Sociopragmatic Perspective to ELT: The Forgotten Indispensable of Communicative Competence

Usha Kanoongo
The LNM Institute of Information Technology, Jaipur
Email: usha.kanoongo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out a case for adopting a sociopragmatic perspective in English language teaching in India. Drawing attention towards this crucial but neglected facet of communicative language teaching, it discusses how sociopragmatic awareness contributes to achieving communicative success at both receptive and productive stages. In the present times when language learners and language users are faced with multiple contexts of using English as an international language, they need to be equipped with tools of socially appropriate language behaviours to achieve multi-contextual and cross-cultural communication. Knowledge of the social constraints of language use, ability to adjust speech to fit the situation, express intended meaning and understand that of the other is often a challenging task for even the native speakers of any language, let alone the second language learners. The growing use of English by its L2 speakers for international communication demands a recognition of this indispensable dimension of communicative competence which encompasses local and international contexts as settings of language use involve native–nonnative and nonnative–nonnative discourse participants, and provides intercultural insights and awareness. The essay argues that language teaching theory, research and pedagogy must evolve to address the sociopragmatic element of communicative competence in India.

Keywords: Sociopragmatics; Communication; Communicative Competence; ELT.

Introduction

Hymes (1970) defined *communicative competence* as a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology and phonology, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) have pointed out that the ability to communicate requires four sub-competencies: *grammatical, discourse,* *sociolinguistic* and *strategic competences.* *Grammatical competence* deals only with sentence-level rules, discourse competence with rules that govern the relationship among sentences to form a meaningful whole, sociolinguistic competence with rules of speaking that depend on pragmatic and sociocultural elements, and strategic competence with the way the speaker manipulates language to fulfill communicative goals. Spitzberg (1988) has

defined communication competence as the ability to interact with other people in accurate, fluent, comprehensible, coherent, effective and appropriate to the context or topic being mentioned. Bachman (1990) has divided communicative competence broadly into *organizational competence*, which includes both grammatical and discourse (or textual) competence, and *pragmatic competence*, which includes both sociolinguistic and illocutionary competence.

While Hymes' concept was constantly being addressed and redefined by language researchers, his primary tenet that *communicative competence* is a *learner's ability to use language to be able to communicate successfully* came to be widely accepted as the goal of language education. It formed the theoretical underpinning of the Communicative Approach to language teaching (e.g., CLT) in which communicative competence is considered the ultimate objective of any or every language teaching situation and this remains to be so till today. CLT as a learner-centered approach which emphasizes learning to communicate through interaction in the target language was wholeheartedly embraced in ESL classrooms to the extent that it has become the lifeline of the entire ELT system. Much has been talked about the significance of CLT and the aim of this article is not to attempt to add another drop to the ocean of literature dedicated to this *Goddess* of language teachers. This essay dwells on how to *do* CLT fruitfully by drawing attention towards the much ignored facet of Hymes's communicative competence model – the

social appropriateness of language use or the *sociopragmatic* competence.

For Hymes, speakers of a language, in addition to possessing linguistic competence, also need to know how the language is used by members of the speech community if they are to accomplish their communicative purposes. Hymes and other promoters of social appropriateness of language use argue that one's ability in the grammatical aspects of language, including grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, is one's linguistic competence, while one's sociopragmatic competence lies in the ability to manipulate utterances, make them fit the communication situation, and successfully convey the intended meaning. Unfortunately, the latter aspect has not been fully adopted in ESL classrooms, particularly in India. Even though language teaching programmes have shifted their focus from mere linguistic form to actual language use, thanks to CLT, attention on 'varying language output in different contexts and social considerations even for the *same use'* is yet to be achieved. The speech act of 'saying sorry', for example, has different variations, such as, 'sorry,' 'I'm sorry,' 'I am so sorry,' 'I apologize,' 'I beg your pardon,' and 'Excuse me.' These expressions constitute the sociopragmatic aspect of language use – the awareness of which of these expressions is most suitable in a given context even if the purpose is the same. Harlow (1990) defines *sociopragmatic competence* as the speaker's adjustment of speech strategies according to social variables and context.

