

Raising Awareness of Pragmatics in the EFL Classroom: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT: The present article deals with some potential applications deriving from introducing reflection on contrastive pragmatics in EFL teaching. Specifically, it focuses on an area of politeness theory that tends to be problematic for Catalan learners of English, namely, the formulation of polite requests. The article includes a framework for the development of contrastive language awareness in the classroom and the explanation of a didactic unit intended to help learners discover the similarities and differences between polite requests in their L1 and English.

Keywords: contrastive pragmatics, language awareness, politeness theory, formulation of requests, intercultural awareness, EFL teaching / learning.

RESUMEN: El presente artículo aborda la introducción de la pragmática contrastiva en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. Específicamente, se centra en la formulación de peticiones, un área de la teoría de la cortesía verbal que generalmente presenta problemas para los estudiantes de inglés cuya primera lengua es el catalán. El artículo contiene un marco para el desarrollo de la conciencia lingüística contrastiva en el aula y la explicación de una unidad didáctica diseñada para ayudar a los alumnos a descubrir las similitudes y diferencias entre las peticiones corteses en su L1 y en inglés.

Palabras clave: pragmática contrastiva, conciencia lingüística, cortesía, formulación de peticiones, conciencia intercultural, EFL teaching / learning.

1. Introduction

The present article is concerned with the introduction of contrastive pragmatics in the EFL classroom. Specifically, it addresses an issue of politeness

theory that has attracted the attention of pragmaticians in the last years, namely, the formulation of polite requests within the opening sequence of service encounters. In our experience as teachers, both at secondary school and at university levels, the formulation of polite requests tends to be rather problematic for our learners of English. This is so because learners invariably transfer the patterns of Catalan / Spanish into their knowledge of English, therefore causing pragmatic failure, misunderstandings and, occasionally, conversation breakdown when interacting with native speakers of English.

In the following sections a framework for the development of contrastive language awareness is presented, together with an explanation of the activities from a didactic unit (*unitat didàctica*) designed to make learners work out the similarities and differences between their L1 and English when it comes to formulating polite requests within the context of shopping exchanges.

The didactic unit that we designed is based on four main pedagogic assumptions:

- a) The development of socio-pragmatic competence is a key factor in the process of learning a language.
- b) The L1 can be used in order to scaffold learners' development of a second or a foreign language (henceforth FL).
- c) Raising language awareness and promoting explicit knowledge about language can contribute to the development of language learners' proficiency.
- d) Developing intercultural awareness is essential for learners to become good communicators in a foreign language, able to handle communicative exchanges with native and non-native users of English smoothly and effectively.

Although total consensus about these four assumptions has not been reached, with some researchers and educational practitioners still finding them problematic, it should be pointed out, however, that they have been introduced in the ESO¹ curriculum for foreign languages (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2001) and the Batxillerat² curriculum (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2002)³ in Catalonia, as well as being adopted for the Common European framework for languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

1. ESO stands for Educació Secundària Obligatòria (Compulsory Secondary Education).

2. Batxillerat is a two-year cycle of Post Compulsory Secondary Education.

3. The Departament d'Ensenyament is the Catalan Education Department, which has recently become the Departament d'Educació.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Development of Socio-Pragmatic Competence

Ever since the advent of communicative language teaching the importance of the development of socio-pragmatic competence has been recognised by both researchers and practitioners. An early advocate of socio-pragmatic competence is Littlewood (1981), who describes four main skills that make up communicative ability,⁴ namely:

- a) The ability to manipulate the system.
- b) The distinction between form and function.
- c) Interactive strategies.
- d) Awareness of the social meaning of linguistic forms.

Having said that, in our own experience, the socio-pragmatic analysis of the meaning of linguistic forms is very often taken for granted in the EFL classroom. As Baiget, Cots and Irún (2000: 160) point out, one of the possible reasons for this is the lack of materials providing realistic examples and enough contextual information for teachers and learners to engage in the analysis of socio-pragmatic issues. Cots (1996: 78), in turn, adds that teachers' own educational background should be taken into account. He argues that the extremely formal linguistic training that most teachers have received has led them to place great emphasis on morphology and syntax. Thus, these two components of communicative competence have become the main core of most FL teaching, pragmatics being relegated to the periphery. A third possible explanation might be the belief that socio-pragmatic meanings are universal or directly transferable from the L1.

