

Challenges in Teaching Interlanguage Pragmatics at Private EFL Institutes in Iran

Tan, K. H.* and Farashaiyan, A.

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges faced by instructors in integrating pragmatics instruction in their language classes. The participants of the study comprised 20 EFL Iranian instructors. Semi-structured interviews were used as the instrument for data collection and the data were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Some pertinent and important challenges emerged from the data. Learners' lack of cultural literacy, lack of instructional media facilities, instructors' low implicit and explicit pragmatics knowledge and insufficient time in implementing the language syllabus were some. Other factors included the high volume of textbooks and lack of materials or input in teacher's guidebooks, which contributes to lack or ignorance of interlanguage pragmatics instruction among instructors. The implication of the findings is that it is necessary to include pragmatics information in instructor's guides, thereby enabling the teaching and dissemination of explicit information in relation to pragmatics issues in the language classroom. Instructors should be given sufficient input in guides and relevant materials to facilitate the teaching of this significant construct so that learners can acquire intercultural communicative competence and due emphasis can be given to pragmatics in teacher training courses.

Keywords: Challenges, instructors, interlanguage pragmatics, private EFL institutes, pragmatics knowledge, cultural literacy

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E-mail addresses:

kimmy@ukm.edu.my (Tan, K. H.),

atieh_farashaiyan@yahoo.com (Farashaiyan, A.)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

With globalisation, people are bound to communicate with each other more than before. Individuals have more opportunities and commitment to interact with other community members due to educational, business, immigration and other motives.

Scholte (2005, p. 13) viewed globalisation as “the spread of transplanetary connections between people.” In other words, globalisation involves unprecedented growth in transworld contacts, where the porosity of geographical borders increasingly allows global citizens to “physically, legally, culturally, and psychologically connect with each other.” Thus, a view of globalisation, as claimed by McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008), stresses the important role of mass communication among individuals. It is therefore essential to have a shared channel for communication due to the shortened space and distance between people, societies and nations. As such, the English Language has become the shared channel *lingua franca* for communication.

As Sharifian (2013) stated, the advancement of more abstruse connection between English Language and globalisation has been witnessed within the last two decades, which has further promoted English Language as an international language that can connect people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As such, English Language has gained dominant status in global communication. Pennycook (2010) suggested that speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL learners) would be the fastest rising group, contributing to the radical propagation of English. This matter indicates the increasing significance and use of English in EFL countries such as China, Japan, Iran, Korea and Taiwan to name a few. Furthermore, due to the increasing use of English Language universally and its role in world communication mostly among

non-native speakers as the dominant users of English Language, growing understanding of the mentioned facts has highlighted the position of English in EFL countries to a greater degree.

However, there often exist more difficulties among non-native speakers, especially EFL learners in intercultural communication than communication among speakers who share identical cultural orientation. The reason is that each speaker has a different interpretation of the other’s speech and they may understand the other’s statements based on their own cultural expectations, values and conventions (Seward, 2013). The wide variation of cultural conventions of interlocutors can easily result in misunderstanding and even total communication breakdown (Al-Zubeiry, 2013).

Intercultural misunderstanding is one of the difficulties that non-native speakers, especially EFL learners, face in the act of communication and Iranian EFL learners often encounter such problem (Rashidi & Ramezani, 2013). It is claimed that the most important cause of intercultural misunderstanding is pertinent to pragmatics failure in using the appropriate speech (Farahian, 2012). Hamouda (2014) believed that pragmatics failure emerges as an unintentional offensive action and not a deliberate mistake due to cultural diversity of individuals and their lack of knowledge in pragmatics rules and norms to realise speech acts in other cultures.