It is argued that, today when the world is fast shrinking into a global village and English has become the language of international communication and cultural exchange, language learners have to be prepared not only for accurate but also *appropriate* communication. Nonnative speakers who have to use the target language in multiple situations are often faced with misunderstandings in the cross-cultural realization of communicative acts, which actually arise from their deficiency in sociopragmatic competence. It is a compelling need that they be equipped with sociopragmatic skills and strategies to be able to use the target language effectively in various social and cultural contexts to avoid such cross-cultural misunder-standings. Widdowson (1986) has rightly asserted that whether we teach *language for communication* or *language as communication*, it is imperative that we take into consideration the findings and recommendations made in the field of pragmatics.

Sociopragmatic Competence

The term 'sociopragmatic' is a blend of 'Sociolinguistics' and 'Pragmatics', which are two subfields of Applied Linguistics. *Sociolinguistics* is the study of the appropriateness of language in different social contexts and tells us how situational factors such as the cultural context, the participants, the setting of a speech event and the function of the interaction affect the choice of what should be said. *Pragmatics* studies the ways in which

context contributes to meaning, how the transmission of meaning depends not only on structural and linguistic knowledge (grammar or lexicon) of the speaker and the listener, but also on the context of the utterance, any pre-existing knowledge about the participants and the inferred intent of the speaker. We may note that while both the fields encompass specific domains of study, there is a fundamental commonality between the two – *the context of use* – so much so that if one attempts to study Sociolinguistics, one invariably ends up acquiring some knowledge of Pragmatics, and *vice versa*. The meaning-making quality of Pragmatics and the socio-contextual appropriateness rendered by Socio-linguistics together offer a perspective which can potentially make communicative goals of language teaching more achievable.

Leech (1983) defines Sociopragmatics as the sociological interface of pragmatics involving speakers' and hearers' beliefs built on relevant social and cultural values. Recognizing this, Harlow (1990) describes *sociopragmatic competence* as the ability to adjust speech strategies appropriately according to different social variables such as the degree of imposition, social dominance and distance between the participants of conversation, and participants' rights and obligations in communication. Thus, Sociopragmatics can be called a set of norms of behaviour for realizing a given speech act in a given context, taking into account the purpose to be accomplished, the culture involved, the relative age and gender of the interlocutors,

their social class, their roles and statuses. Sociopragmatic awareness enables a person to decide the kind of language to be used in an interaction which suits the setting, the purpose, the topic and the participants, also taking into consideration the social distance and power difference that exists between them and their interlocutors. For example, a student uses one expression or *code or variety of language* while interacting with his friend and another with his professor and still another with his father, one variety when discussing an academic topic with his friend, another when planning a party with the same friend, one with his sibling at home and another with the same sibling at a posh restaurant.

For instance, the speech act of 'asking someone to switch on the AC' can be done in several different ways, viz. 'It's so hot today.'; 'Could you switch on the AC?'; 'Please switch on the AC.'; 'How can anyone sit in this heated room?'; 'Aren't you feeling hot?'; 'I can't breathe without AC!!'; 'Switch the AC on!'; 'Is the AC not working?'; 'My head is spinning in this June heat.'; 'Are you (feeling) cold?'; 'Is it winter yet?', and so on.

According to Sociopragmatics, these utterances are different locutions for achieving the same perlocutionary effect (i.e., getting the AC on), but each possesses a different illocutionary force and can fit only a specific context, i.e. setting, participants, their social relationship and purpose. Using any of them inappropriately is sure to cause miscommunication, under-achieved effect, or unintentional insult.

Take another situation: the father comes home from work to see the children studying in the evening (and not playing as usual) and asks the mother, 'Where're the kids?' He is able to infer the reason in the mother's reply, 'Oh, their exam timetable has come!'

