Hints from Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics in the Teaching of Listening and Speaking in ESL

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Abstract:
Research of discourse analysis and pragmatics suggests that English language assumes a three-part feature in communication: locution, illocution, and perlocution. Therefore, the teaching of communicative English language should follow the same pattern. But for years, the classroom teaching as well as the teaching materials in China focuses mainly on locution, but ignores the other two aspects, which, in China, has led to the consequence of creating a large amount of bad non-native communicators in English. On the basis of this diagnosis, this paper proposes a solution to this problem.

Key Words: discourse analysis, pragmatics, speech acts, communicative teaching method, solution

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching method has been adopted for years in China. In the teaching of listening and speaking, particularly, language learners are given example language patterns used under certain condition, and then are required to practise the words and sentence patterns following the sample until they can use these words and sentence patterns to communicate under the same condition. However, can one who can speak fluent English without grammatical mistakes be regarded as successful communicators in English? As a matter of fact, a lot of Chinese abroad are regarded as “rude, bad communicators” by the native speakers of English not because of their English, but because they don’t know when to say what and how to say it appropriately. Particularly, they do not know how to complain, how to apologize, or even do not know how to end their talks in English! Actually, this has been quite a common phenomenon
among Chinese language learners. Is there something wrong with the teaching of English in our
country?

The answer is for sure. Then it comes to another question: what’s wrong in our teaching of
English? And what can we do to avoid it in the future teaching?

To answer these questions, it is necessary for us to understand how people usually
communicate by using language.

2. Hints from Research of Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics concerning English language

To diagnose the problems in the teaching of listening and speaking in English, several hints
from discourse analysis and pragmatics deserve to be noticed.

A hint from pragmatics suggests that communication in English is achieved by “speech acts”,
which refer to actions performed using language. Therefore, communication in English constitutes
three aspects, as the three-part framework suggested by J. L. Austin (1962): locution, which is the
actual words a speaker utters; illocution, which is the ‘force’ of the utterance and what it is meant
to be taken as (e.g. request, apology, promise, etc.); perlocution, the effect on the hearer. But the
traditional language teaching guided by the traditional perception of the language—the actual use
of language—accomplishes its teaching activities by focusing only on the use of language.

Another hint from the discourse analysis of conversations of native language speakers
exposes that many metalanguage elements as well as linguistic factors are employed in
communication. Such discourse tools as “the speaker may rely on (e.g.) gaze direction to supply a
referent; the speaker may replace or refine expressions as he goes along; the speaker typically uses
a good deal of rather generalized vocabulary; the speaker frequently repeats the same syntactic
form several times over, as this fairground inspector does; the speaker may produce a large
number of prefabricated ‘fillers’ (Gillian Brown, George Yule 17[4—21]” are the crucial devices
to realize the purpose of communication.

Besides, discourse analysis also proves that scripted dialogues differ greatly from
spontaneous conversations, particularly in terms of sentence structures, dictions, turn-taking,
duration, backchannelling strategies and discourse markers, etc.

These small implications provide a practical criterion in deciding what should be transferred
when the purpose of teaching is to help the learners to master the language so as to communicate.

3. Data from Classroom Observation and Out-of-class Survey

Then what have we been teaching in our classroom? To make it explicit, two aspects in English teaching shall be reviewed: the teaching process and the teaching materials.

To examine the teaching process, there are several factors to be noticed—the language competence of the teacher, the content taught by the teacher.

Here is a comparison of a ten-minute record of two classroom observations (one is taught by a NS, and another is taught by a NNS) concerning the teaching process of an oral class in our department and discourse analysis of this ten-minute classroom teaching.

A. The language used by the NS & NNS teacher:

1. Though the NNS teacher tried to avoid broken and mistaken sentence structures deliberately, there are 17 times when he uses broken or mistaken sentence structures, whereas the NS teacher made no mistakes like that.

2. In terms of diction in the teaching process, there are 2 times that the NNS teacher used wrong diction (one is “receive general question”, another is “leave sth. in your mind”). On the other hand, an interview with the NS teacher proves that the NS teacher always made an effort avoiding the use of “big” words to make his speaking easy to understand.

3. Both of the NS and the NNS teacher can take turns in conversations naturally in the teaching process.

4. In both of the NS and the NNS teacher’s lectures, “fillers” occur naturally.

5. The replacement or refinement of expressions is the most common type of discourse tool that both the NNS teacher (46 times) and the NS teacher (22 times) employed in the teaching course though the frequency in using it differs significantly.

6. The frequency of “backchanneling” in the teaching process by both the NS teacher (none) and the NNS teacher (1 time) is very low.