It is therefore pertinent that EFL learners’ pragmatics knowledge, as the core

construct of communicative competence, be developed in order to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and pragmatics failure, resulting in more effective and successful intercultural communication (Nguyen, 2011; Rafieyan et al., 2014). Eslami-Rasekh (2011) also supported this idea and declared that learners' L2 pragmatics competence should be well developed in communicating appropriately in the target language. It is claimed that the most important factor contributing to pragmatics development, especially in EFL contexts, is instruction. Therefore, researchers have focussed on the need of instruction on L2 pragmatics domain in EFL classrooms in order to assist learners in developing their pragmatics competence (Farrokhi & Atashian, 2012; Rashidi & Ramezani, 2013; Rafieyan et al., 2014). In addition, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) believed that most of the L2 pragmatics features are not acquired without instruction, or they may be learned more slowly. Thus, raising learners' awareness by means of instruction is the first step in expanding learners' pragmatics competence (Bulut, 2009).

However, as pragmatics behaviours and norms differ extensively across different social and cultural contexts, teaching L2 pragmatics is a highly demanding and challenging task for EFL instructors (Eslami-Rasekh & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008; Simin et al., 2014). Interlanguage pragmatics as a branch of SLA research and a subfield of pragmatics is defined as "the study of L2 or FL learners' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatics knowledge and ability (Kasper, 1996, p. 145; Rose & Kasper, 2001, p. 3). According

to Kasper and Rose (2001), pragmatics ability is recognised as the speaker's ability to utilise language in appropriate ways based on the communicative situation. This ability includes the learner's knowledge of existing linguistic resources (pragmalinguistic characteristics) and the sociopragmatic norms governing the appropriate use of the available resources or tools in communicative contexts. Although SLA practitioners have recently called for the inclusion of L2 pragmatics in EFL classroom instruction, instructors have not shown eagerness and enthusiasm to incorporate it in their classroom practices (Simin et al., 2014).

This paper seeks to discuss findings in relation to the challenges or difficulties faced by instructors in teaching L2 pragmatics. A number of studies (Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani, 2010; Dastjerdi & Rezvani, 2011; Salemi et al., 2012; Barekat & Mehri, 2013); however, have investigated the effects of pragmatics instruction on learners' performance. What is less researched is what the instructors' difficulties are in carrying out interlanguage pragmatics instruction in EFL settings. In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper addresses the issue of instructors' challenges in teaching L2 pragmatics in the Iranian EFL context.

METHODS

This exploratory study employed a qualitative design to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions and motivation behind a situation. It also provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas

or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Dörnyei, 2007).

Twenty Iranian EFL instructors voluntarily took part in an in-depth structured interview and the data collected were validated and their reliability recorded. Basit (2010) mentioned that an interview is a subjective process both for the interviewee and the interviewer. While eliminating bias in interviews is not totally feasible, it can be minimised by employing some methods. For the purpose of the present study, the techniques that were used to enhance the validity of the interview data were peer debriefing (Ary et al., 2010) and reliability concerns by inter-rater agreement (Ary et al., 2010).

Twenty instructors from five private EFL institutes took part in a one-on-one interview voluntarily. During the interview, the instructors were asked to describe the difficulties they faced in incorporating pragmatics in teaching. They were asked to talk about the reasons while trying to execute pragmatics instruction in retrospect. All the interviews were carried out in the Persian language in order to minimise misunderstanding and misinterpretation of questions as the area of pragmatics is relatively new to them. Each interview took approximately 30-60 minutes. All the interviews were tape-recorded.

DATA ANALYSIS

After transcribing the instructors' interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the analytical procedures in Braun and Clarke (2006).

In so doing, all the interviews, including instructors' interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were read and re-read many times to identify the required data. In the next phase the data identified was then put into meaningful groups or codes. In phase three, the codes were analysed and combined to form categories. Phase four involved reviewing and refining the categories identified to develop a satisfactory thematic map to use for the study. In the following phase, the categories were defined and further refined to ensure each identified category was able to capture and analyse the data. The final phase enabled a detailed analysis to be worked out including examples from the data itself.

