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**Department of English Studies Level: Second Year Master**

**The role of pragmatic competence**

**Introduction**

Communicative language pedagogy and research into communicative competence have shown that language learning exceeds the limits of memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules (Canale 1983). Pragmatic competence, although sometimes in disguise, has been a part of the models describing communicative competence. We have defined pragmatic competence as the knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions that have to be followed in various situations (Edwards and Csizér 2001).

Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence (324).

**1.Pragmatic Comprehension**

Pragmatic ability, which is an important part of the language proficiency construct (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1980), is the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation. The importance of the pragmatic dimension in the language ability construct is not disputed, yet its role in interlanguage development has only recently begun to be researched empirically, particularly within the aspect of comprehension (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose, 1999). Pragmatic comprehension refers to the comprehension of oral language in terms of pragmatic meaning. English language learners need to be able to comprehend meaning pragmatically in order to:

* understand a speaker's intentions;
* interpret a speaker's feelings and attitudes;
* differentiate speech act meaning, such as the difference between a directive and a commissive;
* evaluate the intensity of a speaker's meaning, such as the difference between a suggestion and a warning;
* recognize sarcasm, joking, and other facetious behavior; and
* be able to respond appropriately.

In one model of pragmatic ability, pragmatic comprehension can be characterized as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Thomas, 1995). In speech acts, the speaker is trying to do something or trying to get the hearer to do something (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In conversational implicatures, the speaker expresses attitudes and feelings using indirect utterances that must be inferred by the hearer (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The comprehension of pragmatic meaning can be differentiated from linguistic comprehension because it requires the listener to understand not only linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information, such as the role and status of the interlocutor, the physical setting of the conversation, and the types of communicative acts that would likely occur in that context (Rost, 2002; Van Dijk, 1977).

Questions related to the pragmatic comprehension of second language (L2) learners include: Are there developmental differences in the comprehension of pragmatic meaning? Is pragmatic comprehension different from linguistic comprehension? Is the ability to comprehend speech acts different from the ability to comprehend conversational implicatures? In order to investigate these questions, this study analyzed the performances of high-level and low-level English language learners on a listening comprehension task that focused on linguistic and pragmatic comprehension.

**2. Pragmatic Comprehension vs. Linguistic Comprehension**

Van Dijk (1977) proposed a theory of pragmatic comprehension made up of two main processes: context analysis and utterance analysis. In context analysis, language users analyze the meaning of an utterance based on the context in which it was uttered by using background knowledge, past experiences, and knowledge of social rules. They also apply their own expectations of plausible goals of the speaker and expectation of the kinds of utterances that are likely to take place in that particular context. They decide which information to focus attention on, for example, the location of an interaction rather than the hair color of the speaker. This attention to relevant elements has been referred to as "salience" by Verschueren (1999).

Context analysis provides only a part of the information used to comprehend pragmatically; comprehension must finally be based on an analysis of the utterance itself. In utterance analysis, language users analyze semantic (e.g., speech parts, modality), syntactic (e.g., sentence forms, word order), lexical (e.g., word choice, fixed phrases), phonological (e.g., intonation, stress), and paralinguistic (e.g., gesticulation, facial expressions) information to interpret the meaning of an utterance. [-3-]

These same linguistic and paralinguistic elements can be applied to linguistic comprehension (Flowerdew, 1994; Lynch, 1998; Rost, 2002), which leads to the question: What is the difference between linguistic comprehension and pragmatic comprehension? The difference lies in the application of context analysis, following Van Dijk's (1977) model. Pragmatic comprehension includes linguistic comprehension, but it also involves sociolinguistic knowledge and context analysis. In other words, the two types of comprehension involve the same linguistic elements, but pragmatic comprehension involves an added dimension, namely context analysis.

Empirical evidence supports the separation of pragmatic processing skills from linguistic comprehension skills for native English speakers (e.g., Clark, 1991; Colombo, 1993; Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs & Moise, 1997; Holtgraves, 1999; Leinonen, Ryder, Ellis, & Hammond, 2003). In a recent study of native English-speaking children, Leinonen, et al. (2003) found that 17 language-impaired children (5 to 10 year-olds) comprehended implicatures at a success rate similar to 4 to 5 year-old children of normal cognitive ability, but had less success than the older children of normal functioning (7 to 9 year-olds). Furthermore, the language tests used to assess the children's linguistic comprehension did not indicate their success on the pragmatic comprehension task. These findings led the researchers to conclude that there are differences in the processing of pragmatic meaning compared to linguistic meaning. The present study attempts to explore differences in pragmatic comprehension and linguistic comprehension in the case of L2 learners by comparing two groups of learners at different proficiency levels.

