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## Foreign Language Teaching and Higher Education in Algeria Reconsidering the Pragmatic Ability as a Teaching Goal

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, important strides have been made toward recognizing the development of pragmatic competence as a less peripheral component of foreign Language proficiency. Current research questions have extended beyond the confines of how important is integrating pragmatics in Language syllabi to addressing issues like what strategies, techniques and kind(s) of instruction should be implemented for a more sustained pragmatic competence. The contribution of the present paper is threefold; First, revisiting the different Pragmatics developmental models that proved thriving and productive in other-than-Algerian- Foreign Language contexts. Second, reviewing third year students' (Department of English and Literature, University of Batna, Algeria) perception of the place the pragmatic objective holds in their oral and written courses syllabi and, finally, making a case for a more pragmatics-oriented language teaching at the university level, not only by an explicit instructed learning but by situating pragmatics at the heart of Foreign Language Teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Ever since the recognition of Pragmatics as a main subject of inquiry in mainstream language research, many Foreign Language Teaching curricula have adopted it as an important constituent for a more communicative language teaching objective. Despite such a credit, the pragmatic dimension has largely been underrepresented and is scarce in Foreign Language Classrooms in Algeria (Neddar, 2008). But with the latest LMD (Licence (Bachelor's degree), Master's and Doctorate degrees) reforms, it has been included as an independent module in different Language Sciences' programs. The problem is that the nature of Pragmatics requires a more "pragmatic" implementation, i.e., in addition to knowledge about the different politeness strategies, speech acts and conversational routines provided by the Pragmatics module, offering students the opportunity to practice it seems to be indispensable for a more developed pragmatic competence. And since time allotted to the module is barely enough to cover the theoretical aspect of the subject, setting pragmatic competence as an objective for the productive skill modules (written and oral) would put theory into practice and offer more opportunities for students to develop their pragmatic ability.

## 2. Literature review

Pragmatic competence, for the purpose of the present study, refers to "pragmatic ability" as emphasized by Savignon (1972), rather than the broader "pragmatic competence" as defined by Hymes (1972), Widdowson (1983), Canale (1983), and Canale and Swain (1980) who equate "competence" with "Knowledge". According to Savignon (1972), communicative competence is "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which

linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (p.8). According to her, the nature of communicative competence is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute, and it is this definition to be adopted throughout this study.

In spite of the agreement that pragmatic competence is one of the vital components of communicative competence (Bachman 1990, Bachman and Palmer 1996), there is a lack of a widely accepted definition of the term. According to Bachmann's model (1990), Pragmatic Competence is subdivided into illocutionary competence (knowledge of speech acts and speech functions) and sociolinguistic competence, which entails the ability to use language appropriately according to different contexts. Another definition to pragmatic competence, offered by Kasper (1997), is "knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out" (illocutionary competence) and the "ability to use language appropriately according to context" (sociolinguistic competence).

As reported by Roohani and Mirzei (2012), Pragmatic competence could also be defined as "the ability to use language appropriately in a social context", and this involves both "innate and learned capacities and develops naturally through a socialization process" (Taguchi, 2009) Another attempt to define the term is offered by Dippold (2007) who describes it as "knowledge of forms and strategies to convey particular illocutions (i.e. pragma-linguistic competence) and knowledge of the use of these forms and strategies in an appropriate context (i.e. socio-pragmatic competence)".



Thus, in order to be pragmatically competent, it is widely agreed that learners must map their socio-pragmatic knowledge on pragma-linguistic forms and strategies and be able to use their knowledge online under the constraints of a communicative situation (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Roever, 2004).

### **2.1 Rationale for Instruction in Pragmatic Competence Development**

One issue, which has long been debated, is whether language learners need assistance in order to develop a second or foreign language pragmatic competence. In other words, does pragmatic competence simply develop alongside lexical and grammatical knowledge, or does it require a pedagogical intervention? Kasper (1997) argues that, since the deciding factor that underlies pragmatic ability is culture, and culture is a subconscious system, then it is difficult, not to say impossible, to make it teachable. She clearly states that “...when talking about the possibility of developing pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language, it is more appropriate to address the issue of how to arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence” (P. 1). Austin (1998) calls equally for a “need to acquire pragmatic knowledge in a holistic context, encompassing all the discrete components of pragmatic ability, including discourse management ability and, most importantly, culture”. (P. 326).

However, some other researchers (Blum Kulka, 1990; Muller, 1981; and Wierzbicka, 1994) have not only proved convincingly that there is a need for instruction to focus on the Pragmatics of the FL, but also demonstrated that the absence of instruction could result in other linguistic problems ranging from the L1 Schematic transfer (which, according to House (1993) stems

primarily from a lack of the culture-specific pragmatic knowledge needed for a given situation) to a total divergence from their native culture (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991).

