EXPLORING THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF PRAGMATIC COMPETNECE IN THE L2 CLASSROOMS IN IRAN

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─**Abstract**─

Considering the importance of pragmatic competence as one of the components of communicative language ability, SLA researchers have recently called for the inclusion of L2 pragmatics into the classrooms and teaching materials. Despite such calls, it seems to be largely underrepresented in L2 classrooms in Iran. This study, adopting a multi-method data collection procedure, attempted to investigate how and why underrepresentation of pragmatic competence occurs in L2 teaching materials and classrooms in Iran. Two questionnaires were developed based on Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) models of communicative language ability and administered to the participants. Twenty five L2 classrooms were observed and appraised using a checklist developed based on the above-mentioned models. The results of the study indicated that L2 classrooms did not provide language learners with the required information, instruction, and practice in L2 pragmatics. It was evidenced that EFL teachers in Iran generally emphasized the isolated, mechanical aspects of language as these have been given special momentum in the school curriculum, course books, time limitation, and the related tests. In contrast, the main focus of the classroom activities was on developing reading skills, learning new vocabularies, word formation, and grammar. It was also argued that the present underrepresentation of L2 pragmatics would not lead learners to develop pragmatic competence as a central objective in developing communicative language ability.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is not considered simply as an additional aspect to learners' grammatical knowledge but it is an organic part of their communicative competence (Kasper, 1997). Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds (1996) discuss the importance of pragmatic competence thorough putting emphasis on its status and role in meaning negotiation among speakers and point out that a lack of sufficient pragmatic knowledge was a leading cause to run the speakers towards "the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency lead other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence" (324).

Rose (1999) defined pragmatic competence as a kind of knowledge interlocutors resort to use existing linguistic knowledge (pragmalinguistics) in a form appropriate to the context (sociopragmatics). Pragmalinguistics refers to a number of "strategies like directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts" (Kasper, 1997:1). Sociopragmatics is a collection of "conventions that determine the appropriate use of genres, dialects or varieties, registers, natural or idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and figures of speech" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010:47).

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), pragmatic conception has been implemented in a series of SLA models (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). These models suggest developing pragmatic competence is an absolute necessity in improving learners' communicative language ability in L2. As Bulut (2009) expressed, the first step in developing learners' pragmatic competence is awareness. The rationale behind this view is consistent with Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis, suggesting that drawing learners' attention to specific pragmatic features of L2 through receiving instruction leads in the development of their pragmatic awareness and comprehension in L2. He (1995, 2001) asserted L2

pragmatic competence should receive an intentional and focused attention in classroom instruction since most of the pragmatic features are non-salient in L2 input. To this end, researchers have emphasized including pragmatic competence in foreign and second language (L2) teaching to let the learners develop their own pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Rose, 2005; etc.).

1.2. Pragmatic instruction

As a matter of fact, native and nonnative speakers resort to different speech acts in the same situation in terms of pattern, form, semantic formula, and content (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Kondo, 2002). This may partly be the impact of their L1 and a lack of sufficient and appropriate amount of available linguistic input (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). In other words, although language learners inherently possess some sort of pragmatic competence due to universal pragmatic rules and transfer from L1, they are reluctant to apply their knowledge in L2 context (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper, 1997). Consequently, pragmatics instruction is a necessity for L2 learners to accomplish their capability for using and interpreting contextually appropriate language functions.

1.3. The study

The fact that L2 learners in Iran have continually met with the challenges to communicate in L2 and have failed to perform pragmatically appropriate in daily communications inspired researchers to explore the status of L2 pragmatic competence in L2 classroom instruction. The main focus was to examine whether the construct of L2 classrooms in Iran were arranged to cover and represent a careful selection of language aspects as the center of classroom attention, instruction, and practice or underrepresented and failed to notice the fundamental aspects of language, including pragmatic competence, in favor of other subject areas in L2. In this regard, researchers were interested to elaborate the relative factors which made significant contribution to the L2 pragmatics underrepresentation, and stopping learners short of developing an adequately proficient competence in L2 pragmatics. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in this study for providing a response:

- Is L2 pragmatic competence underrepresented in the construct of L2 classrooms in Iran?

