THE ACQUISITION OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE THROUGH VIRTUAL ENGLISH LEARNING

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This paper discusses how virtual learners of English at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) use hedges (a strategy by which speakers mitigate and soften the force of their utterances) in written discourse (electronic mails). It begins with a description of the methodology, in particular the taxonomy used, which adopts and transforms elements from three already existing taxonomies of hedges (Prince, Frader and Bosk (1982), Salager-Meyer (1994) and Fortanet et al. (1998)), and also uses new ones. After studying the hedges in the e-mails of the virtual learners and comparing them with those of a control group (a group of Australian students), I drew the following conclusion: the autonomy (and critical spirit) of the students is fostered by e-learning. They have to cope with real messages, which encourage and improve the acquisition of pragmatic competence.

Introduction

Interlanguage Pragmatics has been defined as the study of "non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic patterns in a second language" (L2) (Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993:3). Kasper also defines it as "a branch of second language research which studies how non-native speakers (NNS) understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge" (Nikula, 1997: 188).

For many years, the main objective of studies on the learning of English as a second language was to analyse linguistic competence. The main reason for this was the teaching methodology used, in which grammar was central to learning. But for some years now, the communicative approach to second-language learning has put grammar-centred classes to one side and fostered the use of pragmatics.

This new vision of second-language learning has led many researchers to define (or redefine) terms such as pragmatic competence, communicative competence or interlanguage. Many of these researchers have considered that pragmatic competence, as well as communicative competence, can be defined as the learner's ability to put into practice the knowledge that he/she has of the target language in order to express intentions, feelings, etc and interpret those of the speakers (Lara 2001).

Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei state that a good level of grammatical competence does not imply a good level of pragmatic competence for two main reasons: "The disparity between learner's and NS's pragmatic competence may be attributed to two key factors related to input and the salience of relevant linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learner (1998: 234) ".

Schmidt (1993) suggests that, if an English language learner is to acquire pragmatics, he/she needs to take into account linguistic functions and the context. Kasper (1996) believes that students need to receive proper input and be aware of it. Trenchs (1997) states that the main aim of the various English language learning projects in secondary schools that use electronic mails is not to acquire grammatical knowledge. Through electronic mails (e-mails) students must "speak" with other students:

therefore, they use not only their grammatical knowledge of the English language but also their pragmatic knowledge.

Methodology

1. Methodology Of The Subject *English I*

The English language classroom is divided into three main zones: the Notice Board, Activities and Exercises. Only the teacher can send messages to the Notice Board, where students can find announcements, tests, welcome messages, etc. The most active parts of the classroom are those called Activities and Exercises, because it is to these areas that students send all their messages:

> In Activities, students will be able to develop their reading skills by reading a variety of texts taken from different sources: they can then participate in class discussions by sending in their comments. They will also be able to enjoy lighter activities such as quizzes and language games set by the teacher.

> In Exercises students will be able to practise specific aspects of the language by doing grammar-based or error-correction exercises based on students' weaknesses (Coe and Ernest, 2001, Pla Docent; Internal document for the UOC, unpublished.Documento de uso interno para la comunidad universitaria de la UOC, no publicado).

Every week the instructor (known as a "consultor") will post assignments on the Notice Board, which typically includes online reading, pre-reading activities, reading comprehension questions and a composition (usually an opinion). Students communicate with each other through threaded discussions and submit their homework to Activities or Exercises via e-mail.

2. The Subjects

The e-mails analysed were those of the engineering students on the English I course at the Univesitat Oberta de Catalunya. They were from four semesters: September 1998- February 1999; February 1999-June 1999; September 1999-February 2000; February 2000-June 2000.

All the messages were divided into five groups according to their level of English: "muy alto", "alto", "medio", "bajo", "muy bajo". These levels were defined according to two different marks: the students' final exam grade, and their Continuous Assessment mark.[1] Both marks had to coincide to put the student in one level or another.

The e-mails studied had to fulfil three basic requisites: 1. They had to be a written text (not a list of, for example, words or short sentences). 2. They had to be written by a student (not copied from another text such asa quotation of a teacher's e-mail). 3. They had to contain at least one hedge.

Finally, out of 500 messages sent to the classroom throughout these four semesters, only 167 messages were considered valid for the purposes of this investigation. The messages were written by a total of 93 students.