Blum Kulka (1990) proposed what she termed the “General Pragmatic Knowledge Model”, where the learner is presented with an organized schema containing all the target language linguistic forms used for a specific speech event. This schema is governed by a “cultural filter” which decides the situational appropriateness of the realization of the linguistic forms. She argues that this type of instruction is necessary because the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general pragmatic knowledge base appears to be their restricted FL linguistic knowledge or difficulty in accessing it smoothly. In addition to acquiring processing control over their already existing pragmatic foundations, adult L2 or FL learners need to develop new representations of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge not existing in their L1 (Bialystok, 1993).

A similar model called the “cultural script” was suggested by Wierzbicka (1994), which she defines as “a specific type of schema which captures characteristic L2 cultural beliefs and values in order for learners to understand a society's ways of speaking” (p. 2). Capturing L2 beliefs and values according to Wierzbicka includes input exposure to pragmatic realizations, discussions of the meta-pragmatic knowledge underlying communicative action, and engagement in communicative activities where learners can practice using the linguistic knowledge they have acquired.

Muller's (1981) “cultural isomorphism model”, which is an interpretive strategy emphasizing the importance of prior knowledge for acquiring pragmatic



competence, is a combination between assimilation and spot-the-difference strategy whereby the FL Learner is helped to situate FL communicative practices in their socio-cultural context and appreciate their meanings and functions within the FL community. Empirically speaking, it is widely observed that many students do have a considerable amount of pragmatic knowledge (thanks to the pragmatics module and / or a supposedly sufficient exposure to the target culture), but these students don't always make good use of it. They either negatively transfer their L1 pragmatic routines into the target language or, in some cases, they totally converge to the target culture. Thus, there is a clear role for a pedagogical intervention.

## 2.2 Pragmatic Competence and FL Advanced Learners

Because of a conspicuous lack of longitudinal studies in the field, not much is known about the order of acquisition in pragmatic development (Ji-Young Jung; 2005). While some researchers (Carrell, 1984) demonstrate that a minimal level of grammatical competence is necessary for pragmatic competence development, others (Bardovi- Harlig ,1999) claim that “high levels of grammatical competence do not ensure equally high levels of pragmatic competence”. (P. 233).

Interestingly enough, both views are not contradictory. In other words, linguistic competence is necessary but not sufficient as a platform for FL pragmatic competence development. And as shown by several studies (Carrell, 1984; Bardovi- Harlig ,1999 among others) the acquisition of L2 linguistic competence generally precedes the acquisition of the L2 socio-cultural rules needed to decide which form to map onto which function in which context.

## 2.3 Pedagogical Framework for FL Pragmatic Development

As it has been attested to by numerous investigations (Wierzbicka, 1985; Crozet, 1996; Liddicoat, 1997; McCarthy, 1994; and many others), the greater the distance between cultures, the greater the difference is in the realization of the pragmatic principles governing interpersonal interaction. And in these cases, more than others, instruction in pragmatics is necessary. Bouton (1988) demonstrated that without some form of instruction, many aspects of pragmatic competence do not develop sufficiently. Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds (1996) point out that a lack of sufficient pragmatic instruction was a leading cause to run the speakers towards “the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting. This is particularly true of advanced learners whose high linguistic proficiency leads other speakers to expect concomitantly high pragmatic competence” (p.324). Following this line of reasoning, a fair amount of classroom activities was suggested to facilitate the development of learners' pragmatic competence with respect to understanding and performing communicative action in foreign language contexts. And since Communicative action comprises not only speech acts such as complaining, apologizing, or refusing, but also dynamic participation in conversation, engaging in different types of oral or written discourse, and maintaining interaction in complex speech events, these activities have been divided into two major types:

**Awareness-Raising Activities:** through which students acquire both socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic information.

These activities are based primarily on observation of particular pragmatic features



in various sources of oral or written data, ranging from native speaker 'classroom guests' (Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 1991) to videos of authentic interaction, feature films (Rose, 1997), and other written and audiovisual sources. Students can also be given a variety of observation assignments outside the classroom. Depending on what aspects these tasks focus on, observation tasks can be classified into socio-pragmatic or pragma-linguistic tasks.

**Socio-pragmatic Tasks:** These aim at making learners discover under what conditions native speakers express communicative acts, when, for what kinds of goods or services, and to whom. Such observation tasks may be open (left to the students to detect what the important context factors may be) or structured (students are provided with an observation sheet which specifies the categories to look out for like social distance, degree of obligation...etc)

**Pragma-linguistic Tasks:** These focus on the strategies and linguistic means by which speech acts are accomplished (what formulae are used, and what additional means of expression are employed ...etc)

The observations made outside the classroom are reported back to class, compared with those of other students, and commented and explained by the teacher. By examining in which contexts the various ways are used, socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic aspects are combined. Such observation tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings. Students are thus led to notice the information they need in order to develop their pragmatic competence in the target language. These discussions can take on any kind of small group or whole class format.

