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A task-based teaching proposal for raising awareness of commissive speech acts through English modal verbs

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This paper focuses on one of the latest and much integrated subdomains of linguistics – pragmatics – with the objective of bringing forward a proposal on teaching the commissive speech acts (promises and threats) expressed through modal verbal units. This is meant to help students internalize this linguistic function, which will, in turn aid them to take part in daily conversations and other activities, such as reading, writing and listening to English excerpts, thus integrating the pragmatic competence into other skills. The study, hence, proposes to facilitate the understanding and use of these language strategies, since commissives are a very common type of speech acts. Moreover, a task-based approach is adopted in designing the teaching plan, as it is one of the best communicative teaching techniques, allowing students to learn through meaningful interaction and being proved to bring positive results to the language learners.

Key-words: *task-based approach, commissive speech acts, English modal verbs, teaching pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Not long ago, the pragmatic competence has been integrated as a key component of a learner's overall linguistic competence, alongside with the grammatical and lexical skills, due to the somewhat recently acquired status of notoriety of the pragmatics sub-field within linguistics. Hence, this paper aims to propose a teaching plan for the instruction of the pragmatics of commissive modality – more precisely, of the commissive speech acts that comprise promises and threats – in an EFL classroom. The main objective of the lesson is that students get familiarized with and internalize how to properly express promises and threats in English through modal language devices. This is considered to be useful in case they need

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to use it in day-to-day interaction or for a full understanding if such speech acts are directed to them.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Commissive speech acts

According to Searle (1983), deontic modality comprises several subtypes, among which Obligation, Permission and Intention, which represent logico-semantic subtypes, and several speech act categories, among which commissive speech acts. The commissives refer to various types of action performed through language and can also be conveyed through linguistic devices that characterize deontic modality.

Commissive speech acts are termed this way because they transmit the commitment of the speaker to make a promise or a threat, among other actions, and they are defined as a type of utterance "where we commit ourselves to do things" (Searle 1983, 166). In Palmer's view (1986), the two aforementioned subcategories are distinguished through the perception of the addressee, since promises have a beneficial impact on the receiver, while threats are typically viewed as negative.

(1) "But I will bring you more today I promise" (Coates 1983, 173)

Example (1) shows the link between the modal verb 'will' with an intentional flavor and commissive speech acts, as presented by Coates (1983, 173), who states that "by declaring his intention to do such-and-such, a speaker is considered to have committed himself to performing such-and-such". Furthermore, the agentiveness of the verb (expressed solely through the first person) plays a crucial role in the interpretation of the speech act, since one can express intention to do only actions that are within one's ability (Coates 1983).

2.2. The pragmatics of modality

Pragmatics started from the notion that an utterance is equivalent to performing an action; our word choice, intonation and the communicative context, among other factors, are involved in this process (Austin 1962). The initial theory was later broadened and still continues to be extended and modified by pragmaticians. Even though its wide range of sub-fields has been consistently researched over the years, deontic modality and the speech acts attached to it remains a less explored domain. Deontic modality is the type of modality that deals with actions that are

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not actualized and that are determined, in most of the cases, by the speaker; however, the authority may also be an external one.

A speech act expressed through modal means may be 'pragmatically strengthened or weakened', which is an operation that permits conveying intentionality at various extents by using distinct language devices, such as distinct modal verbs or lexical items (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). This leads to the link with a certain category of speech acts, the indirect ones – in which the threat, for example, is not expressed directly – and with the concept of 'illocutionary force' of the modal construction – that has to do with the real purpose of the speaker (Depraetere 2017).

Modality and pragmatics are also connected through the existence of the 'subjective/objective modality' antithesis, according to which some structures are less objective than others. A good example here is the realization of the promise speech act through the use of the modal verb will or shall (Verstraete 2001). Moreover, following Grice's framework (1981), observing the principle of cooperation is also a relevant feature to consider in the modality-pragmatics continuum, since a threat, for instance, could be seen as a violation of the principle from the very beginning or it could have an explanation worth dignifying in certain contexts.

The politeness theory, formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987) is another key aspect within the discussion, as it is related to the extent to which the addresser's utterance is evaluated as polite. Regarding commissive speech acts, Boicu (2007, 17) mentions that they "tend to be convivial and convey 'positive politeness' […], excepting the case when the speaker's psychological attitude expresses blaming or accusing in relation to the hearer". Finally, one can also take into account Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1995), which reflects on the relevance of the modal construction in the given situation.

