

Exploring cross-cultural pragmatic failure and how to teach cross-cultural pragmatics in the classroom.

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This paper explores the nature of cross-cultural pragmatic failure and how to teach cross-cultural pragmatics in the classroom. This paper will start by establishing a clear definition of cross-cultural pragmatic failure. It will then consider the key concepts of pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure, before considering implications for teaching cross-cultural pragmatics in the classroom. Examples of cross-cultural failure will be provided throughout.

Introduction

Despite a longstanding recognition that pragmatic competence is a key element of communicative competence (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980), the overt teaching of pragmatics is often neglected in the classroom. The repercussions of pragmatic failure however can be far-reaching. Whilst syntactic failure may not greatly impede the meaning of an utterance, pragmatic failure will usually lead to a direct breakdown in communication. When communication occurs between speakers from different cultures, the complexity of the situation can be compounded, and the difficulty of effectively teaching pragmatics to students from a variety of cultures may explain why it has been largely neglected, despite its importance.

Defining Pragmatic Failure

First it is necessary to clarify some concepts relating to cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Although there have been a number of attempts to define pragmatics, (and considerable disagreement) a useful definition for the context of pragmatic failure is offered by Thomas, who states that pragmatics is “the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of the utterance and the meaning potential of the utterance” (1995, p. 22). Pragmatics is also linked to the concept of ‘implicature’, which argues that the implied meaning of an utterance

is more important than the lexical meaning. Finally it is important to recognize that pragmatic competence is a key area of overall communicative competence. Along with linguistic competence (which deals with aspects of the language itself), pragmatic competence allows an individual to communicate effectively. Thomas further offered a definition of ‘cross-cultural pragmatics’ and states that it is not merely concerned with interaction between native and non-native speakers, but with any interaction between people of a different linguistic or cultural background (1983). Based on these definitions it is possible to define ‘cross-cultural pragmatic failure’ as the inability of people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds to use context to understand the implied meaning of an utterance. Thomas states this more succinctly as not understanding “what is meant by what is said” (1983, p. 91).

Pragmalinguistic Failure

An essential distinction that needs to be recognized when understanding pragmatic failure, is the difference between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Considerable research in this area has also been done by Thomas (1983, 1995). Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the perceived pragmatic force of an utterance by either a speaker or listener is different to the actual force allocated to it by a native speaker. Pragmalinguistic failure is the result of somebody incorrectly transferring a speech act from their L1 to their L2. The following conversation from an intermediate level English class demonstrates pragmalinguistic failure by language learners.

- A) My computer isn't working properly.
B) I know a lot about computers.
A) Really! Can you fix it for me?
B) I don't know. Maybe.
A) Thanks.

This conversation reveals several examples of pragmalinguistic failure. The second sentence (by student B) is clearly an offer to help, but it is possible that

student A fails to recognise the correct force of the utterance, and therefore makes an unnecessary request for help (sentence 3). Most obviously however, student B incorrectly interprets sentence 3 as a question of his ability to fix the computer, rather than a request. By this point each speaker's understanding of the conversation in its entirety is beginning to fail, and student A answers with an inappropriate "Thanks" . It should also be noted that pragmalinguistic failure is not necessarily the result of cross-cultural factors. As already stated, failure occurs due to the incorrect transfer of a speech act from the student's first language, and not specifically the transfer of cultural values. In practice however the line between linguistic and cultural factors may not be so clear. For example misunderstanding can result from differing perceptions of tone or intonation, which, whilst being clearly linguistic factors, can also be viewed as part of a specific culture. The following example of interaction between a Japanese student and an Australian teacher provides a good example of the complicated relationship between language, culture and pragmalinguistics. The Japanese student had just returned from a trip to Australia. He stated that during his trip to Australia he had had no chance to meet native aboriginal people, and that he was actually told by his friend in Australia that "Aboriginal people are dangerous and should be avoided" . The Australian teacher was visibly offended and angry with this comment. He pointed out that he had Aboriginal friends and that they weren't dangerous, and sharply rebuked the student. The student later complained about the teacher, and commented that, as he was merely repeating comments he had heard in Australia, he didn't understand the teacher's anger. It is likely that in some cultures however, repeating comments without offering further opinion can be seen as taking ownership of the comments, whereas the Japanese student viewed his comments as mere repetition. The Australian teacher therefore thought the student was being supportive of a negative view of Aborigines, and took offence, whilst the Japanese student felt he had merely related comments heard on his travel. This misunderstanding was the result of the student incorrectly interpreting the pragmatic force of his comment. The student viewed his comment as additional contextual information, but the teacher interpreted it as supporting evidence for an argument. While the misunderstanding is ultimately linguistic, cultural factors for constructing argumentation are also

relevant. A final example is offered by Manghubai and Son (2003, cited in Dash, 2004), who give the example of a teacher stating 'the chalk is on the floor'. Most native speakers would recognize the implied meaning of this sentence as being a request for somebody to pick up the chalk, however if the students are from a culture which discourages students from acting without explicit teacher instruction, the teacher may have to wait a long time to receive his chalk. Again cultural factors are prohibiting a student from recognizing the correct speech act.

