

Socio-Pragmatic Problems in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

It is a fact that language is a means of communication for human beings. People who need to have social interaction should share the same language, beliefs, values etc., in a given society. It can be stated that when learning a foreign language, mastering only linguistic features of FL probably does not ensure true spoken and written communication. This study aims to deal with socio-pragmatic problems which the learners may be confront with while learning and using the foreign language. Particularly cultural and cultural values of the target language such as idioms, proverbs and metaphors and their role in foreign language teaching have been focused on.

Key Words: Pragmatics, Communicative Competence, Culture, Cultural Components, Foreign Language Teaching

Özet

Dilin insanlar arasında iletişimi sağlayan bir araç olduğu bilinen bir gerçektir. Sosyal etkileşim kurmak zorunda olan bireylerin aynı değerleri taşıması dilin anlaşılabilmesi açısından gereklidir. Yabancı dil öğrenirken sadece dilin yapısı ve özelliklerini öğrenmenin konuşma ve yazmada yeterli olmadığı kabul edilmektir. Bu gerçeğin önemini dikkate alan bu çalışmanın amacı, yabancı dil öğrenirken ve bu dili kullanırken öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları edimbilimsel sorunları ortaya çıkarıp bunların giderilmesine yardımcı olmaktır. Özellikle kültür ve deyim, atasözü, mecazi anlatım gibi kültürel öğelerin yabancı dil öğretimindeki yeri üzerinde durularak bunların nasıl öğretileceği konusunda yardımcı olmaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler : Edimbilim, İletişimsel Yeterlik, Kültür, Kültürel Öğeler, Yabancı Dil Öğretimi

1.0. Introduction

It is true that communication is not merely an event, something that happens; it is functional, purposive and designed to bring about some effect on the environment of hearers and speakers. Furthermore, it is a series of communicative acts or speech acts. According to recent researches, foreign language learners need to understand the purpose of communication, developing an awareness of what the purpose of a communicative act is and how to achieve that purpose through linguistic forms. If learners are attempting to acquire written as well as spoken competence in the language, they must also discern differences in forms and functions between spoken and written discourse.

The importance of pragmatics in recent theories of communicative competence must not be underestimated (Brown,1994:230). Pragmatic constraints on language production and interpretation may be loosely thought of as the effect of context on strings of linguistic events. That is why, it is sometimes difficult to learn these pragmatic conventions which result from the distinctions between forms and functions. Linguistically speaking, forms of language generally serve specific functions such as questions, statements etc. "*I am hungry,*" uttered by a child would not mean that he wants to express his hunger but to have something to eat. "*What are you doing?*" is a form functioning as a question when someone wants to learn what someone is doing. On the other hand, it would not be a question when a mother shouted at his son while he is drawing on the wall or pouring the milk on the floor.

Apart from the propositional and the illocutionary meanings of the utterances, which may easily result in misunderstanding for the non-native English speakers (Chastain,1988 :197), there are some other expressions whose forms and functions are either slightly or totally different, such as idioms, proverbs and metaphors. These expressions belonging to sociopragmatics, which is concerned with the communicative use of language (Dascal,1987: 189), are usually expressed in different ways, and in different words depending on the culture of the related language. For instance in Turkish, we say "*Afiyet olsun*", "*Başın sağolsun*", "*Geçmiş olsun,*" for the same situations valid to an English speaker. However, these expressions are expressed in different ways peculiar to that language. In Turkish, we say "*İşe Başlamak*", but in English it is expressed as "*To go into a business*". Moreover, "*Make yourself at home*", "*Behave yourself*", "*To give somebody a lift*", "*To give somebody a hand*" and the like may not mean for a Turk. Therefore, it is important to be able to establish a good mutual understanding, which is defined by Dascal

(1985) as

“...it is always pragmatic understanding. It is not a matter only of understanding the speaker’s words (determining the sentence meaning) nor of understanding these words in their specific reference to the context of utterance (determining the “utterance meaning”, but always a matter of getting to the speaker’s intention in uttering those words in that context (determining the speaker’s meaning). (p:96)

It should be kept in mind that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis, but also knowledge of certain features and characteristics of the culture, which is a system of values and attitudes, beliefs and norms that users of that language agree to. In building a good communication among the learners, it is important to stress the cultural differences in order not to give rise to funny misunderstandings, absurd consequences and sometimes embarrassment, frustration, even anger or breakdown of communication. Hurley illustrates that sociopragmatic failure stems from unfamiliarity with these norms (1992:260). For that reason, enabling learners to have communicative competence in the target language should be one of the important tasks in the foreign language teaching classroom.

