

Cross – Cultural Pragmatic Failure

Abstract

Successful communication in a second language needs both, the linguistic and the pragmatic competences of that language. But the common mistake second language learners make is that they rely more on linguistic knowledge rather than communication. As a result, they become linguistically competent but pragmatically incompetent, and still make mistakes in their communication with native speakers. These mistakes lead to “cross-cultural pragmatic failure”. Hence, this paper will deal with the problem of “cross-cultural pragmatic failure”. It aims at highlighting the importance of improving the pragmatic and communicative competence of second language learners through analyzing the sources of pragmatic failure and developing the awareness of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Fahima NOUICHI

Department of Languages,
University of Constantine 1.
(Algérie)

ملخص

يحتاج الحوار الناجح في لغة ثانية إلى كفاءة لغوية وكفاءة دلالية في هذه اللغة، ولكن الخطأ الشائع الذي يرتكبه متعلمو اللغة الثانية هو اعتمادهم على معرفة اللغة دون الحوار؛ وكنيجة لذلك أصبحوا يملكون الكفاءة اللغوية دون الكفاءة الحوارية، ولا يزالون يرتكبون الأخطاء في حوارهم مع المتحدثين الأصليين لهذه اللغة، وهذه الأخطاء تؤدي إلى الإخفاق الدلالي بين الثقافات. لهذا السبب ستعالج هذه المقالة مشكلة الإخفاق الدلالي بين الثقافات، فهي تهدف إلى إلقاء الضوء على أهمية تحسين الكفاءة الحوارية والدلالية لمتعلمي اللغة الثانية من خلال تحليل مصادر الإخفاق الدلالي وتنمية الوعي الدلالي بين الثقافات. بناء على ذلك سوف تناقش هذه الورقة مفهومي الإخفاق الدلالي والإخفاق اللغوي بين الثقافات، كما ستعرض لأنواعه، واعتمادا على بحوث سابقة، التركيز سوف يكون على ثلاث مصادر للإخفاق الدلالي بين الثقافات (النقل الدلالي من اللغة الأم إلى اللغة الهدف، واختلاف القيم الثقافية، والمدرسين ومواد التدريس) وبعض الاقتراحات لتحسين الحوار بين الثقافات.

Introduction

Achieving the mastery of a second language requires achieving a mastery of both the linguistic and the communicative competence. Hence, failing to choose the appropriate words or meaning causes misunderstandings and communication breakdowns between interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds. This failure is called “cross-cultural pragmatic failure”. Second language learners often fail in cross-cultural communication due to some pragmatic mistakes. Thus, to develop second language learners’ awareness of cultural differences and improve their cross-cultural communicative competence, it is necessary to know what pragmatic failure is and its types, analyze its causes, and offer some effective cultural teaching strategies.

1. The Difference between Pragmatic Failure and Cross-Cultural Pragmatic

Failure

Pragmatic failure is a misunderstanding in communication happens between interlocutors due to problems in the use of language, especially by foreign language speakers. Thomas (1983) argues that it is the failure to understand an utterance; whereas He Ziran (1988) believes that it is the inability to achieve the wanted communicative effects in communication.

The concept “pragmatic failure” applies to misunderstandings between people from the same speech community. However, the term “cross-cultural pragmatic failure” is used to describe the case of pragmatic failure between people from different speech communities. (Charlebois, 2003). For example, an American speaker of Japanese interprets the answer “that will be a little difficult” as an acceptance for his/ her request whereas this answer refers to a refusal in the Japanese culture (Charlebois, 2003).

Pragmatic failure is an important source of cross-cultural communication crash (Thomas, 1983). It is also identified as a “pragmatic error” (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006). Thomas (1983) prefers to use the term “pragmatic failure” rather than “pragmatic error”, because an error refers to the violation of definite perspective rules such as “grammatical errors”; however, a failure refers the violation of “probable rules” involved in pragmatic competence since a pragmatic force cannot be judged as wrong but as a failure to reach the speaker's objective.

