

English for Science and Technology (EST) Learners' Pragmatic Failure: Its Causes and Solutions

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Abstract:

Failing to perform different speech acts appropriately according to the discourse community norms is a serious difficulty that faces EST learners' in writing research articles. More clearly, pragmatic failure is a serious problem in the EST learners' discourse community. The present paper aims at shedding light on the EST learners' pragmatic failure, searching for causes behind this failure and proposing solutions. Different consulted studies reveal that there different causes that lead to such situation. Some are related to pragmatic studies, or to teaching curricula, or to pre-service and in-service programs and so on. One can argue that all these causes stem from a lack of explicit teaching. As a solution, EST learners have to build a degree of pragmatic sensitivity. The latter can only be constructed through a consciousness raising approach to teaching. That is, EST learners have to be explicitly taught pragmatic aspects.

Key words: pragmatic failure, pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure, consciousness raising approach, explicit teaching.

المخلص:

يمثل الفشل في أداء أفعال الكلام المختلفة بشكل مناسب وفقاً لمعايير مجتمع الخطاب صعوبة كبيرة تواجه طلبة علوم وتكنولوجيا في كتابة المقالات البحثية. بشكل أوضح، يمثل الفشل السياقي مشكلة خطيرة في مجتمع الخطاب لدى طلبة علوم وتكنولوجيا. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على الفشل في الكفاءة السياقية لطلبة علوم وتكنولوجيا، والبحث عن أسباب هذا الفشل واقتراح الحلول. تكشف دراسات مستشارة أن هناك أسباباً مختلفة تؤدي إلى مثل هذه الحالة. يرتبط بعضها بالدراسات تخص الكفاءة السياقية، أو بتدريس المناهج الدراسية، أو ببرامج ما قبل الخدمة وأثناء الخدمة وما إلى ذلك. يمكن للمرء أن يجزم بأن كل هذه الأسباب تنبع من نقص التدريس الصريح. كحل، يجب على متعلمي علوم وتكنولوجيا بناء درجة من الحساسية السياقية. والتي يمكن بناؤها من خلال منهج رفع الوعي السياقي في التدريس. وهذا يعني أنه يجب تعليم طلبة علوم وتكنولوجيا بشكل واضح الجوانب السياقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فشل الكفاءة السياقية، فشل الكفاءة السياقية اللغوية، فشل اجتماعي في الكفاءة السياقية، منهج رفع الوعي، التعليم الصريح.

Introduction:

A question usually asked by EST teachers 'why do learners often fail to write and speak in a way acceptable to the scientific discourse community'(House, 1993; Troia, 2011; Kourilova, 2012). It is important to note that pragmatic competence is a key contributor to effective writing (Hyland, 1998). That is, having the ability to choose the appropriate meaning that guides to the intended message by paying attention to presupposed reader, situational factors, politeness markers, etc. can ensure an intelligible piece of writing by EST learners (Ishihara & Cohen, 2009). In fact, EST learners face difficulties in writing and speaking effectively according to their discourse community norms. Miller (1974) maintains that communication breakdowns are mostly due to misunderstanding of the intended message (Miller qtd. in Thomas, 1983). That is, EST learners' unsuccessful way of interpreting what a speaker means by a certain utterance is the main source of difficulties in communication.

For Thomas (1983), this lack is traced back to pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure is "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (Thomas, 1983, p.91). Put another way, it refers to a situation where an addressee does not grasp the addresser's message. In the context of writing, for instance, an EST learner who is unable to encode his/her intended message clearly, s/he pragmatically fails to write effectively (Troia, 2011; Kourilova, 2012). Also, if a writer fails to assume the reader's knowledge, s/he will fail pragmatically, leading the reader to misunderstand his/her message. Overall, most studies carried out in different areas of pragmatics reveal that FL learners are pragmatically incompetent (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991; Cohen, 1996; Kasper, 1997; and others). That is, they cannot perform communicative acts appropriately. In the area of speech acts, Basturkmen, (2006) points out that learners usually act out speech acts in an inappropriate way; a situation which leads to communication impediment. She states that

