

**Applied Pragmatics and Competence Relations in Language
Learning and Teaching**

İsmail Erton

ierton@atilim.edu.tr

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how a course in language teaching should be designed to help learners develop their pragmatic competence by making use of four language skills in a communicative way. Listening, writing and reading do not occur in isolation in communicative contexts. Thus, competence is the type of knowledge which the learners acquire, develop, learn, use and forget. The purpose of the language teacher should be to provide learners a range of opportunities to experience the use of language in different socio-cultural contexts by creatively and critically using language in different interactional patterns which would make them successful communicators in the target language.

Key Words

Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence, Discourse, Language Teaching, Context, Content.

Özet

Bu araştırmanın amacı yabancı dil öğretiminde bir dersin dört dil becerisini iletişimsel bir yaklaşımla kullanarak öğrencilerin edimbilimsel yetilerini geliştirecek şekilde nasıl tasarlanması gerektiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Dinleme-anlama, yazma ve okuma-anlama iletişimsel bağlamlarda birbirlerinden bağımsız halde bulunmazlar. Dolayısıyla, yeti, öğrencilerin edindiği, geliştirdiği, öğrendiği, kullandığı ve unuttuğu bir bilgidir. Yabancı dil öğreten bir öğretmenin amacı; öğrencilerine dili etkileşimsel sosyo-kültürel bağlamlarda, yaratıcı ve gerektiği gibi farklı iletişimsel kalıplarda, öğrencileri hedef dilde başarılı iletişimciler olarak yetiştirebilmeye olanak tanıyacak çeşitli fırsatlar sunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most debatable issues in linguistics so far is the term ‘competence’. Many linguists have used the term ‘competence’ in different contexts to refer to different types of knowledge. The term competence however was originally set out by the father of linguistics Noam Chomsky. In his book ‘Aspects of the Theory of Syntax’, he defines competence as; “Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener. In completely homogeneous speech community who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.” (Chomsky 1965:3) Later, Chomsky put the distinction between competence (the speaker’s or hearer’s knowledge of languages) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations) This study put forward the distinction between the knowledge on one hand and the use of this knowledge on the other. However, Chomsky did not explain whether this knowledge includes the idea of ‘ability’. It seems that Chomsky equated 'competence' with 'knowledge', but he did not present a clear distinction between 'knowledge' and 'the ability to use this knowledge' for communicative purposes. That is to say, for the very first time when Chomsky uttered the terms 'competence and performance', he reflected a very restricted point of view. Campell and Wales (1970), as they mentioned in their article 'The study of language acquisition', discussed the strong and the weak versions of Chomsky’s definition of the term competence. Briefly, according to them, the knowledge of language includes the ability to use it appropriately in a given situation. However, this hot debate continued until 1980s since neither of the explanations was able to cover the complete meaning of the term competence exactly.

These concepts were also studied by many linguists in the course of time and the term competence was used to refer to different concepts in varying contexts. Towards 1980s, the term ‘pragmatic competence’ began to be studied. According to Crystal (1985:240), “Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in

social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.” In the lines above, Crystal considered pragmatics as the study of the communicative action in its sociocultural context. Thus, it can be said that individuals have some sort of pragmatic competence which allows them to use language in different and concrete situations, in varying contexts. Therefore, pragmatic competence is mainly studied at the social level within the limits of speech acts and social acts, interactions or at the interactional level. The scope of pragmatic competence can be studied in terms of:

1. Sociolinguistic Competence.
2. Discourse Competence.

There can be no doubt that the development of the different types of competence is related to the teachers’ providing opportunities to the language learners to learn and use language in a variety of contexts. To better understand and clarify this issue, the competence types and their relation with language teaching will be studied one by one.

II. SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to interpret the social meaning of a linguistic item and to decide and use language in an appropriate social meaning for communicative purposes. As Savignon (1983:37) mentions, “Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of socio-cultural rules of discourse and language. It requires ‘an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of participants, the information they share, and the function of interacting.” Perhaps, in the lines above, Savignon states that the sociolinguistic competence means more than to use language appropriately in a social situation. Briefly, the sociolinguistic information which the speakers convey to each other share a pragmatic competence which helps them to interpret and act in different situations by making use of different contextual clues. It also includes components like; ‘culture’ and ‘interaction’, which reflects the fundamental concepts of verbal and non-verbal communication.