B. The teaching process of the NS & NNS teacher:

1. The explanation of difficult words and difficult sentence structures dominated most of the time in both teachers’ teaching process (NNS teacher—2 times, 6 minutes; NS
2. The NNS teacher gave plain explanation of the words and phrases (what is “total honesty” and “white lie”) or difficult sentence structure (“better let unsaid) without an emphasis on the social or pragmatic functions of these words or sentence patterns, whereas the NS teacher tried to make the learners aware “how to comment on a situation” by referring to two occasions that the learners may confront in their daily life in an English environment (“meeting new friends and try to comment on somebody”; “comment on the foreign teacher the students have after class”).

From this information, we found that both the NS teacher the NNS teacher are competent in communicating by English naturally following the communicative pattern—“the speech acts” in their use of language, even though there is a difference of frequency of using these tools between the NNS teacher and the NS teacher. This, on the one hand proves that the NNS teacher is competent in language use; on the other hand, it suggests that the language used by the NNS teacher is still in need of improvement in using of some of the discourse tools.

By examining the above facts, we can conclude that though both the NS teacher and the NNS teacher are competent in pragmatic function of the language themselves.

Secondly, data from a classroom observation of the teaching process of the training abroad program also demonstrates that little emphasis has been put on the pragmatic aspect in the teaching process, particularly in the illocutionary aspect of conversation. But, illocutionary force does function as one of the most crucial factors in actual communication. For example, when the teacher teaches the learners the sentence “it is raining”, the learners only know that it is a statement of the weather. However, under different conditions, the statement can be understood differently. For instance, “it is raining” can be functioning as an indirect request to the addressee to hand the speaker her umbrella.

Actually, what teachers particularly focus on in classroom teaching is locution—the actual use of language: by which words the learner can express his/her ideas and by what way can the learner express his/her ideas effectively. Even for advanced language learners, teachers are more likely to stress language use and language knowledge than the illocutionary aspects. Consequently, learners can master plenty words and sufficient ways of expression which can be used under the same condition, but they cannot use the proper words on a particular occasion properly. We
believe that in the process of classroom teaching, teachers’ lack of awareness in transferring the discourse features and the pragmatic functions in language in use must be one of the reasons for the failure of the learners in communicative skills in English.

We have also had a survey of several pervasive listening and speaking textbooks in terms of the features of discourse in the textbooks. There are several obvious problems in the text of these textbooks.

First, the discourse of some of the listening and speaking textbooks is more likely to be a written discourse instead of a spoken one. Utterances are often short and overly well-formed, while turn-taking is discrete and of approximately equal duration, each speaker generally withholding the response until another has completed his or her turn. Backchanneling strategies and discourse markers are typically absent, and there is a bias towards standardized and contextually restricted language, where colloquial expressions, or references to real world entities and event, are rare.

In addition, there are many discourse types which are intermediate cases between writing and speech: spoken language which is read or learnt from a script or based on written notes. Of course, it is necessary to present some formal kind of discourse in oral and listening materials, particularly materials related to academic learning. Yet, the discourse of this type of materials should bear some informal conversational features since though the content of, for example, the lecture is planned in advance, it is still presented by the addressers orally. Therefore, a completely written discourse of the listening or speaking text does not follow the nature of conversation, and thus is not suitable in conveying the pragmatic function of language in use in language teaching.

Second, not many items in facilitating the pragmatic awareness of the learners can be found in these textbooks. Many textbooks written before the 1990s totally ignore the pragmatic aspect in composing the text. For example, in a listening textbook used by our department in the intermediate level, every text abounds of complete, well-written, well-planned materials with little features of conversational discourse, let alone to emphasize on the pragmatic function of the speech acts occurring in the conversation. But in the textbook composed in the 1990s like *Dare to Open Your Mouth* and *Oral Workshop: Reproduction*, though the materials are still organized by situations, more functioning topics like “Complaining and Apologizing”, “Introductions and Greetings”, “Likes Dislikes and Preferences” etc. have appeared in the contents of the textbook. In
addition, a column of “Functional Language” is presented to stress the pragmatic features of the actual use of language. Therefore, we believe that the English teaching group has already noticed that the learning of the pragmatic function of speech acts is essential for learners and their learning should be pushed forward by the language teachers, though from some classroom observations we found that many teachers have not formed the idea of raising the pragmatic awareness in their teaching.