Research has shown that despite high level of grammatical competence, non-native speakers may still have difficulties in communication because of a lack of ability to express speech acts appropriately (Basturkmen, 2006, p.51)

This means that learners succeed in constructing and treating utterances grammatically but they cannot make sense of their illocutionary intent. In trying to explain this failure, Kasper (1997) argues that "L2 recipients often tend towards literal interpretation, taking utterance at face value rather than inferring what is meant

from what is said and underusing information” (p.3). That is, learners neglect the contextual clues that aid them in grasping the intended meaning. For example, learners may treat an utterance literally and fail to infer the indirect ‘order’ as they do not know how to exploit the degree of power imposition between interlocutors which is encoded in the use of the modal verb ‘must’. The same observation has been recorded by most studies in the context of ESP (Clenell, 1999; Basturkmen, 2006; Troia, 2011; Flowerdew, 2013, and others). Researchers notice that EST learners are unable to produce utterances appropriate to the norms of their discourse community because of pragmatic unawareness (ibid.).

1. Types of pragmatic failure

Thomas (1983) identifies two types of pragmatic failure.

1.1 Pragmalinguistic failure:

For Thomas (1983) pragmalinguistic failure “occurs when the pragmatic force mapped on to a linguistic token or structure is systematically different from that normally assigned to it by native speakers” (p.101). More clearly, learners fail pragmalinguistically when they encode a certain illocutionary force in an utterance while native speakers intend another act with the same structure. That is, when the function of a structure in TL differs from its function in MT, a pragmalinguistic failure may occur. For example, in English, the utterance ‘can you X’ (Thomas, 1983, p.101) refers to a ‘request’ whereas to a French learner, it conveys a question of ability to do X similar to their Mother Tongue use (ibid.). Arabic speakers of English, for instance, reply to a thank by the phrase ‘never mind’ which means in their MT use ‘not at all’ while NSs utilize the expression of ‘never mind’ to answer an excuse.

Pragmalinguistic failure can stem from the transfer of strategies used to perform speech acts in MT to TL (Thomas, 1983). Learners may ignore TL use. For this reason, they opt for their own use. For Thomas (ibid.), this type of failure is easy to repair as it involves only an understanding of the conventional way of using language in TL. That is, it is ‘linguistically determined’. This means that the problem of learners in this type is in the form and its associated function. The following conversation provides a clear example of pragmalinguistic failure. In this situation, A is an English speaker and B a Polish man. They are traveling by train. As an attempt to soften communication,

A says: “*A: I wonder how many trees are in Poland*”

B: *I cannot imagine who would want to know that” (Fernández Amaya, 2008, p.18).*

In this example, A transfers the way of ‘opening’ conversation from his MT (English) to the TL (Polish). B, in his turn, interprets the utterance literally as a ‘question’ that requires an answer rather than considering the illocutionary intent of A. As a consequence, a pragmalinguistic failure happens. To avoid such a failure, a need to learn the appropriate way of performing the act of ‘opening’ in Polish is required for the English speaker.

1.2 Sociopragmatic failure:

Sociopragmatic failure takes place when there is a difference between the ‘social perception’ of MT and TL (Thomas, 1983). The difference in what is considered as an appropriate behavior and which sociolinguistic factors to regard in pragmatic choice between MT and TL may lead to sociopragmatic failure. To illustrate the point, a sociopragmatic miscalculation may result from learners’ use of MT social judgment in assessing the social distance between interlocutors or size of imposition which are different from TL perception. Further, Thomas (1983) argues that the requirement of an understanding of the target culture as well as the sensitivity in judging learners’ own perception make the sociopragmatic failure a difficult area of repair. Indeed, this is ‘culturally determined’, that is, its problem lies in the different social judgments (ibid.). To better understand this type, let us consider the following example where Li Ming, a Chinese woman, is talking to her NS colleague:

“Li Ming: you are putting on weight recently, aren’t you?”

