The elements of the business Chinese curriculum: A pragmatic approach

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Introduction

The ability to speak appropriately and communicate effectively in various settings is one of the ultimate goals of language teaching. In the field of second language acquisition, it is believed that the appropriateness of second language use is determined by a learner's pragmatic competency (Kasper, 1997).

Pragmatic competence is one important part of overall language competence. According to Bachman (1990, p. 87):

> Pragmatic competence includes illocutionary competence, and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence indicates a speaker's ability to combine grammatical interpretation of an utterance with its speech act, and the sociolinguistic competence indicates a speaker's ability to perform language functions in appropriate ways according to context. One must gain pragmatic knowledge before becoming pragmatically competent.

Pragmatic knowledge is therefore vital for second language (L2) speakers to acquire in order to communicate appropriately. Some pragmatic knowledge is universal, such as turn-taking and the sequencing of contributions in conversational organization, and is automatic for adult learners. But other cultural and contextual implementations may vary (Kasper & Rose, 2001), and the latter are inadequately taught (Kasper, 1997) in the regular language classroom, let alone in the business language classroom. Students usually acquire only organizational competence. Such skill acquisition enables language students to manipulate words properly at the sentence level (i.e., grammatical competence) and the discourse level (textual competence), but it does not make them pragmatically competent. Integrating pragmatics into foreign language classrooms can enhance students' performance in the target language. It will be of more importance for business language students.

Previous studies

Empirical studies have revealed that pragmatic proficiency can best be acquired through explicit instruction. An explicit instructional approach can raise learners' awareness (Schmidt, 1993) of the functions and contextual distribution of routines, and allow students to use the formulae more

often in an authentic context, so that they can communicate more naturally, fluently, and thus more successfully.

In a 14-week course teaching daily conversational routines, House (1996) demonstrated that communicative practice improves most aspects of learners' pragmatic ability. Students with pragmatic knowledge exposure were superior to their peers in all aspects of pragmatic fluency investigated. A study of teaching Japanese routines (Tateyama, 2001; Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay, & Thananart, 1997) showed that explicit instruction of pragmatic knowledge is more effective than implicit teaching in facilitating the acquisition of L2 pragmatic routines. This study demonstrated the teachability of L2 pragmatics as well. Being aware of pragmatic meanings pointed out in the course of instruction allowed the students to better understand how routine formulas and expressions were used in actual interaction. Moroishi (1999) indicated that students receiving this instruction outperformed those without. It was also revealed that there is a long-term effect of explicit instruction. It worked as an "advanced organizer" of input.

Yoshimi (2001) confirmed the effectiveness of the explicit instruction approach to enable learners to improve in two major aspects: 1) successful handling of organizational and interactional demands of tasks; and 2) ability to maintain the flow of conversation. An investigation of learners' views of explicit instruction of pragmatic aspects (Watanabe, 2002) also concluded that there was a positive effect due to this approach, providing more opportunities for speaking practice and more interaction as well as more flexibility in terms of the speech competency level. Additionally, students reported that the instruction made choosing from among the possible ways of phrasing easier.

A review has shown that routine formulaic speech is "a stepping stone" for students towards higher levels of creative language use (Kasper, 1997, p. 121). Adult learners need to acquire a considerable repertoire of routines so as to cope efficiently with various situations. The previous studies have indicated the value of an effort to include a pragmatic component in the foreign language classroom based on the evident success of consciousness-raising resulting from explicit instruction in pragmatic skills. Moreover, the explicit teaching approach facilitates the acquisition of L2 pragmatic routines that require more formal linguistic expressions. These expressions are reflected in the authenticity and flexibility of teaching materials which contain in-depth explanations. Given the beneficial effects recorded in the literature and the successful pilot teaching in the summer of 2005 for novice Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), we extended this instructional approach to the business Chinese classroom in the spring semester of 2006.

Study design and instruction

This instructional design draws heavily on the collaborative efforts[1] and on the lecture notes of Yoshimi (2005). We designed this study with the goal of building students' pragmatic proficiency in the existing business Chinese curricula. We started with a survey of the 14 MBA students. Two topics were raised overwhelmingly among students from beginning to advanced

levels: 1) "Getting to Know Each Other (informally)"; and 2) "First Meeting with Business Partners". This survey result also reflected the fact that communicative competence in the most common setting, i.e., getting acquainted with one another in various scenarios and the protocols used in such interactions, are always the primary and permanent concern of learners, regardless of the students' proficiency level. Our choosing of these two topics required that different styles of speaking: formal (i.e., Topic 2) and casual (i.e., Topic 1) styles on a similar theme be introduced in adjacent class periods. Each speaking style was presented with a variety of possible patterns for a given conversation. For each of the two topics mentioned above, natural, comfortable, and more detailed conversations would be provided with pragmatic content, which added to the authenticity and flexibility of the teaching materials.

Two main types of classroom activities were suggested as needed for building pragmatic competency (Kasper, 1997): 1) activities raising students' awareness about pragmatic features; and 2) various opportunities for communicative practice. In addition to these suggestions, we drew on the practice presented in Yoshimi's (2001) study, resulting in an explicit instructional approach with three key components. The first component is to raise the learner's consciousness by making certain features of language input salient. The second is to provide teaching materials that are authentic and flexible, i.e., including natural conversations and language use (Scotton & Bernsten, 1988; Tao, 2005), and multiple linguistic inputs in each thematic unit. The third is to provide the students with in-depth explanatory notes with rich cultural content and linguistic information. The whole teaching process implementing explicit instruction was conducted in the following sessions.

