

Pragmatic competence in the listening paper of the Certificate of Proficiency in English

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Resumo O presente artigo baseia-se em minha monografia do curso de especialização, cujo objetivo foi justificar a importância do desenvolvimento de atividades de conscientização pragmática, em sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira. O conceito de competência pragmática foi abordado e descreveu-se seu impacto no desempenho linguístico. Foram analisadas as provas de compreensão e de produção orais de um exame de proficiência britânico intitulado “Certificate of Proficiency in English”, da universidade de Cambridge. Neste artigo, irei descrever as conclusões a respeito da prova de compreensão oral. A análise foi baseada nos modelos de código e inferencial de comunicação verbal e o princípio da relevância de Sperber e Wilson (1986), e na teoria dos atos de fala de Searle (1979). Os resultados oferecem um olhar sobre as habilidades inferenciais e conhecimentos pragmáticos a serem desenvolvidos ou ensinados de forma explícita em sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira.

Palavras chaves: pragmática, competência, desempenho, relevância, atos de fala.

Abstract This article is based on a monograph which aimed at justifying the importance of developing pragmatic awareness-raising activities in the EFL classroom. I addressed the notion of pragmatic competence and described how it can affect linguistic performance. I analysed the listening and speaking components of a British proficiency test called “Certificate of Proficiency in English” by the University of Cambridge. In this article, I will describe the findings from the listening paper. The analysis was grounded on the Code and Inferential Models of Verbal Communication and the Relevance Principle by Sperber and Wilson (1986) and the Speech Act Theory by Searle (1979). The results provide an insight on the inferential abilities and pragmatic knowledge to be developed or explicitly taught in the EFL classroom.

Key words: pragmatics, competence, performance, relevance, speech acts.

Introduction

Mastering a foreign language involves far more than simply learning its grammatical, lexical and phonological aspects. When students interact with other people in L2, they should be able to understand what speakers mean when they produce an utterance and respond linguistically appropriately to the situation. However, speakers may choose to convey their intended meanings explicitly or implicitly, which may cause communication breakdowns. If the interlocutors are native speakers, they may also refer to cultural allusions that non-native speakers may not be aware of. Aspects such as the ability to recognise the unsaid, understand cultural references and manage the conversation appropriately are studied under the science of pragmatics, a linguistics sub-field.

1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effect their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. (Crystal, 1985, p. 240)

As we can see in the above quote, pragmatics is the study of meaning including context, users and interaction. It focuses on the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener (Yule, 1996). Therefore, it goes beyond sentence level as it studies utterances, which possess a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic properties (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

2. Competence and Performance

Learners usually decide to study a foreign language in order to enhance their oral communication. I have been teaching English as a Foreign Language for over 22 years and most students I have taught demonstrated a far higher degree of interest in developing their oral skills rather than the written ones. These students regard English as a means to communicate with other speakers from all over the world since English is considered by many people as a *lingua franca*.¹

Oral communication comprises the participation of speakers in social interaction and the understanding of different forms of discourse. When people communicate with each other, they communicate meanings, information, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, among others (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In order to achieve their communicative aims, learners not only need linguistic knowledge, coined by Chomsky (1957) as linguistic competence, but also pragmatic knowledge. Both linguistic and pragmatic dimensions influence learners' linguistic performance dramatically.

2.1. Linguistic competence

Chomsky (1957) defines linguistic competence as the portion of knowledge native speakers have of the linguistic system of their mother tongue. It allows them to produce and understand grammatical sentences and spot ungrammatical ones. Foreign language students also acquire this knowledge of a second language within a few years of studying.

Furthermore, linguistic competence encompasses knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis, all essential areas for the production and understanding of any sentence in any language. Based on a finite set of rules and elements, speakers are able to produce an infinite number of sentences which convey different meanings.

2.2. Linguistic performance

Chomsky (1957) separates competence from performance. Linguistic performance is the actual use of the linguistic knowledge to produce written sentences or utterances. It corresponds to the way speakers behave linguistically. Not only is language users' performance affected by their linguistic competence but also by non-linguistic factors such as social conventions, beliefs, emotional attitudes, cultural background, etc. Thus, it is also the ability to interact appropriately in communicative situations.

2.3. Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is the ability to understand speakers' intentions, interpret their feelings and attitudes, and differentiate speech acts such as "requesting", "suggesting" and "threats". It is also having the necessary knowledge to interact appropriately in communicative situations.

