and that is why teachers should emphasize a language approach which privileges the pragmatic competence development. Pragmatic competence concerns a set of language patterns, choices, one can use/make properly in response to a certain language used by speakers/writers.

Whoever masters a language, knows how to use it to achieve the meaning intended in several communicative situations, be it a simple information request or an ironic response, for instance. Learning a language requires access to a range of knowledge, such as phonetics, phonology and grammar.

But not only this knowledge. Speaker/writer needs much more than this to operate in socio communicative situations, that is to say, a pragmatic knowledge. In this perspective, Widdowson (1991) argues that it is possible to agree that the ability to produce language is extremely important in the learning process of a language. However, he also argues that this is not the only ability learners need, since who masters a language knows more than understanding, reading and writing. In other terms, speakers/writers know the way languages are used to achieve a communicative effect, what is essentially related to the pragmatic ability in different areas, which leads to pragmatic competence. The areas I mean are those used to greet, to request, to complain, to apologize etc. These are speech acts that testify the pragmatic ability, if they are used properly. For Kasper and Rose (2001), the pragmatic ability is based on the sociolinguistic competence, based on the rules of a language use. The lack of ability to correspond to communicative situations, that is to say, the inability to choose the linguistic elements pragmatically coherent might lead to communication failure. That is why language should be approached in this perspective, in order to prepare learners to be pragmatically competent.

The main goal of approaching language in a pragmatical perspective is to support students to develop a competence able to make them ready to copy with different cultural and linguistic patterns. This is really relevant, because, in fact, all we do, as a speaker/writer of a language, demands from us a pragmatical knowledge. This know-how is what makes us act and react in different situations, and without it, mistakes may occur and may lead to misinterpretation, be it in a linguistic or cultural biases.

In this line of thought, pragmatical knowledge is the key to develop pragmatic competence and it is related with what Murray (2012) called "social grammar", a kind of knowledge which governs associations between specific situations and proper language forms to be used to set and exchange meaning. However, teachers should take into account the fact that in the case of English, it is not a language attached only to two hegemonic cultures, and because of that, the local perspective of use should be respected as well. I mean, users of English, for instance, should express their own local/cultural pragmatical perspectives through the language as well.

To teach a language is this perspective, wishing a successful outcome, one should give it life, putting emotions and feelings to it. Accepting and respecting identities, beliefs and values students might share in classroom. To do that, one should be based on real life. A teacher should open the door of the classroom, so that outside world and its conventions can get into it, what can be done through a pragmatical approach.

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