FINDINGS

The findings pointed towards the four important factors elicited from the instructors. They are: learners' lack of cultural literacy; lack of facilities such as films and movies; instructors' implicit pragmatics knowledge; and lack of time. In addition to these main factors, lack of pictures and illustrations, the large volume of textbooks, age of learners, lack of emphasis in teacher's guidebooks, lack of materials or input, lack of sufficient vocabulary and expressions and the existence of taboo elements were among other factors identified as contributing to lack of awareness of interlanguage pragmatics instruction among instructors.

Learners' Lack of Cultural Literacy

Learners' lack of cultural literacy was found to be the most dominant factor for lack of interlanguage pragmatics instruction reported by the instructors. They referred to it as insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of learners. This problem was highlighted by some of the instructors. For example, Ms S mentioned that learners' lack of cultural background could cause conceptual misunderstanding:

I think learners' lack of cultural background is an obstacle in teaching pragmatics. Most of the learners do not have information about cultural differences between their own language and culture and other cultures and this makes a lot of problems. This matter makes learners not to understand the concepts in English due to this lack or shortage.

Another instructor, Ms H, elaborated: "one of the difficulties in teaching pragmatics is surely culture. It means that learners do not have enough cultural information due to cultural differences."

Ms N, who took part in the interview, had a similar idea. She stated:

The learners do not know the culture behind the phrases or words that I'm saying because they are not familiar with other cultures. As they don't know culture, they don't know the appropriate language and behaviour behind using language functions.

Lack of Media Facilities

The second important factor suggested by most of the instructors was the lack of facilities, especially films and movies. Most of the instructors pointed out that institutions do not provide teachers with facilities such as films and videos. The data revealed some interesting observations in this respect.

As pragmatics is taught mostly implicitly, it is better to make use of films to expose learners to functions or speech acts in a variety of situations. For example, they can learn how to use speech acts such as recommendation or apology and which phrases or expressions to use based on the situation.

I like to use video or films but they are not available. We do not have enough access to these resources as they are very helpful in teaching pragmatics but the institute does not provide these complementary resources in addition to the textbooks.

Lack of facilities such as films is a factor that contributes to the lack of pragmatics teaching. It is better to accompany each taught lesson, especially cultural points, by showing films besides what learners read in the book. I think films can transfer the materials much better and the feedback could be really much better.

Lack of films is an obstacle to present learners with real context or real-life situations. Unfortunately, there is no time and facility to show the movie and it is not also obligatory. As learners do not watch movies, they are not exposed to pragmatics that much. They just learn what is included in their textbooks.

The two factors discussed earlier were the two foremost challenges that instructors faced in teaching pragmatics in Iranian EFL institutes.

Instructors' Implicit Pragmatic Knowledge

The third important factor that a number of instructors referred to was instructors' lack of implicit pragmatics knowledge. They explained that the pragmatics dimension of target language was a somewhat new concept to them and they had not paid much attention to this aspect of language use. Six of the interviewees emphasised that this lack of knowledge had prevented them from implementing and paying sufficient attention to pragmatics features in their practices. To them, it was sufficient to teach the language skills of reading, listening, speaking and the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary in the EFL classroom.

For example, Ms R, one of the instructors who participated in the interview, argued: *"As instructors have been trained to focus on the language skills, they do not have enough knowledge and also necessary skills*

to pay attention to this aspect. As such, it is ignored by them."

Ms S, another participant of the interview, had a similar opinion but a different reason. She stated the fact that instructors did not have pragmatics knowledge for two main reasons.

In fact, we as language instructors, do not have enough pragmatic knowledge or maybe what we know is a whole picture of it for two reasons: first, there is no information or emphasis regarding the pragmatics issues in the teachers' manuals as the basis of the teaching and secondly, instructors are not trained in teacher's training courses to pay attention to this aspect and explicitly teach learners the pragmatics features.

The instructors' lack of pragmatics knowledge was the third important factor that contributed to the lack of interlanguage pragmatics instruction in the institutions. This finding is in line with Bella (2012), who found that teachers mostly practised grammar in their classroom practices in the ESL context. In addition, Al Falasi (2007) found the same results and reported that teachers in EFL settings emphasised grammatical or linguistic aspects of the L2 and did not pay attention to the pragmatics and sociocultural features of the target language.