**3. Pragmatic Comprehension: Speech Acts and Conversational Implicatures**

Comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures involves the integration of information from a wide range of linguistic sources (i.e., phonetic, syntactic, and semantic) to comprehend a contextually appropriate utterance that reveals a speaker's intentions and attitude. In the comprehension of speech acts, the hearer recognizes what the speaker is doing with an utterance; in other words, the hearer must be able to understand the illocutionary force and respond to it. In everyday language use, people use speech acts to do things such as make requests, give advice, and extend offers and invitations. In much of the research on L2 pragmatic competence, linguists have studied how L2 learners produce speech acts (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Takahashi, 1996); and, there is a smaller, but growing, body of research on how L2 learners comprehend these utterances (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Kasper, 1984; Koike, 1996; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994). [-2-]

In the comprehension of conversational implicatures, the hearer recognizes what the speaker thinks; in other words, the hearer infers the speaker's attitudes or feelings. Interpretations are based on the assumption that the speaker is communicating co-operatively (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983) guided by Grice's four maxims of the Co-operative Principle. These maxims were unified into a single theory that Sperber and Wilson (1995) called Relevance Theory. Under Relevance Theory, hearers use a process of hypothesis formation and confirmation in order to arrive at the correct interpretation of an utterance. The hearer assumes that the speaker's utterance is relevant to the previous discourse and seeks the most relevant and accessible interpretation of the intended meaning, usually deriving meaning from the context of the talk. Take for example the following exchange between two roommates:

A: Are the neighbors on vacation?  
B: I haven't seen their car all week.

In this exchange, speaker B provides an answer that requires speaker A to infer that the neighbors are on vacation because speaker B does not explicitly say, "Yes, they are," or "Yes, I think they are." Although speaker B's answer appears to be a violation of relevance theory, it is, in fact, entirely relevant. The seeming violation becomes a signal to the hearer that more is being said than what is on the surface level; that is, speaker B hasn't seen the car, and therefore, he thinks the neighbors are indeed on vacation. Levinson (1983) explained that speakers do not always "adhere to these maxims on a superficial level, but rather that, wherever possible people will interpret what we say as conforming to [Grice's] maxims on at least some level" (p. 103).

Correctly interpreting conversational implicatures requires the listener to form hypotheses about what the speaker thinks and feels based on the combination of propositional content of the utterance and the context in which it was uttered. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations, for native (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) alike, are always possible (Leech, 1983; Mey, 1993, Thomas, 1983).

1. **The teachability of pragmatic competence**

Can pragmatic competence be taught? This question has inspired a number of research projects exploring the role of instruction in learners’ pragmatic development. Kasper (1997) argues that while competence cannot be taught, students should be provided with opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence:

Competence is a type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use or lose. The challenge for foreign or second language teaching is whether we can arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2 (1).

A number of studies have explored how English language textbooks present speech acts (see Bardovi-Harlig et al (1996) on closings; Boxer and Pickering (1995) on compliments; and Edwards and Csizér (2001) on openings and closings). These studies are essential from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perspective because in EFL instruction natural input is much scarcer than it is in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Therefore the role of textbooks in raising students’ pragmatic awareness is more important. However, all the above-mentioned articles concluded that textbooks usually fail to provide the necessary and appropriate input in speech acts, and the material they do present often differs from real life speech.

It is difficult to give clear suggestions for improving pragmatic input in textbooks, particularly because textbooks are usually targeted to an international audience. Boxer and Pickering (1995) underline the importance of building teaching materials on spontaneous speech and not relying on native speaker intuition, which may be misleading at times. Enriching classroom input with real-world  
materials, such as recordings of native speaker conversations, radio programs, and even television soap operas, can be beneficial. To provide sufficient pragmatic input for the students, it is also important to supplement textbooks with additional books that focus on pragmatics.