Kasper (1997) states that pragmatic competence is not extra or ornamental. It is not subordinated to knowledge of grammar and textual organization but it is co-ordinated to formal linguistic and textual knowledge. Learners need to develop pragmatic competence in order to communicate successfully in a target language.

Garcia (2004) presents the concepts of pragmatic ability and pragmatic comprehension. The former is the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation and the latter refers to the comprehension of oral language in terms of pragmatic meaning. Therefore, students need to be able to comprehend meaning pragmatically in order to:

1. understand a speaker's intention;
2. interpret a speaker's feelings and attitudes;
3. differentiate speech act meaning such as the difference between a *directive* and a *commissive*;
4. evaluate the intensity of a speaker's meaning, such as the difference between a *suggestion* and a *warning*;
5. recognize sarcasm, joking, and other facetious behaviour;
6. be able to respond appropriately.

Still on the topic of pragmatic comprehension, Thomas (1995) proposes that the comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures are features of pragmatic comprehension (In: Garcia, 2004, p. 2). Speech acts define utterances produced by a speaker who is trying to do something or trying to get the hearer to do something (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Conversational implicatures are utterances which express attitudes and feelings from the speaker and must be inferred by the hearer (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

¹ A lingua franca is any language widely used beyond its native population, primarily used for international

3. The effect of pragmatic competence on linguistic performance

There is a dispute whether pragmatic competence can be taught in the foreign language classroom. Several studies have been made addressing this question. Kasper (1997, p.1) states that competence is not teachable: “Competence is a type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use or lose”. However, she suggests that teachers can arrange learning opportunities in a way that learners benefit from the development of pragmatic competence in L2.

LoCastro (2003) addresses this question even further. She indicates that all the areas of pragmatics are potential problems for learners in the L2 classroom and for members of minority groups who have a more limited proficiency in the target language. She exemplifies sources of input to which learners are exposed to: teachers, classroom and supplementary materials and other learners. In her study, she proposes different ways to maximize opportunities for the development of pragmatic knowledge using these sources of input.

On the other hand, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) advocate the explicit teaching of pragmatic aspects to foreign language students in order to develop pragmatic competence in the EFL classroom. After observing a number of EFL learners, they came to the conclusion that students demonstrated a clear need for it and that the explicit teaching of pragmatics can be a successful classroom experience.

Language learners’ linguistic performance is significantly different from native speakers’. Areas such as the execution and comprehension of certain speech acts, conversational functions such as “greetings” and “leave takings” and conversational management such as “back channelling²” and “short responses” are particularly problematic to non-native speakers.

Furthermore, without the explicit teaching of pragmatics, language learners’ pragmatic competence will vary a lot regardless of their language background or language proficiency. “That is to say, a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic development”. (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 2).

From my own experience, even students at advanced levels show a wide range of pragmatic competence, especially if we compare learners who have had some experience living in the target language community and the ones who have not. The former tend to be more pragmatically aware in terms of appropriacy of linguistic forms whereas the latter tend to be more accurate in terms of grammar and less aware of cultural aspects.

Taking the nature of pragmatics into consideration, pragmatic errors are often interpreted on a social or personal level rather than a result of faulty learning. Pragmatic errors tend to have more serious consequences than language errors. When speakers produce an utterance, they attempt to communicate an intended meaning which may be wrongly interpreted.

commerce and eventually accepted for cultural exchanges.

² Backchannels are vocal indications such as ‘uh-huh’ to signal that the listener is paying attention to the speaker’s turn.

Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) list the following consequences to pragmatic errors:

1. A pragmatic error may hinder good communication between speakers;
2. It may make the speaker appear abrupt or brusque in social interactions;
3. It may make the speaker appear rude or uncaring;
4. Unintentional insult to interlocutors;
5. Denial of requests.

Bearing learners' oral communication goals in mind, foreign language teachers should provide learners with classroom activities which promote the development of pragmatic competence. Thus, learners are more likely to successfully communicate in English without suffering the consequences of pragmatic errors mentioned above.

There are several ways to help learners to acquire pragmatic knowledge. Students can observe polite social behaviour of members from a community where English is spoken as their first language through video or listening activities. Learners can practise different forms of interaction in specific social situations by role-playing real-life situations. Thus, teachers need to explicitly present different functional exponents to express specific speech acts and their individual illocutionary force³. Learners also need to be given practice in inferring hidden meanings so that they are able to analyse discourse effectively and predict information to come.