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[1] This system of evaluation has been changed and from September 2002 there's no final exam in English I for those students who have a C+, B or A in their Continuous Assessment and have decided to keep that mark as their final mark.

In order to compare the language of the students with the language used by native speakers, I also studied the language that some students of La Trobe University (Australia) used in their e-mails. By so doing, I wanted to establish a baseline, which would serve as a reference point for the analysis of the interlanguage of the English language students.

Taxonomy

The first time that the term "hedge" appeared with a linguistic meaning was in Lakoff's article "Hedges: A study of meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts" (1972). In it, he defined hedge as a word used "To make things fuzzy or less fuzzy" (1972: 195). Subsequently, this definition has changed and several research projects have been carried out on this topic.

Since there is no single taxonomy on hedges to date, I created one that is mainly based on three existing ones: Prince, Frader and Bosk's taxonomy (1982), Salager-Meyer's (1994) and Fortanet et al. (1998).

1. Prince, Frader and Bosk defined two types of hedges: the **Approximators** and the **Shields**. According to them, "Approximators affect the truth conditions of the propositions associated with them" (1982: 86), and "Shields (..) do not affect the truth conditions of the propositions associated with them (...). The only effect is that the speaker has implicated that s/he is not fully and personally committed in the usual or 'unmarked' way to the belief that the relevant state of affairs actually obtains" (1982: 89).
   They distinguish two types of Approximators: *Adaptors* and *Rounders,* and two types of Shields: *Plausability Shields* and *Attribution Shields.*

2. In her article "Hedges and Textual Communicative Function in Medical English Written Discourse" (1994), Salager-Meyer analyses the hedges found in the corpus of 15 magazines. This taxonomy takes into account the following formal and functional criteria of hedging:

   1. Shields: all modal verbs expressing possibility; semi-auxiliaries like "to appear", "to seem" (also called plausibility shields in Prince et al., 1982); probability adverbs like "probably", "likely" and their derivative adjectives; epistemic verbs (that is, verbs which relate to the probability of a proposition or a hypothesis being true) such as "to suggest", "to speculate".

   2. Approximators: stereotyped "adaptors" as well as "rounders" (see Prince et al 1982) of quantity, degree, frequency and time which express heed and coyness.

   3. Expressions such as "I believe", "to our knowledge", ".... it is our view that." which express **the author's personal doubt and direct involvement**.

   4. Emotionally-charged intensifiers (comment words used to project the author's reactions).

   5. "compound hedges": double hedges "It may suggest that..."; "it could be suggested that..."), triple hedges (It would seem likely that...; it seems reasonable to assume), quadruple hedges (It would seem somewhat unlikely that...), and so on (Salager-Meyer, 1994: 154).

3. Fortanet, Posteguillo, Palmer and Coll, in their article "Disciplinary Variations in the Writing of Research Articles in English" (1998), base their analysis on Salager-Meyer's taxonomy to which they add two more hedges: **parentheses** and **inverted commas.**

Finally, and after thoroughly studying the e-mails and the classification of the hedges that in them, I found new forms of hedging. For this reason, I created a new taxonomy, which can be added to these of Salager-Meyer and Fortanet. This is the final taxonomy used in this study:

1. Shields: Plausability shields and Attribution shields
2. Approximators: Adaptors and Rounders
3. Expressions with the author's personal doubt and direct involvement
4. Emotionally-charged intensifiers (comment words used to project the author's reactions)
5. Parentheses: to give examples; to introduce additional information, personal comments of the author, clarifications, ironical or humorous comments and/or words or expressions in the student's L1 (Spanish or Catalan)
6. Inverted commas: Original expression used by the scientific community; to introduce a word or expression which belongs to another context and/or idiom; critical attitude towards an expression or word; word and/or expression in the L1 of the author (Catalan or Spanish); ironical or humorous comment; word or expression that belongs to another context
7. Suspension points: Pause which introduces a new comment; pause for suspense; summing-up comment; doubt; unfinished sentence
8. Interjection
9. Capital letters
10. Symbols: smileys, question/exclamation mark
11. Comments on their low level of English

Results

In the 167 e-mails sent by the English language students, 514 hedges were found, which means a ratio of 3 hedges per message. The ratio of hedges found in the control group was 2.1.

