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English language learners' spoken interaction: What a multimodal perspective reveals about pragmatic competence

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ABSTRACT

Broadly speaking, pragmatic competence can be defined as the ability to communicate appropriately in a social context. Learning how to use pragmatic features adequately in a particular setting is paramount for language users in order to achieve communicative purposes effectively. However, since communication involves the interplay of various semiotic modes such as spoken language, gestures, facial expression, head movement or gaze, researchers examining face-to-face interaction should go a step further to explore pragmatic competence from a multimodal perspective, which leads them to focus on multimodal pragmatics. The aim of this paper is to show how a multimodal approach can shed some light in the study of interlanguage pragmatics. We conducted a microanalysis of the performance of learners of English as an additional language at two different proficiency levels, who produced complaint sequences. Results suggest that spoken language is just one of the resources that learners use during the interaction, which is not always prevalent in all the moves in which the complaint is structured, the different roles, and the proficiency levels under examination. This confirms that the centrality of the linguistic mode in the analysis of this speech act will lead to a biased understanding of the interlanguage pragmatic competence.

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), learning an additional language (AL) and obtaining official certificates that accredit the corresponding level of a potential user has become one of the major concerns of language learners. Needless to say, the ultimate goal of language teachers is to increase learners' communicative competence in order to help them to communicate and use the AL successfully in a variety of contexts, with speakers of different linguistic backgrounds and for several purposes. Achieving this particular competence involves delving into communicative competence and focusing particularly on pragmatic competence, which may serve to provide learners with adequate tools for using language (Taguchi, 2009). In addition to this, it is important to note that pragmatics, and particularly in face-to-face interaction, should be viewed from a multimodal perspective since interaction implies the interplay of different semiotic modes.

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The present study aims to discuss the nature of pragmatics and multimodal pragmatics, as well as to illustrate how multimodal pragmatics can be applied to the analysis of face-to-face interaction following a multimodal conversation analysis (CA) approach. In this study, we focus particularly on learners' face-to-face interaction when performing complaint sequences elicited by means of a role-play task. Therefore, this study attempts to exemplify how learners' performance and interaction can be explored from a broader perspective, that is, going beyond the traditional approach grounded in linguistic realisations.

2. Pragmatics beyond language

As a branch of linguistics, pragmatics is a relatively young discipline. It is viewed from different approaches, such as those that maintain that this discipline focuses on the use of language in social interaction and the effects its use may have on interlocutors. As part of the communicative competence construct, pragmatic competence plays an important role. Its development is crucial for language learners as it may help them to increase their ability to use language appropriately under specific circumstances to reach communicative purposes. Communication, however, goes beyond the construction of utterances; rather it is shaped by the interplay of different semiotic modes. In what follows, theoretical background on the notion of pragmatic competence and the nature of multimodal pragmatics is presented.

2.1. Pragmatic competence

It is generally accepted that the ultimate goal of language teachers is to increase language learners' communicative competence to prepare them for authentic interaction using an AL. In this respect, scholars have brought their expertise to describe the phenomenon of language teaching, learning and assessment (Ross & Kasper, 2013). Concerning this, various communicative models have been advanced ever since Hymes (1972) proposed the term communicative competence, which comprises knowledge of grammatical and sociocultural rules of language use. Pragmatic competence, however, was not treated as an independent competence within the communicative competence construct until Bachman's (1990) model. The model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) includes pragmatic competence within sociolinguistic competence. In Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell's (1995) and Celce-Murcia's (2007) models, pragmatic competence falls under the categories of actional competence and interactional competence respectively. Pragmatic competence has also been conceptualised in two types of knowledge: pragmalinguistics, i.e. different linguistic resources speakers have at their disposal to construct utterances in a given language, and sociopragmatics, i.e. social conditions that constrain and govern language use (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). Accordingly, in order to produce appropriate and successful utterances, speakers are expected to draw on these two components following a pragmalinguistic or grammatically oriented assessment of the pragmatic force, and a sociopragmatic assessment of politeness variables, including social distance, social power and degree of imposition of a specific face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the area of second/foreign language acquisition, where this study is placed, pragmatics, and more precisely the exploration of speech acts, is typically known as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which focuses particularly on the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of the target forms in the AL (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

A well-known definition of pragmatics is proposed by Crystal (2008, p. 379), who states that pragmatics refers to "the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication". The author further adds that pragmatics "focuses on an 'area' between semantics, sociolinguistics and extralinguistic context; but the boundaries with these other domains are as yet incapable of precise definition" (p. 379). This definition stresses the perspective of the users, speakers, and the choice they make, the constraints they may encounter in interaction, and the effect that language use has on the interlocutors. Kasper and Rose (2001) argue that pragmatics refers to "the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context" (p. 2), and suggest that communicative action involves "not only using speech acts (...), but also engaging in different types of discourse and participating in speech events of varying length and complexity" (p. 2). The act of communication is seen as part of social interaction and it comprises the effects speakers' have on other participants, thereby conforming to Crystal's view that pragmatics is concerned with speakers and listeners (Kasper & Ross, 2013). Moreover, this conceptualization of pragmatics can be aligned with both discursive pragmatics and CA. Although CA is typically used for naturally occurring data (Huang, 2016), it can be applied to the study of pragmatics, and more specifically ILP (Kasper, 2006), in order to see how speakers construct face-to-face interaction.

Broadly speaking, as Hall and Pekarek-Doehler (2011) report, from an interactional perspective, speakers and listeners use a variety of semiotic modes such as prosody, language, and non-verbal resources to produce and interpret turns and actions, and repair problems. Interestingly, Celce-Murcia's (2007) communicative competence model includes interactional competence, which according to He and Young (1998, p. 7) "(...) is not an attribute of an individual participant, and thus we cannot say that an individual is interactionally competent; rather we talk of interactional competence as something that is jointly constructed by all participants". In this model, interactional competence involves actional competence, related to the performance of speech acts; conversational competence, associated with the turn-taking system in conversation; and non-verbal/paralinguistic competence, which encompasses kinesics, proxemics, haptic behaviour and non-linguistic utterances with interactional import, silence and pauses.

The study of pragmatics is therefore fundamental to understand how speakers and listeners co-construct and deconstruct meaning in a given interaction. However, regardless the importance of pragmatic competence in the communicative

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