Hence, since there exist so many connections between the notion of 'pragmatics' and that of 'modality', their study becomes a highly motivating task and presenting to the students the results of extensive research of already existing studies on this topic – an aiding element in raising their pragmatic awareness of linguistic phenomena.

2.3. Teaching pragmatics: theories of pragmatic learning

According to Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006), the pragmatic competence is a compulsory part of the communicative abilities of a speaker. It represents the knowledge and capacity of using the appropriate linguistic means – taking into account a suite of factors, including the situational and communicative contexts, the social relationship between the interlocutors, among other factors – in order to correctly convey one's intentions. However, it can be defined in various manners:

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for example, Bardovi-Harlig (2013, 68) refers to it as "how-to-say-what-to-whom-when", while Yule (2002) associates pragmatic competence with understanding the intended meaning.

Before designing a teaching proposal for any pragmatic competence, it is necessary to review the best-known pragmatic learning theories, since they help the instructor integrate key-elements into the classroom experience and have a better understanding of the students' acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. According to Timpe-Laughlin (2016), there are three types of perspectives in L2 pragmatics development: the cognitive, the socially-oriented and the emergentist approaches, each with its own theories, such as: the identity theories, the speech accommodation theory and the second language socialization theory, among others.

The cognitive perspective proposes hypotheses which focus on the mind's ability to process and acquire information; from this viewpoint, developing pragmatic competence becomes an "intrapersonal mental process" (Timpe-Laughlin 2016, 2). The noticing hypothesis postulates that a learner needs to notice a linguistic aspect in order for it to come to influence the learner's interlanguage and, also, their pragmatic awareness (Schmidt 1990, 1993 in Timpe-Laughlin 2016).

Ishihara and Cohen (2010, 113) formulate the awareness-raising approach, which is based on the noticing hypothesis and "is designed to facilitate learners' noticing and understanding of the form-context relationship". It includes pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic-focused tasks, as well as other mixed-knowledge tasks. In view of this approach, according to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), the class should be sequentially organised, and it should include both deductive and inductive instruction, with the mention that inductive instruction supposedly prompts higher-order thinking skills (known as HOTS).

The learner factors that need to be taken into consideration when taking a pragmatic phenomenon to class are linguistic proficiency, learning styles, motivation and interest in learning L2 pragmatics, while the target language features are frequency, salience and complexity of the target structure (Ishihara and Cohen 2010). The current teaching plan draws on the awareness hypothesis, among others, since it is a very well-built and complex perspective.

Moreover, similar to the noticing hypothesis, there is Bialystok's two-dimensional model of L2 proficiency development (1993), which claims that learners need not only detect the linguistic phenomenon, but also acquire it (i.e. understand it or be aware of it to a certain extent). The name of this model refers to the two key stages in the development of pragmatic knowledge, which are analysed representation and control of processing (Bialystok 1993).

According to Kasper (2001), adult L2 learners already have an L1 pragmatic system which will represent the new basis for pragmatic strategies of the L2 at a

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conceptual level. Hence, the two-dimensional model predicts that, in the case of adult learners, "the task of forming representations of pragmatic knowledge is already largely accomplished" (Hassall 1997 in Kasper 2001, 517). Nevertheless, adults may experience issues with transmitting the desired illocutionary force (Taguchi 2012 in Timpe-Laughlin 2016) and with the processing control in communicative contexts (Taguchi 2011 in Timpe-Laughlin 2016).

Consequently, because adult L2 learners need to acquire L2-specific pragmatic knowledge (and to integrate it within the existent L1 pragmatic representations) and to gain control of new form-function-context L2-specific relations, Taguchi (2015, 2) considers that they "experience a unique challenge in their pragmatic development, stemming from the co-existence of L1 and L2-based pragmatic systems". This claim is also supported by Bialystok (1993). The present paper also addresses a pragmatic structure to adult learners; for this reason, it takes into account the difficulties that might arise from their pre-existent L1 pragmatic representations and it facilitates their tasks by exposure to interaction in the L2.