In conclusion, learners who undergo pragmatic enhancement activities are more likely to achieve their communicative aims. The key to success of non-native speakers' linguistic performance partially lies on their pragmatic knowledge.

4. Certificate of proficiency in English

The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) originally offered the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in 1913 to meet the special needs of foreign language teachers of English. Since then, it has been updated on a regular basis. UCLES test designers carry out a large number of surveys and pre-test activities all over the world so as to ensure that the examinations meet the standards of good tests such as reliability, validity, authenticity and interactivensess.

As well as being at Cambridge level five, the CPE examination has also been placed at level five of the ALTE framework, which corresponds to mastery in the Council of Europe framework. CPE candidates are expected to demonstrate mastery of English in terms of language use, cognitive skills and appropriate social behaviour. It is not simply a language examination. It presupposes candidates' pragmatic competence. Therefore, I decided to use the CPE listening and speaking components to highlight the pragmatic features present in this examination because of their oral nature.

³ According to Searle (1979), illocutionary force is the communicative force of an utterance which has a specific purpose.

5. Communication: listening and speaking

Considering the nature of oral communication, our listening and speaking skills are inextricably intertwined. Each time we produce an utterance there is one or more listeners we want to address in order to convey a message. We may choose to express our intended meanings explicitly or implicitly depending on various factors such as the degree of imposition that the utterance carries, social distance, gender and how much actually needs to be said. The CPE listening paper analysis was grounded on the Code and Inferential Models of Verbal Communication and the Relevance Principle proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) and the Speech Act Theory by Searle (1979).

5.1. Communication theories

Sperber and Wilson (1986) contrast two approaches to provide an explanatory account of verbal communication: the code and the inferential theories. In the code model, human languages are seen as codes and these codes associate thoughts to sounds. “Communication is achieved by encoding a message, which cannot travel, into a signal, which can and by decoding this signal at the receiving end” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 4). Although the code model of verbal communication is only a hypothesis, Sperber and Wilson highlight its well-known merits and less-known defects:

Its main merit is that it is explanatory: utterances do succeed in communicating thoughts, and the hypothesis that they encode thoughts might explain how this is done. Its main defect, as we will shortly argue, is that it is descriptively inadequate: comprehension involves more than the decoding of a linguistic signal. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 6)

In the inferential model, on the other hand, communication is achieved by the communicator providing evidence of his/her intentions and hearers inferring his/her intentions from the evidence provided. Utterances are used to convey thoughts and to reveal the speaker’s attitude or relation to the thought expressed. As previously mentioned, utterances express propositional attitudes, perform speech acts and carry illocutionary force (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 11).

An essential inferential device used for interpreting an utterance constitutes what is generally known as the context: “A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of course, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 15).

Members from the same linguistic community share the same language and possibly have similar inferential abilities. However, their assumptions about the world are likely to be very different. For instance, when people witness a dramatic event, each person will possibly describe it by providing different details, strengthening or lessening its dramatic effect as if each of them has seen it from a different camera angle.

A problem area for pragmatists is to find out how a hearer finds an appropriate context which enables him/her to successfully interpret an utterance. Communication breakdowns happen when there is a mismatch between the context chosen by the speaker and the one selected by the hearer. An alternative to minimize the chances of misunderstandings is for both speaker and hearer to rely on shared or mutual knowledge.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) conclude saying that verbal communication involves both types of processes: one based on coding and decoding and the other based on ostension⁴ and inference. The code model is not autonomous; it is subservient to the inferential model. Being autonomous, the inferential process functions in essentially the same way whether or not combined with coded communication. Nonetheless, in the absence of coded communication, performances are likely to be poorer.

4.2. Relevance

When attempting to describe the comprehension process, the notion of a contextual effect is of utmost importance. Sperber and Wilson (1986, p.109) define contextualisation as a deduction based on the union of new information and old information: “To modify or improve a context is to have some effect on that context”. However, they claim that the addition of new information that duplicates old information or that is entirely unrelated to old information does not count as an improvement to the context. Utterances have contextual effects when they add new and related information, strengthen an old assumption or provide evidence against it, perhaps leading to its abandonment.

Sperber and Wilson believe that the notion of contextual effect is essential to a characterisation of relevance. They argue that having contextual effects is a necessary condition for relevance, and other things being equal, the greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance (1986). Nevertheless, they also claim that as contextual effects are brought about by mental processes, these involve a certain effort, a certain expenditure of energy, which has to be taken into account when assessing relevance. Therefore, they propose the following theoretical concept of degrees of relevance (1986, p. 125):

Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large;

Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small.