In the following example, a candidate for a scholarship failed to get it because his professor wrote a recommendation for him as follows:

Dear Professor Smith

'John Jones has asked me to write a letter on his behalf. Mr. Jones is unfailingly polite, is neatly dressed at all times, and is always on time for his classes.'

Sincerely,

Harry L. Homer (Levis and LeVelle, 2011)

What and how did Prof. Homer try to convey which Smith aptly deciphered?

Need

Sociopragmatic competence denotes knowledge of the social constraints of language use –knowing how to read a situation, what to speak, when to speak, how much to speak, where to stop, adjusting the speech to fit the situation, expressing intended meaning and understanding that of the other, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks and invitations, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations . . . and the list is as vast as is

the scope of human language use. Achieving this can be a challenging task for even native speakers of a language, which is evidenced from the misunderstandings that we encounter in our own *native* language in everyday life, let alone the case of second language learners of any language. Without this ability, even perfectly grammatical utterances can convey a meaning entirely different from what the speaker intended. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) reported that, "Even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value."

Contextual factors such as the time when the utterance is made, the setting of the speech event (e.g., boardroom discourse; the talk of people eating in a restaurant), load of imposition (e.g., borrowing a pen *Vs* borrowing a car; asking the time *Vs* asking for time) and the participants involved (considering social distance, power difference, gender, and age of the participants) all affect the language that is crafted. Every speech act is constrained by sociopragmatic factors and norms of speech behaviour which speakers (and hearers) have to follow, the failure of which leads to miscommunication.

In cross-cultural communication, cultural context plays a vital role in accurate expression of meaning. Even proficient learners' communicative behaviour often deviates from L2 conventions due to lack of sociopragmatic competence causing many misunderstandings. In cross-cultural interactions, rules of speaking change as one moves from one culture to another, and what is appropriate to say in one culture may not be so in another, even if the situation in which it is said is the same. All languages have sociolinguistically related regulations which generally do not overlap and vary considerably. Limited knowledge of the relevant social and cultural values, deficiency in varying speech strategies and applying the rules of speaking of their native culture in cross-cultural communication called pragmatic transfer cause serious breakdowns in communication. Ironically, learners who have a high level of linguistic competence are judged more severely because their sociopragmatic errors are perceived not as lack of knowledge but as rudeness, insincerity and insults, which result in mockery, disappointment, ethnic stereotypes, shock and contempt. Lack of awareness of sociopragmatic rules for speaking, conventionalized expressions and socio-cultural differences between their first and second language or between their native and non-native cultures leads to nonconformity to the speaking norms of the target language, unintelligibility and misunderstanding.

Challenges

In view of the importance of social, cultural, and pragmatic elements in communication, the challenge lies in incorporating the concept in language teaching curricula. Unfortunately, sociopragmatic perspective in language teaching is a formidably neglected area in India. Sociopragmatic

research methods like discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis which analyze language occurring in different social contexts are highly effective tools that provide authentic insights on language behaviour to be incorporated in language teaching and training. But this research field is yet to be fully tapped in our country. Courses in sociolinguistics and pragmatics and their applications are being taught only in a handful of universities and even these teaching/research endeavours have not permeated into language teaching pedagogies. There are hardly any coursebooks which integrate socio-linguistics/pragmatics/sociopragmatics in ELT materials in the country. Absence of theoretical background, model courses and the limited number of available pedagogical resources are the challenges. Want of acceptance, lack of time and resources or teachers' confidence in sociocultural aspects of second language learning are possible reasons why this perspective remains to be addressed by academics.

Providing an immersion environment in the target language culture is one solution through which the rules of speaking can be slowly acquired by the language learner. It is believed that if the classroom environment is appropriately structured and well-organized, L2 learners will develop this kind of competence naturally in the course of their learning because sociopragmatic rules will be picked up unconsciously in the process of acquiring language features such as grammatical rules, pronunciation and vocabulary. But providing such a sociopragmatically conducive immersion experience is a challenging and time consuming process, which is not available to many.