From our point of view, even though the contributions of such authors as Jones (1981), Blundell, Higgins and Middlemiss (1982), Nolasco and Arthur (1987), Bygate (1987), Cook (1989), McCarthy (1991), and McCarthy and Carter (1994), among others, have been instrumental in giving practitioners a more holistic view of language use and its teaching and learning, there is still need for a new approach that would consider pragmatics as one of the main axes of the FL curriculum. This new approach should involve a new type of contrastive analysis such as the one advocated by James (1992), whereby the learners should be trained to develop contrastive awareness of the similarities and differences between the pragmatics of the languages in their linguistic repertoires.

4. Littlewood's notion of communicative ability draws on Hymes' (1971) seminal work on communicative competence. Other foundational works in the field of communicative competence and language teaching are Canale & Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990). These authors provide categories similar to Littlewood's.

2.2. L1 in the EFL Classroom

The role of L1 in L2 / FL learning remains a problematic issue for both academics and practitioners. This can be seen when reviewing standard handbooks on FL teaching (Willis (1981), Ur (1997), Thornbury (1997), just to mention a few), where the main idea seems to be that we should try and teach English through the medium of English exclusively. In brief, as Baiget, Cots and Irún (2000) point out, the position adopted in most ELT handbooks is that of considering the English language as the major focus of reflection and also as the only legitimate means of expression in the classroom. In other words, and following van Lier (1995), English is established not only as the «vehicle» but also the «goal» in most EFL classrooms, whereas contrastive analysis of the various languages in the learners' linguistic repertoires is ruled out in order to prevent interference.

This is not the approach adopted in the present article: We believe that the L1 may be strategically used as a means of communication in the classroom, and that it should definitely be one of the foci of reflection in this context. Specifically, and as regards the potentiality of the L1 as one of the codes used for classroom interaction, Baiget, Cots, Irún and Llorca (1998: 3) list the following positive aspects:

- a) The L1 as a facilitating element in group work, where emphasis is laid on the final product rather than the process.
- b) Strategic use of the L1 as an element that helps to create a friendly, relaxed atmosphere for learners who feel anxious or lost when asked to perform in the FL.
- c) The L1 as a cost-effective means to solve comprehension problems.
- d) The L1 as a means to promote learners' motivation and interest.
- e) The L1 as a stepping stone into potentially difficult contents (e.g. textual or cultural aspects).
- f) The L1 as a resource that allows learners to monitor their own learning.

Furthermore, we should consider to what extent promoting an «English only» policy in the EFL classroom is congruent with the linguistic practices that learners engage in in the broader educational context, where bilingualism is the rule; and also with the trend towards multilingualism and multiculturalism that can be observed in the Catalan society presently.

Finally, regarding the L1 as a focus of study and reflection, we believe that the Vygotskian approach to learning at the basis of the language curriculum in Catalonia favours occasional integration of the mother tongue. This is, without doubt, part of the background knowledge that learners can activate in order to scaffold their FL learning.

2.3. Language Awareness, Explicit Knowledge About Language and the Development of Proficiency

Researchers in the field of psychology, exploring the cognitive requirements of learning, have come up with a variety of terms in order to refer to the role that awareness plays in the learning process. Some of these terms have a clear pedagogical aim, that is to say, they are presented as if it is not the learner but the teacher who fosters consciousness. Terms such as «consciousness raising» and «input enhancement» (Sharwood-Smith, 1981) refer to techniques which are defined as guiding the learners' attention to particular aspects of language, thereby increasing the degree of explicitness. Other terms involving the notion of awareness, approached from the perspective of the learning process itself, are even more difficult to pin down: van Lier (1996: 10) defines «language awareness» as noticing the language around and examining it in a critical manner, while James and Garret (1991: 7) define it as reflecting on language and being able to talk about it.

Most of the authors mentioned above tend to identify language awareness and explicit knowledge about language with morphology and syntax. However, following Thomas (1983) and Schmidt (1990 *a*, 1990 *b*) we think that socio-pragmatic issues should also be included in the activities designed to develop explicit knowledge about language for the following reasons:

1. The actual performance of specific pragmatic functions seems to be unclear to learners (the area of politeness theory).
2. Relevant contextual factors may be overlooked by learners.
3. In terms of interlocutor tolerance, socio-pragmatic errors may be more grievous than grammatical ones, since they may have more negative social consequences for the learner.
4. Explicit reflection on socio-pragmatic issues such as politeness, indirectness, humour and face can help learners to become aware of cultural differences, and to become less ethnocentric.

