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Local Pragmatic Norms in Students' English: An Identity to Unleash

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Abstract

English has grown into a global language shared by people in diverse places of the world; and by this definition, can no longer be rightly described as the belonging to one nation or a small group of nations claiming it to be their native language. Considering the different needs that African learners have in learning English and the different functions that English serves in the African region, it is strongly suggested that at the least three points below be accommodated in the regional English curriculum to be specified at the levels of phonology, lexis and grammar, as well as elements of communicative competence all aimed at training learners to develop language functions needed for both inter- and intra-group communication, especially across national boundaries. This paper first discussed the meaning and nature of pragmatic norms. Then it revealed the local pragmatic norms of various kinds, which students usually incorporate into their use of English. It further argued to what extent these local pragmatic norms can or cannot be justifiably adopted. Finally, it proposed ways to best deal with these local pragmatic norms at their occurrences.

Key Words: Pragmatics, norms, learning English, communicative competence

Introduction: Local Pragmatic Norms in Students' English: Points to Ponder

English is firmly established as the most widely spoken language in the world today and one of the effects of this is that non-native speakers make up a significant portion of the stakeholders in the language. Citing McArthur (1992), Li wrote that "...English is the possession of every individual and every community that in any

way uses it, regardless of what any other individual or community may think or feel about the matter” (1999, p. 1). To begin, we cannot expect anymore that English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners will come into contact with their American counterparts. They will only get to use English with their teachers and friends within their own community (be it their school, society or country), the farthest being the region or world, but not necessarily America. According to Li, the assumption that teaching English should go with teaching the Anglo-American sociolinguistic norms governing the language use “...has been increasingly called into doubt, especially by advocates of New Varieties of English (NVEs), (cf. D’souza 1997, Kachru 1989a). The main argument is that, given that NVEs are typically learned and used in local and neighboring communities, there is really no room for Anglo-Americanism, a point already asserted by Kachru (1976) well over two decades ago...” (1999, p. 2).

Secondly, adult learners, who make up the majority of learners of English in the region, are already equipped with what Li, quoting Agar (1995) termed “languaculture”, that is, the learners’ L₁ language culture which has shaped their values, belief system, and behaviors. These will undoubtedly clash with the English pragmatic norms and values that these learners have to adopt when learning the language. Honna and Takeshita (1995) asserted that many people in the world are learning English not to assimilate themselves to the Anglo-American norms of behavior, but to acquire a working command of the language of wider communication whereby to express their national identity and personal opinions. In other words, none is forced to abandon his or her native culture and behave as Anglo-Americans in order to acquire proficiency in English.

Thirdly, more often than not, given an established system of values, beliefs, and behaviors, learners consciously resort to transferring their L₁ pragmatic norms and cultural values to English out of fear of losing their identity rather than adopting English pragmatic norms and cultural values and developing a new identity in the language. Citing works of some scholars, Li observed that this pragmatic transfer occurs in the areas of politeness strategies, turn-taking, topic confusion, making requests, refusing, using terms of address, complaining, and offering apologies.

A New Understanding of “Cross-Cultural”

In the past, cross-cultural understanding meant that foreigners learning English had to learn how English is used, i.e., spoken and written, following its own pragmatic norms and cultural values, which sounds unfair because it is one-sided. Now, in EFL learners’ encounter with their counterparts of either America or England or any given (non-English speaking) country, understanding, suspension of judgment, cognitive curiosity, respect, open-mindedness, sensitivity, equality, empathy, etc. crucial for intercultural/cross-cultural understanding should come from both sides. Put in a simple way, a Nigerian EFL learner speaking with his or her American friend (especially in America) should know how to use the language employing American sociolinguistic norms to his or her utmost. But his or her American counterpart is also expected to understand why and how his or her Nigerian friend uses English the way he does. This is especially so if the given place is Nigeria.

This understanding is equally needed on the part of the American friend and is best described by Wolfson’s (1988) example in which an American host might judge his

Korean guests to be a bunch of slobes because of their slurping of the soup served, not knowing anything about norms in Korea. Actually, “his bad feeling about those well-meaning Korean would automatically turn to appreciation if he knew that slurping was meant to be a compliment for the delicious soup” (p. 56). In the words of Li, “...given the active role of English in international communication, it is also important for native speakers of English... to be aware of such norms” (that is, taking the above example, those of how non-native speakers of English speak, act, and behave with reference to their own norms and standards; additional comment mine [citing Kachru 1983, 1989b]).

