TEACHING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF HEDGING

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Abstract. Competence-based language teaching which has become an integral part of teaching foreign languages at the present moment is paid attention to. Basic language competences are distinguished highlighting communicative competence which demonstrates a student's ability to use a foreign language in such a way that will be appropriate from the point of view of linguistics, socio-linguistics and pragmatics. Teaching students' pragmatic competence in general and the use of hedges in particular is focused on. The interpretation of hedges and their classification are analysed. Awareness-raising tasks such as identification, cross- linguistic comparisons, reconstruction, reformulation and metalinguistic discussion as a method of teaching learners' pragmatic competence are considered.

Keywords: awareness-raising tasks, communicative competence, competence-based language teaching, hedge, pragmatic competence.

Аннотация. Рассмотрено компетентностно-ориентированное обучение иностранным языкам, ставшее неотъемлемой частью учебного процесса. Выделены основные языковые компетенции, среди которых коммуникативная компетенция, показывающая способность студента использовать иностранный язык таким образом, чтобы это считалось приемлемым с точки зрения лингвистики, социолингвистики и прагматики. В статье уделяется внимание обучению студентов прагматической компетенции в целом и использованию хеджирования, в частности. Проанализированы варианты интерпретации хеджирования, а также дана его классификация. Рассмотрены задания, направленные на повышение уровня понимания лингвистического явления, такие как идентификация, кросс-языковые сравнения, реконструкция, перефразирование и металингвистическое обсуждение, как способ обучения студентов прагматической компетенции.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативная компетенция, компетентностно-ориентированное обучение иностранным языкам, повышающие уровень понимания задания, прагматическая компетенция, хеджинг.

Introduction

The process of teaching foreign languages has become competence-based language teaching (CBLT) recently. The latter focuses on functional and interactional aspects of a language which is taught regarding the social context in which it is used.

It is claimed that language is always used as a tool which facilitates communication and interaction between people for achieving specific purposes and goals. So CBLT is considered to be a framework for teaching learners to use languages in situations when there are specific needs [12, 8, 13].

Among the basic competences a student must develop there are such competences as linguistic, language and communicative ones. It should be noted that linguistic competence refers to the main linguistic terms and notions whereas language competence covers units of all levels of the language system. However, much attention has been paid to communicative competence lately as it embraces the most essential spheres of any language application. The competence demonstrates a student's ability to use a foreign language in such a way that will be appropriate from the point of view of linguistics, socio-linguistics and pragmatics [10]. Thus, different competences can be distinguished within communicative competence including pragmatic competence which is of great interest to us. Pragmatic competence is defined as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended" [3, p. 15]. It is stated that pragmatic competence is not centered as it should be in the process of teaching foreign languages that results in producing grammatically correct speech on the part of students but no communicative aim can be reached in this way [ibid.] Several problems are associated with this issue and one of them is hedging.

Hedges and their classification

One of the first interpretations of the term was suggested by G. Lakoff who defined hedges as "words whose meaning implicitly implies fuzziness – words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" [6, p. 471]. Later linguists began to include other interrelated concepts such as vagueness, indetermination, indirectness and approximation into the term, although politeness was also associated with hedging [1, 11]. P. Brown and S. Levinson interpreted the term hedging as "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected" [1, p.145]. According to B. Fraser hedging is "a rhetoric strategy that attenuates either the full semantic value of a particular expression or the full force of a speech act" [3, p. 15]. If non-native speakers do not use hedging correctly or do not refer to this strategy at all, this can be considered to be impolite or even offensive and arrogant. It is claimed that native speakers can have problems with understanding the non-native speaker's meaning without any hedged sentences. Furthermore, fluency in a foreign language implies the appropriate use of grammar and pragmatics [ibid.].

K. Hyland argues that hedges are applied to show the absence of full connection of the proposition to the truth as well as an intention not to be very categorical [4]. So

hedging can even indicate some conflict between an intention and a desire. A person's ability to be indirect in particular situations can help him to resolve conflicts.

The classification of hedges differs in the same way as the interpretation of the term. According to E. Prince et al. there are two types of hedges, namely approximators and shields. Approximators are based on the propositional content dealing with true conditions of the stated proposition and thus called propositional hedging while shields connect the propositional content and the speaker in order to indicate the speaker's attitude to the truth of the stated proposition. This type of hedges is called speech act hedging [9]. Such words and expressions as *somewhat, kind of, sort of, a little bit etc.* are the examples of propositional hedging whereas *I think, probably, as far as I can tell, according to her estimates, mother says that, etc.* refer to speech act hedging [ibid.].

B. Fraser agrees that on the one hand, approximators are used when the speaker feels that it is necessary to correlate a real situation with the situation which is relevant for achieving communicative goals. Hedges in this case point out at the closeness of the real situation and the prototypical one. On the other hand, shields are needed to change relationships between the speaker and the propositional content indicating some uncertainty of the speaker [3].