These assumptions will be developed in the didactic unit that is presented in Section 4.

2.4. Intercultural Awareness

In the last years, a good deal of attention has been given to intercultural awareness in the fields of psychology, sociology, pragmatics or education. Results from research in these areas show that the exchange of information is dependent upon understanding how this information will be processed in

another cultural context. One of the key findings is, then, that successful communication is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of the information exchange. Rather, communication is also about establishing and maintaining relationships. With this principle in mind, one EFL objective would then be to improve communication, both verbal and non-verbal, the latter being an essential component which is at the core of many misunderstandings in the intercultural relationships.

Another area that needs reflecting upon is politeness, since attitudes of politeness vary from one culture to another, and, thus, students should be made aware of the differences «which may be incompatible and contain the seeds of conflict unless relationships are maintained through politeness» (Byram, 1997: 14).

3. The Pedagogic Framework Employed

We regard the different activities that we have included in our didactic unit as perfectly amenable to the FL classroom, as part of a pedagogic framework based on the idea, suggested by authors such as Byalistok (1982), Gass (1983), Bourguignon and Candelier (1984), that, by starting with metacognitions, the learner can gain insights into the language which are first transformed into intuitions and subsequently into skills and the capacity to process text:

METACOGNITIONS
 ↓
 INSIGHTS
 ↓
 INTUITIONS
 ↓
 SKILLS / TEXTS

We believe, with James (1992), that contrastive analysis has a very important role in this process, since metacognitions, insights and intuitions can only be derived from something which is «known», and if there is one thing that the FL learner knows for certain this is his / her L1. The process, therefore, should be initiated in the learners' skills to use their native language, and subsequent reflection about those skills will lead automatically to the formulation of intuitions, insights and metacognitions by the learners themselves. Once this process is concluded it can be applied in a reverse fashion to the description of the facts of the FL. Since this presentation will be based on a series of concepts and facts based on the L1, which are already known by the learner, the description will

become at the same time an explanation, for an explanation is nothing else than a description of the unknown in terms of the already known.



4. Didactic Unit

In this section we are going to present a pragmatic consciousness-raising activity that we designed for one group of 2nd year Batxillerat EFL students and one group of 1st year English Studies Degree (Filología Inglesa) students enrolled in the course «Audio-Visual Communication in English». For us, this kind of tasks should be a must in all FL classrooms that seek to enhance and develop students' communicative competence. As Bardovi-Hardig and Dörnyei's (1989: 235) research results suggest, awareness raising and noticing activities should «supplement the introduction of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning, particularly in the EFL setting».

4.1. Objectives

The main objectives of this unit are:

- a) to enhance and develop students' communicative competence, and in particular, their pragmatic and intercultural competence.
- b) to make students aware of the different realisations that polite opening turns have in English.
- c) to develop students' capacity of reflecting upon language.

4.2. Description of Unit Procedure

This didactic unit, which you can find sketched in the appendix, is divided into three steps, plus an introduction:

Step 0: The unit begins with an introduction to the topic of shopping which serves as an initial evaluation for the teacher as well. Then, the objectives of the unit are handed out. Learners know what the aim of the unit is and, therefore, they are more aware of their role.

Step 1: It focuses on the students' L1. Four sequences from three Spanish films (*Policías, Torrente, Solas*) and one sequence from an English film in Spanish (*Notting Hill*) are introduced so as to bring real Spanish into the classroom. These film sequences enable us to show the ways in which language varies according to the socio-cultural context of its production. They are also aimed at making students aware of the different registers and attitudes that people may use according to the situation and the social relationships established.

The activities in **Step 1** were designed with the objective of focussing on making students aware of the formal features of spoken discourse in their mother tongue. Thus, activities 1 to 3 (see Appendix) are intended to make students aware of the different realisations of opening turns in shopping exchanges according to the kind of shop and the degree of familiarity or social distance that both customer and assistant want to express. The main aim of activity 4 is to trigger the reflection on how politeness is expressed explicitly in Spanish.

The section finishes with explicit work on metalanguage, where the knowledge about opening routines is systematised, so that students will be able to use such terms later on in the unit. It is at this stage that the teacher can talk about this phenomenon more theoretically, thus providing scaffolding for **Step 2**, in which students are expected to bring into use their explicit contrastive knowledge when performing in the FL.