2. Types of Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure

Thomas (1983) categorizes the cross-cultural pragmatic failure into two types, pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure.

2.1. Pragma-linguistic Failure

Pragma-linguistic failure is a linguistic failure resulted from dissimilarities in expressing a pragmatic force (Thomas, 1983). That is, it is the failure to choose the appropriate linguistic means to express pragmatic objectives.

Thomas (1983) affirms that pragma-linguistic failure occurs when speech act strategies are transferred from the first language and applied in the second language resulting inappropriate effects in the target language. So that “the pragmatic force mapped by speakers onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to by native speakers of the target language” (Thomas, 1983, p. 99).

2.2. Socio-pragmatic Failure

Concerning socio-pragmatic failure, it is the failure to choose what to say under certain circumstances and social factors. This is why, Leech (1983, p.10) states that it is “the sociological interface of pragmatics”.

Riley (1989, p. 234) asserts that socio-pragmatic failure is the outcome of applying the social rules of one culture in a communicative situation where the social rules of

another culture should be applied. Thus, misunderstandings may occur in communication.

Unawareness of cross-cultural differences between people speaking different languages further causes socio-pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication (Thomas, 1983). That is, what is considered an appropriate linguistic behaviour in one culture may not be so in another culture.

3. Causes of Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure

Based on a comparative pragmatic study between Algerian Arabic and English speech acts of thanking and greeting, the writer of this article finds that pragmatic failure may occur mainly due to the following sources: Pragmatic transfer, different cultural values, and teachers and teaching materials.

3.1. Pragmatic Transfer

Pragmatic transfer is one source of the inappropriate use of a second or foreign language in communication (Wannaruk, 2008). Richards and Schmidt (2002) claim that pragmatic transfer is the transmission of first language strategies of performing speech acts into a second language. This transfer may be inappropriate either at the level of form and words or at the level of politeness and indirectness in the second language.

Pragmatic transfer can be positive or negative. Positive when it helps second language learners in their communication in the target language. And negative when it leads to misunderstandings and pragmatic failure.

Kasper (1992) states that there are two types of pragmatic transfer: Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic. Pragmalinguistic transfer is the use of first language forms and strategies in the interlanguage; however, sociopragmatic transfer is the transference of first language cultural perceptions of internal and external context variables into a second language (Barron, 2003).

Möllering (2004) claims that pragmalinguistic transfer is a recurrent cause of pragmalinguistic failure. It is the use of first language speech act strategies and methods while interacting with people from different speech communities (Cutting, 2005). That is, expressing speech acts the same way they are expressed in the first language in cross-cultural communication with people from different cultural backgrounds.

3.2. Different Cultural Values

Culture is all the practices, codes and values that are specific to a particular community. The combination of culture and language gives what is called “discourse”. This latter refers to the social identity of the person through the ways of talking, thinking, and behaving. (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Furthermore, “culture is communication” (Tannen, 1984, p. 194). Thereby, cultural competence is very important in cross-cultural communication. It “involves knowing culture (in native or target language, social structure, traditions, taboos, beliefs) and the ways in which the things are done” (Erton, 2007, p. 62). That’s why, language

understanding is affected by cultural and social factors. Thus, knowing the target culture leads to successful cross-cultural communication and its ignorance causes cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

For that reason, the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules that organize the realization of speech acts are cultural specific. So, the ignorance or lack of knowledge on the differences between cultures of the first and the target languages may cause cross-cultural pragmatic failure (House, 2008). Because, in this case, one may make inappropriate choices of what to say in a given situation to a given person.