Sociopragmatic Failure

Sociopragmatic failure on the other hand, occurs when speakers from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions about what is appropriate linguistic behaviour (Thomas, 1983). It is more overtly caused by cultural differences than pragmalinguistic failure, and implies that students may need to alter their cultural beliefs to communicate successfully with native speakers. A good example of a sociopragmatic misunderstanding is the mention of blood type between Japanese students and English speakers from the U.K., Australia and the U.S. In Japan it is common for people to know their blood type, and common for people to enquire about the blood type of other people. This is in contrast to western countries where few people know this information, and even fewer request this information from others. When Japanese people request this information from a foreigner, they are usually met by surprise, or even offence. For Japanese speakers this question is not dissimilar to enquiring about a person's job or free time interests, while westerners often view this question as being very intrusive.

Thomas (1983) also mentions three areas of sociopragmatics that are of particular significance when considering cross-cultural misunderstanding. The first of these is the size of the imposition, and in particular the perception of this size in different cultures. Thomas (1983) bases this upon work by Goffman (1967) and the concepts of 'free' and 'non-free' goods. Differing cultures have differing views about what is free, and what isn't. Thomas cites the example of cigarettes as a commodity that has differing values in different cultures. In some cultures cigarettes can be

requested almost freely, whilst in others the imposition is considered much greater. The second area mentioned by Thomas is the discussion of 'taboo' topics. The previous example of blood types between Japan and western countries shows how some topics are more taboo than others. Finally is the complex assessment of power and social distance between cultures. In particular certain cultures can attach varying amounts of status to positions within society. For example teachers are held in great esteem by some societies, such as Japan, but carry less weight in other cultures.

Avoiding Pragmatic Failure with L2 Learners

It is of course necessary to look directly at how teachers can avoid cross-cultural pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure in the classroom. Tannen (1989) argues that in daily conversation there is a great deal of small, unnoticed misunderstanding due to minor cultural differences between native speakers. These small differences are amplified considerably when dealing with cultures displaying vast differences. Therefore, it is necessary that pragmatics receives appropriate attention in the classroom. For students to become aware of the cultural aspects relating to pragmatics, they first need to become aware of pragmatic issues and the impact this can have upon their overall communicative competence. Kaspar (1984) identified some general problems related to pragmalinguistic failure that need to be dealt with in the classroom. For example, students rely too heavily on bottom-up processing, and as a result focus on the lexical details of utterances rather than overall meaning. In addition students pay inadequate attention to 'illocution indicating devices' and again overlook the overall meaning. Finally students have trouble activating appropriate frames within a context, and therefore assign an incorrect meaning.

In addition, Judd (1999) highlights three areas of pragmatics that need to be actively developed in the language classroom. These areas are the raising of cognitive awareness towards pragmatics, receptive skill development and productive use. The active teaching of pragmatics is likely to produce great benefits for pragmalinguistic

awareness. Students from all cultures can improve their ability to recognize the correct speech act for utterances, and along with teacher guidance, also recognize what is expected of them by native speakers in each situation. For example when a teacher states ‘the chalk is on the floor’, the students will understand that the teacher is requesting a volunteer to pick up his chalk, and that cultural factors determine that students should take the initiative and do this. The overt teaching of pragmatics in this way also emphasizes the necessity for teachers to have a heightened awareness of issues relating to pragmalinguistic failure. The example of the Australian teacher misunderstanding the Japanese student reinforces this point, and highlights that teachers in general need to be very sure that they are correctly ascertaining the student’s intentions. Finally however, it should be kept in mind that it is probably not possible for a teacher to familiarize students with the implied meaning of all potential utterances in English, and it is even more difficult for a teacher to recognize, and teach differences in implicature between the student’s L1 and the target language. As Dash (2004) argues though, students should adopt an attitude of openness to pragmatic interpretations and develop sensitivity to cultural factors that may influence pragmalinguistic misunderstanding.