The following table shows the frequencies and percentages of hedges (types and sub-types) that appear in the e-mails according to the English level of the student:

	Hedges			Frequency (514)	Percentage (100%)
+	Shields			119	23%
	Parentheses			93	18%
		+	Personal comments	41	44% (included in the 18% of the total)
		-	Ironical/humorous comments	4	4% (included in the 18% of the total)
	Inverted commas			73	14%
		+	Expressions in the author's L1	25	34% (included in the 14% of the total)
		-	Expressions used by the scientific community	5	6% (included in the 14% of the total)
	Approximators			67	13%
	Suspension points			62	12%
	Symbols			50	9%
_	Interjection			2	0.3%

The following table shows the frequency (maximum and minimum use) of hedges according to the student's level of English.

Level of English	Hedge	Maximum (+) Minimum (-)
"Muy alto"	Shield	(+) 12 out of a total of 42 in this level = 28.5%
	Interjection, Capital letters	(-) 0
"Alto"	Shields	(+) 73 out of a total of 287 = 25,4%
	Capital letters	(-) 0
"Medio"	Parentheses	(+) 17 out of a total of 54 = 31.4%
	Capital Letters	(-) 0
"Bajo"	Suspension Points	(+) 24 out of a total of 119 = 20%
	Interjection and Capital Letters	(-) 1 out of a total of 119 = 0.8 in both groups.
"Muy Bajo"	Parentheses	(+) 5 out of a total of 12 = 41%
	Expressions with the author's personal doubt and direct involvement, inverted commas, symbols, interjections and capital letters.	(-) 0

Conclusions

This research makes the following contributions to the study of interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition:

- It is the first time that the interlanguage pragmatics of the virtual learning of English has been studied.
- It is based on discourse hedges and, as far as I know, there is only one other research article (Nikula, 1997) about hedges in the interlanguage of English students.
- The interlanguage studied was real discourse; that is, the exercises sent to the students were not specifically created for this study.

Nikula (1997:188) believes that hedges are very difficult to learn and use for students of English, who focus on referential function and do not use hedges as much as they could. This makes them lose a considerable amount of interpersonal communication.

- On the basis of this opinion, we can start explaining the results obtained in the groups "muy bajo" and "alto". In the first group, the lack of English language knowledge implies the lowest number of hedges in the messages. The e-mails of the students in this group are written with a minimum number of words, the sentences are short and the messages are direct. The language of the higher-level students, however, not only has a referential function, but also expresses attitudes and feelings. This is due to their good command of pragmatic competence.
- The language used by the group with a medium level of English ("medio") sometimes has characteristics of the higher levels but is in general more similar to that of the lower group.
- The students with a really high level of English (group "muy alto") are the ones who send fewest messages to the class. Their messages are also the shortest. This may be because they want to do all the continuous assessment activities so that they can get the maximum mark. For this reason, they send short, clearly

expressed messages. They give exactly what they are asked for and do not comment on their classmates' texts. Generally speaking, in their messages we can find a grammatical and lexical simplification similar to that of the lower level groups, but their grammatical accuracy and pragmatic competence are higher.

- The results of the group with a low level ("bajo") were quite difficult to predict. This group has the highest number of hedges used in the messages. One explanation may be that they use just two types very frequently: suspension points (especially the ones that represent an unfinished sentence) and shields. For obvious reasons suspension points are frequently used by learners with a low level. Shields, on the other hand, are used consistently and often throughout the five levels of students.

After studying the hedges in the e-mails of the virtual learners, I drew the following conclusions:

1. The quality of hedges is not related to the students' level of English. The quantity is.
2. The quantity and variety of hedges is not greater in the control group than in the students from the UOC.
3. Some hedges are used exclusively by those students learning English.
4. The level of pragmatic competence does not depend on the subjects' level of English.

The results of this research show that students with a low level of language mainly use the referential function. On the other hand, students with a high level of English not only use the referential function but also demonstrate considerable interpersonal communication.

The subjects with a high level of grammatical knowledge have a higher level of pragmatic competence than the subjects with a lower level because they have had greater exposure to the second language. This means that pragmatic competence can be taught and learnt in the same way as grammatical competence.

In a virtual class, the main characters are the students: they decide on the rhythm and the organisation of the work. In this way, the teacher's role is transformed into that of assistant and guide to the students' learning process.
The autonomy (and critical spirit) of the students is fostered and they have to cope with real, spontaneous messages, which encourages the acquisition of pragmatics.

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