DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL SPEAKING THROUGH ROLEPLAY

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Abstract

Teaching speaking is intrinsically complicated but it is quite challenging at once. Pragmatic competence, an essential element of speaking competence, refers to the ability to use appropriately selected forms of language to express and to interpret the intended speaker's meanings in various contexts. Despite its vital role in fostering social harmony within everyday communication, developing such a competence seems 'easier said than done'. As pessimistically voiced by some EFL speaking teachers and several empirical studies, this ability does not seem well developed among EFL students of all education levels in Indonesia. Hence, English speaking teachers in this country should pull out all the stops to find a potentially effective teaching strategy in this issue. This article proposes a prescribed roleplay, enhanced by the utilization of social media applications, i.e. YouTube or Instagram, for teaching a speech act. The utilization of social media platforms potentially generates students' learning motivation since it enables them to have a one-click access to authentic speaking learning resources and to journal students' progress in conversational practices. This prescribed roleplay comprises twofold stages, i.e. (i) to activate the students' pragmatic awareness and (ii) to execute a step-by-step instructional activities; Hopefully, such a teaching practice will inspire our dedicated ELT speaking teachers aiming at developing pragmatic competence within the students' speaking command.

Keywords: *Speaking, Pragmatic competence, Roleplay*

INTRODUCTION

Among other language skills, speaking is considered the most dynamic one. In a real communicative event in English, a speaker must simultaneously and quickly activate not only his cognitive, physical and socio-cultural resources but also his knowledge on language and the conversational topic of concern. As such, Johnson (1996) emphasizes that speaking is of a 'combinatorial skill', in which the speaker must spontaneously synergize various abilities dealing with verbal and non-verbal at the same time.

As globalization intensifies, coloured by more prevalent cross-cultural communications, the need for English speaking proficiency is vital. However, some voices of pessimism are echoed by English teachers concerned with students' abilities in productive skills, especially speaking. Students' reading and listening skills are fairly good but not their writing or speaking skills. Still other teachers complain about the students' passiveness and timidness as well in speaking class. Few students are eager to speak but they sound vividly "bookish", deviating from naturally spoken English by native speakers. For one thing, most teachers, especially the non-native, do not tend to focus on the same characteristics of the EFL contexts. They find it difficult to facilitate effective speaking skill, specifically the pragmatic dimension, for the students due to the fact that they have few learning resources pertaining to their enriched horizon on pragmatic aspects of language (Rose, 1999).

Indeed, developing students' speaking skill, especially the pragmatic aspect, is challenging in spite of its complexity. Teachers commonly encounter an unconducive class atmosphere due to a wide range of pedagogical problems in an English speaking class pertaining to psychological facets like students' anxiety, low self-confidence, or low engagement. Inadequate language resources like limited vocabulary, little knowledge on language rules, pronunciation inaccuracy and so forth are also commonly lingering on the part of the students. Hence, innovative instructional materials and teaching strategies emphasizing pragmatic aspects of English in EFL classes are urgently needed.

Moreover, empirical evidence suggests the verifying tools to teaching realities encountered by EFL Speaking teachers. A study found that a high level of language proficiency has no positive correlation with the level of students' pragmatic competence (Tajeddin & Pir Hosseinloo, 2012). Such a finding also becomes a challenging issue partly related to the characteristics of EFL teaching and learning contexts which lack adequate exposure, exacerbated by an absence of native speaking English teachers, as well as the quality of EFL teaching resources. Hence, EFL speaking teachers should be shoulder to shoulder, creatively seeking a breakthrough to overcome hindrances and to pave a better path to students' success in developing speaking competence.

This paper aims to propose an innovative speaking teaching strategy for developing pragmatic competence, contextualized within EFL Indonesian students. It proposes a potentially effective solution to clear up obstacles complicating the efforts of developing an essential element of speaking competence, i.e. pragmatic competence, in EFL class. The proposed role play involves two major major stages, i.e. (i) activating the students' pragmatic awareness and (ii) executing step-by-step instructional tasks on speaking practices.

The former stage is carried out by utilizing IT, e.g. Youtube or instagram, as to explore authentic learning material. As such, IT enables teachers and learners to have one-click access to ample authentic materials in different formats. Meanwhile, regarding the latter stage, IT is utilized to journal their speaking practice progress of the students. IT can be implemented in dealing with both the aspects of pragmatic language assessment and pragmatic language instruction (Abraham and Williams, (2009a/2009b). Expectedly, such a teaching practice will inspire our dedicated EFL speaking teachers aiming at improving the students' pragmatic competence.