2.0. The Relation Between Communicative Competence and Socio-Pragmatics

Communicative competence incorporates grammatical competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence (Celce-Murcia,1991:154). Basically, the sociolinguistic component refers to rules of speaking which depend on social, pragmatic and cultural elements. Thus, which linguistic realization we choose for making an apology or a request in any language might depend on the social status of the speaker or hearer and on age, sex or any other social factor. In other words, a foreign language learner not familiar with contextual discourse constraints of English might produce with perfect pronunciation and perfect grammar, but fail to achieve the communicative purpose of apologising to a dinner host or hostess, and instead appear to be impolitely critical or complaining.

A perfect mutual intelligibility, in other words, to understand every word in a sentence is not enough and there still can be total communication breakdown. The important thing is to be able to understand and figure out the meaning which is implied. Needless to say, communicative strategies differ from one culture to another and problems may arise in communication among participants who do not share the same cultural norms, which may easily lead to misinterpretation. We communicate with others on the basis of shared cultural norms and conventions and if we fail to meet the cultural expectations of the others the consequences can be

negative.

As mentioned earlier, acquiring only linguistic or lexical knowledge would not always lead to a successful communication. That is to say, a person's knowledge of his language includes more than knowledge of syntactic, semantic and phonological rules, he must also have the knowledge of when to speak or to be silent; how to speak on each occasion; how to communicate and also interpret meanings of respect, seriousness, or politeness. It is true that sociopragmatic competence includes all the factors listed above. In sum, sociopragmatic competence implies that the speaker knows how to vary speech-act strategies according to the situational or social variables present in the act of communication (Harlow 1990:328).

3.0. Socio-Pragmatic Problems in EFL Classrooms

3.1. Problems in Teaching Culture

The teaching of the target language culture alongside the target language has been stressed by both educators and linguists. The reason for stressing to teach the target language culture is, in general, to have an effective verbal and written communication. Demirezen (1980:134) contends that learning another language is more than knowing its forms, that is, it also involves a greater understanding of the cultural values of a society, which is also supported by Brown (1980) in his words below;

“...it is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. In foreign language teaching and learning the basic aim is to have contact with the members of foreign language community. The contact can be either spoken or written. Whatever it is, in order to have an effective communication, learners need to gain some insights on FL culture.”(p.122)

Disregarding the fact given above, some teachers claim that they don't have to teach the culture but the language. However, to the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis, language and culture are indispensable and they go hand in hand. Furthermore, it can easily be stated that you can't imagine foreign language teaching without culture. Having strong relationship between language and culture, language teaching forces educators to integrate FL culture effectively into FL curriculum.

Another issue to be considered is that language learning for students is an integral part of their socialisation. Students learn the social structure of their culture when they learn language and they learn to use appropriate linguistic forms. The set of sociolinguistic rules are learned first

through family interaction, then peer and group and wider community involves, age, sex, and social class, as well as ethnic group and larger societal membership. According to Allen and Vallette (1977:326) cultural goals of language in class can be for;

- 1.increasing student awareness of the target language
- 2.stimulating student interest in foreign language study
- 3.developing the ability to function in the target language
- 4.establishing an understanding of linguistic cultural referents, cultural values and attitudes.

In communication between members of different cultures, the mutual stereotyping is like negative both ways, as the norms are different in cultures. Ignoring cultural differences leads to misinterpretation and hence discrimination of another sort. Brown (1980:173) claims that a number of people experience certain psychological blocks and other inhibiting effects of the second language culture whereas most learners can indeed find positive benefits in cross-cultural living or learning experiences. Teachers can help students to turn such an experience into one of increased cultural and self awareness. In teaching a foreign language we need to be sensitive to the fragility of students by using techniques that provide cultural understanding.