- Which subject areas receive the major focus and attention during classroom instruction and practice?

2. METHODLOGY

2.1. Participants

The participants were 220 high school students and 100 EFL teachers across six provinces of Iran including Tehran, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, Urmia, and Shahrekord. EFL teachers were within the age range of 24 to 68 with a central tendency of 39 and their teaching experiences ranged from 1 to 40 years with a central tendency of 15. Out of 100 EFL teachers, 83 teachers possessed a BA degree, 16 held an MA, and one teacher was with an AD. Students were selected from among senior and junior high school students majoring in Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Humanities, and Art. The students were candidates to take part in high-stakes final examinations in high school and National University Entrance Test in Iran.

2.2. Instrumentation and data collection procedure

To identify the status and extent of construct underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms, two Likert-Type questionnaires were developed based on the models of communicative language ability proposed by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010). The questionnaires received expert judgment, were modified, and administered to both EFL teachers and students in public high schools in order to elicit their perception regarding the construct underrepresentation of pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms. The questionnaires consisted of 10 items which addressed the practicality of L2 pragmatics from both the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic perspectives (i.e., speech acts, language functions, dialect & variety, register, naturalness, & cultural references). These questionnaires were assessed on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (4) in order to avoid the "middle-of-the-road syndrome" (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2005, p. 10).

The content validity of the instruments was delineated through the development and use of two detailed item specifications as the blueprint, experts' judgments, and pilot testing to ensure that the instruments were carefully and accurately planned to include a representative sample of the components of L2 pragmatic competence.

The construct validity of the tests was examined using factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis). An inspection of the screeplots for the two tests revealed a clear break after the second component. Therefore, using Catell's scree test, it was decided to retain two components for further investigation which was further supported by the results of Parallel Analysis (PA). The oblimin rotation revealed the presence of simple structure, with two components showing a number of strong loadings. The complementary analysis of the item loadings supported the use of the tests' items for exploring the construct underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence. The results of the Cronbach alpha for construct underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence for the L2 classroom instrument was 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.

Twenty five L2 classrooms were examined and rated regarding the status and extent of representation of L2 pragmatics in the construct of classroom teaching, activities, and exercises. To this end, a checklist was developed based on Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996, 2010) models of communicative language ability. The examiner and rater in classroom observation was one of the researchers.

2.3. Results

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed to the data analysis to increase the strength of reliability and generalizability of the final results and represented claims about the underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence in the construct of L2 classrooms. Descriptive statistics were first computed to investigate the central tendency, distribution, and dispersion of L2 pragmatic competence across the activities and exercises performed in L2 classrooms. Each participant's score was cumulated across all 10 items to give interval scores for calculating total value score for mean, standard deviation, Skewness, and Kurtosis. The results of the descriptive statistics for construct underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms were represented in Table1.

Table1: Descriptive Statistics for Pragmatic Competence Underrepresentation in L2 Classrooms

Participants	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Teachers	100	10	32	23.37	4.19	-0.885	1.561
Students	220	10	35	18.88	6.38	0.755	0.046

The total calculated mean scores gave the mean value of 23.37 (SD = 4.19) for teachers and that of 18.88 (SD = 6.38) for students. The minimum score for each subtype of the L2 pragmatic competence was 10 and the maximum score was 40. A central tendency towards low scores among the participants showed learners suffered from underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence in the construct of L2 classrooms.

In order to make strong claims regarding the status and extent of underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence on the construct of L2 classrooms, chi-square tests were run to the two questionnaires at item level. The results of chi-square tests are represented in Table2 for L2 classrooms.