ENCOMPASSING THE TEACHING OF SPEAKING

Addressing the ideal goal of teaching speaking can be misleadingly

determined without a clear comprehension on what actually a speaking competence is. Otherwise, teachers may be trapped into speaking-teaching routines which contribute a little enhancement to students' speaking achievement in the classroom. Speaking teacher should be aware of the holistic nature of speaking competence, comprising not only what language elements and discoursal features to know for processing and producing spoken texts but also how to manage and maintain verbal interactions.

Goh and Burns (2012:53) comprehensively encompasses speaking competence on foreign language to three essential components, i.e. (i) knowledge of lingual and discoursal features, (ii) core speaking skills, and (iii) communication strategies. The first component, language and discourse knowledge, pertaining to the students' mastery of the sound patterns, grammar and vocabulary of the learned second language; also the ability to organize the cohesive stretches of utterances in such a way that they are meaningful. Meanwhile, the core speaking skill refers to 'the ability to efficiently process such elements of a speech rate, formulaic language, discourse markers, chunks, and pauses to process and produce a spoken text. Besides, it involves the ability to negotiate speech including 'building on previous talks, monitoring interpretation, fixing communication breakdown, and providing feedback.' Ultimately, communication strategies, which refers to managing and maintaining spoken interactions, such as compensating for weaknesses in language knowledge and planning in advance what to say, consciously formulate how to say it, and asking for clarification or repetition, reformulation, rephrasing as well as interpretation check.

The other essential component of speaking competence is concerned with the notion of communicative competence, as posited by Hymes (1972), which refers to a successful communication requiring a language user not only to acquire knowledge of language rules but also knowledge on principles of language use. In line with Hymes, the notion of communicative competence comprises an ability to capitalize language resources not only to convey both effective message but also to select appropriate language forms in accordance

with the contexts (Bachman:1990; Bachman and Palmer:1996; Canale:1983; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell:1995). The most comprehensive one is underscored by Bachman (1990), delved communicative competence into (i) organizational competence and (ii) pragmatic competence.

Both sub-categories are substantial and supplementary to one another in conceptualizing the ideal ability in using foreign language for effective and socially acceptable communication. The pragmatic competence is of the substantial speaking component since it deals with language appropriacy, i.e. how to say things right or acceptable according to the socio-cultural contexts. As all theoretical models basically underscore that pragmatic competence is a distinct and vital element within second language proficiency (Taguchi, 2009). It comprises "a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in contexts, or most prominently the ability to use and interpret non-literal forms, such as metaphorical uses of language and indirect speech ..." (Bialystok, 1993).

Hence, developing English speaking means enhancing the ability to use the aforementioned essential components to orally convey thoughts, feelings, or messages effectively, appropriately, and strategically.

COMMON PEDAGOGICAL METHODS OF DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Teaching speaking geared to promote pragmatic competence in EFL classes has been dominated by such traditional approaches as explicit instruction and rote memorization. These approaches commonly involve teaching speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicatures by providing direct explanations and examples. Role-plays, scripted dialogues, and pragmatic awareness exercises are rarely used as instructional tasks assisting students in selecting and using appropriate language expressions in different social contexts. In spite of the benefits of the approaches, i.e. generating students' basic awareness of pragmatic principles and conventions, in real everyday communication, they still tend to fail in using appropriate English expressions representing their intended speech acts in accordance

with situational contexts.

A number of pedagogical methods have been prescribed and practiced to promote the students' pragmatic competence. One of them is 'task-based language teaching' (TBLT). On one respect, task-based language learning promotes accuracy and fluency in pragmatic use by emphasizing the use of language in meaningful tasks. Students can practice language in context and interact in real-life settings, which can greatly enhance their pragmatic skills. Even though TBLT is resource-intensive, it might not always meet each learner's unique pragmatic needs and demands.

Innovative approaches to teaching pragmatic competence are provided by technologically enhanced learning resources such as interactive platforms, online simulations, and language learning applications. With the help of these engaging and immersive experiences that can imitate in-person interactions, students can practice in a low-stakes setting and receive feedback. Even while these tools bring some advantages, hindrances pertaining to their accessibility, technological literacy, and user-requirement, i.e. for instructors to provide consistent and insightful feedback, might limit their effectiveness.

In general, present approaches have benefited EFL students to gain pragmatic competence; however, they are commonly accompanied by issues regarding implementation, student engagement, and flexibility to various learning environments. Creative solutions balancing the advantages of both modern and ancient methods, simultaneously minimizing their constraints, need to be continuously innovated. Through a comprehensive discussion, this paper aims to provide educators with practical insights and tools to enhance pragmatic competence of EFL students.

