Enhancing EFL learners' communicative competence through the concept of Conversational implicature

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Abstracts: *Conversational implicature is definitely crucial for the development of Pragmatic competence in second language acquisition. Pragmatic competence contributes to Communicative competence. The paper aims at raising awareness of the prime importance of teaching/learning Conversational implicature in order to enhance the communicative competence. The paper thus offers an overview of relevant definitions and classifications, presents the rationale for the significance of Conversational implicature in language teaching/learning and suggests some pedagogic techniques which could be used in Vietnam context.*

Keywords: *Conversational implicature, Pragmatic competence, teaching conversational implicature, second language acquisition, EFL contexts*

1. Introduction

The pragmatic notion "Conversational Implicature' is very important in daily conversations. Grice (1989) believes that in a conversation the speaker sometimes implies something beyond what he really says for some reason so the listener has to draw out what the speaker actually means. Conversational Implicature is part of pragmatic knowledge without which even advanced learners of English cannot communicate properly and efficiently.

In Vietnam there is very little classroom-based instruction to help students to develop their pragmatic competence except that pragmatics is taught as a theoretical subject to third or forth year students of English major so conversational implicature is almost neglected in the EFL teaching. As a result, English conversational implicature is troublesome for many Vietnamese EFL learners. Many learners, for example, complain that they usually have difficulty in identifying correct answers for TOEFL questions of inference which usually cover some kinds of conversational implicature.

In Bac Lieu University the teaching situation is just identical. No attention has been paid to the development of pragmatic competence for English non-majored students. According to a survey conducted by the researcher through questionnaires all of the ten teachers of English asked to give their opinion about pragmatic development admitted that they had never tried developing their students' pragmatic competence. And all of the one hundred students asked said that they had been taught neither the concept of conversational implicature nor any other pragmatic concept in high school education as well as in higher education. Although the ten teachers confirmed that they had never taught the concept of conversational implicature to their students, they still believed that knowledge of conversational implicature is important in developing communicative competence. They all believed that helping to develop students' pragmatic competence is as important as helping to develop their linguistic competence.

2. Conversational implicature

The notion of conversational implicature, according to Levinson (1983), is one of the single most important ideas in pragmatics; but unlike many other topics in pragmatics, it does not have an extended history. The American philosopher, Herbert Paul Grice, is considered as the father of this notion.

Grice (1989) believed that all speakers regardless of their cultural background obey a basic principle governing conversations which he termed '*the cooperative principle*'. According to him, speakers cooperate with each other when making their contributions in a conversation. He argued the following:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative effort; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction

may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation). But at each stage, *some* possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable. (Grice, 1989: 26)

Grice (1989: 26-27) described his cooperative principle, which includes four sub-principles or maxims, as the following:

The cooperative principle: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The maxims:

Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation Be relevant.

Manner Be perspicuous

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4. Be orderly.

Grice (1989: 30) also believed that these maxims are not always observed. And he predicted that a participant in a talk exchange may fail to fulfill a maxim in various ways, which include the following:

1. He may quietly and unostentatiously *violate* a maxim; if so, in some cases he will be liable to mislead.

2. He may *opt out* from the operation both of the maxim and of the Cooperative Principle; he may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. He may say, for example, *I cannot say more; my lips are sealed*.

3. He may be faced by a *clash*: He may be unable, for example, to fulfill the first maxim of Quantity (Be as informative as is required) without violating the second maxim of Quality (Have adequate evidence

for what you say).

4. He may *flout* a maxim; that is. He may blatantly fail to fulfill it.

In Grice's analysis, he made a clear distinction between 'quietly violating a maxim' (1 & 2) and 'openly flouting a maxim' (3 & 4). The former means that the speaker does not deliberately exploit a maxim and it does not lead to conversational implicature while the latter means the opposite and it leads to conversational implicature with the hearer's assumption that the speaker has not really abandoned the cooperative principle.

Grice (1989: 30-31) believed that it is the speakers that implicate and it is the hearers that work out a conversational implicature. According to him a speaker who, by saying that p has implicated that q, may be said to have conversationally implicated that q, if:

(1) The speaker is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle.

(2) It must be supposed that the speaker is aware or think that q is required in order to maintain this presumption.

(3) The speaker thinks and expects the hearer to think that he thinks that the hearer can work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required.

And in order for a hearer to work out a conversational implicature Grice thought the hearer will rely on the following facts:

(1) The conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved.

(2) The Cooperative Principle and its maxims.

(3) The context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance.

(4) Other items of background knowledge.

(5) The fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.