The socially-oriented perspective considers that the L2 learning is an interpersonal process based on social interaction (Timpe-Laughlin 2016). Ishihara and Cohen (2010) state that pragmatics connects the cognitive and the social and, moreover, that L2 pragmatics is connected to L2 identity, ideas which give rise to the identity theory (Hassall 2015 in Timpe-Laughlin 2016). According to Ishihara and Cohen (2010, 109), "in L2 development, learners' subjectivity affects the way they learn and use the language". The term 'subjectivity' or 'identity' comprises a person's own beliefs, perspectives, opinions, emotions etc. and each person has various identities or subjectivities that are "socially and culturally constructed, negotiated, and jointly enacted with others in interaction" (Ishihara and Cohen 2010, 106).

Another social perspective is the speech accommodation theory, which claims that subjectivity creates either convergence with or divergence from the L2, which consequently influences the L2 pragmatic development (Ishihara and Cohen 2010). The second language socialization theory "views language learning as socially situated in communities of practice" (Ishihara and Cohen 2010, 110-111).

Lastly, theories following the emergentist perspective include the DST (dynamic systems theory), the complexity theory and the emergentist approach, which all agree on one statement, claiming that language development is conditioned by the context-learner interaction and by variability, being thus a dynamic and complex process (Taguchi 2012 in Timpe-Laughlin 2016).

Therefore, Timpe-Laughlin (2016: 6) concludes that the implications of all these theoretical frameworks on designing teaching plans should translate into enhanced input, which allows learners to notice the intended structure, and into providing them with the opportunity to interact and to reflect on pragmatic

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phenomena, leading to awareness building. Alcón and Guzman (2005, 41-42) state that "features related to the interactive nature of conversation are rarely used in most of the pedagogical proposals for teaching the speech acts", although all findings "provide evidence of the positive effect of instruction".

3. Method

The setting of the paper is an L2 English classroom for adults of intermediate level (B1-B2) of approximately 20 students. The participants are aged between 25 and 50 years old and are learning English for instrumental purposes, as their goal is to get a job in an English-speaking country. Hence, the teaching proposal takes into account the nature of the participants, who are adult learners, and follows a task-based approach, while also drawing on the awareness hypothesis.

These approaches have been chosen as they permit students to have authentic, meaningful interactions and to solve practical communicative tasks, through flexible discourse; in other words, they allow learners to be in charge of the dynamics of the interaction and of its topic. The lesson plan contains sufficient entertaining tasks for the class to understand the pragmatics of making a threat or a promise to someone through the use of modal verbs, since it is more challenging than using a performative verb, as in a sentence of the type "I promise to…".

4. Discussion

4.1. Lesson plan

The lesson starts with an explicitly instructed task. Students are provided with a video which presents how "will" is used to express promises through a few laugh-provoking wedding animations. The examples mentioned are "I'll always take care of you", "I'll never kiss another woman" and "I will always love you", thus also exemplifying the contracted form of "will", mainly used in informal language.

The task of the students then consists in naming different contexts that involve the need of expressing a promise, such as: betraying a friend and promising not to repeat that, promising someone to help them with a situation they are dealing with etc. They are divided into pairs and each pair must come up with a promise-requiring situation. Then, students are asked to act out the situation they have thought of in the form of a real-life dialogue, where one necessarily needs to make a promise to the other using the verb "will".

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Task number three asks students to brainstorm other ways of making a promise to someone, starting from an image where one of the interlocutors says "You lied to me…". It is expected from students to think of utterances like "I promise I won't lie to you again". In the likely case that they do not mention examples including the verb "shall", the teacher gives them an example with this verb. Then, teacher asks students to find the difference between promises expressed with "will", on one side, and with "promise" and "shall", on the other side. After listening to their answers, the teacher clarifies the informality degree and frequency of use of the three expressions.

The next tasks that students are given in order to check their comprehension of the pragmatic marker being taught is the following: teacher provides them with a context, where Anne's girl best friend invites Anne to her wedding, saying "I won't take 'no' for an answer". Learners are, consequently, asked to formulate an answer which includes a promise (using either "will" or "shall") and to justify their choice (more formal way of expressing the promise would imply a stronger commitment amusingly conveyed, such as, for example, "I shall come to your wedding or I shall die trying").