Table2: Chi-Square Test for Pragmatic Competence Underrepresentation in L2 Classrooms

Pragmatic Competence	Participants	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always	x^2	df	p
Item1	Teachers	23.0%	39.0%	32.0%	6.0%	63.98[a]	3	.000
	Students	66.5%	14.8%	14.3%	4.3%	827.69[b]	3	.000
Item2	Teachers	11.0%	63.0%	21.0%	5.0%	125.87[a]	3	.000
	Students	55.9%	26.4%	12.3%	5.5%	556.81[b]	3	.000
Item3	Teachers	10.0%	56.0%	30.0%	4.0%	97.20[a]	3	.000
	Students	57.0%	23.0%	14.8%	5.2%	579.85[b]	3	.000
Item4	Teachers	14.0%	38.0%	36.0%	14.0%	38.60[a]	3	.000
	Students	54.3%	23.5%	15.7%	6.5%	549.18[b]	3	.000
Item5	Teachers	7.0%	41.0%	36.0%	16.0%	38.55[a]	3	.000
	Students	33.5%	31.7%	23.5%	11.3%	207.33[b]	3	.000
Item6	Teachers	15.0%	39.0%	33.0%	13.0%	39.07[a]	3	.000
	Students	31.3%	25.7%	27.8%	15.2%	142.75[b]	3	.000
Item7	Teachers	18.0%	51.0%	21.0%	10.0%	79.65[a]	3	.000
	Students	37.0%	36.1%	19.6%	7.4%	261.20[b]	3	.000
Item8	Teachers	16.0%	51.0%	25.0%	8.0%	78.08[a]	3	.000
	Students	39.6%	29.6%	22.6%	8.3%	271.17[b]	3	.000
Item9	Teachers	17.0%	45.0%	29.0%	9.0%	60.20[a]	3	.000
	Students	33.0%	27.8%	27.8%	1.3%	172.94[b]	3	.000
Item10	Teachers	18.0%	37.0%	36.0%	9.0%	46.07[a]	3	.000
	Students	46.1%	22.2%	18.7%	13.0%	335.39[b]	3	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 10.0.
b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 22.0.

As represented in Table2, the chi-square test results for the two questionnaires concerning L2 classrooms were statistically significant (p = .000) in all 10 items. The results confirmed that there was a discrepancy between the types of the expected and the observed classroom activities, that is, in practice, elements of L2 pragmatic competence were not included and emphasized in L2 classrooms. In other words, it was evidenced that L2 classrooms considered none of the aspects of L2 pragmatics (speech acts, language functions, dialect and variety, register, naturalness, & cultural references) to be represented and covered in the construct of L2 classrooms as the instructional or practical goals.

In addition to the quantitative analyses, a checklist was developed based on Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996 & 2010) models of communicative language ability, as mentioned before, to observe and rate which elements of L2 pragmatic competence were covered in L2 classrooms. The observation was conducted in two sessions for every L2 classroom and was rated by one of the researchers .The results of the descriptive statistics of L2 classroom observations are presented in Table 3.

Table3: Descriptive statistics of Construct Underrepresentation of L2 Pragmatics in Classroom Observations

Components	N	Items	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
Speech acts	25	1	100%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Language functions	25	2-10	90.8%	6.8%	2.4%	0.0%
Dialect & variety	25	11	60.0%	32.0%	8.0%	0.0%
Register	25	12-16	77.0%	18.0%	5.0%	0.0%
Naturalness	25	17	68.0%	32.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Cultural references	25	18	72.0%	28.0%	0.0%	0.0%

The observations corroborated the questionnaire results regarding underrepresentation of L2 pragmatics in the construct of L2 classrooms. The rater reported the concept of pragmatics and its major aspects including speech acts (100%), language functions (90.8%), dialect and variety (60.0%), register (77.0%), naturalness (68.0%), and cultural concepts (72.0%) had no opportunity to receive attention, practice, and feedback during classroom activities on the part of both teachers and students.

No time was specified to engage the students in role playing, discussions—even teacher-fronted ones—or problem-solving activities with an orientation towards L2 pragmatics awareness and development. The major emphasis was confined to covering those aspects and elements included in the content of the teaching textbooks, that is, isolated vocabularies, reading skills, word formation, and grammar. The interesting point was that L1 was the dominant language in transferring teaching materials and eliciting responses during classroom instruction and practice.