It is important to note that hedges do not refer to a separate grammar class but they can be expressed by means of lexicology, morphology and syntactics. Therefore, the following linguistic devices are considered to be hedges by B. Fraser:

- modal verbs: *can, could, should, would, may, might*;
- modal words such as adjectives, nouns, adverbs: *likely, probably, presumably, perhaps,*
suggestion, estimate, possibility, etc.;
approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time: *occasionally, generally, approximately, somewhat, somehow, etc.;*
- epistemic verbs: *to suggest, to argue, to propose, to speculate, to assume, etc.;*
- parenthetic constructions: *I guess, I believe, etc.;*
- conditional sentences: *if……;*
- indirect speech acts: *he was reported to have left for the USA…;*
- metalinguistic comments: *strictly speaking, almost, exactly, etc.;*
- tag questions: *you know this fact, don't you? etc.;*
- negative constructions: *they didn't know anything about that, etc.;*
- agentless passive: *it was published in…., etc.;*
- compound constructions: *it looks probable, it seems reasonable, etc.;* - impersonal pronouns: *one, it, etc.* [3].

Teaching the use of hedges

It is argued that teaching students how to use hedges in an appropriate way can cause problems due to several reasons. Firstly, hedges become meaningful only through the context in which they are used. Secondly, the use of hedges is related to the speakers'/writers' system of values as well as their personal traits of character that significantly complicates the process of teaching. Thus, awareness-raising is suggested as a method for teaching how to use hedges [7].

As hedges are an integral element of any language it is necessary for learners to acquire the rules of using them for the successful communication in a foreign language. These rules can be different in various cultures but without them it is impossible to be fluent in a language. There are some problems distinguished in this sphere, namely the insufficient use of modality and the reduced number of expressions that are used by learners in comparison with native speakers. Furthermore, learners often refer to more explicit ways of expressing their ideas than the implicit ones. What is really important is that students always use those hedges that are typical for their native language without taking into account the fact that there can be a different system of hedges in a foreign language and it is compulsory to apply it in order to sound and write more naturally from the point of view of native speakers [ibid.]. The more expressions students know and use the more successful and native-like they will be in any communication act whether it is spoken or written.

Another point that is quite critical is translation. If the writer of the original text uses a lot of hedges and the translator/learner tries to maintain the same amount of them in the translated version coming into contradiction with the norms of the native language the translation will fail. But it should be noted that the translator/learner in this case must be aware of the writer's intentions and that can be quite problematic [7].

So to raise learners' awareness of a foreign language different techniques can be used. It is suggested that video clips might be a good resource for helping learners to become familiar with the context whereas role-play activities can encourage students to use hedges in their own speech [5]. Moreover, the following awareness-raising tasks can be considered:

- identification;
- cross-linguistic comparisons;
- reconstruction;
- reformulation;
- metapragmatic discussion [ibid.].

The word identification task is aimed at the search of words related to different language means and expressions, for example, hedges. The task can be as follows:

Read the conversation and find words and expressions which refer to hedges:
- What are brands and why do we need them?

- Well, brands are all about trust. You know what a brand is about, what it means, what it is going to deliver and you actually trust it to deliver time and time again. So in a world of endless choice, a brand can give you something to fix on – it's a kind of beacon in the

darkness. So you know that Coca-Cola will taste exactly the same wherever you are in the world.

You can argue that we don't need brands, that we'd all be better off in a world where nothing is branded and we all wear blue overalls and buy cats out of sacks and have no choice over who we bank with or what TV channels we watch. And I think one thing about brands is they add a lot of color and enjoyment and fun, as well as giving you the power to choose things [Market Leader Intermediate].

Learners are expected to note down such hedges as *<you know>, <can (give)>, <it's a kind of>, <can (agree)>, <we don't need brands>, <we'd all be better>, <and I think> etc.* Based on the context students can understand the meaning and appropriateness of the hedges.

Cross-linguistic comparisons tasks imply learners' ability to compare language elements (in our case hedges) in the native and foreign languages. For example, having analysed the hedges used in the text above students might be asked to translate them into Russian and then think about Russian equivalents that are more frequently used in the Russian language and compare the cases. For instance, the hedge *<you know>* is translated as *<вы знаете>* but Russian native speakers would rather say *<вы же понимаете>* etc. Thus comparing hedges learners can develop the skill of using appropriate hedges in their native and foreign languages.

Reconstruction and reformulation tasks have to deal with students' abilities to correct given sentences or their own sentences and phrases in oral or written speech. Reconstruction tasks can show learners specific areas where mistakes have been made. For example, a student used a conditional sentence incorrectly from the grammatical point of view, and reconstruction instructions can help him/her to find the mistake and correct it. The sentence *<If they did it a month ago, they would have succeeded>* must be corrected into *<If they had done it a month ago, they would have succeeded>*.

At the same time reformulation focuses on those norms which are followed by native speakers. Therefore, learners are asked to make changes in their utterances in such a way that the latter will sound more native-like. This can be an incorrectly used hedge or no hedging was applied in the sentence but it was essential. For example, the sentence *<They did it deliberately>* would sound not so categorical with some hedge *<It looks probable they did it deliberately>*. Students are taught to understand the nuances of language use and form necessary communicative competences.

As for metapragmatic discussion it is relevant when learners and teachers can engage in a dialogue discussing some pragmatic expression, for example, hedges, that

they have come across in some context. The teacher explains the expression and analyses it together with students encouraging the latter to use it in their own speech.

Conclusion

Teaching students' pragmatic competence in general and hedges in particular is a complicated process which requires a lot of efforts on the part of teachers who must do their best to raise learners' awareness of the rules and norms of a foreign language and appropriateness of those expressions which are typical for communicative situations and native speakers and thus must be understood and applied by learners in their written and spoken communication in order to sound more native-like.

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