

Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure in Moroccan EFL learners' Requests

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Abstract:

“Most of our misunderstandings of other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to parse their sentences or to understand their words.... A far more important source of difficulty in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker's intention”

(Miller in Thomas 1983:92)

The concern in this paper is with such situations where we fail to understand “what is meant by what is said” thus with situations of pragmatic failure especially in an area of cross-cultural communication. Undoubtedly, these are situations where the actual use of language for the maintenance and preservation of social harmony among interactants depict clearly cross-language variations and interference. The discussion will revolve around such basic issues as: a) how interactional events in intercultural communication establish relationships between participants marking dimensions of social distance, status and politeness, b) the effects which different linguistic forms in different languages can have on the performance of the foreign language learner and c) basically the implications of all this for the teaching of the pragmatic competence to the non-native speakers of English, with special reference to the teaching of English at the university level in the Moroccan context.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; politeness; pragmatic failure; Requests.

1. Introduction

“For the speaker of a foreign language, any conversational exchange with a native speaker of target language is a form of cross-cultural encounter” (Richard & Sukwiwat 1986:113). In these respects, the foreign language learner is to be seen as developing some pragmatic skills that would entitle him to engage in some interactional activities that instantiate as constituted realities social, moral and cultural values.

The task here is to shed some light on the pragmatic skills of Moroccan learners of English as a foreign language. The starting point for this is the situation of foreign language teaching and learning in Morocco, and so, the learners directly addressed are native speakers of Moroccan Arabic or Tamazight learning English at the university level. (Faculty of Beni-Mellal). Samples of their

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interactions with their American teachers, thus native speakers of the language, are isolated and analysed. It is an attempt to see the extent to which students are equipped to face cross-cultural encounters for culturally specific assumptions and strategies for communication, with special reference here to the politeness phenomenon, emerge and determine the choice of form in the performance of different speech acts.

For this, the aim, we have to specify; is not the formalization of a theory but rather the categorization of learners' speech behaviour pointing out to aspects of their actual communicative attempts as a way perhaps towards understanding the causes of any failure on their part and towards promoting, consequently, better ways to address their pragmatic or communicative ends.

1.1. Levels of Pragmatic Communication Differences

To speak of appropriate ways of interacting, reference is made first to the appropriate styles of speaking that are adopted to the power paradigm of the interaction and which indicate the degree of perceived affiliation or distance between speaker and hearer, and second to the extent to which the weightiness of the speech act has been graded according to some absolute ranking of impositions within the cultures concerned.

There is a consensus (see Arndt & Janncy 1992) that we share similar feelings that relate to the need to feel unimpeded, estimated and respected; needs that refer to both personal and interpersonal face, but it is the expression of these feelings that seems to vary from one culture to another. Therefore, "many problems of intercultural communication arise from the difficulty of finding appropriate ways to signal feelings and attitudes to foreign partners" (Janey & Arndt 1992: 21).

Indeed, at this level of communication, being polite reveals itself to be a complicated skill that involves much more than simply translating politeness formulas from one language to another. The reason for this is that

"people from different cultures often have not only different ideas about what counts as language, but also different ideas about what counts as imposing options, friendliness, dominance, supportiveness, and other key concepts."

(Janey & Arndt 1992:29)

This is what is expected to present great problems for the foreign language learner who has to realize that there are cross-cultural differences in the perception of different dimensions and so the same transactions may involve for greater face - costs "in one culture than in another. This is of paramount importance as it determines the learner's development of pragmatic skills, and a failure in an adequate development is likely to reflect on him not as a less proficient language user (as in the case of grammatical failure) but on him as a person. (See Thomas 1983).

1.2. The Approach

To evaluate students' abilities related to "socio – pragmatic" judgments concerning the size of imposition, cost / benefit, social distance and relative rights and obligations, we report on their use of one speech act - Request. The way they formulate such an act and the different forms they rely on for its issuance will thus be examined.

However, the examination proposed here is necessarily a sketchy one as the present is but a report of a work which is still going on and so much greater details are expected to be provided in a later work. The pragmatic features of students' requests described were massively present in the different

encounters observed and where the students were involved. The examples cited are illustrations of the requests of three groups of 4th year students (total number 45 students) from whom a total number of 530 requests were elicited.

The speech act of request was chosen as it represents a sensitive area for detecting learners' perceptions of the social meanings conveyed by different forms of utterances since they are by definition face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson 1978). When s/he makes a request, the speaker impinges on the hearer's claim to a certain freedom of action as well as a certain freedom from imposition. The speaker has, at her/his disposal, a variety of direct and indirect forms capable of minimizing the type of imposition involved in the act and he can opt for some indirect forms that allow a choice for the hearer as whether to comply or not. Therefore, a request issued in the form.