Moreover, it has also been observed that despite a long time spent in the target language environment, an unaware language learner continues to use the rules of speaking of their native language making sociopragmatic mistakes, a phenomenon which Gumprez (as cited in Marsh, 1990) labels as *pragmatic fossilization*. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) emphasizes the significance of classroom instruction in helping to push students towards higher levels of sociopragmatic competence, which can possibly lessen pragmatic fossilization. Teaching culture and cross-cultural differences to learners also has limitations because culture by itself is a complex and sensitive concept. The issue of whose cultural and socio-pragmatic system to teach in the context of English as an international language is yet another point that adds to the growing ambivalence about the inclusion of sociopragmatics in the ESL curriculum. The existence of various Englishes with their different cultural and pragmatic norms has also offered a serious challenge to any approach based on sociopragmatics (McKay, 2009).

The Way Forward

Sociopragmatic knowledge can be divided into two: the first is culture specific, which is gained through the knowledge, experience and awareness of a culture that a learner

finds himself in; and the second is universal, which refers to the universally applicable concepts and rules of communicative behaviour which find their relevance in any and every situation of human interaction.

The first type of knowledge may be acquired by learners by providing them with sufficient and appropriate input by immersing them in the target language culture. Real life experience is one option but it is a slow and lengthy process and has its own limitations, as mentioned earlier. An alternative to this can be observation of target language culture, interaction of the speakers, their verbal and non-verbal behaviour and strategies. This can be done by watching movies, TV programmes, talk shows, video presentations, meetings, etc. and are quite feasible.

The second type of sociopragmatic knowledge which is universally applicable and doable in language classrooms is formal instruction in sociopragmatic rules of language use which can potentially help learners express themselves more appropriately and prevent them from unintentionally causing offense or misunderstanding. Some of the essential sociopragmatic concepts that can be taught to language learners are:

➢ Searle's (1975) Speech Act Theory and Performative use of language

➢ Brown and Levinson's (1978) Theory of Politeness through the concept of Face

➢ Leech's (1983) Politeness Maxims

➢ Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Maxims of Cooperativeness and Implicature

➢ Grice's (1975) Rules of Conversation

The concepts mentioned above may be said to govern all human communicative behaviour and are central to the acquisition of sociopragmatic awareness, which enables learners to communicate appropriately and effectively not only with native speakers of the target language but also with anyone in any interaction in any situation. Space precludes elaboration of these fundamentals of human communicative behaviour and it may be left to the informed reader to explore them and appreciate their significance for language teaching/ learning. It may be argued that these concepts have immense relevance for all language learners because they equip them with strategies of language behaviour to manipulate in different situations and contexts, teach them what to speak, how to speak and how much to speak in order to communicate effectively. Assessment of learners' academic level and their needs can aid course designers in incorporating these concepts in an ESL course.

Sociopragmatic research is another instrument which can aid second language specialists to provide meaningful insights in designing syllabuses, preparing teaching materials and developing classroom teaching methodologies. Discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis are research methods which identify language variation that

occurs at all levels of language: phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax and discourse-linguistic features and analyze the language that takes place in different situations, like classroom, student presentations, boardroom, newsroom, political speech, media, informal discussions, newspapers, emails and blogs. Comprehensive evaluation of the language of such discourses can yield valuable insights on the do's and don'ts of communication, what went wrong and what facilitated successful communication. Sociopragmatic research can thus act as a bottom-up approach.

Engaging learners in performative use of target language, like speech acts of making requests, apologies, refusals, complaints, giving compliments and responses in multiple contexts which enable sociopragmatic, functional, authentic use of their target language for meaningful purposes enables experiential learning of sociopragmatic norms.

Conclusion

Competence in a language requires a combination of the formal, sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the language. In addition to learning structural and functional rules, second language learners need sociopragmatic rules which guide them in the choice of appropriate forms of using the language and thereby contribute towards achieving communicative competence. It is high time that we looked up to this *Cinderella* of ELT in India and promoted a sociopragmatic perspective in language classrooms in our country.

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