



The use of language learning strategies to improve students' pragmatic competence: A case study of EFL learners at the intensive language teaching centre

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Abstract

The growth of English and its further implementation in various domains have become more and more vital in Algeria. Learners are highly interested in the English language and its use effectively and appropriately. Thus, the ability to use English adeptly is essential if language learners are to achieve communicative competence to develop pragmatic competence. Many researchers have tended to heed largely on the teaching of pragmatics rather than on how students acquire pragmatic competence. Its importance has been increasingly carried out, but a few researches on how to achieve it have been done. For this reason, this study investigates students' use of language learning strategies (LLSs) to improve pragmatic competence and to enhance the learning of English as a foreign language as well. It aims also at raising learners' awareness of the importance of pragmatic knowledge and LLSs for classroom instruction. To carry out this investigation, a sample of 10 pre-intermediate, 10 intermediate and 10 advanced learners was taken. To collect data, a questionnaire was given to students in which, they are asked to fulfil the LLSs they think are necessary to improve their pragmatic competence. The results showed that applying LLSs, namely, direct strategies could help them achieve communicative competence and hence become pragmatically competent learners.

Keywords: language learning strategies, pragmatic competence, communicative competence

1. Introduction

For decades, the field of applied linguistics and language education have witnessed a drastic change in the teaching and learning processes. A shift from the teacher-centred to more learner-centred approach is remarkable. In this respect, numerous researchers have emphasised how different learners manage to learn by using different kinds of LLSs. It is worth stressing that studies of LLSs have proliferated to such an extent that it has been proved that successful learners make use of various types of LLSs in an orchestrated way than do less successful learners.

Strategies are of a paramount importance for language learning as they are means for active and self-directed involvement that is vital for the improvement of communicative competence (Oxford, 1990)^[3, 14], and hence the development of pragmatic competence which is deemed as an important ingredient of language proficiency. (Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1986)^[3, 4]

The term language learning strategy has been differently highlighted and defined by a number of researchers. Rubin and Stern (1975) are considered as the pioneering researchers in the field of LLSs during the mid-1970s. Rubin (1975) states that learning strategies are "techniques or devices which a learner can use to acquire knowledge." (Griffiths, 2004:2)^[8] Chamot (1990) gives that definition of LLSs as: "techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area of information." ((Ching-yi and Shu-Chen and Yi-Nian 2007: 239)^[6]

Congruent with this, Oxford claims that, "LLSs are steps

taken by students to enhance their own learning." (1990: 1) More importantly, she expands her definition to "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations." (1990: 8) Oxford (1989), in her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), orchestrates six categories of LLSs, namely, memory strategy (e.g., grouping, representing); cognitive strategy (e.g., repeating, analysing, etc); compensation strategy (e.g., switching to the mother tongue); metacognitive strategy (e.g., linking new information with already known one); affective strategy (e.g., lowering anxiety by listening to music, motivating oneself); and social strategy (e.g., working collegially, communicating with native speakers).

Since 1970s, various theorists have contributed to giving different definitions of LLSs. Such outstanding theorists have proposed different models to classify and create a hierarchy of strategies on the basis of how they are related to the learners and the task they employ in the learning process. However, among all these different categorisations of LLSs, Oxford's classification has been referred to in many studies. She defined direct strategies as "language learning strategies that directly involve the target language which include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies." (1990: 37) Indirect strategies, for her, "are for general management of learning." (1990: 15) Therefore, the direct strategies are employed for learning the language; whereas, indirect strategies are for using the language. Notwithstanding, Oxford's classification remains the most comprehensive, systematic and detailed one. The aim of this research is to understand how language learners apply LLSs in learning English in general and

pragmatics in particular. There has been no study in the Algerian context that particularly examines LLSs applied in learning pragmatics. It is this gap that this study fills. Being aware of LLSs allows both learners and teachers to facilitate learning pragmatics of the target language. Therefore, the achievement of communicative competence should be the objective of university English learning and teaching in Algeria.

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning expressed by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or a reader. (Yule, 1996) ^[16] It focuses mainly on the use of language and what people mean in relation with the social and interpersonal context. (Roever, 2010) ^[15] Moreover, Levinson (1983) ^[10] contends: “pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalised or encoded in the structure of a language. (Levinson, 1983: 9) ^[10] It is a limited definition since it gives importance to language and context only. It also deals with the utterances speakers utter in relation to whom they speak, when and where. (Yule, 1996) ^[16]

More importantly, Crystal (1997) ^[7] admits that pragmatics “is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use has on their participants in the act of communication.” (Crystal, 1997: 301) ^[7]

Correspondingly, pragmatics is also defined as “the ability of language users to match utterances with context in which they are appropriate.” (Bardvin Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003: 37) ^[1] Therefore, pragmatics encompasses many outstanding features, namely, language users, context, meanings, speaker/listener relationship and the social interaction. All of which are important ingredients in achieving pragmatic competence.