Can you post this letter for me?

is estimated by Brown & Levinson (1987) as a tentative and thus polite form than if it is the imperative or what they would refer to as " bald- on - record " forms that were used.

Students' Requisite Forms

To comment on the forms used for the issuance of the students' requests, it would be said that there seems to be a prevalent tendency to adopt rather bald and direct forms for addressing their teachers. Consider the following examples:

Situation I = (Request for references)

Ex1=T=I have got some few articles on this

S= you bring them to me tomorrow

Ex 2=S=Miss, I don't have references for my topic. You can bring me some?

Situation II (Request for supervision)

Ex3=S= I want you to supervise my monograph.

Ex4=S = It is about monograph; I need a supervisor.

T=I am so sorry, but I am already working with seven.

S= Add another one.

Ex5=S= Teacher, you may supervise my monograph

T=Well, it all depends on what you want to do.

S=Give me a topic.

Situation III (Request for information)

Ex6=T= we can meet this afternoon to discuss this in some more details.

S=the time?

T = Well around 3'O'clock.

S=No teacher, we have a lecture.

The situations reported on here are situations that involve certain social distance between students as speakers and their teachers as interlocutors, as this is certainly not an intimate or familiar relationship. Besides, the acts issued are acts that involve some imposition on the hearer ie asking for references, supervision or information. Therefore, the cost of such acts has to be rightly estimated.

The restricted use of indirect forms by the learners may be attributed to the non-conversational status of these forms in connection with the usage prevalent in the Moroccan community which, being a positive politeness culture, seems to enhance spontaneity, solidarity and clarity of intent, hence the prevalence of direct forms.

The learners in the present context do not seem to realize, or are not made to realize, the correlation of these structures, i.e., indirect structures, with forms of politeness as they may not have been instructed to use these forms and they. This simply means they are ignorant of the tactful deviousness for which indirect forms may be used in some other cultures. This is perhaps the reason why the learners do not manifest a real awareness of the necessity to go a gradient up the scale of politeness for efficient and polite communication.

In fact, positive politeness cultures present interactants with a variety of other devices, apart from indirectness, to mark one's concern for politeness and tentativeness. Some of these modifying devices is the need/want statements, and here again, some inappropriate usage on the part of the students could be noticed. Consider this:

Ex 7: (the same situation, request for references)

S: I need books for my monograph.

Ex8: S: I want some references for my research.

Once again, there seems to be a misconception of power relation between students and teachers as the need / want statement are categorized by Brown & Levinson (1987), Searle (1975) as formulas generally used in familiar and intimate situations. So, the appropriate conditions for the usage of such forms are not met here hence, I think, the reactions marked by the teachers interactants.

Another positive redressive device with bald - on - record forms is the use of the politeness marker " please" which in the Moroccan interaction comes in the form of invocations as /Ila:hjxalli:k.../. Those were computed to be widely used in the issuance of requests by the foreign language learners. We know that these are formulaic expressions, which are easily attached to almost any imperative form, and it is no surprise that they should appear so frequently in the learners' speech. They seem to have been developed as routine behaviors. Though marking some kind of politeness, such a behavior on the part of the learners may be a mere reflection of the system prevalent in the Moroccan culture. The observer of the Moroccans' speech is indeed struck by the rather heavy reliance on invocations by Moroccan interactants. You can hardly find someone making a request without inserting such expressions. These are certainly perceived as mitigating in effect and as able to promote compliance since people are unlikely to react negatively to something where there is allusion to God's blessing.

By showing such a preference for these politeness markers, the learners do not seem to realize that there are other forms less explicit in content, but which are more tentative and perhaps more polite that can be used with foreign addressees.

The on-record forms in these respects are the most straightforward on the structural level that learners can evidently produce and perhaps even respond to. They are also more efficient as they involve a rather direct communication of s's intent and they may, therefore, increase the possibilities of compliance on the part of the interlocutor. This takes us to another issue which is that of efficiency and how this dimension may be conceived differently in different cultures. In negative politeness cultures, we presume, the efficient forms would be the ones that present the H with some ambiguity leaving its requestive reading to his solicitude. In positive politeness cultures, the efficient form is certainly the one that may suggest some solidary and close ties between interactants.

This, however, may not be the only interpretation of what is going on. The learners' usage of direct forms, though redressed sometimes, may, in fact, not relate to any attempt on their part to increase efficiency. Their performance may rather be, and naturally enough, affected by some states of high emotion, that of anxiety and vulnerability as they are aware that they are communicating via a language they are still learning, and that they are engaging in some interactional activities with native speakers of the language, a thing for which they have not been prepared. We know that states of high emotion correlate with a decline in the efficiency of the communicative behaviour. (And here one can, I think, attempt a conceptualization of the covert psychological processes of the learner of a foreign language).