In short, they propose that the more relevant an assumption is, the less effort is required to process it.

A final consideration about relevance is related to how contexts are determined. When people engage in conversations, hearers hope that the assumption being proposed is relevant, otherwise they would not bother trying to process it at all. Then, they try to choose a context which will justify that hope, maximising relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Thus, a context is chosen once it is relevant to an individual.

5.3. Speech acts

As previously mentioned, speech acts define actions which are performed via utterances. When people try to express themselves, they produce utterances which have a communicative purpose. Searle (1979) distinguishes five categories of speech acts (In: Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 243-244)

1. *Assertives*: statements which commit the speaker to the truth of the assumption expressed;
2. *Directives*: speech acts that speakers use to get someone else to do something;
3. *Commissives*: speech acts which commit the speaker to the performance of a future action;
4. *Expressives*: speech acts which convey the speaker's emotional attitude to the assumption expressed;
5. *Declarations*: statements which bring about the state of affairs described in the assumption expressed.

Yule (1996, p. 54) presents an alternative approach to distinguish types of speech acts based on *form* versus *meaning*:

1. *Direct Speech Acts*: utterances in which there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function, for instance, a declarative used to make a statement;

2. *Indirect Speech Acts*: utterances in which there is an indirect relationship between a structure and a function, for example, a declarative used to make a request.

He also states that actions performed by utterances are usually given more specific labels such as “apology”, “complaint”, “invitation”, “promise” or “request”.

The study of speech acts plays a vital role in the study of pragmatic meaning of utterances:

Perhaps the single most uncontroversial assumption of modern pragmatics is that any adequate account of utterance comprehension must include some version of speech-act theory. As Levinson (1983, p. 226) says, speech acts remain, along with presupposition and implicature in particular, one of the central phenomena that any general pragmatic theory must account for. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 243)

6. Listening paper: findings

The CPE Listening Paper comprises four parts and a total of seven listening texts. The test takes 40 minutes approximately. Candidates listen to each part twice. “The range of texts and tasks types reflects the variety of listening situations which candidates at this level need to be able to cope with” (Cambridge ESOL, 2003, p. 82). The test material used for the analysis was taken from the CPE Handbook 2003, Paper 4, listening sample paper 1 (pages 83 to 86) with the kind permission of ESOL.

⁴ Ostention or ostensive behaviour makes manifest an intention to make something manifest, i.e., showing someone something (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, P. 49).

6.1. Part 1

In part 1, candidates listen to four unrelated extracts with two three-option multiple-choice questions on each extract. Candidates are expected to read the introductory sentence to each extract carefully before listening to it. This strategy aids the contextualisation of what is to come. In all the four extracts, candidates must infer the correct answer to each question since none of the choices are explicitly mentioned.

After the analysis of the four extracts of part 1 and the application of the relevance theory, I was able to draw the following conclusions:

1. The introductory lines of each extract help hearers to choose a context of what is to come;
2. By choosing a context, hearers are able to anticipate content;
3. Some of the contexts involve cultural schemata or shared knowledge;
4. The questions presented give candidates a focus to concentrate on;
5. The assumptions derived from the options can be reinforced or abandoned when applying the relevance theory.
6. Out of the three options, in most cases candidates end up having two most relevant and likely ones.

6.2. Part 2

Part Two consists of a radio broadcast of an informative nature aimed at a non-specialist audience. Candidates are given a summary of the text which contains nine gap-fills in the form of single words or short phrases reporting its main ideas. Candidates are expected to read the whole gapped-text before they actually listen to it. They must retrieve specific information from the text as well as stated opinions and attitudes. The answers are short, follow the order of information found in the text, and must be correctly spelled fitting into the grammatical structure of the sentence.

The retrieval of specific information from the text is the main focus of part 2. Hearers must listen to the text intensively so as to fill in the gaps with relevant information in terms of meaning and grammar. The neutral accent of the speaker facilitates the information transfer activity which does not involve any paraphrasing strategies, inference or synonymy. Therefore, considering the fact that the information is explicitly given, part 2 tests candidates' intensive listening ability rather than any pragmatic aspect derived from the text.