From all this Grice gave out a general pattern for working out of a conversational implicature as follows:

a. The speaker has said that p

b. There is no reason to suppose that the speaker is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle.

c. The speaker could not be doing this unless he

thought that *q*

d. The speaker knows (and knows that the hearer knows that he knows) that the hearer can see that the supposition that the speaker thinks that *q* is required.

e. The speaker has done nothing to stop the hearer thinking that *q*

f. The speaker intends the hearer to think, or is at least willing to allow the hearer to think, that *q*

g. So the speaker has implicated that *q*.

Consider the following example (Yule, 1996: 43):

(3) A: Hey, coming to the wild party tonight?

B: My parents are visiting.

This situation might be explained as follows: B has apparently violated the maxim of relation with a change of topic, yet A has no reason to think that B is not cooperating; A can regard B's irrelevant response as apparent if, and only if, A supposes B to think that B cannot come; B knows that A can work out that B cannot come; B intends A to think that B cannot come, so B implicates that he cannot come.

In summary, as Peccei (1999) made it short, in Grice's analysis a conversational implicature is a result of the speaker's flouting of a maxim combined with the hearer's assumption that the speaker has not really abandoned the cooperative principle.

Grice (1989) classified conversational implicature into two main kinds:

● Generalized conversational implicatures: implicatures that arise without any particular context or special scenario being necessary.

● Particularized conversational implicatures: implicatures that require specific contexts.

Consider the following examples (Levinson, 1983: 126) to see the difference between these two kinds of conversational implicature.

(8) I walked into a house yesterday.

(9) The dog is looking very happy.

Whenever (8) is said there is always an implicature that the house is not the speaker's. This implicature remains the same in any context in which this utterance appears. So there seems to be a *generalized conversational implicature* from the use of the expression *an F* to the assumption that the mentioned *F* is not the speaker's.

In contrast, what is implicated when (9) is uttered is completely dependent on the context in which it appears. The implicature that perhaps the dog has eaten the roast beef can be worked out only when (9) appears in the following context:

A: Where is my roast beef?

B: The dog is looking very happy.

This implicature is thus a *particularized conversational implicature*.

3. The necessity for conversational implicature teaching

Kasper (1997, as cited in Edwards & Csiceùr, 2004: 17) believes that pragmatic competence is not a piece of knowledge additional to the learners' existing grammatical knowledge, but is an organic part of the learners' communicative competence. Therefore, this big disparity between grammatical and pragmatic competence in the EFL teaching in Vietnam has led to the problem that many learners of English even advanced ones lack necessary pragmatic competence, which certainly leads to the deficiency in their communicative competence. This problem has already been pointed out by Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds (1996, as cited in Melinda & Kata, 2004: 17):

Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run 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).

Studies on teaching pragmatic aspects of the L2 have come to the conclusion that pragmatic aspects are teachable (Kasper and Rose, 2001). According to Kasper and Rose there were several studies on the instruction of pragmatic knowledge in various learning contexts and different target languages for investigation and these studies investigated the teachability of different aspects of pragmatics such as different speech acts, pragmatic routines, conversational implicature. These studies involved students of different proficiency levels (Kasper, 2001)

These studies, as Kasper pointed out, have proven that there exist positive effects for instruction in pragmatic features.

Kubota (1995) conducted a study on the teachability of conversational implicature to Japanese EFL students and concluded that it is effective to teach conversational implicature to EFL learners in Japan.

The current situation in Vietnam is definitely the same as that in Japan in 1995 when Kobuta conducted his study. EFL textbooks issued by the MOET do not deal with conversational implicature as a whole. Therefore, the class instruction of conversational implicature is significantly necessary for EFL learners especially for English non-majored students.

4. Pedagogical recommendations

Conversational implicature should be taught to English non-majored students at BLU with the combination of implicit and explicit instruction and this can be done, for example, through some pieces of language material in the textbook of Know-How. In other words, teachers can use some pieces of language material in this textbook with some alteration and implementation both to introduce and to teach some types of conversational implicature to students. For example, the scalar implicature (with the scale of frequency) can be introduced and instructed through item 2 and 3 of unit 3 in book I with some alteration and implementation. Item 2 is a dialogue which is originally used for the introduction of adverbs of frequency and role play practice. It is the dialogue between Mike and Vera. They are talking about what they usually do for entertainment. After the role play practice teachers may ask students to underline the adverbs of frequency appearing in this dialogue and then ask them to do item 3a which requires students to put six adverbs in the order from the least frequency to the most frequency (*always, hardly ever, never, often, sometimes, usually*). By doing this students learn the scale of frequency. After finishing item 3a teachers should ask students to focus on these two utterances from item 2:

Vera: ... We sometimes stay out until 4:00 a.m.

Mike: ... I hardly ever stay out that late. ...

And ask students this question *Does Mike sometimes stay out until 4:00 a.m.?* (In this case Mike, by choosing *hardly ever*, implicates the negative of *sometimes*. So, the answer is No). After correction teachers should give some more small dialogues (one after another) like the followings:

1. *A: Are you always late for school?*
   B: Sometimes I am.

