

English Pragmatics in Ecuador

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Abstract—Research has revealed that developing the pragmatic ability is a key element for any second or foreign language learner. The present paper aims to shed some light on the issue of pragmatics as part of English teaching and learning in the context of Ecuador. This paper is part of a research project that will involve public high school English teachers of Cuenca, Ecuador. After extensive research, it has been found that even though pragmatics is now part of the new English curriculum in this country, research in this field of linguistics is almost nonexistent.

Index Terms—English pragmatics, speech acts, English as a foreign language

I. INTRODUCTION

The field of pragmatics, as a key aspect of second and/or foreign language teaching and learning, has gained great importance in the last four decades (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) because many studies have revealed major differences between how non-native speakers and native speakers produce certain speech acts. These differences are so significant that they could hinder communication. These variances between native and non-native language production have appeared even in advanced students of a second language, students with a great command of grammar, for example (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Kasper and Rose (2002) claim that the significance of developing the pragmatic ability when learning a second language has been demonstrated through many studies. If someone wants to develop communicative competence in another language, that person needs to learn not only the grammar of that language, but also the pragmatics (Leung, 2005). There is much research from around the world regarding the performance of English pragmatics by learners of this language; however, even though this language is taught as a mandatory subject in Ecuador, this area of linguistics has not been researched to a great extent in this country (Heras, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of pragmatics research in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language. We also aim to shed some light on how this field of linguistics has been treated so far in the context of Ecuador, as this aspect of second/foreign language learning seems to be still in its infancy in this country.

It must be made clear that this paper constitutes part of a much bigger research study, which will involve public high school English teachers. We will explore how -or if- these teachers are incorporating pragmatics into their teaching. Pragmatics and sociolinguistics have been part of the Ecuadorian English curriculum for a year or so (Ministerio de educación, 2014). The data collection from the teachers will take place in September 2018. The information presented in this paper represents part of the literature review related to the research of English pragmatics in Ecuador and international settings.

Definitions of pragmatics

There are many definitions of pragmatics. The first idea that may come to someone's mind is that being pragmatic means being practical, as this is the broad meaning of this word (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In linguistics, however, pragmatics has a deeper and more complex meaning, and, in some cases, it includes using language in a practical manner.

First, David Crystal (as cited in Kasper and Rose, 2002) argues that pragmatics is the field that analyzes language, taking into account the users' perspective. Pragmatics studies the manner in which the type of language people decide to use influences the success or failure in their communication. The problems they might have when interacting.

In addition, George Yule (1996) gives us a more thorough concept of this field of linguistics:

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). It has consequently more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning. Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning. Pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than is said (p. 3).

Another noteworthy explanation of this area of academic study is given by Brian Paltridge (2012). This author states that pragmatics studies the meaning a person gives to their utterances according to the different contexts that come into play, namely, social, situational, and textual. Paltridge (2012) also emphasizes that background knowledge context is another main factor involved in communication; this refers to the knowledge people have about each other and about the world. This author goes on to say that when people interact, they follow some rules, whether they are aware or not.

When these rules are not observed, problems in communication occur. This set of rules is what Grice (as cited in Heras, 2014) called the Cooperative Principle.

The cooperative principle

When we have a conversation with other people, we normally -should- follow some rules. If everybody followed these rules, there would not be much interference or failure in communication. Sometimes conversations among native speakers of a certain language are difficult to understand because these rules might change from one context to another. However, more problems seem to appear when second language learners are not aware of these rules. This set of rules is known as the Cooperative Principle (Grice, as cited in Heras, 2014).

This principle contains four maxims that ideally people should observe when having a conversation. These maxims are:

The maxim of quantity: this maxim, mainly, states that people should communicate only the information that is needed, not more, not less.

The maxim of quality: this one relates to the use of information that is perceived as genuinely true.

The maxim of relation: this rule is about using important information only, not information that is not relevant to the topic.

The maxim of manner: this maxim is about articulating one's ideas in a clear manner in order to avoid ambiguity, misunderstandings, or confusions, (Grice, as cited in Heras, 2014).

Grice (1975) gives an example to explain the Cooperative Principle being observed in what could be a common dialog.

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, *Oh quite well, I think: he likes his colleagues and he hasn't been to prison yet* (p.43).

Now, the previous exchange can show us some of the concepts we have been discussing so far. For example, we have mentioned how context plays a very important role in the field of pragmatics. You need to know the context in order to understand why B answered in this way. This short conversation also shows us that even among speakers who are familiar with the context, it might be difficult to understand, without clarification, what the real message is; what exactly did B want to say? Furthermore, if this exchange were not understood by its listener, it would constitute a violation of the maxim of manner. But, if the listener did not need extra information to understand the message, it would be an example of the maxim of quantity being observed by the speaker.