Consider, as an example, the students' striking use of modals to issue requests as:

a-Teacher, you should sign this paper for me.

b-The administration told us that the teachers must sign the papers.

Implications

As was made clear at different junctures of the paper, the principal motivation of the present project is to address the needs of learners in a foreign language classroom. Therefore, certain implications are suggested.

In her survey of the different aspects of the pragmatic difficulties that foreign language learners encounter, Thomas (1983) distinguishes between pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failure. She argues that while the first category refers to a highly conventionalized usage that can be easily taught to learners, the second is a rather delicate aspect as the socio-pragmatic descriptions have not yet "reached the level of precision which grammar has attained in describing linguistic 'Competence'" Therefore, it cannot be easily and obviously taught; the reason why perhaps the pragmatic aspects of language are not dealt with on equal terms with other aspects. This is what makes of the students' accumulated abilities incomplete ones as the interactants with them would notice that the way they have been instructed enables them to face academic fields related to the different disciplines taught to them. Outside these limits, their pragmatic means remain inappropriate and some of their pragmatic structures seem to be highly affected by structures of the native language.

Because of this, we need to make the student realize that "politeness markers are an integral part of the foreign cultural system, and should neither be used, nor interpreted by reference to the learners' native system. More effective teaching of behavioural component may minimize native cultural interference and prevent impolite, ineffective or otherwise inappropriate behaviour on the part of the learner."(Thomas1983:99).

Allusion then here is made to an effective teaching of aspects of foreign language relating to pragmatic usage. One way to this is through an explicit exposition of the different pragmatic parameters operating in foreign language interactions. Explicit exposition implies also clear discussions of students' actual use in the light of these pragmatic parameters. Here, I think, the whole concept of teaching in general and teaching a foreign language in particular where we have the interplay of what is language specific and what is culture specific need to be modified.

Indeed, a well - balanced initiation of the students to all aspects of language, including the tactful aspects, extends beyond the limits of those situations generally created in which some immaterial idea or concept in the mind of one person (teacher) is sent into the mind of another (learners). It is through actual interactional activities, things that are almost inexistent in our teaching programs, that students will come to realize that for each utterance they produce they have to draw not only on

grammatical knowledge but also on their knowledge of the world. Cross cultural mismatches in the assessment of social distance, of what represents an imposition, of when an attempt at a face - threatening act must be avoided and in evaluating relative power, rights and obligations is what cause their socio-pragmatic failure. This is on the production level where we should have a real application of interpersonal functions of speech communication. Listening, we would argue, too needs to be responsive in that the "passive referential understanding" generally prevalent in classrooms should be supplanted by what Shotter (1992) would refer to as " active responsive understanding "where the listener's preparing some kind of response (agreement, sympathy, objection, execution) should rather be expected.

Politeness is a " living event which is played out in the point where two or more consciousness meet dialogically " (Shotter 1992 : 13).Therefore, as learners we are certainly in possession of systematic and orderly factful tools which, in our utterances, we merely codify into words. What is important here, and what stresses the importance of engaging learners in interactional or dialogical activities in that these tools are only given a form for us as we interact with others. The learner's awareness is located at the point of contact between an utterance use and the responsive effect it achieves. These attempts will constitute types of negotiations of the learners' skills negotiations about the intelligibility, legitimacy and appropriateness of their means.

What is advocated here is that more creativity is needed in the design of syllabuses because students in a foreign language learning context are operating in a context which provides them with linguistic and sociolinguistic systems that are too restricted to prepare them for coping with a variety of communication situations including situations in which they have to deal with native speakers of the language.

These are by no means the only needs of students but we cannot go more details here. We simply need to emphasize, together with Thomas (1983), the fact that we do a great disservice to the learners if we expect them to absorb pragmatic norms without explicit formalization, without giving them the tools to make the processes of pragmatic decision-making explicit and without sensitizing them to expecting cross -cultural differences in the linguistic' realizations of politeness and truthfulness. Making them to engage in some interactional activities would take the teaching of language beyond the realms of mere passive reception and would certainly equip the student to face the truth that interacting via a foreign language is not only interacting while looking into the eyes of another, but also while looking with the eyes of another.

2. Conclusion

We need to conclude by saying that this paper is basically a research project report. The work on "the development of communication competence in foreign language teaching contexts " is still going on. This report then provides only an overview on the project's activities and orientations, lacking detailed information. Still, it contains, in our view, a number of suggestions, it indicates some research insights and it poses some problem areas, which can constitute possible starting points for research in this field.

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