A final area to consider is the avoidance of sociopragmatic failure, which can be more difficult because it may require students to modify their beliefs, rather than their language. This is therefore a controversial topic and teachers need to be very careful how they approach this issue in the classroom. In particular teachers should be careful not to enforce cultural beliefs and values upon the students in an attempt to assimilate them into the L2 communicative environment. The role of the teacher therefore, should be to raise awareness of how utterances are perceived by native speakers, but students should be left with the ultimate choice of whether to modify their comments in accordance with the target language, or maintain their L1 linguistic behaviour, even at the risk of communicative breakdown or offence. As Davies states, “Rather than being taught to be polite, learners should be given the possibility of choosing to be polite or impolite” (1986, p. 121). All productive tasks should therefore require feedback highlighting the sociopragmatic implications of their comments, so that students can make informed choices of how

to interact with native speakers outside the classroom. Feedback should not be in the form of correction, but merely as a discussion for raising awareness. It is therefore also important for teachers to have a good knowledge of sociopragmatic differences, and be able to differentiate between a misunderstanding (which results in one participant taking offence) due to cross-cultural pragmatic failure, and situations where meaning and implicature is fully understood by the students, and the students are simply unwilling to alter their language due to cultural beliefs. A framework has been proposed by Barraja-Rohan (2000) in light of these issues with an explicit cultural component. Similar to Judd, the framework emphasizes the need for an initial awareness raising stage, a reflective stage, and a productive stage (the experimental phase), but Barraja-Rohan introduces a cultural evaluation phase at the end of the framework, and also emphasizes the circular nature of the framework, which requires students to return to earlier stages after feedback and exploration of cultural factors. Again, the framework by Barraja-Rohan stresses the need for 'identification' and 'exploration', rather than overt teacher correction.

Finally it can be concluded from the previous discussion of sociopragmatics that all second language education programs would benefit from an overt cultural component that complements work on pragmatics. Some bilingual programs already include cultural components in an attempt to bridge the overlapping disciplines of pragmatics and culture (Cruz, Bonissone and Baff, 1995), and the inclusion of such a component could have similar benefits in general second language classes. Such programs can also help to emphasize to students that sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of language are just as important as purely linguistic aspects when learning to communicate.

Raising Awareness of Pragmatics in the Classroom

Based on the issues highlighted above, the following activities are suggested for raising cognitive awareness in students. There are obviously a number of different methods for incorporating the guidelines mentioned above, but the following activities are suggested as a good introduction.

Role plays/Discussions

Teaching pragmalinguistic awareness doesn't necessarily require major changes in the classroom. Roleplays and discussions can still be some of the most effective ways to teach pragmalinguistic awareness, providing there is a conscious effort to notice, and respond to the student's performance in this area. Recording student's conversations, then analyzing transcripts, can be a particularly effective way to highlight pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic concerns, and discussion tasks based on transcripts can directly deal with these issues.

Analysis of Speech Acts

Based on his own recommendations about how to teach pragmatics, Judd (1999) suggested a useful framework for teaching pragmatic issues in the classroom. The teacher should analyse a speech act with the students, with tasks specifically designed to heighten cognitive awareness by the students. This should be followed by tasks to determine if the students can recognise the speech act in conversation. Finally the students should participate in controlled productive practice, and then free, integrated practice with other students.

L1/L2 Comparison Activities

Using the student's L1 allows students to compare utterances between their native language and their target language, and to more clearly notice both the suitability of the L2 language they use, and differences in meaning from similar phrases in their L1. The following example is taken from a Pragmatics-based course taught by John Rylander at Kwansei University in Japan. The theme of the lesson is 'compliments', and students are first asked to brainstorm common 'targets' of compliments in their culture, such as new clothes or an object such as a cell phone. These are then compared to common targets in English-speaking cultures. Students then brainstorm recent examples of compliments they have heard in their L1 (including the 'Giver' and 'Receiver' of the compliment), before being exposed to a number of common utterances for compliments in their L2. Finally students generate their own compliments (and responses) for a new range of situations, and feedback is provided on the appropriateness of these utterances (both the compliment and

the corresponding response). This can be particularly effective for highlighting sociopragmatic issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pragmatic competence should be a key concern in the classroom, and cross-cultural pragmatics should be an important component of any syllabus where the students are not familiar with the target culture. The concepts of pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure provide a useful starting point when teaching cultural factors to second language learners, and a relevant knowledge of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors by teachers can lead to many benefits for students. As a result of this component, students can develop an awareness of factors essential to their ability to communicate in the target language environment, and more effectively convey what they intend to say.

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