USING ROLE-PLAY TO DEVELOP PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

The forms of language are unique as they are used from one context to another. It depends on such factors as, situation, setting, the participants, other sociolinguistic aspects. Being able to use language forms differently and appropriately in various contexts is called 'sociolinguistic competence'.

Canale (1983) states that appropriateness of utterances refers to both appropriateness of meaning and forms.

This means that a teacher who wants to develop pragmatic competence of the students should ensure that students can sense the different contexts affecting their choices of appropriate language forms. In short, a certain pragmatic situation determines the formal realizations of a certain speech act. The ability in choosing appropriate forms in accordance with the context can be best taught through a roleplay strategy, in which the students can act as participants with different social variables in different situations. Hence, the teacher can conduct simulations that vary social variables regarding the context.

The Advantages of Using Role Play in ELT Class

Several studies discovered that roleplay provides positive contributions in EFL classrooms. Among other things, the advantages of implementing roleplay in ELT classes are described as follow:

Instinctively, children have got their natural interest in 'pretend' play since they were at a very young age. We frequently spot a toddler imitating his older siblings or family members during his play sessions. Such an instinct is, thus, a valuable experience to be more familiar with the reality of the social world. As such, role-play may potentially promote confidence, creativity, and problem solving skills. It is also a significant element of a child's mental and physical development.

The best feature of role-play, as we bring it into EFL class, is that it is real fun. For example, while learning about different social roles or various professions in society, our students tend to undergo and learn more while pretending or acting out particular characters rather than passively watching some images or films of the same themes as the learning media. In doing roleplay, they will feel like they are in real life situations, in which they genuinely interact with others, seek solutions and learn to take accountability. Indeed, there will be more positive impacts on the part of the students' personality and character building as we utilize roleplay in ELT classroom.

Concerning the teaching of speaking, aiming at developing pragmatic competence, roleplay is a best-fit strategy. It enables the speaking teacher to assign different social roles to the students according to various contexts. Alghamdy, R. (2022) states that "Roleplay minimally involves (i) giving a role to one or more members of a group, and (ii) assigning a purpose or objective that participants must accomplish". By roleplay, a purposeful dialogue on a particular topic can be pragmatically planned and managed in various situational contexts. Moreover, the teacher can easily assess the appropriateness of language forms chosen by the students in various predetermined contexts.

Next, Being confident in performing a conversation is important. As such, Robinson (1981) revealed that roleplay strategy can boost students' self-esteem of L2 language learners. Working with peers, the students will get engaged in a 'take and give' process in terms of language forms used in the planned dialogue. Thus, they must feel capable of performing conversation in a pre-performance phase of speaking. In addition, compliments can also be given to promote students' positive feelings during the practice. Hence, it increases their self-confidence. As the students gain their self-confidence, they will eventually turn out to be an active learner, subsequently assuring learning outcomes. Poorman (2002) emphasized that "true learning cannot take place when students are passive observers of the teaching process".

At last, roleplay facilitates a match between language forms and social functions; and it can train the students for communicative or focused grammar practices. (Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z., Thurrell, S.:1995). Thus, roleplay is a good technique to enhance students' fluency. As they are practicing dialogues using realistic scenarios, role playing can help them become more fluent with the language. Role playing enables the students to practice words, phrases, and sentences in a realistic setting by using appropriate expressions and responses. Not only fluency, students' spontaneity in using English is also claimed to be enhanced through roleplay.

Using Roleplay: An Example of Teaching Scenario

It is vital for speaking-class teachers to systematically plan tasks and develop material for students at various learning processes. In so-doing, they should prudently consider learning tasks and activities enabling students to fully get involved at the cognitive and affective facets.

Successful use of roleplay as strategy to teach speaking, specifically cultivating pragmatic competence, can be mainly organized into (i) pre-roleplay activities and (ii) roleplay- implementing activities. The former aims at activating the students' pragmatic awareness while the latter deals with how to practically execute roleplay activities.

Pre-Roleplay Activities

This stage is chiefly intended to activate the students' pragmatic awareness. Substantially, developing pragmatic competence is "to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interactions in the target language" (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003:38). As such, the key success of pinning pragmatic competence on the students' speaking proficiency will rely on how creative the teacher is in generating the students' pragmatic awareness, i.e. a wide-range of abilities in producing and interpreting language used in various contexts, including speaker's abilities both in using language for such various functions as greeting, thanking, informing, apologizing, etc., and also adapting or modifying language forms in accordance with situations, in the speech acts occur.

