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RAISING PRAGMATIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL AWAIRENESS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDENTS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Knyshevytska Liliya

Senior instructor of the English Language

Department of Foreign Languages

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University

Kyiv, Ukraine

Abstract: Apart from communicative fluency as the main domain of Communicative approach to teaching English to EFL international relations university students, there is one aspect of language that is often neglected or ignored by many instructors as being peripheral or even taken for granted. This is pragmatic and socio-cultural awareness, language accuracy in a specific cultural context. Foreign language students even if they reach advanced levels of linguistic competence, in our case university undergraduate students majoring in international relations should be taught the rules of appropriate culture-based behaviors in the English language. Knowledge of the language does not at all presuppose knowledge of the communication culture. This article emphasizes crucial importance of teaching various context-bound pragmatic behaviors and discusses teaching such aspects as conversational skills, turn taking and shifting, power-solidarity dynamics, story-telling mastery and structure and gendered language behavior in English language classes. These socio-cultural and pragmatic domains must be taught to the university students majoring in international relations to enhance their communicative mastery in the English language and bring them to near-native levels of language proficiency.

Key words: EFL, international relations students, communicative approach, conversational skills, socio-cultural awareness, pragmatic competence, turn taking

and shifting, power-solidarity dynamics, gendered language behavior, story-telling structure.

Apart from communicative fluency as the main domain of Communicative approach to teaching English to EFL international relations university students that the supporters of method find equivocally important, there is one aspect of language that is often neglected or ignored by many instructors as being peripheral or even taken for granted. This is pragmatic and cultural awareness, so to say language accuracy in a specific cultural context. By culture or rather cultures we mean here myriads of specific local pragmatic and context bound situations that become fossilized as norms of appropriate linguistic behavior in a foreign language. It is important to understand that knowledge of context-bound pragmatic behavior, conversational skills, turn taking and shifting, power-solidarity dynamics, story-telling mastery and gendered language behavior do not “appear as easily as leaves on the trees”. Foreign language students even if they reach advanced levels of linguistic competence, in our case university undergraduate students majoring in international relations should be taught the rules of appropriate culture-based behaviors in the English language. Knowledge of the language does not at all presuppose knowledge of the communication culture.

Extensive research has been done in the field of examination of language discourse in various EFL classrooms. Some studies focused on interplay of oral language proficiency and competency in socio-linguistic and pragmatic aspects [1], the others investigated discourse domains and their effects on performance [2]. Topic framing and various types of accommodation were studied [3; 5], as well as interpretation of L1 pragmatic system in L2 frame [4], framing oral proficiency in terms of speech event system and examination of questions [6], negotiation of meaning, elaboration of responses ([7], management of communication problems [1]) and many others.

As a part of the Direct Method of teaching conversational skills, for example, I suggest to focus on teaching various aspects of conversation such as openings and

closings (initiations of conversation that in general are highly formulaic and by all means cultural, pragmatic and situation bound), turn-taking skills, interruptions, topic shifts, adjacency pairs (question :: answer, gratitude expressions, returning the favors, compliments, praises and returning them).

Further, I suggest teaching a number of strategies that will be helpful for the non-native speakers of the language in acquiring conversational competence (message adjustment or avoidance, paraphrase, approximation fillers or hesitation devices, appeal for help, asking for repetition, clarification, or interpretation).

One of the aspects of building conversational skills is to teach the students the rules of turn-taking [9]. Turn taking is a very difficult aspect for a non-native speaker of the language and sometimes for a native speaker as well. One has to be aware of pragmatic and cultural subtleties such as status of the speakers, negotiation mechanisms of who takes the floor and keeps it, interruption mechanisms, contributions to the conversation by feedback, topic shifts and closures.

One more conversational skill that should be taught is an adjacency pair. Adjacency pairs are formulaic utterances or speech acts that occur sequentially in a conversation and usually have ritualistic conversational value and phatic (social) function: question – answer, greeting-response, gratitude-response, complement-response, apology – acceptance or denial, and many others. Usually, responses to the first proposition in an adjacency pair requires more conscious effort on the part of the speaker since they are not iconic, though of course, terminal.

Furthermore, naturally occurring conversation in any language is full of imperfections such as fillers, adjustments, repetitions, appeals for help. A non-native speaker in order to acquire communicative competence in a target language has to acquire a mechanism of using these aspects of conversation to sound naturally.

One more important aspect of effective communication is to teach our students story-telling structure due to its universality and translinguistic nature. In general, the theory of narrative structure (Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Coda) will be an effective tool to make our students effective communicators. The studies of correlation between communicative language competence and story-telling

proficiency, ability to frame the answers as speech acts, might suggest EFL instructors teach their students speech act theory and a theory of a narrative structure that will be helpful in their personal, academic and professional lives. [9, 10, 11, 12].

Another pragmatic skill that must be taught to language students is conversational differences in gendered language behavior [13,14, 15,16,17]. Men and women represent two different subcultures and utilize different communicative styles even if they speak the same language. These gendered styles might be completely culture specific, alien to foreign students. Thus, according to Deborah Tannen men and women belong and are socialized into different subcultures. They will use language differently. Table 1 summarizes specific features of men and women conversational styles to be taught to EFL students.

Table 1.

Men versus women in communication

women	men
Women generally use cooperative/ affiliative style of interaction	Men generally use competitive / adversarial style of interaction
Women boast less than men	Men boast more than women
Women ask more questions	Men ask less questions
Women use conversational ritualized phrases: ' <i>I am sorry</i> ' to express involvement	Men interpret these meta-messages directly thinking that women apologize
Women give positive feedback and compliment	Men criticize and tell the TRUTH!
Women in power downplay their position by giving positive evaluations before criticisms	Men in power give criticism first, tend not to downplay their authoritative position
Women are more indirect / send and decode meta-messages	Men are more direct, tend to send and decode messages
Women use hedging, tag questions, and descriptive evaluative adjectives more to cooperative in a conversation	Men interpret these linguistic features as lack of confidence and power. They rarely use hedges, indirectness and do not wish to look or be evaluated as uncertain. They do not lack power.
Women compliment more both women and men	Men compliment less, but they compliment women more than men.
Women interpret the style of ritual opposition as an aggressive attack and become defensive	Men use ritualistic confrontation style in negotiating the meaning

Women are cooperative, they will use affiliative style of interaction, while men are competitive, prefer adversarial style, ritualistic opposition. Women boast less than men, but men ask less questions than women. Women use conversational ritualized phrases: '*I am sorry*' to express involvement, while men interpret these meta-messages directly thinking that women apologize. Women are more indirect, send and decode meta-messages, men are more direct, tend to send and decode messages. Women use hedging, tag questions, and descriptive evaluative adjectives more to

cooperate in a conversation. Men rarely use hedges, indirectness and do not wish to look or be evaluated as uncertain. Women compliment more both women and men, men compliment less, but they compliment women more than men. By raising foreign language students' awareness of the subtleties of gendered language behavior, the instructors will teach our students skills of natural conversation, and will be able to explain that in order to lead a natural conversation on a foreign language both men and women will have to accommodate for each other's conversational style of interaction. To summarize, we believe that to teach and assess separately social, pragmatic and cultural appropriateness of speech acts and conversational mechanisms in language classrooms is crucial. Pragmatic knowledge and socio-cultural sensitivity are extremely important in teaching and learning a new language.

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