Teaching pragmatics

Kasper (1997) presents a report on the aspects of pragmatics that have been taught in classrooms, according to research. This author includes an analysis of several pieces of research that have reported the fact that teaching pragmatics is important and that it can be taught in an explicit manner. It should be noted, however, that research shows that some elements of pragmatics seem to be more difficult to teach than others. One of these aspects is implicature (Kasper, 1997). But the great majority of research studies show that pragmatics can and should be taught. Kasper and Rose (2002) cite Schmidt to argue that simply exposing learners to the pragmatics of the target language might not be enough for them to acquire them. What is more, people, especially children, are directly taught the pragmatics of their native language whenever teachers, parents, or caregivers think it necessary. Students of a second or foreign language can learn how to be pragmatically competent in the target language as a result of carefully planned classroom instruction. The teacher plays an important role here because outside the classroom, students have little possibility of learning the pragmatics of the target language and also of receiving feedback on their performance (Kasper and Rose, 2002).

Now, let us examine one research study which focused on the effects of explicitly teaching refusals to Iranian university students. Farahian, Rezaee, & Gholami (2012), report that a treatment and a control group were used, along with a pre and posttest. The results showed that the experimental group did significantly better on the posttest than the control group. These authors also suggest using films and videos as a source of authentic-like input material (see also Abrams, 2014).

Another study focused on the explicit teaching of requests to EFL learners. Rajabia, Azizifara, & Gowhary, (2015) report that after using explicit instruction of L2 pragmatics with EFL learners, the experimental group noticeably improved their mean on the posttest, whereas there was not much difference on the control group performance. The authors did emphasize that the students who had a better command of grammar did significantly better on both the pre and the posttest.

Although there is evidence that researchers and teachers around the world are starting to use the evidence available to improve the teachers' role in the classroom, it is important to mention that Ishihara and Cohen (2010) claim that while the interest in researching pragmatics has grown exponentially in the last four decades or so, most of these studies focus only on demonstrating that the majority of second or foreign language learners are lacking the pragmatic ability of the target language. According to these authors, not much has been done to try to remedy this situation. In other words, investigators, teachers, textbook writers and editors are not taking advantage of what research has revealed, namely the need to incorporate pragmatics in the teaching practice. One of the reasons why textbook creators do not incorporate pragmatics as part of the content is that teaching pragmatics is difficult; its rules are not clear-cut rules like grammar, for example. The rules of pragmatics may vary from one culture to another even though they might speak the same

language. The authors of these books base the content on their own intuition and introspections, which according to research could cause problems as it reflects only a very limited part of how language is used; normally, it does not include how the target language is employed in reality by the majority of the members of a specific speech community. It is time now to start putting into practice what research has revealed. Teachers should also begin to do their own research in their context to find out how pragmatically developed their students are in the target language and take the necessary measures to improve their learners' communicative competence (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010).

Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan (2003) argue that the lack of pragmatic ability in second language learners is one of the main reasons why they cannot communicate effectively with native or high proficiency speakers. These authors allege that many times the lack of pragmatic ability is thought to be because of personal issues rather than the process of teaching and learning. The instruction in this field of language learning should be introduced as early as possible. There is no reason to wait until the students have a great command of grammar to teach them pragmatics. The main goal of teaching pragmatics is to "raise learners' pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interactions in the target language" (p.38). As for the techniques for teaching pragmatics, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan (2003) state that there is no single best approach. They suggest, however, using authentic language samples, and before any production or interpretation by the students, there should be input.

Previous studies

As mentioned earlier many researchers around the world are interested in the field of second language pragmatics because 1) the development of the pragmatic ability is key for acquiring communication competence; and 2) apparently, second language learners are not being taught how to develop this skill efficiently. (see also Al-Tayib, 2006; Bardovi-Harlig, & Dornyei, 1998; Kwai-peng, 2016; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

In a study conducted by Edwards and Csisz ́ (2004), it was found that Hungary high school EFL learners were having problems performing openings and closings in conversations with their native speakers counterparts. Therefore, the researchers decided to create a booklet with activities to try to remedy this situation. The interesting part of this study is that part of the tasks that were assigned to the students involved translating some greetings and leave-takings from Hungarian to English. They used very informal Hungarian language so the students would have to think hard as to how to convey the same level of informality and the same message in the target language. Role-plays as the pre and posttest were also used. The results showed that even after only four weeks of explicit instruction, the students in the treatment group improved their performance of the speech act of opening and closing conversations. This improvement was measured in terms of appropriateness. In other words, the students had to choose the correct kind of language according to the context in the role-plays.

In another study, Fukuya, & Mart ́nez, (2008) compared the effects between the explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatics. Role-plays were also used to look at the participants' realization of the speech act of suggesting. Both groups -the explicit and implicit- were given the same input, that is, videos of native English speakers making suggestions. The group where direct instruction was used was taught how to give suggestions based on what they saw in the videos. For the other group, the suggestions were underlined in the subtitles of the videos. After the lessons, as a posttest, both groups had to make suggestions in role-plays, via email and on the phone. The results showed that both groups improved their scores in comparison with the pretest. It was also found that the group where explicit instruction was used performed better than the other group in the activity in which they had to suggest on the phone. However, in the email activity both groups performed equally.