Research has shown that linguistic competence only cannot help learners acquire pragmatic competence. Thus, learners should be aware of pragmatic competence since it is one of the crucial components that help learners achieve communicative competence. (Bachman, 1990) It is defined as “the capacity of persons to select and recognize the type of language appropriate to the occasion.” (Milroy and Milroy, 1990: 503) ^[12] Hymes (1970) also explained the notion of communicative competence as the ability not only to know the knowledge of a language, but also the ability to apply that knowledge appropriately. (Barron, 2003; Widdowson, 1992) ^[2] Hence, it was examined that explicit and implicit teaching instruction and strategies were needed to raise learners’ pragmatic awareness. (Martinez-Flor and Alcon-Soler, 2007) ^[11]

Interestingly, LLSs are the tools that help learners outstandingly develop their language learning effectively. (Kaplan, 2002) Therefore, LLSs are so important in the development of learners’ communicative ability in the target language. (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990) ^[13] The aim of this study, then, is to investigate learners’ use of LLSs in learning at the Intensive Language Teaching Center of Mostaganem. Therefore, the following questions are addressed in this study:

1. How do students apply their language learning strategies in the learning of English and pragmatics?
2. What kinds of LLSs do students think are necessary to improve their pragmatic competence?

2. Method

To conduct this study, the sample was three classes of 10 pre-intermediate students, 10 intermediate and 10 advanced learners. To analyse data, a questionnaire was given to determine how students learned English and pragmatics by using different types of LLSs. To carry out this investigation, Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for language Learning (SILL) was used. It divides LLSs into direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective and social strategies). The second instrument is an interview with the same students to indicate the most important LLSs they find are necessary to enhance the learning of pragmatic competence. The data obtained from investigating students’ use of LLSs was analysed by using percentage.

3. Findings

The use of the questionnaire was to analyse how students learn English and pragmatics through using different kinds of LLSs. The results are summarised in the following table.

Table 1: Learners’ Use of LLSs

Strategies	Pre-intermediate N=10	Intermediate N=10	Advanced N=10
Memory	90%	80%	40%
Cognitive	80%	90%	90%
Compensation	80%	80%	90%
Metacognitive	60%	100%	70%
Affective	30%	70%	30%
Social	40%	80%	60%
Direct strategies	83.33%	83.33%	73.33%
Indirect strategies	43.33%	83.33%	55.33%

Students managed to identify and use unconsciously a range of various types of LLS, though they did not know how to label each kind. The data showed that learners of all levels of proficiency preferred using direct strategies to learn English and improve their pragmatic competence.

According to the results, the most frequently used strategy by pre-intermediate students is memory strategies, followed by cognitive and compensation strategies (80%), metacognitive strategies (60%), social strategies (40%) and finally affective strategies (30%). There is in fact a difference between direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are more employed (83.33%) than indirect strategies (43.33%). Intermediate students most frequently reported strategy is metacognitive strategies (100%), followed by cognitive strategies (90%), social, memory and compensation strategies (80%) and finally affective strategies (70%). Therefore, they employed both direct and indirect strategies in the same frequent manner (83.33%). For advanced learners, they employed more frequently cognitive and compensation strategies (90%), followed by metacognitive strategies (70%), social strategies (60%) cognitive strategies (40%) and affective strategies (30%). Thus, direct strategies (73.33%) are used more often than indirect strategies (53.33%).

To answer research question number two, students were interviewed. They admit that the best way to achieve and learn pragmatic competence is through watching movies and listening to music (memory strategies). They also stressed the

imitation of native speakers pronunciation, taking note, writing new vocabulary and expressions (cognitive and memory strategies) as other means that help them improve their pragmatic competence.

What is more important for them to reach communicative competence is to find opportunities to communicate with native speakers and learn from them different skills. With the development of technology, it is easy to take chances and get in touch with professionals (social strategies) through the different kinds of social media. Moreover, students prefer to guess the meaning of words from the context so as to be kept in mind (compensation strategies). Interestingly, students determine that self-management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation which are parts of metacognitive strategies help them know and detect their weaknesses in English learning and pragmatics in particular.

4. Discussion

As found earlier, pre-intermediate students tended to use more cognitive and memory strategies. They preferred using new English words in a sentence so that they could easily remember them, as they favoured making a silent written or oral summary of what they have learnt to memorise them. They could, then, manage their learning without the help of the teacher. They also promoted the use of compensation strategies through which the use of mimes and gestures is required when facing difficulties to communicate in English. Students realised that monitoring and planning might speed up their learning process. Social strategies were ranked the fifth. They preferred cooperating with professionals and communicating with native speakers to enhance their pragmatic competence.

Intermediate students used with a higher degree of frequency metacognitive strategies which involve thinking about the learning process, planning and monitoring. In the second position come the cognitive strategies. They tended to associate new information with what has been learnt. In the third position, social, memory and compensation strategies were used. They were likely to retrieve the information that has been studied from long term memory, to use synonyms to compensate for missing knowledge and to get in touch with others to reach communicative competence.

Advanced students tended to devote great effort to problem-solving tasks, to give more importance to facilitate their learning by summarising or paraphrasing what has been learnt, writing items and repeating them several times to be remembered, and therefore, these help achieve pragmatic competence. They were also more likely to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning processes. They also preferred to have opportunities to practice English with other people.

Hence, all the categories of students tended to use direct strategies more frequently since it is important for them to learn the language, instead of employing more often indirect strategies to use the language. Thus, knowing what to learn, how to memorise, how to summarise and take notes should be a stepping stone to knowing how to use the English language effectively so as to achieve pragmatic competence.

5. Conclusion

Although learners had a very limited knowledge about LLSs

that might hinder the development of their learning process and pragmatics as well, they managed to determine the use of LLSs and to be interested in transferring their usage to other contexts. Admittedly, LLSs help learners acquire the knowledge of the target language and put that knowledge into practice to boost learning and promote practicing pragmatics. However, what is more important is the fact of enhancing students' autonomy and independent learning.

6. References

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