Miss Green: it’s none of your business” (Xiaohong, 1994, p.31)

Here, the topics which are counted as private matters differ in the Chinese and English cultures respectively. That is, Li Ming performs the act from a Chinese cultural background where asking about weight is not a private topic and a colleague relationship implies a near social distance, while in the English culture things differ. Similarly, in some cultures such as Arabic, different settings imply different social distances between the same participants while in other cultures the social distance remains the same regardless of the setting. So, an Arabic speaker of another language may sociopragmatically fail through applying different social distances.

Accordingly, it is necessary to build learners’ metapragmatic ability, that is, “the ability to analyze language use in a conscious manner” (Thomas, 1983, p.98) so as to be able to distinguish between two types of pragmatic failure. The distinction is necessary, as it facilitates for learners the process of correcting their pragmalinguistic failure and discussing the sociopragmatic one. As a first step, EST teachers have to look for the causes of this lack (Thomas, 1983; El- Okda, 2011). It is this point that is tackled next.

2 Causes of EST learners' pragmatic failure

Discovering EST learners' pragmatic failure is not the ultimate point. Rather it should be considered as the impetus that leads teachers to search for different causes that lie behind this failure (Thomas, 1983). Some of the domains where these causes may stem from are set below:

1/ Pragmatic research

Despite the lateness which characterizes pragmatic research in comparison with other areas of language study, a considerable body of studies has discussed pragmatic issues (Judd, 1999; Bardov Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). But just few of them are designed for teaching purposes (Judd, 1999). That is, most of pragmatic studies inquire about the subject of pragmatics and aspects of pragmatic inquiry but ignore the question of how these aspects can be applied in the classroom. Judd (1999) accounts for this neglect by stating

Ironically, although while much research on pragmatics has appeared in the literature in the past few decades, little of it is addressed to classroom instructors who need to devise and implement practical teaching strategies for their classrooms beyond a general caveat to somehow include this information in a teaching curriculum" (P.168)

In addition, pragmatic studies have focused more on some aspects such as politeness, speech acts and spoken mode, neglecting to some extent other aspects which are of equal importance to the teaching process, i.e., pragmatic acquisition, pragmatic testing methods and written mode, etc. (Liu, 2006; Ellis, 2012). This means that pragmatic teaching process is in need for more practical studies.

2/Teaching curricula

Overall, teaching curricula at tertiary level ignore pragmatic aspects in their design (Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). That is, curricula do not include lectures on functions and on other pragmatic themes. Other language areas such as grammar, vocabulary and syntax are the main subjects taught at school without any pragmatic dimension. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor (2003) report that "these areas of language and language use [i.e. speech acts, conversational implicature, etc.] have not traditionally been addressed in language teaching curricula" (p.37). In fact, such curricula can result in learners paying no attention to language use norms (Kasper, 1997).

3/ Teaching pragmatics

Teaching pragmatic aspects is no easy task (Rose, 1999; Fernandez-Amaya, 2008). Since pragmatic norms are subconscious and indeterminate, describing and teaching them is no easy task for teachers (Thomas, 1983; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). In other words, difficulties in teaching pragmatics lie in the fact that pragmatic norms differ from one situation to another, i.e. they are indeterminate and that native speakers cannot describe their language use explicitly as these norms are subconscious. Another difficulty in teaching pragmatics is the evaluation of pragmatic development mainly the sociopragmatic one (Ellis, 2012). It cannot be clear to the teacher whether learners are judging those sociolinguistic factors such as relative power, size of imposition, social distance, etc. appropriately in performing an act as it has been taught or rather it is matter of a positive transfer. That is, it can be understood that learners treat factors aptly due to their sociopragmatic knowledge while it is a matter of chance or L1 positive transfer.