To sum up, language cannot be properly learned without familiarity with its cultural features. It is obvious that the vocabulary of a language may provide us the reflection of culture of the people who speak it. For example, while “*paternal aunt*” distinction is not reflected in English, in Turkish social environment “*teyze*” for “*maternal aunt*” and “*hala*” for “*paternal aunt*” are reflected in the language in single words. In Turkish there are many culture bound kinship terms which do not exist in English such as “*elti*”, “*görümce*”, “*abi*”, “*abla*”, and so on.

3.2 Problems in Teaching Idioms

An idiom is any string of words for which the meaning of the whole expression cannot be determined from the meanings of individual morphemes that make up the string (Richards, et al, 1992:172). They are words or phrases whose meaning cannot be taken literally - they defy logical or grammatical analysis. Some idioms are well known and immediately recognised as idioms such as:

“*To make yourself at home.*”

“*To behave yourself.*”

“To give somebody a lift.”

“To give someone a hand.”

“To drop a few lines.”

Some idioms are not so well known and seem difficult to understand through the sentences. In this case, they should be handled carefully by the language teacher and help the students understand what they mean by supplying meaningful contexts. One of the best ways of keeping the idioms and proverbs in mind is to memorize them. Any expression that must be memorized will constitute a single lexical entry, no matter how many morphemes the expression contains.

Since idioms, proverbs and certain not productive compounds must be entered in the lexicon of grammar as single units as if they were single morphemes, it is not surprising that these items pose difficulties when translation from one language to another is involved. Perhaps because many idioms are almost as long as whole sentences, traditional dictionaries rarely include them, but for many of the well-known languages of the world, bilingual dictionaries of idioms exist. Without such lists, translation of idioms is all but impossible for the beginning student of a language when he has not had time to memorize them.

In Turkish, we may use the idiom *"kafa ütülemek"* to mean that somebody is talking too much and bores us with things we do not want to hear. English also has an idiom to express the same concept, which is *"to take somebody's head off"*. But the words that make up the Turkish equivalent are different from those in English. A word-by-word translation of the Turkish idiom into English makes no sense to a speaker of English, just as an equivalent word-by-word translation of the English idiom into Turkish would sound like nonsense to a Turkish speaker.

3.3. Problems in Teaching Proverbs

Proverbs offer an interesting challenge to theories of language use. They are traditional sayings having a general sentential form, alluding to a common truth or general wisdom, with some literary value, used to guide action, explain a situation, or include a feeling or attitude (Akmajian, et al. 1997:367). It seems that proverbs are similar to idioms. Although a proverb may be interpreted literally, more often its meaning is understood as something more than the sum of the meanings of the morphemes it contains. We can say *“A stitch in time saves nine”* even if we are not sewing; or we can say *“Every cloud has a silver lining”* although there may be no clouds at all in the sky. Proverbs, like idioms, should not be translated into Turkish as they

may lead to misunderstandings and every translation might not match the Turkish or English equivalents. In the following list some proverbs have the same or similar equivalents such as the ones 1,2,3,6 respectively, whereas the others (4, 5) do not produce the right meanings when translated directly.

1. *“To kill two birds with one stone.” Bir taşla iki kuş vurmak*
2. *“Don't look at the mouth of a gift horse.” Hediye edilen atın ağzına bakılmaz.*
3. *“Where there is smoke, there is fire.” Ateş olmayan yerden duman çıkmaz*
4. *“Years know more than books” Çok yaşayan çok bilir.*
5. *“Once a thief, always a thief.” Alışmış kudurmuştan beterdir.*
6. *“Where there is life, there is hope” Çıkmadık candan ümit kesilmez.*

It should be borne in mind that in teaching a foreign language the proverbs related to that language should be taught in meaningful contexts so that the students are not puzzled when they confront such expressions. The crucial point in teaching the proverbs of the related foreign language is not to translate the sentences word by word so as not to misinterpret. Needless to say, proverbs have different meanings from those of they convey in words. Besides, the students learning a foreign language must memorize the idioms, proverbs, and some of the compounds in that language. Such expressions are idiosyncratic; that is, their meaning cannot be predicted by means of generalizations. All idiosyncratic information about morphemes, words, and expressions is presented in the lexicon of a grammar.