2. *A: Do you always stay up late on the weekends?*

   B: Usually

There should be a question about the implicature coming after each dialogue. For dialogue 1 teachers may ask this question *Is B always late for school?* (In this case B, by choosing *sometimes*, implicates the negative of *always*. So, the answer is No). For dialogue 2 teachers may ask this question *Does B always stay up late on the weekends?* (In this case B, by choosing *usually*, implicates the negative of *always*. So, the answer is No). After such dialogues teachers should ask students to generalize the rule for

this type of conversational implicature (the choice of any value in a range implicates the negative of any value higher on the scale). If they cannot, teachers should help them to make it with facilitation and finally with explicit instruction if necessary. After that teachers should add a speaking activity like the following for students to practice applying the rule:

*Extra activity: Work with a partner. One asks questions beginning with **Do you always/ Are you always**.... about these things. The other answers using only an adverb of frequency.*

stay out late   get up early   late for school
get home early   busy at school   nervous before an exam

Doing this activity students have to choose one value that is lower than *always* in the scale of frequency for their answer instead of a No answer. Thus, they can apply the rule in communication.

In item 3c which requires students to rewrite six sentences with adverbs of frequency in parentheses, after students have finished rewriting the sentences, teachers should require them to write out the scalar implicatures of the first three sentences as a comprehension exercise.

1 On 0weekends, I usually go out dancing.…….

2 We sometimes stay out late..........................

3 I hardly ever stay out so late. …………….....

(Keys: 1. I don't always go out dancing on the weekends. 2. I don't usually stay out late. 3. I don't sometimes stay out so late)

In item 3d which asks students to practice asking and answering how often they do these things: *Get together with friends/Go to the movies/Go to English class/ Go shopping for clothes/Go out to eat/Use a computer.* Teachers may use the already-given expressions to make some more questions beginning with **Do you always**…. And ask them not to provide a yes/no answer. This activity provides students with another opportunity to apply the rule in communication. For example:

Do you always get together with friends on the weekends?

Do you always go to English class on time?

Do you always go out to eat only with your parents?

Similarly, the scalar implicature with the scale of quantity can be taught through item 5 of unit 7 and the scalar implicature with the scale of likelihood can be instructed through item 7 of unit 12.

Other kinds of conversational implicature can be

taught in the same way, for example, the particularized conversational implicature of flouting the maxim of relevance can be introduced and taught through item 10 of unit 7 in book I with some implementation.

Teachers should also deal with other pragmatic concepts besides the concept of conversational implicature such as speech acts because pragmatic competence, like linguistic competence, is an organic part of the communicative competence. If teachers neglect the development of pragmatic competence for their students, they hardly ever help their students develop their communicative competence effectively.

In conclusion, the concept of conversational implicature should be taught in BLU through the combination of implicit and explicit education. This can be done through some pieces of language material in the textbook of Know-How with some alteration and implementation. The teaching of conversational implicature at BLU should be done frequently. Other pragmatic concepts should also be dealt with besides the concept of conversational implicature in the development of EFL students' communicative competence in BLU.

5. Conclusion

Pragmatic competence plays an important role in the development of communicative competence. Without Pragmatic competence, learners cannot communicate properly and effectively in the language they are studying. For that reason, pragmatic knowledge such as conversational implicature deserves a worthy position in the field of foreign language teaching in general and English teaching in particular in order to improve learners' communicative competence. Especially in Vietnam, where teaching pragmatic knowledge is not really taken seriously. Hopefully, this article can arouse the interest of teachers as well as the language learner community in the enhancement of pragmatic competence.

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Vận dụng mô hình 5E trong dạy học đơn vị... *(tiếp theo trang 15)*

3. Kết luận

Vận dụng mô hình 5E trong dạy học đơn vị bài oxygen cho thấy sự phù hợp, tính hiệu quả trong việc phát triển năng lực tìm hiểu tự nhiên cho học sinh. Tiến trình dạy học phân tích chi tiết các bước mô hình 5E kết hợp các tiêu chí năng lực tìm hiểu tự nhiên cụ thể, giúp cho việc dạy học của giáo viên có tính logic và hệ thống hơn, đồng thời tạo ra môi trường học tập tích cực, khuyến khích sự tham gia chủ động của học sinh và giúp các em xây dựng kiến thức mới dựa trên những trải nghiệm-thu thập những hiểu biết trong thực tế cuộc sống. Điều này không chỉ giúp học sinh hiểu sâu hơn về bài học mà còn góp phần phát triển năng lực, phẩm chất và hình thành tư duy khoa học cho học sinh theo định hướng giáo dục mới của Việt Nam.

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