The usual approach towards enhancing vocabulary knowledge was memorizing isolated, out of context vocabulary lists compiled for each lesson including their synonyms, antonyms, and L1 equivalents. Developing reading skills focused on improving students' ability to read and understand written English texts in their course books and to answer reading comprehension questions. The typical teaching strategies were silent reading, paraphrasing, L1 translation, and giving a summary of the reading text. Grammar points were taught both deductively and inductively, and writing practice was limited to exercises included in the teaching textbooks.

Regarding developing speaking and listening skills, students suffered from exposure to authentic, audio-video input to get familiar with natural speech routines in daily communication and correct pronunciation, and no time was specified to practice L2 speaking and listening during classroom instructions. Hence, the observation reports corroborated that L2 pragmatic competence underwent an absolute underrepresentation in the construct of teaching-learning process in L2 classrooms.

2.4. Discussion

The findings revealed the major elements of L2 pragmatic competence such as speech act, language function, register, dialect and variety, and cultural concepts underwent an absolute underrepresentation in L2 classroom instruction and practice in Iran. It was found that a number of factors made a strong contribution to this underrepresentation. On the one hand, L2 classrooms obediently followed the public syllabus of the course offered for school curriculum. Since the school curriculum had defined getting mastery in organizational knowledge of L2 as the desired educational goal and ignored other aspects of L2 in its construct, L2 practitioners did not face with the challenge to include practicing appropriateness,

speech acts, and politeness in role-plays, participating in metapragmatic assessment tasks, or doing writings in different styles in teaching-learning process of L2 classrooms. On the other hand, as the observations confirmed, both students and practitioners encountered underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence on available teaching resources as well as a time pressure to achieve the immediate, desired, educational goal of passing the final future tests. Since school curriculum was not scheduled to cover pragmatic aspects of L2, the available resources did not meet learners' L2 pragmatic needs, and the dedicated time for L2 classroom instruction was too limited, in practice, L2 pragmatic competence found no opportunity to developed, improved, or strengthened. The psychometric methods of measuring the isolated pieces of organizational knowledge in imminent tests was another significant factor which caused fossilizing L2 teaching-learning system in putting emphasis and practicing grammatical competence in favor of other aspects of L2 and put both teachers and students in pressure to schedule to work on developing and improving the organizational knowledge of L2 in order to pass the tests. Therefore, stakeholders deliberately turned a blind eye to L2 pragmatic knowledge in L2 instruction. The observations corroborated that a wide range of classroom activities and exercises were designed to develop and strengthen students' language abilities on the mechanical aspects of language such as vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and grammar rules. However, since a good level of grammatical competence does not entail a good level of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998), L2 classrooms failed to meet students' communicative needs, in general, and pragmatic needs, in particular.

3. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at exploring underrepresentation of L2 pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms using Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) models of communicative language ability. The results revealed that L2 pragmatic competence was absolutely underrepresented in the construct of L2 classrooms. There was found no explicit instruction or a simple input exposure which directly or implicitly address the pragmatic aspects of L2 during classroom instruction. Since the current curriculum system did not officially serve to meet learners' L2 pragmatic needs, as the central objective in communicative language ability, it would be inevitable for L2 learners to have difficulty in dealing with L2 context

situation pragmatically appropriate. Therefore, there exists an absolute demand to expose the students to sufficient L2 pragmatics input, classroom practice, and feedback to provide an opportunity for developing their L2 pragmatic knowledge and awareness.

The results of the study was in line with the research conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) who found that receiving instruction and engaging in classroom activities are crucial factors in raising learners' pragmatic awareness and empowering their pragmatic productive skills in L2. It is implied that L2 classrooms serve a critical function in the realm of L2 pragmatics instruction, particularly, because of the fact that they possess an extremely high potentiality to provide learners the opportunity for an explicit, attentive, and practical language learning in the foreign language context. Therefore, it is suggested that improving pragmatic skills required a careful selection of pragmatically-oriented teaching materials and syllabuses to offer them "tools to interpret and respond to a variety of speech acts when they are addressed to them" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996:29) as proficient L2 communicators.

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