

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS ABOUT PRAGMATIC AND DISCOURSE TRANSFER FOR L2 LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract

Pragmatic and discourse transfer herein refers to the influence of the first language (L1) and culture on second language (L2) performance. In my previous research (Tran, 2004c, 2006a), I found a number of conditions of pragmatic and discourse transfer, which are factors necessary for pragmatic and discourse transfer to take place. In this paper, I will discuss several pedagogical implications of findings about conditions of pragmatic and discourse transfer for L2 learners and teachers.

Key words: pragmatics, discourse transfer, cross-cultural interaction.

INTRODUCTION

My previous research (Tran, 2004c, 2006a) showed that Vietnamese learners of English transferred the L1 frequency of use and combination of compliment response (CR) strategies into their L2 performance. When responding to a compliment, the Vietnamese normally neither use nor include an "Appreciation Token" in their CRs. They tend to deny or downplay the compliment instead. CRs by Vietnamese speakers of English exhibited this tendency as a result of pragmatic and discourse transfer. It is acknowledged that pragmatic and discourse transfer does not always cause miscommunication because "negative transfer equals 'difference from L2', but 'difference from L2 equals miscommunication' is a *non sequitur*" (Kasper 1992, p. 221). However, although the Vietnamese speakers' intention was to be modest and polite to the other interlocutor, some Australians failed to perceive it as such. For example, one third of the Australian English speakers interviewed perceived CRs which exhibited pragmatic and discourse transfer by the Vietnamese interlocutors as an expression of discomfort, lack of confidence and/or absence of trust in the sincerity of compliments. On the contrary, Vietnamese speakers of English reported having

experienced none of the above. So although pragmatic and discourse transfer did not cause a breakdown in communication, it led to the NSs' misperception, which is also a consequence of miscommunication, of the L2 speakers.

In order to prevent such instances of misunderstanding in cross-cultural interaction, the learners need to know about cross-cultural differences between the L1 and L2 as well as the L2 norms in realizing communicative acts. L2 speakers in this study were at the advanced level of L2 proficiency but they still transferred their L1 pragmatic and discourse norms into their L2 performance. Therefore, cross-cultural differences and L2 pragmatics and discourse need to be learnt and taught. The question is how to do so.

EXPOSURE AND NOTICING AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING

As found in my previous research (Tran, 2004c, 2006a), one of the conditions that can inhibit pragmatic and discourse transfer is exposure. Exposure in the senses of length of stay in the target language country and amount of input seems to be able to reduce transfer. This implies that the L2 learners should actively increase their exposure to the L2. While it is not always feasible to learn an L2 in the target country, it is possible to increase the amount of L2 input one is exposed to. Moreover, long duration of stay in the L2 country does not necessarily entail improvement of L2 proficiency and pragmatic and discourse knowledge. So learners should engage in activities that enhance their exposure to the L2 input because "without input, acquisition cannot take place" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 31). L2 learners in the target country, for instance Vietnamese ESL learners in Australia, should make full use of their learning environment to expose themselves to the target language in communication in order to advance not only their L2 proficiency but also their L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge. Although those who learn an L2 in their native country, for example Vietnamese EFL learners in Vietnam, may use textbooks as a source of learning about L2 pragmatics and discourse, it is not recommended because "in general, textbooks cannot be counted on as a reliable source of pragmatic input for classroom language learners" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 25). Instead, EFL learners can increase their exposure to the L2 media.

The L2 media is a useful source of L2 pragmatic and discourse input for both L2 learners in their home country and those in the target language country. As Rose (2001) compared compliments and CRs from forty American contemporary films and naturally occurring ones, he found that "film data corresponds fairly closely to authentic data, particularly for major

pragmalinguistic categories” (p. 321). Film data was found to be more representative of authentic speech pragmalinguistically than sociopragmatically. Although the media in general or films in particular do not complete the source of L2 pragmatic and discourse input, they contribute considerably to the enrichment and accessibility of this source.

Increased exposure to the L2 input alone, however, is not sufficient. The learners can hardly acquire L2 knowledge by being merely passively exposed to the L2 input. Input needs to be processed and there have been cognitive perspectives on input processing. Gass (2003) remarked that

The important role of input has not diminished over the years; what has changed, however, is the conceptualization of how individuals process the input and how the input interacts with the mental capacities of those learning a language (first or second) (p. 229).