On the other hand, the teaching process in itself may sometimes be a source of pragmatic failure due to the techniques used (Thomas, 1983). Truly, there are some teaching techniques that lead to learners' pragmatic failure. The classroom discourse usually requires learners to provide a complete answer which violates the pragmatic principle of 'quantity and economy'. As a result of these difficulties, little attention is given to pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Fernandez-Amaya, 2008; Ellis, 2012). Fernandez-Amaya (2008) maintains that "..., L2 teachers often overlook pragmatics, due to the difficulty of its teaching, and instead focus on the grammatical aspects of language" (p.12). But it is crucial to draw attention that by providing detailed pragmatic studies and well structured teaching strategies, the task of teaching pragmatics can be more easily managed.

4/Pre-service and in-service programmes

Pre-service and in-service programmes provide little and inexplicit pragmatic information for teachers (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, El-Okda, 2011). This means that educational programmes do not prepare teachers to teach pragmatics. As a result, teachers find difficulties in instructing pragmatic aspects to learners (Rose, 1999). In an attempt to rate the degree to which educational programmes train teachers for teaching pragmatics, Cohen (2008) notes that "most programs investigated rarely provide information about pragmatics or pragmatic knowledge instruction and assessment" (Cohen cited in El-Okda, 2011, p.179). As a result,

teachers ignore their roles in teaching pragmatic (Kasper, 1999). That is, teachers may start by supplying new pragmatic information instead of drawing learners' attention to what learners have as a universal or free knowledge and teaching them how to exploit it.

5/ Corrective feedback (CF)

When learners produce inappropriate utterances, they often receive no corrective feedback (CF) from their teachers so as to modify their pragmatic knowledge (Chavez de Castro, 2005). For instance, teachers may correct their learners in using 'has' instead of 'have' with the pronoun 'she' but not to use the utterance 'I beg your pardon' instead of 'sorry' in the case of not hearing well (Hornby et al., 2005). Bardovi-Harlig & Hatford (1996) claim that

..., if no CF is provided to learners as to how inappropriate their utterances have been and how to make them more appropriate, it is likely [sic] they will not realize the need to modify their production. (Bardovi-Harlig & Hatford qtd. in Chevez de Castro, 2005, p.282)

Searching for the reasons behind this absence of feedback, researchers suggest that teachers may neither be able to observe pragmatic failure (Mestro & Pastor, 2012) nor to distinguish between pragmatolinguistic failure which should be corrected and sociopragmatic one that requires discussion for its sensitivity learners. It does not matter, in fact, what the reasons can be, the essence is to discover and make learners understand that there is a pragmatic gap.

6/ Differences among languages

It is undeniable that there are differences among languages in terms of linguistic encoding and social judgment (Kasper & Blum-kulka, 1993; House, 1993; Taguchi, 2009; Yule, 1996 a; Cohen, 1996 and others). In fact, these differences may be the source of pragmatic failure. Variation in linguistic encoding of functions among languages reveals that there are difficult areas in learning (Taguchi, 2009). To illustrate the point, Russian learners of English, for example, are required to know that English contains other forms of 'obligation' such as 'must, should, ought to, etc', unlike Russian which makes use of only 'to be to' (Thomas, 1983). Otherwise, the Russian learner of English will use 'to be to' in all situations, while it is usually used only in the case of unequal power relationship, and thus a pragmatic failure occurs.

Further, societies differ in judging social perception and values (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). That is, social values including relative power, social distance, taboos, size of imposition, etc. that affect pragmatic choice differ from one culture to another. For

example, in some cultures, an old person has a high social status and relative power and thus talking to him or her involves a careful choice of forms with a degree of politeness, while in other cultures, the age is not at all a determining factor of pragmatic choice (Thomas, 1983). Kasper and Bulm-Kulka (1993) point out that sometimes learners' sensitivity to their social values leads them to neglect TL values. On some occasions, learners act against TL social norms not because of their ignorance but because these norms conflict with their own social ones such as taboo topics. Kasper and Bulm-Kulka (1993) express the point by reporting that "... even purposeful loyalty to L1 cultural patterns, may yield deviations from native use..." (p.7)