3.3. Teachers and Teaching Materials

In the teaching process, second language teachers are not only responsible for explaining the linguistic knowledge of the target language, but also for describing its appropriate use, to improve the learners' linguistic and pragmatic communicative competence. But, there is a lack of teachers who are competent in the culture of the target language community, and this causes learners' pragmatic failure. If teachers themselves fail in cross-cultural communication, how they can help the students to avoid pragmatic failure! As a result, second language teachers often ignore pragmatics and focus on grammar which leads the students to pragmatic failure and communication breakdowns. (Amaya, 2008).

Thomas (1983) affirms that some teaching techniques or “teaching-induced errors” as they are referred to by Kasper (1981), help in the increase of pragmatic failure. For example; in classroom discourse, the use of complete sentence responses, breaks the textual pragmatic principle of economy. That is, students get used to make full answers in their communication.

Besides, emphasizing too much on “the metalinguistic Knowledge” by teachers may also lead to pragmatic failure, as the example of the imperative where students believe that there is an isomorphism between the grammatical category of “imperative” and the speech act of “ordering” while the imperative can also be used to command or to request in formal spoken English. (Thomas, 1983). For example, the statement “bring me the customers’ files” is in the imperative, but it represents a request from a manager to his/ her secretary and not an order. Consequently, students avoid using the imperative in formal requests thinking that it is impolite to order people in requests even in formal situations.

4. How to Improve Cross-cultural Communication

There is an emergency to include pragmatic knowledge in cross-cultural communication since linguistic knowledge is not enough to interact in a second language. Baker (2001, p. 217) asserts that “[w]e need to get away from the linguistic organization and look at reality, precisely because that reality is encoded in situations and texts ... and not in language”. That is, language is a means of communication, but if it is not related to the social and cultural perspectives of people, it will not be so. Therefore, to avoid cross-cultural pragmatic failure, pragmatic awareness should be arisen and pragmatic competence should be developed.

Pragmatic competence can be developed through investigating and analyzing cases of pragmatic failure (Nelson et al., 2002). So that second or foreign language learners will have experience, and thus they will avoid repeating the same mistakes in their future cross-cultural communication. Therefore, learning pragmalinguistic aspects of the target language helps to decrease communication misunderstandings and develop the pragmatic competence of learners. But this does not mean that pragmatic competence can be acquired as natives. Because acquiring the native pragmatic knowledge of a target language requires early and continuous dealing with the target language and culture (Kasper, 1998).

Thomas (1983) suggests that teachers should develop students' metapragmatic ability; i.e., the ability to study and discuss language use in a conscious manner, to avoid cross-cultural failure. For instance; discussing drama through analyzing pragmatic parameters explicitly in class, to build the students' awareness of pragmatic differences. In other words, discussing the characters' implied meaning in dramatic dialogues to help the students to understand the use of language appropriately.

But explaining pragmatic limitations in the target language is not enough; teachers should also make their students aware to possible cross-cultural pragmatic differences between their first language and the language they learn. Furthermore, effective teaching reduces the cultural interference and protects the students from being impolite, ineffective, or inappropriate in their behaviours in the target language. (Thomas, 1983). Moreover, students should know when to be polite and when to be impolite to be free in choosing their behaviours (Amaya, 2008).

Yueke (n.d.) offers in his article "The Development of Pragmatic and Communicative Competence of Non-English Major Postgraduates" the following advice in English teaching to increase the students' communicative competence and avoid pragmatic failure.

1. Teachers should pay their students' attention to evade confusions caused by cultural differences in their process of learning. This means that cultural differences may mislead the learners because they will affect their way of thinking.

2. Teachers should explain language barrier in communication caused by different social systems and cultural backgrounds. In this case, teachers should increase the students' target cultural knowledge to avoid misunderstandings in communication, because not all the students have enough time to attain their cultural knowledge as students of medicine and science and technology.

3. Teachers should increase the students' use of communicative strategies and direct them to understand the meaning according to the context in which it occurs.

Erton (2007), as well, suggests some points to teach and build a good pragmatic competence of second language learners in the following.