**Practicing FL pragmatic Activities:** These activities require student-centered interaction. As Nunan (1989) explains, most small group interaction requires that students take alternating discourse roles as speaker and hearer, yet different types of task may engage students in different speech events and communicative actions. It is therefore important to identify very specifically which pragmatic abilities are called upon by different tasks. This type of activities can be divided into: **Referential Tasks:** Generally speaking, Referential communication means communicative acts in which some kind of information is exchanged between two speakers. This exchange depends above anything else on successful acts of reference, whereby entities are:

- 1) Identified (generally by naming or describing),
- 2) Located or moved relative to other entities (by giving instruction or direction)
- 3) or are followed through sequences of locations and events.

Such tasks expand students' vocabulary and develop their strategic competence.

**Interpersonal Communication Tasks:** are more concerned with participants' social relationships and include such communicative acts as opening and closing conversations, expressing emotive responses as in thanking and apologizing, or influencing the other person's module of action as in requesting, suggesting, inviting, offering,...etc

It is clear that the purpose of the proposed learning activities is to help students become pragmatically competent, and consequently more effective communicators in the FL. However, it is very important to mention that "pragmatically competent" does not mean having the same or very similar pragmatic ability as native speakers. As



Siegal (1996) points out, "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" (P. 356). Thus, the objective of teaching pragmatics and culture bound linguistic strategies is not a complete convergence towards a stereotypical target Language norm, but rather an accommodation between the two cultures, and accommodation undoubtedly needs a pedagogical assistance.

### **3. The Present Study**

#### **3.1 Methodology**

##### **3.1.1 Research Instruments**

Assessing students' perception of the importance of Pragmatics and of an eventual pragmatic-oriented language teaching calls for a descriptive design. To achieve such an objective, it was judged that the use of a questionnaire as a research tool is more appropriate for "it affords a good deal of precision and clarity, because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions" as asserted by McDonough and McDonough (1997:171)

##### **3.1.2 Population and Sample**

In order to discover what students had retained from the module of pragmatics and whether they were offered opportunities to use this knowledge in the oral/written modules, the questionnaire was submitted to 105 student, representing thus 23,64% of the entire population of third year (the entire number is 444). The sampling technique used to select our survey subjects is random sampling technique, i.e. without taking into consideration any parameter (other than their "availability" and cooperation).

##### **3.1.3 Questionnaire Description**

The questionnaire (attached as appendix A) comprises nineteen items, grouped into four major categories according to the aim

of each set of questions: Questions about Pragmatic Knowledge/use, Questions about the Oral Expression Module, Questions about the Written Expression Module, and a Question about coordinating objectives. The questionnaire in its whole comprises two open ended questions, thirteen closed questions, one likert-scale question, and the remaining three are multiple choice questions. Sometimes one question is asked (differently) in more than one section in order to test the validity of the answers. Overly long questions, double-barreled and leading questions were avoided.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

Following the responses of the participants to the questionnaire, it is noted that all the students (100%) are aware of the importance of the pragmatic module in their curriculum; they claimed that it helped them broaden their knowledge about the English language, mainly matters related to the cultural traits differentiating the English language and Arabic (85.71%) while performing different speech routines. However, the majority (81.90%) of the respondents claimed that, outside the pragmatics class, they are not offered opportunities to practice this knowledge.

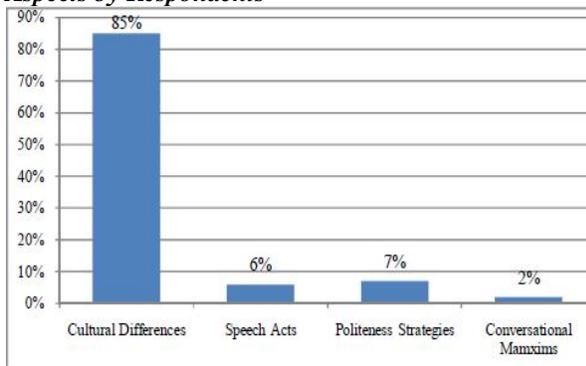
Concerning the productive skills modules (oral and written expression), all students reported that oral expression activities range from book reviews presentations to exposés discussions, while written expression activities vary between "writing short stories and plays" (about 38.09%) and discussing assigned literary works (61.90%) , and although this discussion might be perceived as "offering opportunities to practice written communicative ability" (5.6%), that is not the case, as argued by Rose (1994) who suggests that if the FL learner is not consciously targeting a specific pragmatic aspect , he will not develop competence in