Planning Session

Before the planning session meeting, native Chinese speakers were asked to act in front of a camera in natural ways given the situations corresponding to each of the two topics. At least two or three samples of natural conversations for each topic were collected so that students could be exposed to a variety of authentic speech exchanges and natural body language use within the focus range of each topic. These conversations were later transcribed and organized as different variations of a given situation or conversational setting.

In the first class meeting, students were first allowed time to brainstorm the scenarios for each of the selected topics. Then a few students volunteered to role play these scenarios in English. More than three variations of the same topic were performed by different groups of students. Afterwards, the instructor outlined the main phases such as opening phase, core phase, and closing phase. For each phase, sequences of typical central moves were delineated. The use and function of routines, strategies and speech acts were also highlighted.

The students then watched video performances by native Chinese speakers for the same scenarios of the same topics. The rationale for this was based on the pragmatic theory regarding "positive transfer" of pragmatic elements (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1997). The positive transfer from a student's native language to target language makes the student aware that there are often similarities between one's native language and the target language regarding what to talk about

on a certain topic. Recognizing these similarities was thought to help establish their confidence in active participation in communication even if they feel unable to contribute or converse in the foreign language. On the other hand, for many of the students, observing quite a different style of interaction by native Chinese was a consciousness-raising experience in foreign language learning.

Explicit Instruction

After watching the video, instructors led the students in comparing and contrasting the conversation flow, strategies, expressions, and speech acts, etc. in the conversations of the English native versions and the Chinese native versions. Then students were provided handouts with sample conversations with explanatory notes containing pragmatic information about the conversation flow, functions and use of selected pragmatic items. The example conversations by Chinese native speakers were transcribed with very little revision: the majority of the natural conversation is intact but the repetition and pause that are not necessary for interactive task are expunged. Echoing the consciousness-raising activity (watching native speakers' exchanges), the teacher taught new vocabulary and expressions in the teaching materials. Then students were guided to attend to 1) the sociopragmatic features (under what conditions Chinese speakers were using certain forms); 2) strategies and linguistic means; and 3) the pragmalinguistic features (in which contexts the various strategies and linguistic means were used). Then the teacher summarized the conversation flow by highlighting various functions, typical formulae, and explaining the notes with non-technical descriptions of the use of the items in extended discourse. The sample uses of the items in extended discourse were mostly drawn from natural discourse because natural conversations have been shown to be more complex and variable across situations than many textbook dialogues and they are also key to preparing learners for such unmarked choices (Scotton & Bernsten, 1988). An array of alternative expressions, especially the appropriate conduct and ritual words in different situations, were provided so that students might learn an extensive variety of ways of speaking to different types of people, more comfortably, naturally, and fluently.

Communicative Practice

Students were grouped across proficiency levels, with each group composed of all beginning, intermediate, or advanced level students. The rationale for this was based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development", and the successful outcome of collective scaffolding in conjunction with peer learning (Donato, 1994; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Three in-class meetings were provided for students to practice their planned conversations. Their conversations were to follow the flow of the example conversations. However, they were not allowed to practice the assigned text, but rather were to concentrate on target items with an extended and negotiable piece of discourse – allowing for more group responsibility for linguistic content and body language, but less memorized forms. Students within each group were responsible for communicating fully and effectively, but were not to engage in rote memorization of any of the sample conversations. This was designed to enable them to gain

competency for potential roles in real-life communication. Instructors and the students in other groups provided feedback and suggestions for improvement during rehearsals.

Production session and assessment

A specific role was assigned to a student just before their performance for the same rationale as discussed above. Students' self-evaluation was conducted immediately after the performances. They were asked to reflect on their own performances based on an achievement rubric,[2] containing items provided in the explanatory handouts and cultural notes. Written assessments were given one week later, allowing students enough time to study and internalize what they had acquired about appropriate language use in these scenarios. The assessment focused on examining a student's ability to produce a natural utterance in the different roles in the topic-related situations. Students were asked to produce appropriate expressions for all the scenarios. During the assessment, the learner's ability to perform, language fluency, and learning styles were also taken into consideration. Generally, a student may be assessed as "satisfactory" if s/he performed naturally, participated in the conversation actively and followed the conversation flow so that the task could be completed successfully in given situations.

Conclusion

Pragmatic theory provides language teachers the basics for deciding what to teach. The pragmatic perspective also offers a framework to assess and improve alternative learning activities and classroom interaction (Kasper, 1997). Through lecturing, group work, and a combination of teacher-centered and student-centered activities, the pragmatic-oriented explicit instructional approach in the business Chinese classroom proved to be a beneficial way for students to learn. After the completion of the experimental instructional unit, we conducted a survey in order to obtain students' feedback. A summary of this survey indicated four perspectives were welcomed by the students: 1) the collaborative or peer learning approach; 2) the list and explanation of conversation flow; 3) learning with meaning-negotiation; and 4) the teacher's analytical and detailed explanation.

Students were informed of the cultural practices of the target community in addition to the instruction they received on the linguistic forms. Using authentic discourse produced by native speakers of the target language as teaching materials is also crucial – allowing students to build their own pragmatic knowledge by imitating native speakers' action patterns highlighted in the example conversations. In short, natural conversations in different scenarios, explicit instruction of conversational flow, functional use, and cultural practice were felt to be the keys for students to develop their pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence will lead students majoring in business to the optimal goal of their Chinese language learning: communicative success.

Notes

1. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dina R. Yoshimi (UHM) for joint efforts piloted at the business Chinese classroom at the Japan-America Institute of Management Science, which preceded the Chinese Summer Institute (2005). The entire practice of systematically applying pragmatic explicating instruction in business Chinese classroom was inspired and supported by her.

2.   The rubric was a revised version based on the rubric which was designed by Dina Yoshimi and was used for the 2005 Chinese Summer Institute at UHM.

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