Step 2: It focuses on English. Work is devoted to comprehension and to developing learners' awareness of the differences between Spanish and English with respect to shopping exchanges, specifically the openings and the degree of formality involved. In the first five activities (see Appendix), seven different scenes from five films are analysed by the students with the aim of rendering them aware of the fact that the very same request can be uttered using different structures, depending on the degree of politeness. To that purpose, students are asked to guess the type of shop, the type of relationship that the shop assistant would like to initiate, etc. In activity 6 students have to recognise the problems arising in a shopping exchange, and to rewrite it as an appropriate conversation. Therefore, learners have to recognise the reason for the breakdown in communication and also have to solve it. In such a way, the teacher may test whether students have understood how to open shopping exchanges in English, and acquired the proficiency to do so.

The last activity in this section prepares learners for the final task in **Step 3**, while asking them to put everything that they have been learning into practice. Once students have ordered a scene, they should re-write and re-play it, but changing the social relationship of the customer, and the gender of both the customer and the shop-assistant.

This activity is followed by a recapitulation of the most usual structures and strategies employed in polite shopping exchanges. First, students should make up a list of structures commonly used in such openings, and then they should write down a few rules on how to go shopping, as if these were needed for an extra-terrestrial being. It is at this stage that students will make their knowledge about language explicit.

Step 3: It is the end of the unit. It involves a task where students have to perform two out of three different situations in an audition.⁵ We decided that this final task had to be oral and as real or authentic as possible. Even if we were talking about speech acts, we would not like to deal with isolated sentences, but utterances embedded in a real context. The three situations presented have a certain degree of difficulty in terms of the purposes both for the customer and the shop-assistant, but share the same context (buying a dress for a special occasion). A role play is handed out in order to be performed after it has been rehearsed, thus, the audition constitutes a real oral task. **Step 3** also includes a group assessment which, apart from encouraging the learners to pay attention to their classmates, provides evaluation material for both the learner and the teacher, and ends the unit in a very entertaining way. This task was found particularly suitable for a class activity due to its management, its catering for diversity, and its resemblance to a real world activity.

5. Concluding Remarks

The unit that we have presented constitutes an attempt to introduce contrastive pragmatics in EFL teaching, based on a series of activities in which language awareness and explicit knowledge of language are promoted through reflection and strategic use of the L1. This didactic unit has been recently piloted with two groups of learners (at Batxillerat and University levels), and the preliminary results obtained are encouraging. These results show that students have become aware of the different realisations that opening turns in polite requests have when comparing their L1 (Catalan and Spanish) and English. In

5. This was done in order to cater for diversity.

this respect, the comment by one of the participating students is particularly revealing:

Jo em pensava que els anglesos eren molt més educats que nosaltres, perquè sempre estan amb el *please* i el *thank you*, però ara m'adono que el que passa és que nosaltres som educats d'una altra manera, amb el *tu* i el *vostè*, per exemple. [I used to think that British people were more polite than us because they always say *please* and *thank you*, but now I realise that we are polite in a different way, using *tu* and *vostè*, for example.]

Our purpose in the near future is to assess the effectiveness of this type of work experimentally, by comparing the results yielded by a group of learners who received explicit pragmatic instruction on the formulation of polite requests, with those of a group of students who received standard tuition with no specific language awareness training. We hope that this proposal will contribute to the raising of pragmatic awareness in the EFL classroom, since, as already mentioned above, even though there is a substantial body of research on service encounters, the results have not been transferred to pedagogic practice in the form of didactic units.

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Appendix

STEP	ACTIVITY
0.- Think about it.	1.- Initial assessment.
1.- L1 Analysis. Consciousness Raising.	1.- Guessing kind of shop. 2.- Listing openings. 3.- Ranking. 4.- Rules for beginning a shopping exchange in Spanish. 5.- Metalanguage work.
2.- L2 Analysis. Consciousness Raising.	1.- Guessing kind of shop. 2.- Analysing the difference between two shopping exchanges. 3.- Analysing register and reason. 4-5.- Analysing opening routines. 6.- Spot the problem. 7.- Re-writing and re-playing a scene. 8.- List of conversational rules.
3.- L2 Performance. Task.	1.- The audition.