The use of sitcoms as a means of raising pragmatic awareness in university EFL learners was used by Mart ́nez and Fern ́andez (2008). In addition, the authors' intention was to use various excerpts from a popular sitcom to explain and discuss with the students the Cooperative Principle being followed. It was concluded that the explicit teaching of pragmatics helps raise students' pragmatic awareness. Furthermore, the authors claim that the Gricean model, though an old theory, is still effective enough to be used as a guide for teaching how real conversations take place.

II. THE ECUADORIAN CASE

In the year 2012, the Ecuadorian Government decided to test the English proficiency of public high school English teachers. The results were not encouraging, as this study showed that the great majority of these teachers had a very low level of proficiency. The Government said that if our teachers cannot speak English, how can we expect our students to learn it (Ecuador tiene falencias, 2012).

However, it is common knowledge that the Ecuadorian Government has not tested these teachers' English proficiency since the previously mentioned date. It would be interesting to find out if their level has improved or not.

One of the measures that the Ecuadorian Government took was to make changes to the English curriculum. The new Ecuadorian national English curriculum takes into account the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In other words, learners' level is now measured A1, B1, etc. Part of the changes that were made to the curriculum is the incorporation of pragmatics in the teaching practice, which is stated on the document (Ministerio de educaci ́n, 2014). Research is needed to find out whether teachers are aware of what pragmatics even is, and if they are incorporating this field into their lessons.

Based on this review of the literature, we want to shed some light on this issue by raising the following research question.

To what extent has English pragmatics been researched in Ecuador?

III. METHOD

We wanted to demonstrate the importance of including pragmatics into the classroom as well as the significance of doing research in this field. In addition, we wanted to find out the extent to which this field has been researched in Ecuador.

Since in Ecuador, research in the field of linguistics, particularly pragmatics is still in its infancy, and only very few professional research studies regarding English pragmatics were found, a decision was made to study, especially, masters level theses which included studies in this field in the 10 major universities of Ecuador -according to international rankings-, although we do include one bachelor's degree thesis. Additionally, we decided to include part of what has been researched around the world in the field of pragmatics, especially when teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. The criteria for including the research studies in the *previous studies* section was that they had to be carried out in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. As we mentioned before, the review of the literature is not finished yet.

IV. RESULTS

As stated earlier, the present paper is part of a more thorough study, the results of which will be reported in approximately two years. So far, after intensive online research, this is what has been found in terms of the research question for this paper.

First, we must mention one study on Spanish pragmatics in Ecuador that was not part of the teaching and learning environment. It was conducted by Hardin (2013). It basically looked at how the lack of Spanish pragmatic ability in some English-speaking doctors caused misunderstandings and therefore they were unable to understand the real message of patients, and they would become confused because they understood that their patients reported something different from their real symptoms.

The first study we will mention does not mention the word pragmatics in its title, but it is directly related. As part of a graduation project at master's level, Burbano (2011) wanted to discover if the English textbook that was being used in Ecuadorian public high schools at that time offered students any possibility of developing the pragmatic elements of adjacency pairs and backchannels. The author also used questionnaires to find out if the high school teachers were including these elements into their practice. The results showed that the backchannels presented in the textbook seemed insufficient for students to be able to use them in different contexts. Additionally, the adjacency pairs found in the book did not represent the manner in which native speakers ask and answer questions in real life situations. Moreover, the teachers in general did not make use of the pragmatic features mentioned above in their classrooms.

There is one study that focuses on English pragmatics, but it was carried out by an undergraduate student as a graduation project. This piece of research showed that most students of English as a foreign language at a university in Ecuador use the target language in a way that would be considered inappropriate for native speakers. The author emphasizes that these students might have serious problem in communication because of their lack of English pragmatics. Another aspect that was found in this investigation was that the learners also showed significant deficiencies in their grammar and vocabulary (Rengifo, 2017).

The next research study was carried out at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador by Heras (2014). This one and Burbano's work (2011) are the only ones found at a master's level. It showed that 1) student teachers who had taken a subject called basic pragmatics before the investigation took place still remembered what this field deals with; 2) more research on English pragmatics needs to be carried out in Ecuador; 3) English learners in general lack pragmatic ability in the target language; and 4) the use of sitcoms for raising students' pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness might be a good idea as they show many excerpts of real-like use of language, which might be different from the English in many textbooks (Heras, 2014).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on this review of the literature in the field of pragmatics, we selected the following as the major conclusions. Pragmatics is a key element in the field of teaching and learning a foreign or second language.

Most research on pragmatics is mainly exploratory.

Many textbook writers and teachers do not make use of what research has found in terms of using language in a natural manner in order to avoid breakdowns in communication.

The discourse completion test (DCT) is the most commonly used research instrument in the area of pragmatics.

Many studies demonstrate that pragmatics can and should be taught in the classroom after carefully planning the lessons.

Films and series can be used as authentic-like material to be used for instruction.

It could be said that even though it is now part of the new English curriculum, research on pragmatics in Ecuador is almost nonexistent. This is a serious issue because teachers and researchers need to be aware that there is a field of

English teaching and learning that could help their students drastically improve their communication in the target language, namely English.

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