Since inductive instruction triggers higher-order thinking skills, it is used to introduce threats to students through a picture presenting a man who is making a direct threat; the large contrast between the dimensions of the action mentioned ("taking someone's pen") and the proportions of the threat ("killing that someone") provokes amusement, thus making it easier for learners to assimilate and to be aware of the new knowledge. Following this, students are asked to pair up and to find situations where a minor, moderate and major threat can be expressed. Further on, they are asked to act said situations as dialogues, making threats with the verb "will".

Teacher then mentions that most examples of threats are expressed in a rather violent manner and asks learners whether there are any polite ways of conveying a threat. Teacher then gives example of formal (written) complaints, where a person can threaten a company, for example, but in a polite manner, such as "Unfortunately, if you do not take any measures, I will take this to legal extents". Afterwards, the teacher asks students to think of other ways to express a threat in a given context. Students are then provided with some examples and are asked to classify them according to formality and frequency of use (based on their previously acquired knowledge of expressing promises). One important mention is made by the teacher to help students notice pragmatic usage, i.e. the fact that the verb "promise" is not only used to express a promise, but also a threat.

After completing the task, the teacher comes up with a challenge for the class: they need to express a threat in the second person, instead of the first person, as all

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examples have been so far. Following the students' examples, teacher asks them to think of the reason behind using this kind of threat and then asks students whether the threat will be put into action by the addressee or by the speaker. Class then decide together that it is the speaker who will put the threat into action, even though the second person is employed, thus making it a more indirect threat.

The teacher then presents a situation where an utterance may be perceived as either a promise or a threat, depending on the speaker. Finally, the teacher summarizes the main aspects of the pragmatic structures discussed during class to ensure better learning.

4.2. Expected results

After being presented with the previously explained plan on promises and threats, students are expected to understand the expression and use of the two types of speech acts, especially with modal verbs. Moreover, since students are adults, they are expected to completely comprehend the fact that threats can have various degrees and can be expressed in a more polite or violent manner; also, expressing threats in the second person is not considered to be an issue for them. Therefore, teaching this lesson to a classroom of intermediate adult students will most likely result in a fully-fledged comprehension and internalization of expressing commissive speech acts through modal means.

The fact that the approach employed was a task-based one, which also took into account the awareness hypothesis, allowed students to develop genuine, grounded interactions and to deal with real-life tasks; the authenticity and entertaining character of the tasks aided students to feel in charge of the classroom activities, which, in turn, helped them assimilate the newly presented notions in a dynamic and pleasant way.

Hence, students will most probably retain the fact that both promises and threats can be expressed through "will", "shall" and through the verb "promise". What is more, they are expected to assimilate the fact that "will" is most used in informal daily conversation to express commissive acts, since they have been exposed to sufficient communicative situations that show this.

4.3. Expected problems and suggested solutions

One problem that is expected to occur after teaching commissive speech acts resides in those contexts that may receive dual interpretations; in other words, the fact that, in certain cases, an utterance can be seen as a promise as well as a threat, depending on

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the speaker's communicative intentions and on the hearer's decoding mechanism, might represent an issue for students, as it might cause confusion.

A suggested solution to this minor pedagogical difficulty lies in the explicit instruction in which the teacher insists on the idea that it is the hearer's perspective which dictates the final interpretation of the utterance. Furthermore, the teacher provides students with another easily memorable example, where an overly attached girlfriend tells his boyfriend "From now on, I'll go everywhere with you".

Then, the teacher explains to the students that this, too, can be seen either as a nice promise or as a threat, depending on the girlfriend's intention (whether she intends to simply be around him or to supervise him) and, mostly, on the boyfriend's preferences (whether he likes her being with him at all times or not). This is supposed to solve the possible problem that students may encounter when learning how to express commissive speech acts by means of modal verbs.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, a task-based approach which also adopts the awareness-raising hypothesis, following the teaching plan described above, is proposed as the optimal solution to presenting promises and threats to intermediate adult students and to, ultimately, result in achieving the initial objective, which is to help students internalize the linguistic devices of performing commissive speech acts. In other words, having authentic, meaningful interactions and solving practical communicative tasks will enable learners to express a promise or a threat with easiness and pragmatical appropriateness and to correctly interpret a commissive speech act that is addressed to them.

Since pragmatics represents such a huge part of communication, pragmatic competences are considered highly important skills within the linguistic competences of a student; hence, enhancing awareness on pragmatic behaviour is one of the key steps in teaching a foreign language efficiently and a teacher should, consequently, maximize the benefits for the student through pragmatic instruction.

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