3.4. Problems in Teaching Metaphors

One of the many problems in the teaching of a foreign language is the acquisition of competence in the area of figurative language. All aspects of figurativeness (metaphor, idiomaticity, proverbs and semantic extension) seem to present difficulty for learners. It is wrongly believed that to grasp such kind of expressions should be achieved at the advanced level. So, most of the coursebooks avoid the issue of figurativeness and concentrate on denotative aspects of language. It is common that intensive work on the figurative use of language is left to courses on literature, and metaphor, which is substituting words for others with which they share characteristics of meaning, (Hudson,2000:317), especially is tackled through the presentation of

literary texts. On the other hand metaphors, according to Lewis, are one of the hardest aspects of the language to understand and express. It is not just a particular expression needs to find its equivalent in another language. It is the fact that in speech and in writing, particular language speakers, and in fact groups of people within those speech communities have preferences for the source of their metaphors (1999:229).

Linguistically speaking, metaphor is not a special use of language but pervades all interaction. It is produced more often, and every author, journalist, and newscaster strives to create interesting new metaphors. It shouldn't be forgotten that language is essentially a way of expressing meaning. With a metaphor, it is always obvious that the expression is not intended in its literal meaning. In fact, the literal meaning of a metaphor is usually complete nonsense. Moreover, it should be accepted that a metaphor is the result of the analogical nature of human conceptualization. It is necessary to understand metaphoricity and its culture-specific connotations in order to correctly interpret even simple everyday texts. For instance, the metaphoric expressions "*I am so hungry that I can eat an elephant*", or "*He is killing himself to teach him English*" can easily be interpreted by the Turkish learner as they have the same or similar equivalents.

In metaphorical extension certain objects, ideas or events from one realm are described with words from a different realm of objects, ideas, and events. The metaphorical extension becomes part of the conventional linguistic meaning of the words in question. For instance, let's consider the following sentences:

a. "*You need to **chew** on that idea for a while.*"

b. "*She wouldn't **swallow** that idea.*"

c. "*You have to give me time to **digest** that idea.*"

It is clear that in the metaphoric expressions above, one realm (ideas) is described in terms of words from another realm (food and digestion). However, metaphors, compared to idioms and proverbs, are easier to teach and learn as they can be easily grasped through the sentences presented in meaningful contexts. Besides, some metaphoric expressions are represented in similar ways in the mother tongue. Encouragement of students to elaborate metaphors is one way of empowering them as users of English.

4.0. Conclusion

Cross-cultural studies focus on the similarities and differences of whole societies and cultures. The factors of perception, thought, socialisation and personality differ from culture to culture. It has been widely recognized that culture and language are interrelated and that language is used as the main medium through which culture is expressed. In teaching the target language ways of life, one of the most difficult areas is to decide what to teach and select the essential cultural topics which present contrast with the learner's own culture. The aim of this study has been to provide the difficulties that the foreign language learners face in learning idioms, proverbs, and metaphors. That is to say, the socio-pragmatic aspect of foreign language teaching has been tackled by supplying the necessary information in the field in question.

If we want our students to master another language, we need to help them become communicatively competent in that language. Successful speaking is not just a matter of using but also knowing when to use it under what circumstances. Culture should not be seen as a support to language teaching but it should be placed on an equal footing with foreign language teaching. Therefore, establishing a perfect mutual understanding –which is mostly culture and cultural values of that language-, should be in the agenda of foreign language teachers in order to eradicate or decrease the socio-pragmatic problems. It should be noted that in language teaching it is not pedagogically acceptable that some concepts like proverbs, idioms, metaphors should be skirted. However, a good foreign language teacher should strive to teach them in a communicative and meaningful way together with the culture of that target language in order to help the students get the message of the related language.

As a result, in this paper, it has been observed that in dealing with the sociopragmatic problems in foreign language teaching, a good teacher must pay special attention to present the target language as it is providing students with its authentic use. While doing this he or she must keep in mind that it is not enough to know the grammar of a language or to be able to speak that language. However, what is important is to be able to use the language appropriately where and when necessary as the native speaker does.

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