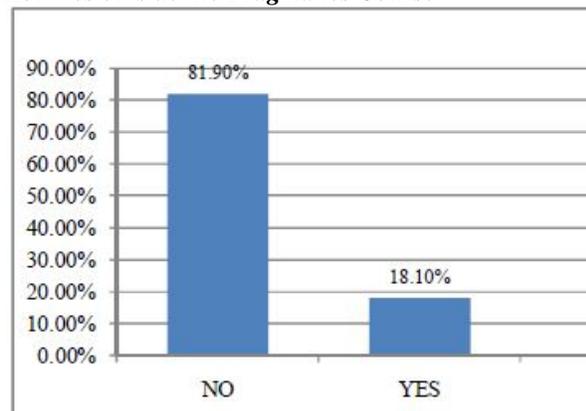
it. Thus the communicative dimension (including the pragmatic one) is very scarce, and not enough to reinforce the pragmatic knowledge provided by the module.

Finally, student have been unanimous in recognizing the importance of coordination between the more theoretical Pragmatics module and the productive skills modules, mainly to reinforce pragmatic knowledge, and to offer them a possibility to practice what they have acquired.

**Table 1: The Importance Given to some Pragmatic Aspects by Respondents**



**Table 2: Opportunities for Practicing the Pragmatic Abilities outside the Pragmatics Course**



## 5. Conclusion

The present research attempted to shed light on the importance of instruction in pragmatics paralleled with an actual practice ensured by the productive skills modules. The results obtained confirm that the FL learners can be instructed/lectured on the strategies and linguistic forms by which

specific pragmatic features are performed and how these strategies are used in different contexts, and then this instruction should be reinforced by some communicative activities (written or oral) in which a set of activities could be proposed. That is to say, the Oral and Written expression modules should be designed to provide learners with the opportunity to learn and practice the different functions of language. It is important to mention however, that the aim of this pragmatic-oriented language teaching is not to force learners to adopt native speaker pragmatic choices at the expense of their own, but rather to make them aware of a variety of linguistic resources that are used in combination with specific contextual factors. This knowledge progressively enables learners to make more sound decisions when interacting in the foreign language.

### About the Author:

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#### **Appendix: Questionnaire**

To students of third year:

You are kindly requested to answer this questionnaire which investigates "Foreign Language Teaching and Higher Education: Reconsidering the Pragmatic Ability as a Teaching Goal." This questionnaire attempts at seeing the importance of a possible coordination between pragmatic knowledge ensured by the Pragmatics course and the productive skills (oral and written) classes.

Your contribution will certainly be of a great help.

#### **I. Questions about Pragmatic Knowledge/ Use**

1. How would you rate the importance of the course of Pragmatics in your curriculum?

- Of a big importance
- Important
- Not very important



2. Do you think that this course help increase your knowledge about the English Language?

Yes

No

2. B. In the yes case, what is the main knowledge you developed based on the lessons?

The different Speech acts and the forces governing them

That there are differences in speech routines between the different cultures

Politeness Strategies and how, when and with whom to use each.

Conversational maxims and implicatures

3. Do you find this information useful in realizing real life communication?

Yes

No

4. Apart from the assignments and activities related to the lessons, do you (outside the course itself) practice this newly acquired knowledge?

Yes

No

5. Do you think that it is important to give you an opportunity for more practice?

Yes

No

## II. Questions about the Oral Expression Course

1. As far as third year level is concerned, what do you think the overall objective of oral expression should be?

To make students communicate effectively in the target language

To make students able to listen to/ reproduce native speakers' conversations

To make students overcome fear by presenting research works in front of the class

All of these

None of these (specify)

.....  
.....

2. Is the objective you chose met in your oral expression course?

Yes

No

3. Are you offered opportunities to practice your oral communicative ability?

Yes

No

3. b. If yes, How?

.....  
.....  
.....

4. Are you offered opportunities to practice your Pragmatic ability (speech acts, conversational maxims, politeness strategies...etc)

Yes

No

5. Do you consider that this should be among the teaching goals for oral expression?

Yes

No

## III. Questions about the Written Expression Course

1. As far as third year level is concerned, what do you think the overall objective of the written expression course should be?



To make students communicate effectively in the target language (by introducing different techniques and formulas of writing letters, speeches, E-mails and other written forms.

To make students able to write grammatically correct and semantically dense essays.

To foster students creativity by reading literary works.

All of these

None of these (specify)

.....  
.....

6. Is the objective you selected above met in your written expression course?

Yes

No

7. Are you offered opportunities to practice your written communicative ability?

Yes

No

3.b. If yes, How?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

8. Are you offered opportunities to practice you Pragmatic ability (application letters, apologies formulas, formal letters....ets) ?

Yes

No

9. Do you consider that this should be among the teaching goals for written expression?

Yes

No

VI. Do you think that there should be coordination between the theoretical Pragmatics course and productive skills courses?

Yes

No

IV.b. explain?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Thank you for your co-operation