In the early stage, the students must be firstly geared to a set of tasks generating pragmatic awareness. This stage is vital since a group of various forms can be used to realize a particular speech act but only one or two are socially acceptable or appropriate in a certain situational context. In a case of requesting, for example, 'Would you please kindly lend me your pen?' will sound very weird when it is intentionally uttered to a close friend. Generally, a pragmatically incompetent speaker unconsciously uses 'sound funny' language forms due to lack consideration in the nature of context.

In teaching a request or other speech acts, generating pragmatic

awareness can be initiated by asking such general questions as: (i) to whom the request is addressed and in what typical occasion it is performed?; (ii) what available language forms or expressions are usually used by a speaker to make a request to these typical people?; (iii) do we use the same or different forms of expressions as a request is made to a person with different age, status, or degree of social distance? Why or why not? Such questions would stimulate students to realize that a particular most context-appropriate form of request must be selected out of a bunch of request expressions to get harmoniously involved in natural verbal interactions.

In the next stage, the teacher may proceed to ask the students to (i) recall their experiences in dealing with variety of ways they can make a request in a natural conversational exchange; and (ii) focus students' attention on the phrases or verbal routines commonly used while considering how to apply the various forms in various contexts and making comparison with the experiences they might have encountered. They are directed to thinking of a wide range of situations in which they would use requests. By so doing, they must be guided to acquire an awareness of available patterns of social variables of the situation in which a request is normally conveyed by their users. Theoretically, students are asked to observe and analyze the social attributes of the speech participants in terms of variables of power (P), distance (D), and ranking of imposition (R), as prescribed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Exploring English Expressions Realizing a Speech Act on Social Media

Providing a limited set of exemplified linguistic forms in EFL speaking class ought to be avoided since it could hamper the developmental process of students' speaking proficiency. Teachers should seriously regard this significant learning phase, dedicating themselves to analyzing the types of situations, in which a particular speech act is performed, and exemplifying a wide range of linguistic expressions used to express the target speech act in different contexts.

Considering that the very essence of pragmatic awareness is how to make the right choice of a linguistic form appropriately representing a speech in a particular communicative situation, appropriate language inputs realizing a speech act is of a vital role. In this stage, the teacher is advised to utilize Youtube or TV channels, from which the students are to make exploration on how a particular speech act is expressed in a wide range of language forms. Hence, they are guided to make discoveries on the various expressions realizing the target speech act and how they are naturally used in different situations.

For instance, prior to a class session, the students are assigned to identify and spot the verbal expressions of a request along with the accompanying gestures of the interactants in the movies or videos. Furthermore, they are also required to study the elements of the contexts (setting, communication purpose, activities of the participants) in which a request act occurs. The students are required to make detailed descriptions on social attributes of the speakers and hearers, as outlined by Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) as follow:

1) The "role" of two speakers involved in requesting if one of them is in a position of higher, lower, or equal power. The students might necessarily be given examples of different powers versus equality in status in order to imagine their roles concretely;

2) The relationship of the two participants involved in request, whether they are intimate or distant;

3) The imposition of the requesting act including where it takes place and if there are any temporal limits or spatial constraints (e.g., busy hallway, open sidewalk, subway) when the requesting event occurs.

In the subsequent stage, during the class session and under teacher's supervision, the students are asked to have a class discussion on the results of their video-explorations, which may result in lists of request expressions plus their detailed elements of contexts. They can insightfully discuss the pragmatics of request act along with its various linguistic realizations for

the sake of generating their pragmatic awareness.

Acquiring some knowledge of the most useful sets of request verbal routines and the variety of situations the students might encounter, they can begin to make their own choices and create their own request routines, and thus they are eventually moving closer toward communicative competence in the target language. As the class discussion is effectively completed, the speaking practice sessions, in the form of student-roleplaying, are readily conducted.

IMPLEMENTING ROLE PLAY

At the beginning of role play, the students were paired up and given an opportunity to firstly write up an assigned script of dialogue containing a particular speech act based on the provided situations in about 10 minutes. A reflective session with a full teacher's guidance is then held. The student-made scripts will be evaluated in terms of (i) grammatical and lexical aspects and (ii) the appropriateness/ politeness of the used expressions. Corrective feedback is importantly provided in this session.

Besides, to have the students be more self-reflective in doing the activity, they are also required to make a comparative script in their native language. The purpose of so-doing is to provide perspective by revealing differences between the conversations done both in English and in their vernacular versions. A discussion on these differences is worthwhile conducting to draw attention to phrases or actions that need attention to the appropriate performance of the target speech act. The students' attention must also be better drawn to the intrinsic FTA content and how to mitigate the FTA in response to the situation by using right verbal expressions.