6.3. Part 3

Part Three consists of one broadcast interview with five four-option multiple-choice questions. Candidates are expected to recognise and evaluate attitude and opinion and infer the meaning of what they hear. The questions focus on a detailed understanding of the points raised and follow the order of

information found in the text. The final question, however, may test global understanding of the text as a whole.

This analysis was based on an account of a boat trip. The introductory line aids hearers to anticipate the frame of a narrative very accurately. First, the interviewee relates this experience to previous ones. After the introduction, he describes what was good about it and then what went wrong. Finally, he describes how things turned up well in the end.

Considering a consecutive successful task achievement as from the very first question, hearers usually have two or perhaps three most likely answers to each question. The relevance theory aids candidates to reduce their choices in a least twenty five percent. Nonetheless, the answers to each question are mostly built from separate longer verbal clues which need to be put together so as to construct meaning. Candidates' inferential abilities are required throughout the text.

6.4. Part 4

Part Four usually consists of a discussion between a male and a female speaker, which facilitates the identification of individual speakers. A presenter may introduce the discussion. Candidates are given six statements summarising the main points raised in the text. Candidates must decide whether the opinions are expressed by only one of the speakers, or whether both speakers agree. Then, they must match each point to one of the speakers or the third option which includes both of them. The recognition of the role of stress and intonation in supporting meaning as well as through what is directly stated is required. Candidates also need to be aware of speech acts in order to identify the purpose of each utterance.

The extract selected for Part 4 has a neutral nature as the two guest speakers are giving a more formal talk on novel adaptation. The formal introduction by the presenter helps hearers to anticipate the nature of the text. Probably because of the neutral tone of the talk, speakers adopt a high considerateness style which illustrates speakers who use a slower rate, expect longer pauses between turns, do not overlap, and avoid interruption or completion of the other's turn (Yule, 1996, p. 76). There are no conversational functional exponents, hesitation devices, overlap or backchannels.

The rubrics of the questions contain the views known to be explicitly or implicitly mentioned in the text. Therefore, it is not relevant to analyse assumptions, implicatures or contextual effects of the same. The analysis of speech acts, on the other hand, helps candidates to realise what each speaker's turn is about, how they relate to the previous ones and direct the ones to come. The utterances which guide candidates to the views expressed in the rubrics of the questions are mainly assertive, directive and expressive speech acts. They complement the nature of the exam task in which candidates are expected to identify the speakers who agree with particular views.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to justify the importance of developing pragmatic awareness-raising activities in the EFL classroom by analysing how pragmatic competence is tested in the listening and speaking papers of the *Certificate of Proficiency in English* (CPE), by the University of Cambridge.

In the theoretical background section, I presented a few definitions for pragmatics and Chomsky's dichotomy of competence and performance (1957). I also addressed the concept of pragmatic competence and described how it can largely affect linguistic performance. As the explicit teaching of pragmatic competence is a controversial issue among pragmatists, I introduced some opposing views on this theme. Based on the undesirable effects that pragmatic errors may cause, I concluded that EFL students need to be explicitly exposed to pragmatic awareness-raising activities.

I also provided some background information on the CPE examination and commented on its nature. The conclusion that this examination gives candidates the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of English in terms of language use, cognitive skills and appropriate social behaviour supported my justification for the selection of material for the pragmatic analyses.

As far as pragmatic theories are concerned, I summarised *The Code* and *Inferential Models of Verbal Communication* and the *Relevance Principle* proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). I addressed the notions of context, contextual effects, relevance and degrees of relevance which are an integral part of the Inferential Model. In the analysis, I illustrated the inferential abilities that candidates need to possess or develop in order to anticipate content and infer the unsaid, especially in parts 1 and 3 of the listening paper, which involve multiple-choice questions.

As part 4 of the listening paper involves the identification of purpose of individual utterances, I decided to base its analysis on the concept of speech acts. I presented Searle's five categories of *Speech Acts* (1979): *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives* and *declarations*. I also described Yule's (1996) alternative approach to the treatment of *Speech Acts*: *direct* versus *indirect speech acts*. I came to the conclusion that the awareness of speech acts can aid listeners to identify the nature of individual utterances, how each utterance relates to the previous ones and directs the ones to come.

To sum up, I believe that *The Certificate of Proficiency in English* is a reliable and valid instrument to measure pragmatic competence. Candidates at this level should master a number of pragmatic aspects which directly affect their linguistic performance. The listening paper analysis provided an insight on the inferential abilities and pragmatic knowledge to be developed in the EFL classroom.

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