In order for input to be processed efficiently or to have a role in learning, learners need to notice information to be acquired in the input. According to the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995, 2001), input becomes intake, which is what the learners actually know and can use, only when they notice it. Noticing “is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake” (Schmidt, 1993a, p. 209). Schmidt’s strong claim that there is no learning without attention was challenged by Gass (1997) and Schachter et al. (cited in Gass, 2003). However, it is generally accepted that selective attention plays a significant role in language learning. Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which says that negotiation of meaning in interaction between NSs and non-native speakers (NNSs) and between NNSs facilitates language acquisition, highlights the role of selective attention. Gass (1997) also considered such attention as “one of the crucial mechanisms” in input processing (p. 132). So Schmidt (1998, 2001) modified his assertion and later acknowledged that learning may take place without learners’ awareness but such learning does not make a major contribution to L2 learning.

When applying the notion of attention, also known as noticing, to L2 pragmatic development, Schmidt (1993) affirmed that

For the learning of pragmatics in a second language, attention to linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features is required. I also claim that learners experience their learning, that attention is subjectively experienced as noticing, and that the attentional threshold for noticing is the same as the threshold for learning (p. 35).

Schmidt’s (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1998, 2001) application of the Noticing Hypothesis to the acquisition of L2 pragmatics was supported by

DuFon (2000). According to them, the learners can gain L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge through exposure to the L2 if they attend to and notice pragmatic and discourse features in the L2 input. When the learners consciously process L2 pragmatic and discourse information, “environment may not be the most important factor accounting for learners’ pragmatic awareness” and “both EFL and ESL learners were aware of pragmatic infelicities” (Niezgoda and Roever, 2001, p. 76). It is thus important that the L2 learners observe and take notice of how differently communicative acts are realized in the L1 and L2 cultures as well as what pragmatic and discourse norms normally govern the performance of L2 communicative acts. Socio-cultural knowledge can also be increased by noticing how sociocultural norms are expressed and practised cross-culturally.

This type of conscious noticing turns proficiency from potentially facilitating transfer to being capable of preventing it. Advanced proficiency is a facilitative condition of pragmatic and discourse transfer because the learners have the L2 tool to realize transfer. However, if the learners consciously notice pragmatic and discourse features in the input they are exposed to, their L2 proficiency boosts comprehension of the L2 input and, as a result, enhances their L2 pragmatic competence. Accordingly, pragmatic and discourse transfer can be reduced.

Exposure to and noticing the L2, however, is not the only source of learning. Besides instruction in the classroom, the learners should also utilize the source of knowledge that they process, together with their universal and L1 pragmatic and discourse knowledge. According to Bialystok’s (1993, 1994) two-dimensional model of L2 proficiency development, in the case of adult learners, the development of pragmatic knowledge has been mostly achieved. This prediction was supported by Koike (1989) and Hassall (1997). Unlike children acquiring their mother tongue, “adult learners get a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge for free. This is because some pragmatic knowledge is universal” (Kasper and Rose, 2001, p. 4). So learners come to the L2 learning process with available universal and L1 pragmatic and discourse knowledge which they can rely on. However, this does not mean that the learners should transfer the total system of pragmatics and discourse in their L1 into their L2, because not all of the L1 pragmatic and discourse features are transferable. It just means that they can apply what, at least to their perception, may be applied across cultures.

It should also be noted that learning greatly benefits from and is most useful in practice. Frequent practice enhances the automatization and acquisition of pragmatic and discourse knowledge. Moreover, ample practice means increased output, and output (i.e. language production or use) is es-

essential to language development (Swain 1985, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995, 1998). Although Swain's argument for the need for output was based on syntax and morphology, it can reasonably be applied to other domains of language including pragmatics and discourse. Therefore, learners should also actively take part in interaction with a diversity of speakers to put both their L2 skills and their cross-cultural knowledge to use, thereby improving and maintaining both.