As the students are getting more self-reflective and have some necessary corrections on their own made scripts, the speaking practice session may begin. It is recommended that the roleplay performance is divided into two stages. The first stage is a prepared script-based performance, in which the students recitingly perform their roleplay by referring to their previously

made script. They may be given some rehearsal time for relieving their anxiety prior to the real performance.

The second stage is spontaneity-based roleplay, in which the students must conversely perform a speech act without script preparation but merely given the following performance scenario as organized into several steps as follow:

1. Greet your addressee.

2 Give relevant opening speeches before requesting.

3. Make your request based on the given situation.

The addressee's response of request will be prescribed as follow:

1. Answer the greeting.

2. Show concern (relevant verbal or nonverbal responses)

3. Give your response to the request where you may accept the request, or decline the request.

Following up the practice, the teacher provides feedback to the students in terms of (i) pronunciation and (ii) intonation of the students' speech. The practice was conducted overtime to build spontaneity and the students were encouraged to make considerations and decisions more quickly in the next repeated practice activities. Moreover, they were assigned to make their own reflections on the appropriateness of their requesting speech act.

As the last assignment, the students were asked to create a video recording their best roleplay at home and upload it into their Instagram or YouTube channel. This assignment is aimed at generating students' motivation to do the best performance of their practices as well as journaling their own speaking progress. Assigning the students to journal their practice activities in the target language can make them aware of the nature of a particular speech act as it is used in a certain context. Journaling is an effective method for self-reflection in language acquisition (DuFon, 1999).

ASSESSING THE LEARNING OUTCOME

Assessment is an important part of EFL teaching and learning process, including the teaching of speaking targeting the aspect of pragmatic competence. However, evaluating the students' pragmatic awareness underlying the realization of language functions is not an easy task for any teacher. Since the purpose of explicit pragmatic speaking instruction is to prepare students for being able to produce variability of spoken discourse, which are naturally, socially and contextually acceptable, the assessment tool should be pragmatically and sociolinguistically accountable for the sake of its construct validity. However, it is well-known that no single type of assessment can be perfectly constructed to meet all the needs of measurement.

To know to what degree the students' ability in producing discourse of a speech act performance, an assessment rubric of appropriateness may be used. In evaluating a speech act performance, for example a spoken example of a request exchange, the teacher might use a rubric scaled from "most appropriate" to "least appropriate" to indicate the degree of acceptability of a recorded request expressions being used by the students based on predetermined contexts. Meanwhile, the aspects being measured in the rubric can be scrutinized into the aspects of (i) language elements and (ii) pragmatic appropriateness. The former covers such aspects as (a) accuracy of grammar and vocabulary being used; (b) pronunciation including the prosody, stress pattern, intonation, and tone of the exchange; and (c) fluency. The latter includes sub-aspect like (a) the degree of directness of illocution of used expressions pertaining to the predetermined context; (b) suitability use of mitigating devices; (c) utterance comprehensibility of the addressee. The rubric may also be provided a commenting space in which the the rater can offer general reflections on the quality of request performed by the students.

CONCLUSION

Performing a speech act in English in real life situation could be a difficult, which might lead to an inappropriate behavior, for an L2 learner. However, such an unexpected behavior is derived from pragmatic in-competence, i.e. insuffcient knowledge on how to choose appropriate expressions that are acceptable in social contexts. Such an ability to make a consideration in choosing appropriate language forms according to the social context is called pragmatic competence, which is necessarily built on EFL students in order to be socially acceptable as they get along with others, either locally or internationally.

Success in acquiring pragmatic competence, for instance performing a speech act of request, can be achieved in a classroom setting by an innovated strategy of roleplay. The innovative element suggests the use of information technology applications like YouTube and Instagram utilized to promote students learning resources of English expressions of the requesting act. Procedurally, to strategy include (i) pre-role activities aiming at activating the students' pragmatic awareness and (ii) roleplay implementation, dealing with how to execute effective roleplay activities by utilizing youtube channel and instagram to promote acquiring process of request expressions and making portfolio of student progress in English speaking practices.

The writer assumes that EFL class providing the students with explicit instructions through the 'pragmatic awareness-raising tasks', as outlined in this paper is likely able to promote their ability to perform a speech act, e.g. request, appropriately according to the contexts. Thus, the 'bookish' EFL speaking phenomenon among our students can be, at least, mitigated. However, an experimental study on this topic of interest is strongly encouraged to empirically validate such a claim.

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