4. Solutions to the Problem

Since the principal cause of the failure in forming a successful communicator is the insufficient awareness of the pragmatic functions in language teaching, the first thing that we can do and should do is to facilitate L2 pragmatic competence of the teachers so as to raise the pragmatic awareness of the learners. Learners will benefit from instruction in which they will gain exposure to a good dose of communicative formulas, conventional approaches to making speech acts and other language forms that are characteristic in the language used by NS. Though some experts like Ellis (1994) points out that the acquisition of pragmatic competence is likely to take years and that many learners will probably never achieve it, the facilitating of the learners’ acquisition of pragmatic competence shall always be the main goal the language teachers should pursue.

Then, how to facilitate the awareness of the pragmatic aspects in language teaching? Different language teachers and researchers propose different ideas. In Keiko Tanaka’s article “Developing Pragmatic Competence: A learners-as-Researchers Approach”, he insists that “the learners-as-researchers approach in developing pragmatic competence has been ...a useful alternative to the more traditional functional approach that fails to offer learners enough clues to use the new language in ways that are contextually appropriate.” Juliane House (1996) proves by classroom practice that first, “metapragmatic information is essential in counteracting negative pragmatic transfer and promoting the use of a move varied and more interpersonally potent repertoire of different discourse lubricants, discourse strategies, and speech act realizations, thus increasing learners’ pragmatic fluency. Second, metapragmatic information does not directly translate into developing pragmatic fluency in instructional situation, when it comes to improving learners’ responding behavior.” Another project done by Charles Clennell (1999) in Australia
shows that “a process which allows non-native speaking (NNS) learners to experience authentic oral interaction with NNS, as well as providing opportunities for them to reflect on the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of spoken discourse as they arise. This heightened awareness of language in context can build confidence in the learners’ oral skills, and may enhance academic performance. In summary, two major approaches can be enlisted to raise pragmatic awareness: learners-as-researchers approach and more pragmatic input in the teaching process.

To guarantee the pragmatic input in the teaching process, there is a necessity to take the advantage of more authentic materials in the teaching of listening and speaking. As a matter of fact, many experts support the idea of using authentic texts in the foreign-language classroom. Bragger (1985, p85) states that “everything we do with the language must be authentic”. What’s more, Gilman and Moody (1984, p331-334) recommend using “authentic materials in implementing listening comprehension training at all levels.” Other experts (Byrnes 1984, Johnson 1979, etc.) also indicate that we must be aware of the functions that distinguish oral from written language.

Though there is a consensus of the using of authentic materials in language teaching so as to raise the pragmatic awareness of the learners, a controversy on what kind of materials is authentic comes into being.

Some people consider “authentic materials” as “texts made to seem real”; some indicate that texts spoken by native speakers for native speakers may be edited and changed for the language learners since though the spontaneous conversations between native speakers would transfer the most pragmatic information in language teaching, they sometimes may not be very suitable for a certain topic in teaching; others maintain that content-oriented texts, rendered when necessary in a simple code, are required at the basic levels of language instruction.

As a matter of fact, the discussion exhibits different opinions on the degree of authenticity in the choosing of teaching materials. Lana Rings suggests the degree scale of authenticity in her article titled “Authentic Language and Authentic Conversational Texts”(from authentic conversation to inauthentic conversation): 1. Native Speakers’ spontaneous conversations produced for their own purposes (no knowledge of being monitored); 2. Conversations in which one participant is aware of being monitored or recorded; 3. Simulated role play by native speakers; 4. Plays written by a genius in language use and enacted by good actors/actresses; 5. Excerpted

Though the first type of conversation possesses the highest authentic degree in discourse, the materials may not be very suitable for the teaching purpose. Furthermore, teachers may think that authentic materials are too difficult for beginners, particularly in terms of pronunciation and the speed of speaking; therefore, the 15th type of conversation mentioned by Lana is frequently applied to teaching practice. However, many experts think that it is not only possible but also necessary even for beginners to improve their listening and speaking by naturally occurred authentic materials so that a true and practical awareness of discourse and pragmatics can be established in their minds.

All in all, the solution of the problem should start with the training of the teachers in their awareness of the pragmatic function of the language and the composing of textbooks which are filled with authentic materials bearing true pragmatic and discourse features of conversation in social communication. Then what we can do next is to help the learners to establish a pragmatic awareness in their learning of the language.

5. Conclusion

Though the time limitation for doing the research made it impossible for us to collect and analyze more data, we can still make a conclusion that the failure of the communicative language teaching in English is basically caused by the lack of discourse and pragmatic awareness by both the teachers and the learners. Though it is hard to facilitate such awareness in language learning, it is necessary to constitute these in the syllabus of language teaching and language learning, particularly, the textbooks should be revised or rewrite following the nature of conversation.

More pragmatic inputs can help to raise the awareness of the language learners. A learners-as-researchers approach can also help. Most important of all, it is high time that the language teaching experts considered this problem and tried to solve this problem.
References