So on the L2 learners' part, they can develop their knowledge of cross-cultural differences and L2 pragmatics and discourse by actively increasing exposure to the L2 and noticing L2 pragmatic and discourse features in the input. However, not all learners are good at detecting cross-cultural differences or noticing salient L2 pragmatic and discourse features. Moreover, the learning task becomes more difficult for adult learners because NSs, although being possibly willing to indicate learners' linguistic failure to help them improve their L2, rarely point out learners' pragmatic failure. Nor do NSs provide them with the feedback as to what is considered appropriate or polite in the L2 culture. Therefore, on the L2 teachers' part, they should bring this type of knowledge to the learners' notice in order to assist them in their L2 pragmatic development.

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN PRAGMATICS AND DISCOURSE

Although the essential role of pedagogical instruction in such L2 linguistic components as grammar, vocabulary, phonology and so on has long been established, the need for L2 pragmatics and discourse teaching has not yet been as widely recognized. Indeed, pragmatic and discourse instruction is crucial to the acquisition of L2 pragmatics and discourse. As found in Tran (2004c, 2006a), instruction in pragmatics and discourse in teaching methodologies can develop learners' L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge and thus prevent pragmatic and discourse transfer. This finding is supported by previous research by Billmyer (1990). She found that Japanese learners of English who received formal instruction in American English norms of complimenting produced more native-like compliments and CRs than those who did not. Bardovi-Harlig's (2001) review of research into instruction in pragmatics up to date also lends support to this finding. She found that "learners who have received no specific instruction in L2 pragmatics have noticeably different L2 pragmatic systems than NSs of the L2. This is true for both production and comprehension" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 29). Because teaching methodologies have a significant influence on pragmatic and discourse knowledge and consequently communicative

act performance as well as pragmatic and discourse transfer, there is a growing need for teaching pragmatics and discourse. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), there is “a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability” (p. 8). Moreover, the self-learning process through exposure to and noticing L2 pragmatic and discourse features in the L2 input may be ineffective. It is thus highly recommended that L2 teachers provide pedagogical instruction in pragmatics and discourse in their teaching methodologies. Specifically, pragmatics and discourse should be integrated into the English curricula in Vietnam.

Given that pragmatics and discourse teaching is included in L2 teaching curricula, the point is *how* to teach these components of language effectively. This can be achieved through the synergy of three elements with which the L2 teachers should provide the learners. These are authentic input, assistance with L2 comprehension, and explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse.

It is the teacher’s responsibility to provide the learners and encourage them to expose themselves to authentic and representative L2 input (Bardovi-Halig, 2001; Bouton, 1996; Boxer and Pickering, 1995; Rose, 1993, 1997). Since input is a source of learning, the learners can only benefit from the input if it contains authentic pragmatic and discourse information. Moreover, the L2 teacher should assist learners with comprehension (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001) because input and instruction would not be effective if learners fail to understand them.

Perhaps the most helpful task that the L2 teacher should do to advance their students’ pragmatic and discourse development is to explain L2 pragmatic and discourse rules explicitly. My previous research (Tran, 2004c, 2006a) indicated that explicit input or instruction apparently increased learners’ awareness of how the communicative act of responding to compliments is normally realized in English, which inhibited pragmatic and discourse transfer. The positive effect and significance of explicit pedagogical intervention in pragmatics and discourse were confirmed by research on the teaching and learning of these facets of language (Liddicoat and Crozet, 2001; Rose and Kwai-fun, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Yoshimi, 2001; etc.).

Adopting the explicit approach to teaching pragmatics and discourse, teachers can both improve and activate learners’ existing L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge. This is beneficial to the learners because although they possess universal and L1 pragmatic and discourse knowledge, they may not be able to put that knowledge to good use. Moreover, since L2

pragmatic and discourse development “can be facilitated by instruction, particularly when that instruction is of an explicit nature” (Kasper and Rose, 2001, p. 121), it is necessary to not only teach pragmatics and discourse but also provide explicit instruction in these components of language.

Explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse is recommended also because it brings pragmatic and discourse features in the input to learners’ notice, raises their consciousness of cross-cultural differences, improves their L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge and thereby counteracts pragmatic and discourse transfer. Consciousness at the level of noticing is essential to the learning of L2 pragmatics and discourse. Therefore, consciousness-raising is influential in learners’ acquisition of pragmatic and discourse norms (Liddicoat and Crozet, 2001). Although consciousness-raising may be achieved through implicit pedagogical intervention, it is only through explicit teaching that learners’ consciousness of pragmatic and discourse features in the input is most effectively raised. Research (Takahashi, 2001) has shown that input enhancement, which is a form of attention-drawing or consciousness-raising, is most productive of acquisition of L2 pragmatic features and that explicit instruction is “the explicit teaching condition manifesting the highest degree of input enhancement” (p. 173). Accordingly, explicit instruction is the most effective way to raise consciousness of pragmatic and discourse features in the input and thus enhance the learning of pragmatics and discourse.

Moreover, when explicit and implicit approaches to teaching pragmatics and discourse were compared (Rose and Kwai-fun, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; etc.), results consistently evidenced the superior effect of explicit instruction. As found by Tateyama (2001), explicit teaching leads to successful consciousness-raising and improvement in the acquisition of L2 pragmatic routines. When Rose and Kwai-fun (2001) compared these two methods in the teaching of compliments and responses to compliments in English to Cantonese speaking Chinese ESL students, they found that the deductive approach produced “better results for both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics” (p. 168). The inductive approach even negatively influenced sociopragmatic development. Rose and Kwai-fun (2001) explained that it was because in the inductive teaching method, difficult matters were raised without specific solutions so the learners were confused.

Results of my research together with the supporting evidence from other studies discussed above reinforce the need for explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse in L2 teaching methodologies. Given that an explicit approach to teaching pragmatics and discourse is adopted, another important question arises as to *what* to teach specifically. This is where the

findings about the nature and conditions of pragmatic and discourse transfer come into effect.

Based on the findings about the nature of pragmatic and discourse transfer (See Tran, 2004c, 2006a), explicit instruction can address what specific pragmatic and discourse features are transferred and how to raise learners' consciousness and understanding of this phenomenon. Vietnamese learners of English, for example, should be explicitly informed about what CR strategies were transferred by other Vietnamese speakers of English and why these strategies were more transferable than others (See Tran 2004c, 2006a). They should also receive explicit information about how frequency of use of and combination of CR strategies are transferred in Vietnamese-English interlanguage pragmatics so as to avoid pragmatic and discourse transfer if they wish to. Emphasis can be placed on CR strategies that are more likely to be transferred than others and the reason why. This can also be applied to L2 learners in general. Moreover, L2 learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences between their L1 and L2 communicative act realization should be raised through explicit instruction in how and why pragmatic and discourse norms concerning these communicative acts vary across cultures. Such specific knowledge is useful for learners in their L2 performance in cross-cultural interaction. In addition, it is recommended that explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse should include conditions that facilitate or inhibit pragmatic and discourse transfer. Being conscious of such conditions, the learners can reinforce conditions that prevent transfer and thereby refrain from transferring unintentionally.

Explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse, however, should be applied properly in order to avoid transfer of training. Although providing explicit information about common CR strategies in the target language is necessary, an emphasis on one strategy over others (e.g. the use of "Appreciation Token" in English CRs) "may encourage overuse of the formula" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 26). As a result of such transfer of training, learners may merely say "Thank you" to all compliments in English without realizing the social function of the compliments (i.e. a means of initiating a conversation). Their brief CRs may discourage further social interaction between the learners and NSs (Wolfson, 1989). Moreover, as suggested by Bardovi-Harlig (2001), "if a learner does not recognize the social function of such speech acts, then she cannot hold up her end of the conversation in response to such speech acts when other people use them" (p. 30). Therefore, it is important that social functions of communicative acts be incorporated into explicit instruction in pragmatics and discourse.

In addition, teaching the learners explicitly about strategies to real-

ize communicative acts in the target language needs tact because these strategies, which are also known as semantic formulas, are more “cultural” than “linguistic” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, p. 31). Adopting the explicit approach to teaching pragmatics and discourse, the L2 teacher should strike a delicate balance between instructing the learners and respecting their own choice. While it is necessary to inform learners of the L2 pragmatic and discourse norms, it is also advisable to let them decide on whether to adopt these norms or not. This is particularly suggested for the teaching of sociopragmatics. Unlike pragmalinguistics to which learners are more amenable, sociopragmatics is a more sensitive issue because it manifests learners’ “social (or even political, religious, or moral) judgement” (Thomas, 1983, p. 104). Although teachers should proceed with caution when teaching L2 pragmatics and discourse, it is still highly recommended that they provide explicit instruction in these facets of language so that learners can make informed decisions. As stated by Bardovi-Harlig (2001), “the adoption of sociocultural rules as one’s own in an L2 may have to be an individual decision. Providing the information so that a learner can make that choice is a pedagogical decision” (p. 32).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPEAKERS OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION

As discussed, L2 learners should improve their L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge in order to avoid miscommunication. Most interlanguage pragmatics studies often conclude with the implication that NNSs should familiarize themselves with L2 pragmatic and discourse rules. However, NNSs’ understanding of sociocultural norms underlying L2 pragmatics and discourse is not sufficient for effective cross-cultural interaction. NSs should also develop their cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse awareness because it increases their understanding of NNSs and tolerance of the differences, which contribute significantly to the effectiveness of cross-cultural interaction. Learning should take place in both directions.

A number of reasons justify the suggestion that NSs should also make attempts to understand NNSs and not expect only the latter to do the learning task. One reason is concerned with unintentional pragmatic and discourse transfer. As found in Tran (2004c, 2006a), pragmatic and discourse transfer can take place in the face of L2 pragmatic and discourse knowledge as a result of unmonitored speech or non-consciousness of the ongoing communicative act. This was demonstrated through the Naturalized Role-play (Tran 2004a, 2004c, 2006a, 2006b). So even if L2 speakers possess L2

knowledge of pragmatics and discourse, they may still transfer unintentionally. In such instances, NSs' cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse knowledge can prevent them from misinterpreting the NNSs and thus prevent miscommunication.

Another reason why NSs should improve their knowledge of other cultures and norms of speech is that L2 speakers, despite having knowledge of the target language pragmatics and discourse, may choose to adhere to and transfer their native pragmatic and discourse norms to express their cultural identity. Transfer might be intentional as a result of learners' subjective choice (Tran, 2004c, 2006a). Presentation of self or cultural identity through subjective choice was identified by Bourne (1988), Siegal (1994, 1996), Peirce (1995), etc., and was found to be a cause of pragmatic and discourse transfer (Al-Issa, 1998). Since learners can intentionally transfer their L1 pragmatics and discourse into their L2 use to express their loyalty to and pride of their L1 cultural patterns (Al-Issa, 1998; Blum-Kulka, 1991) as well as to distinguish their cultural identity from the dominant culture in the L2 society (Blum-Kulka, 1991; Preston, 1989), pragmatic and discourse transfer inspired by subjective choice is not a deficiency and does not need treatment. It should be seen as a creative expression of identity because "second language learners do not merely model native speakers with a desire to emulate, but rather actively create both a new interlanguage and an accompanying identity in the learning process" (Siegal, 1996, pp. 362-363).

When intentional transfer happens, NSs with cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse knowledge are more likely to interpret the NNSs' behavior or language use properly and maintain effective communication than those without that knowledge. It may be impossible to learn about every existing culture in order to understand all NNSs of one's language, but it is sensible of speakers of different languages to increase their cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse awareness. Australians, for example, may not need to know specifically about how the Vietnamese respond to compliments but a general knowledge of how this communicative act is often realized in Asian cultures can prevent instances of misinterpretation that may arise when pragmatic and discourse transfer happens either accidentally or on purpose.

CONCLUSION

It is therefore recommended that not only NNSs but also NSs of different languages should be aware of cross-cultural differences in order to avoid misinterpretation or misunderstanding and to excel effectiveness of cross-cultural interaction. As modern societies have become multilingual

and multicultural, cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse knowledge is advantageous to speakers of various languages. English NSs with knowledge of cross-cultural pragmatics and discourse also gain an advantage over those without this understanding because the number of speakers of English as an L2 or foreign language will far exceed the English NS population and play an important role in the global future of English (Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2002).

In order to enhance cross-cultural pragmatic and discourse awareness, one can learn by noticing cross-cultural differences in such a source of input as public education, the media or interaction with speakers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, cultural programs highlighting cultural diversity in the community should be encouraged on the radio and television as well as in newspapers, books, communal activities, etc. because they enhance mutual understanding which is the key to effective cross-cultural interaction.

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