1. The design of a language course should take into consideration the needs of the language learners to better their communicative competence. For example, including linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge and the ability or skill to use this knowledge for communicative purposes.

2. The course material should be planned to engage the learners in the pragmatic, coherent and functional uses of language for communicative purposes.

3. Choosing activities that are useful for pragmatic development and raising students' pragmatic awareness.

The writer of this article thinks that, to improve their cross-cultural communication, second language learners should be taught everything about the target language culture, etiquette, and traditions. To do so, teaching pragmatic competence should be involved in some modules such as Oral Expression (through watching films and analyzing how speech acts are performed in natural situations with a comparison to the first language), Literature (through analyzing poems, metaphors, idioms, expressions, etc. to show cross-cultural differences between the first and the target language), Civilization (through describing the target etiquettes, traditions, behaviours, principles, attitudes, etc.), and Translation (through explaining the cultural differences between the first and the target language).

Moreover, the application and evaluation of the students' pragmatic knowledge is necessary in second language teaching to test their ability to communicate in the target language, analyze the sources of their pragmatic failure and make them aware of the cross-cultural pragmatic differences between the first and the target language.

Conclusion

Since cross-cultural communication is the communication between people from different cultural backgrounds, it requires a good command of both the linguistic and the pragmatic knowledge of the target language. Knowing the factors that may cause cross-cultural communication breakdowns can help to avoid nonnative speakers' cross-cultural pragmatic failure. That's why; the present article focuses on analyzing three major causes of cross-cultural pragmatic failure and providing some implications to improve second language learners' pragmatic competence. It seeks to raise second language learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences between the first language and the target language and have successful communicators with nonnative speakers.

References

- Amaya, L. F. (2008). Teaching culture: Is it possible to avoid pragmatic failure? *RevistaAlicantina de EstudiosIngleses*, 2, 11-24.
- Baker, M. (2001). *In other words: A course book on translation*. London: Routledge
- Barron, A. (2003). *Acquisition in interlanguage pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.
- Charlebois, J. (2003). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure and language teaching. *JALT Hokkaido Journal*, 7, 35-43.
- Cutting, J. (2005). *Pragmatic and discourse: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.

- Erton, I. (2007). Applied pragmatics and competence relations in language learning and teaching. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 3(1), 59-71.
- He Ziran. (1988). *A Survey of Pragmatics*. Changsha: Hunan Education Press.
- House, J. (2008). *Intercultural language use and language learning*. Spain: Springer.
- Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic Transfer, *Second Language Research* 8:3, 203-231.
- Kasper, G. (1998). Interlanguage pragmatics. In H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Learning foreign and second languages: Perspectives in research and scholarship* (pp. 183- 208). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Kasper, G., (1981): *Pragmatische Aspekte in der Interinsprache*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Möllering, M. (2004). *The acquisition of German modal particles: A corpus based approach*. Germany: Peter Lang AG.
- Nelson, G. L., Carson, J., AlBatal, M., & El Bakary, W. (2002). Cross-cultural pragmatics: Strategy use in Egyptian Arabic and American English refusals. *Applied Linguistics*, 23, 163-189.
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). London: Longman.
- Riley, P. (1989). Well don't blame me! - On the interpretation of pragmatic errors. In W. Oleksy (Ed.), *Contrastive pragmatics* (pp. 231-249). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Salmani-Nodoushan, M. A. (2006). *A sociopragmatic comparative study of ostensible invitations in English and Farsi*. (Unpublished M.A. thesis). University of Isfahan, Iran.
- Tannen, D. (1984). The Pragmatics of Cross-Cultural Communication. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 189-195.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 91-112.
- Wannaruk, A. (2008). Pragmatic transfer in Thai EFL refusals. *RELJ Journal*, 39, 318-337. Doi: 10.1177/0033688208096844
- Yueke, M. (n.d.). *The Development of pragmatic and communicative competence of non-English major postgraduates*. Zhengzhou University.