Lack of Time

In addition, lack of time was also noted by five of the instructors as having an impact on the non-inclusion of pragmatics instruction in the language classroom. They expressed that since the contents of the textbook, which include mostly grammatical items, were too wide and demanding to be covered by them in a mere semester, they tended to leave out pragmatics and not consider teaching the nuances of it.

Large Volume of Class Textbooks

The extensive contents of the textbook was another factor that four instructors put forward as one of the challenges faced. The syllabus dictated that textbook coverage was mandatory. The instructors stated that the huge volume of the class textbooks did not allow them to include pragmatics instruction. They only had sufficient time to cover the materials they were supposed to teach. In this regard, Ms R stated: *“The high volume of the textbook does not let us as instructors pay more attention to the pragmatics dimension of the language. We have to just cover the book.”* This finding is consistent with that of Vellenga (2008), who found that the sheer volume of subject material to be taught was a reason for the lack of the use of pragmatics instruction to ESL upper-intermediate English language learners.

Lack of Adequate Instructional Materials in Pragmatics

Out of the 20 instructors who were interviewed, four stated that they did

not have access to enough materials or input to teach interlanguage pragmatics. This shortage could be attributed to the textbooks, which are the major and the only source of input in foreign language contexts. They present pragmatic information either in conversational models or by giving a list of expressions without any adequate contextual and meta-pragmatics information about their use. This finding is in line with Eslami-Rasekh (2005), who asserted that the difficulties teachers encountered in teaching pragmatics were lack of sufficient materials and training in the ESL context. Table 1 shows the factors mentioned by the instructors and their frequency.

CONCLUSION

It appears that L2 pragmatics features should be highlighted by policy makers, curriculum developers and material writers. Curriculum developers would be better convinced of the significance of incorporating the pragmatics dimension of language ability in EFL materials. Since the prerequisite for pragmatics instruction is the availability and provision of especially fitting and suitably prepared materials, material writers/developers can embrace a “speech act pedagogical model” in planning, developing or writing instructional materials.

Factors such as learners’ lack of cultural literacy, lack of facilities such as films and movies, instructors’ implicit pragmatics knowledge, lack of time, lack of pictures, illustrations, the bulkiness of textbooks, age of learners, lack of emphasis in teacher’s guidebook, lack of materials or input, lack

Table. 1
Instructors' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Their Non-Inclusion of Pragmatics Instruction

| Factors | N/20 |
|---|------|
| Learners' lack of cultural literacy | 10 |
| Lack of facilities such as films, computer programmes, pictures & illustrations | 9 |
| Instructors' implicit pragmatics knowledge | 6 |
| Lack of time | 5 |
| The huge volume of textbooks | 4 |
| Lack of adequate materials or input | 4 |
| Others | |
| Age of learners | 1 |
| Lack of emphasis in teacher's guidebook | 1 |
| Transfer from L1 & literal translation; existence of taboo elements | 1 |

Note. Superscripts denote significant differences as follows: ** $p < 0.01$. Statistically significant difference in mean

of sufficient vocabulary and expressions and the existence of taboo matters were identified from the data. These setbacks could be overcome by the concerted effort of all education quarters in the country.

This study, however, had a number of limitations. The first limitation was the selection of EFL instructors. The participants were from one province in Iran. So, they may not represent all Iranian EFL instructors. The second limitation was the fact that although all the participants were Iranian EFL instructors, they were not homogeneous in course major, age, educational background and teaching experience, which may have influenced the results of the current study. Finally, the data were collected only through interviews due to institutional constraints and policies.

The present study made an attempt to explore the challenges faced by instructors during the integration of pragmatics instruction in their language classes at private EFL institutes. Future research can

investigate other contexts such as higher education institutions as these problems affect education at all levels.

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