7/ Materials for teaching pragmatics

Designing materials for teaching pragmatics is a big issue (Widdowson, 1979; Olshtain & Cohen, 1991; Edwards & Cizer, 2004). There is a lack of pragmatic teaching materials. Textbooks lack relevant input that is needed in the teaching of different pragmatic aspects. Olshtain and Cohen (1991) posit that "it may, at this stage, be difficult to find sufficient material on the various speech acts and on the cross-cultural differences that exist between languages" (p.164). Widdowson (1979), in his turn, claims that the materials which address the knowledge of language alone cannot satisfy the learners' pragmatic needs. Alemi and Razzaghi (2012) clarify that even ESP textbooks disregard this area. They state that

The lack of this pragmatic input especially in ESP textbooks in which learners are to master the English in order to be able to communicate in an international business context can lead to inappropriate development of communicative competence" (p.109)

There is, then, a pressing need for teaching materials that treat different pragmatic aspects (Widdowson, 1979).

8/ The existing pragmatic materials

It is necessary to note that even existing materials usually comprise inaccurate or isolated examples (Judd, 1999; Cohen, 1996). That is, the available input is far from real language use. This hinders the building of learners' sensitivity to sociolinguistic distinction in TL. Judd (1999) notices that

Many texts do not include examples of speech acts that are representative of naturally occurring discourse or the examples are often inaccurate or limited in regard to sociolinguistic variables (p.157).

Further, there are some teaching materials that focus only on developing learners' pragmlinguistic knowledge (Kasper, 1997; Basturkmen, 2006; Alcon Soler & Martinez-Flor, 2008). These materials aim to construct learners' linguistic background of how to realize different speech acts, giving scant attention to building up their sociopragmatic knowledge, i.e. how to perform acts appropriately. This partial emphasis generates learners who treat utterances literally and neglect their illocutionary intent (Kasper, 1997). Basturkmen (2006) reports that

It has been noted that some speech-act-based courses and materials target pragmlinguistics with the aim of equipping learners with the linguistic sources to make a number of speech acts and to do so more or less politely and directly, but neglect sociopragmatic aspects (p.51)

9/ Linguistic proficiency

Linguistic proficiency plays a crucial role in performing acts flexibly in different contexts (Ellis, 2012). A considerable linguistic knowledge enables learners to make use of the appropriate strategies to the given contextual factors. A lack of such proficiency may hinder learners' ability to adjust their linguistic forms in different situations, i.e. to fail pragmatically (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Ellis, 2012). For instance, a learner who agrees to the speaker's request of appointment by saying 'yeah, that's right' as if s/he is evaluating the speaker's utterance, pragmatically fails to provide the appropriate answer, i.e. 'ok' or 'fine' because of his /her lack of linguistic proficiency (House, 1993). Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) state that "the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general pragmatic knowledge base ... appears to be their restricted L2 linguistic knowledge, or difficulty in accessing it smoothly" (p.7).

10/ Pragmatic transfer

FL learners tend to transfer the pragmatic knowledge such as speech act strategies and social perception from their MT to the TL (Kasper, 1997; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Basturkmen, 2006; Ellis, 2012). In other words, learners make a negative transfer of their native pragmatic norms to the TL use. As an illustration, NS usually use an indirect strategy to order a stranger, while EFL learners opt for a direct strategy as they may do in their MT (Yule, 1996 a). In TL, this implies that the learners have more 'social power' than the stranger. Further, Arab learners of English tend to transfer the way of answering compliments in their MT to the TL that utilizes another strategy. They, therefore, fail pragmatically to use language appropriately. On these premises, Olshtain and Cohen (1991) report that "the results revealed situations in which EFL deviations from

cultural patterns appeared to be a result of negative transfer from the first language” (pp.162-163).