2.1 INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

Interactional competence is the ‘communicative ability’ of the person which reflects knowing the structure; the rules of language and the principles of interaction in real life contexts within a social setting and specific culture. Some linguists also study

this concept with functional competence which reflects the ability to use the language for different communicative purposes. Kramsch (1986: 367) in her article 'From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence' defines the term 'interaction' as “. . . interaction entails negotiating intended meanings, i.e., adjusting one's speech to the effect one intends to have on the listener. It entails anticipating the listener's response and possible misunderstandings, clarifying one's own and the other intentions and arriving at the closed possible watch between intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings.” Considering this information, it can be true to say that interactional competence not only makes the use of structural rules of language, but also runs the psycho-linguistic and socio-linguistic functions of language which help to provide accuracy and clarify to the mutual comprehension of the speech acts covered in the course of a conversation. Thus, such an ability; the so called 'functional competence', involves the ability to establish the tie between the question and its equivalence in particular real life situation, recognizing the speaker's intention by evaluating his/her body language, awareness of the semiotic symbols used, types of social interaction (i.e. introducing, greeting, farewell, etc.), the communicative functions of language, acting accordingly and appropriately.

2.2 CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Before trying to understand cultural competence, the term 'culture' should be understood clearly. Lyons (1990:302) defines this term as, “Culture may be described as socially acquired knowledge: i.e. as the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society.” As Lyons points out, culture cannot be thought separate with its social value. Thus, cultural competence can be defined as the ability to understand and use language in a way that would be understood by the members of that culture. Such a cultural interaction through language may even cause misunderstandings if not achieved clearly and appropriately. Therefore, the cultural competence involves knowing culture (in native or target language, social structure, traditions, taboos, beliefs) and the ways in which the things are done. For Le Page (1978:41), “When we come to the central question of 'competence' we have to ask: 'What is it an individual needs to know, in order to operate as a member of this society?' A society only exists in the competence of its members to make it work as it does; a language only exists in the competence of those who use and regard themselves as users of that language; and the

latter competence is the essential mediating system for the former.” Here, Le Page considers the term competence a living social construct which paves the way to social behaviour as shared and used by the members of that society.

2.3 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

H.G. Widdowson (1989:135), about the communicative competence wrote, “. . . communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences and being able to employ such rules to assemble expressions from scratch as and when occasion requires. It is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative but regulative and subservient.” Thus, as Widdowson said, communicative competence is the ability to put language for communicative purposes. The communicative competence considers language as a tool used for communication. This competence not only aims to focus on the development of four language skills, but also depends on the correlation between the skills. By doing so, the language learner will learn how to convey the right message to the audience. According to Canale and Swain (1980:5), “It is common to find the term ‘communicative competence’ used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capability relating to the rules of language use and the term ‘grammatical (or linguistic) competence’ used to refer to the reciprocal rules of grammar.” As Canale and Swain state, they find the rules of language useless since the language user is unaware of the rules of language use. In other words, there is a reciprocity between the language rules and the rules of language use. To be brief, Canale and Swain consider the term ‘communicative competence’ a mediator which refers to the relationship between grammatical competence (the knowledge of the rules of language) and the sociolinguistic competence (the knowledge of the rules of language use).

2.4 STRATEGIC COMPETENCE

Strategic competence deals with the knowledge of language and the ability to use this knowledge effectively and appropriate to purpose in order to take an active part in communicative interaction. In other words, the strategic competence is the link that ties

'everything' together. A typical example for this case can be; if you are late to a meeting and if you need to find a good excuse, the white lie that you utter at that time is a product of your strategic competence which reflects a criteria of the competence types that the language user has. However, under the title strategic competence the critical and the creative aspects of the human mind can also be considered as well. The knowledge of language enables the speaker to combine words to form phrases, sentences, and longer texts. Since the speaker of a foreign language cannot know a dictionary with all the possible sentences in the language, s(he) refers to the creative aspect of the human mind which is able to produce unlimited utterances by making use of what has already been obtained in terms of the knowledge of language. Creating a new utterance for communicative purposes and critical thinking go hand in hand during the speech production phase. In an interview with Farrell (1998:95) Richards says, "Critical reflection refers to an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as the basis for the evaluation and the decision-making and as a source for planning and action." In other words, as Richards also mentioned, critical thinking is carefully and actively analysing, synthesising, and evaluating the value of information through observation, experience, reflection, interaction, taking into account the factors like; accuracy, unity, fairness, and clarity. In the critical thinking process the questions have to be thought stimulating which would help the learner to generate another critical question. Therefore, in this process, the questions are more important than the answers. At the preparation stage, the speaker carefully plans the stages and produces the utterance. Such an utterance might be recalled from the memory or might be created for the very first time. Here, at the preparation stage, both the language and the ability to use this knowledge is no doubt directed by the strategic competence of the language learner for further action.

III. DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

One of the major goals of the language learner is to make the connection between the different types of discourse in such a way to create a meaningful whole by providing accuracy and fluency in the target language. Thus, discourse competence deals with the ability to arrange sentences into cohesive structures. In Discourse Analysis, the term discourse competence is studied within the limits of conversational interaction where

language is considered a tool for successful communication. Such interactional patterns can be of great variety. As Akmajian (1997:369) exemplifies, “There are many forms of discourse and many forms of talk-exchange. Letters, jokes, stories, lectures, sermons, speeches, and so on are all categories of discourse; arguments, interviews, business dealings, instruction, and conversations are categories of talk exchanges. Conversations (and talk-exchanges in general) are usually structured consequences of expressions by more than a single speaker.” In discourse analysis, Akmajian’s examples are studied in a variety of contexts considering openings, turn taking, closings, speech acts, and in authentic texts. Therefore, the development of discourse competence will not only lead to success in uttering meaningful sentences but also helps the language learner to gain insight by experiencing different interactional patterns in varying socio-cultural and physical contexts.

IV. PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the previous sections, it was argued that the several competence types go hand in hand with four language skills. Thus, four skills in language learning; reading writing, listening and speaking do not occur in isolation in communicative texts or activities. In order to shape a good pragmatic competence for the language learner, the following should be taken into consideration.

1. The goals and the objectives of a language course should be designed to meet the needs of the language learner to help them develop and improve their communicative competence. Since the primary goal of learning a foreign language is to provide fluency and accuracy in written and spoken modes of communication, first, the language teacher and the learner should pay attention to design communicative activities which would help to develop the communicative competence. Stern (1983:346) summarises ‘competence’ in language teaching as:

- a. The intuitive mastery of the forms of language.
- b. The intuitive mastery of the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings, expressed by the language forms.

- c. The capacity to use the language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form.
- d. The creativity of language use.

As is understood, for Stern, the competence seems to be a very broad concept including linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge on the one hand and the ability or skill to use this knowledge for communicative purposes on the other. However, the language learners start to achieve the socio-cultural aspects of language in childhood. In this respect Heath (1983:11), claims that, “. . . the different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways which (members of) each community structured their families, defined the roles of that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that gained child socialisation.” According to Heath, the children learn to communicate in spoken and written formats through socialisation in the significant society they are in. Thus, this supports the idea that the sociolinguistic competence of the language learner not only shapes the ‘ethno-identity’, but also the world view of the individual as well.

2. The language teacher should design the course material to engage the learners in the pragmatic, coherent and functional uses of language for communicative purposes. The development of coherence and the ability to communicate in different situations reflect the development of grammatical and functional competence. Therefore, in order to communicate successfully in the target language the pragmatic competence of the language learner must be well developed. Thus, the grammar of the target language should not be taught in isolation with its use. In this respect it may be important to remember that grammatical competence is to recognise and to produce grammar structures and rules for effective and meaningful communication. The learner should have the ability to put the knowledge of the language into practice. Such an experience can take place in different communicative settings and situations. That is to say, the language course should be designed to provide learners the opportunity to learn and practice different functions of language. This simply reflects the idea that form and function go hand in hand in language teaching. As Erton (1997:7) claims, “The functional study of language means, studying how language is used. For instance, trying to find out what the specific purposes that language serves for us, and how the members of a language community achieve and react to these purposes through speaking, reading, writing and listening.” Therefore, in order to structure a good pragmatic competence,

functional study of the target language should be one of the vital goals of the language curriculum. In this way, however, the language learner not only learns to participate accordingly in classroom discussions, but also experiences the ways of interaction in natural settings.

3. It is possible to distil a number of activities that are useful for pragmatic development for the foreign language teaching. Some of these have already been mentioned, however, activities aiming at raising students' pragmatic awareness should also be taken into account. The term awareness-raising is used for activities which require the development of socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic knowledge of the speaker. For the pragmatic development of the language learner, a variety of tasks could be assigned to students for practice. To illustrate, students can be assigned to observe the particular pragmatic features in the spoken, written, or in audiovisual sources. In this case, open observations (i.e. observing the education in a village, observing the ways of interaction at a train station) provide the opportunity to experience different context and discourse factors in the target language. Such observations enable the language learner develop his/her socio-pragmatic competence. On the other hand, studying the contexts in which different functions of language are used to enable to study a combination of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects in the target language. By focusing on what the student has learned from these observations help learners to establish the connection between pragmatic functions and linguistic forms. Such a study also enables the way to experience different social contexts and their cultural meanings. As Mey (1993:185-6) states, "Linguistic behaviour is social behaviour. People talk because they want to socialise, in the widest possible sense of the world: either for fun, or to express themselves to other humans, or for some 'serious' purposes, such as building a house, closing a deal, solving a problem and so on." Thus, Mey claims that, language is a tool for human beings to express themselves as social creatures and the language used in that particular context is important in terms of linguistic interaction that takes place. "Such a context naturally presupposes the existence of a particular society, with its implicit and explicit values, norms, rules and laws, and with all its particular conditions of life: economic, social, political and cultural.", admits Mey (1993:186-7). However, an actual result of the development of the pragmatic competence is to learn to communicate meaning appropriately in the target language. According to Thomas (1995:22), "making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and

hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social, and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance.” Here Thomas suggests that the meaning of an utterance should be considered in its physical, social and linguistic context which simply promotes the development of pragmatic competence (in general) in language learning.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the application of different teaching and learning activities is to help students become more effective, fluent and successive communicators in the target language. As Harlow (1990:348) states, “. . . most importantly, both teachers and textbooks alike need to emphasise to the learner that language is composed of not just linguistic and lexical elements; rather, language reflects also the social context, taking into account situational and social factors in the act of communication.” Since pragmatic competence is a combination of these factors, the development of the pragmatic ability should be accepted as one of the primary teaching goals. If considered carefully, the students find the opportunity to experience language in different social contexts, they practise functions of language in a variety of interactional patterns, by using the right utterance at the right time, they learn how to be socially responsible language learners. Moreover, the study of different communicative patterns not only help students to be the active participants in the classroom but also encourage them to think critically and creatively in foreign language. In sum, language learning is a socio-cultural process which requires the application of linguistic rules in a variety of contexts, audiences and purposes. The development of the pragmatic competence with all its aspects, help the language learners to broaden their education and shape their world views. If the language learner does not achieve most of these goals through the language learning process, the result will absolutely be a 'pragmatic failure'! To say, it is the misunderstanding or the lack of the ability to understand the message uttered by the speaker. As White (1993:193) in his article mentioned, “. . . although an utterance is grammatically well formed it may be functionally confusing or contextually inappropriate.” Therefore, the message conveyed by the speaker can be grammatically accurate, but because of the contextual factors the message might sound inappropriate. The reason of this inappropriacy can result from social factors (traditions, customs, values), the lack of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, cultural differentiations, lack of critical and creative thinking, etc.. Therefore, it should be borne in mind that the development of the

pragmatic competence in language learning and teaching today is very indispensable, because pragmatic competence not only shapes the world view of the individual through language but also provides teachers the opportunity to better understand their students by keeping in mind the necessary interactional, psychological, social and cultural factors in language teaching pedagogy.

REFERENCES

- Akmajian, A. and Demers R. A., et.al. 1997. **Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication**. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Campbell, R. and R. Wales. 1970. "The Study of Language Acquisition." In J. Lyons (ed.) New Horizons In Linguistics. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Canale, M. 1983. "From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy." In J. C. Richards and R. W. Schmidt (eds.) Language and Communication. London: Longman.
- Chomsky, N. 1965. **Aspects of the Theory of Syntax**. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Crystal, D. 1985. **A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics**. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Erton, İsmail 1997. **A Contrastive Study of Turkish and English Interrogatives: A Discourse Perspective**. (MA Thesis) Ankara: Hacettepe University, Institute of Social Sciences.
- Farrell, Thomas. 1998. "Reflective Teaching: the Principles and Practises." English Teaching Forum October-December (No:4).
- Harlow, L. Linda. 1990. "Do They Mean What They Say? Sociopragmatic Competence and Second Language Learners." The Modern Language Journal 74.
- Heath, S. B. 1983. **Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms**. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, Claire. 1986. "From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence" The Modern Language Journal Vol.70, Issue 4, 366-372.
- Le, Page, R. B. 1978. "Sociolinguistics and the problem of Competence." In V. Kinsella (ed.) Language Teaching and Linguistics: Surveys. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Lyons, John. 1990. **Language and Linguistics**. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Mey, L. Jacob. 1993. **Pragmatics: An Introduction**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Savignon, S. J. 1983. **Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Stern, H. H. 1983. **Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching**. Oxford: Oxford UP.

- Thomas, Jenny. 1995. **Meaning In Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics.** London: Longman.
- White, Ron. 1993. *"Saying Please: Pragmalinguistic Failure in English Interaction."* ELT Journal 47/3.
- Widdowson, H. G. 1989. *"Knowledge of Language and Ability for Use."* Applied Linguistics 10.
- Young, R. F. 2002. *"Discourse Approaches to Oral Language Assessment"* Annual Review of Applied Linguistics. (22), 243-262.

Biography

İsmail ERTON completed his BA. and MA. at the Faculty of Letters, English Linguistics Department of Hacettepe University. He received his PhD. from the Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Department of Hacettepe University. From 1994 to 1997 he worked as an instructor at Ankara University, Language Teaching Center, and 1997-2005 at Bilkent University, Faculty Academic English Program. Currently, he is the Assistant Professor of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Translation and Interpretation at Atılım University, Ankara.