Observed Phenomenon

The following are excerpts from students’ language which occur in our language classes, taken from Antoni and Radiana (2001), Antoni and Gunawan (2005), and Antoni and Zuraida (2010):

1. *Presentate* (in place of *present*)
2. *I am agree*
3. *Excuse me, Sir, I want to go to the bathroom*
4. *Teacher: Why late now?*
Student: Sorry Sir, I have to take my mother to the hospital
5. *Teacher: You don’t like durians, right?*
Student: Yes, Sir (that is, yes, Sir, I don’t)
6. (When delivering a presentation). *In this presentation, I want to explain...*
7. (In a conversation class, when creating a dialogue)
A: Hi, where are you going?
B: Hi. I am going to the market. What about you?
.....
8. (When delivering a presentation) *Firstly, I want to thank God for the opportunity given to me to present this essay...*
9. *I am flu*
10. (When ending a presentation) *I am sorry if I made mistakes in my presentation.*
Mistakes are from me, the truth is from God...

Local Pragmatic Norms in Students’ English: The Extent to which this is Possible

Adopting Aziz` (2001) view on areas in which signs of Indonesian English similar to Nigeria English may be traced, we can easily say that students’ *presentate*, *I am agree*, *I have to take my mother to the hospital*, and *I am flu* are examples of mistakes in grammar; students’ *I want to go to the bathroom*, *I want to explain...*, are examples of mistakes in lexis; and students’ *where are you going?*, *I want to thank God for the opportunity given to me to present this essay...*, *I am sorry if I made mistakes in my presentation. Mistakes are from me, the truth is from God...* are examples of ‘mistakes’ in discourse strategies.

The question is: which ones are to be corrected and which are to be understood as pragmatically typical of Nigerian and therefore to be tolerated? I would argue that mistakes in grammar and lexis must be corrected no matter how often they persist.

Given the above examples, the teacher should explain that the correct forms are *present, I agree, I had to takemy mother to the hospital* (the use of past tense), *I am having a flu* (the use of have a + illness), and *I need to go to the bathroom* and *I would like to explain...* (The use of “want” in comparison to “need” and “would like”).

As for the ‘mistakes’ in discourse strategies, depicted in students’ *where are you going? I want to thank God for the opportunity given to me to present this essay..., I am sorry if I made mistakes in my presentation. Mistakes are from me, the truth is from God...*, they should be understood as typically pragmatic (that is, of Nigerian, Indonesian—even African and Asia—norms and values of culture) and therefore tolerated and accepted. But the teacher should explain that it is not commonly spoken by native speakers of English. The teacher should continue explaining that educated native speakers of English will understand it and students should therefore not feel uneasy about it.

Concerning this, Kirkpatrick (2000) asserted that speakers of a new variety of English will want to preserve their identity, and the reflection of their pragmatic and cultural norms in the local variety of English is an important way of doing this. Below is an example of an English-translated Hausa dialogue, provided by Amina Muhammad, an ex-student at Madonna University, Okija, Nigeria who is a Hausa.

A female (A, aged 40) wants to invite a friend (B, aged 41) to a wedding party. A goes to B’s house.

A: (knocks at the door). Assalamua’alaikum

B: Wa’alaikum salaam. Please come in

A: Are you alone?

B: Yes. I am always alone during the day

A: Where are your children?

B: My son is helping his father in the yam field and my daughter is studying at school

A: What are you growing at the moment?

B: Yam. Earlier we grew tomato. What about your children?

A: Oh, he is still in Jos. I haven’t heard from him for months now. But I believe the saying ‘no news is good news’

B: What is he doing in Jos?

A: He is a tailor in plateau. He works for his uncle

B: Has he married?

A: Yes. He married a Fulani girl

B: That’s good

A: Oh, what I would like to tell you is this...do you know Hassan’s daughter?

B: I vaguely know her

A: She is going to marry Abdul's son. The wedding party will be next Friday. We hope

You can come

B: Inshaallah I will come

A: I think I should be off now. Assalamu'alaikum

B: Wa'alaikum salam

Kirkpatrick contended that this kind of dialogue, in which one does not directly get to point of what he or she wants to say, but instead talks about something else before he or she hits the point, might well represent a cultural norm typical of African and Asian people at large and so should not be considered as peculiar. It should in fact be seen as appropriate given the context of the region.

Implications for English Teaching as a Foreign Language

Teachers of English should know what aspects of students' English must be considered as mistakes and therefore corrected and what aspects of it must be understood pragmatically and consequently accepted. This will require teachers who are not only verbally proficient, but also pragmatically (that is, especially, local-pragmatically) competent. And for this purpose, "...trained non-native speaking teachers of English (NNST) are better qualified to teach English than monolingual native speakers are, provided of course that their own level of English is of sufficient standard and that they have had relevant training..." (Kirkpatrick in Proceeding of Seminar on Specific English, 2001, p. 12).

Conclusion

English is now owned by any country which uses it in ways appropriate to its own context. In the context of Nigeria—and Africa at large—this means that local pragmatic norms and cultural values may be incorporated and color the kind of English used in the region. Such a use is justified by the fact that the language will be used mostly among the people in the region, not necessarily with native speakers of the language. Even when it is used with the native speakers, the native speakers realize that we use English in our own way and respect the practice.

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