In this regard, researchers, including Kasper, 1997; Yule, 1996 a; Rose and Kasper, 2001 and others, stress that learners possess a considerable amount of free pragmatic knowledge (i.e. universal pragmatic knowledge) they could exploit in TL (positive transfer). Languages share some features such as the three types of request (direct, indirect, and hints) or the significance of silence in conversation (Yule, 1996 a). But learners usually do not exploit or transfer their free pragmatic knowledge from their MT to TL (Kasper, 1997; Rose & Kasper, 2001). The causes behind this inability may be due either to the learners’ lack of linguistic proficiency that enables them to express universal features in the TL or to their ignorance of such a free knowledge. Rose and Kasper (2001) describe this situation saying that

Unfortunately, learners do not always capitalize on the knowledge they already have. It is well known from educational psychology that students do not always transfer available knowledge and strategies to new tasks. This is also true for some aspects of learners’ universal or L1- based pragmatic knowledge (p.6)

11/ Contextual factors and pragmatic ‘errors’

Learners always raise the issue of “how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said or written” (Yule, 1996 b, p.127). That is to say, learners wonder about the way to grasp the speaker’s intended meaning. In trying to answer this question, Yule (1996 a) and Kasper (1997) insist that speaker or writer showed hinging on shared knowledge, some contextual clues that help the listener or reader to infer the conveyed meaning. But the problem is that learners neglect such contextual clues and sometimes ignore the connotation of some shared clues (House, 1993; Yule, 1996 a; Kasper, 1997). In the case of writing, for instance, learners do not pay attention to the writer’s use of certain verbs such as ‘seem, appear’ and not others such as ‘can, could’ which convey an implicit meaning concerning ‘degree of imposition’ (Hyland, 1998).

Another cause of pragmatic failure is learners’ ignorance of shared meaning of certain clues (House, 1993; Troia, 2011). Practically, if a learner ignores the communicative intent behind the use of, say, inverted commas, s/he will not grasp what is meant by putting the word ‘errors’ the present subtitle between inverted commas. This means that the word is either inappropriate to the context or borrowed. In this case, the word ‘errors’ is inappropriate to the context of pragmatics. As Thomas (1983) claims that since pragmatic norms are indeterminate, an action cannot be judged

pragmatically correct or wrong but rather appropriate to the norms or not. Another example of learners' ignorance of contextual factors is their lack of knowledge about the negative connotation of some phrases like 'does not matter' which is used to reduce the importance of something (House, 1993). Kasper (1997) summarizes the point by stating that "L2 recipients often tend towards literal interpretation... and underusing context information" (p.3).

In addition, learners not only neglect contextual clues but also pragmatic 'errors' (Kasper, 1997). In fact, both teachers and learners do not take pragmatic errors seriously. Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) see that teachers and learners give much more importance to grammatical errors than to pragmatic ones (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei cited in Edwards, 2003). They state that "...EFL learners and their teachers tend to undervalue the seriousness of pragmatic mistakes and consistently ranked grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors..." (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei (1998) cited in Edwards, 2003, p.41).

Conclusion:

Concerning the different causes that may lead to pragmatic failure, one can notice that some of these causes have relation with the lack of explicit teaching. That is, the reasons behind pragmatic failure can be classified either as the inappropriate atmosphere for explicit teaching namely, problems in, say, pragmatic research, teaching curriculum, pre-service and in-service programs, and teaching materials. Or, they may be due to a lack of explicit pragmatic teaching with all its aspects such as corrective feedback, pragmatic transfer, neglect of contextual factors and others. It is clear that the main cause of learners' pragmatic failure in using language appropriately in general and in performing acts for writing is due to the lack of explicit teaching. Writing an abstract is no exception, in this connection. It appears that flouting pragmatic norms is the main factor of failure of communicating *via* this mode. Thus, a consciousness raising approach to teaching which based on explicit teaching is likely to ensure for EST learners a rich and flexible pragmatic competence that will help them to produce pragmatically appropriate pieces of writing in their area of specialism and be assessed likewise.

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