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Assessing Academic Reading Skills and Pragmatic Competence in The Context of Higher-Level EFL Learning and Training

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Abstract: The article discusses the concept of pragmatics in the study of linguodidactics with particular focus on the principles and methods of the development of pragmatic competence in foreign language, especially English language education in university-level learning context. In addition, the paper reflects the most significant tools and techniques to explore the assessment of linguistic and communicative knowledge encountered in academic English reading assessment tasks which also integrate the testing of pragmatic ability of students and test-takers in learning and testing situations.

Key Words: pragmatics, foreign language, English, communication, reading, text, assessment, technique, testing, tasks, EFL, students, development, discourse, situation, context, comprehension, competence, objective, subjective, performance scale, authenticity, proficiency

Introduction

Training in learning is a significant process that involves, as foreign researchers note, "the correlation of new events or objects with an already existing cognitive concept" (Patel, 2008). If we are to discuss teaching a foreign language or linguodidactics, then this process is based not only on mastering the linguistic system of the language being studied, including the procedure for selecting a suitable vocabulary and grammatical structures, but also on its pragmatic component, suggesting language acquisition from a sociocultural perspective and linguocultural context of speech acts.

Pragmatics is the name of the science that perceives its subject as "language in action," in living functioning. Translated from Greek, pragmatics means "business or action". The Greek historian Polybius (died 118 BC) once called his writings pragmatic because he believed that they were intended to educate and meant to be useful for readers. In philosophy and psychology, this term was used to mean 'relating to experience, activity'. After C. S. Peirce and C. W. Morris, pragmatics refers to both the user's attitude to the signs he uses and the corresponding section of semiotics.

Linguistic pragmatics is a discipline that studies language not "in itself and for itself," but as a means used by a person in his activities. Today, pragmatics is an interdisciplinary field in which almost all linguistic, many logical-philosophical, sociological, psychological, pedagogical, ethnographic and some cybernetic (related to the creation of artificial intelligence) directions are involved. The empirical tasks of the general theory of pragmatics include the development of a cognitive model of the production, understanding, and memorization of speech acts, as well as a model of communicative interaction and language use in specific sociocultural situations.

A unified scientific definition of pragmatics as a science has not yet emerged, but there is no doubt that it was formed under the influence of a linguistic paradigm focused on the study of speech communication.

The idea of the need to take into account the "human factor" in linguistic research was formed in semiotics. Semiotics (from the Greek "sign") is a scientific discipline that studies the general structure and functioning of various sign (semiotic) systems that store and transmit information, be they systems operating in human society, in nature or in individuals themselves.

C. W. Morris (1938) distinguished three branches of semiotics: syntactics (or syntax), which deals with the relationships between signs; semantics, which studies the relationship between the sign and the

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signified (designatum), and pragmatics, aimed at studying the relationship between the sign and its interpreter, that is, the one who creates, accepts and understands the sign.

In 1970, the International Symposium on the Pragmatics of Natural Languages took place. Its participants were unanimous that the pragmatic aspects of natural language communication (at least some of these aspects) should be studied within the framework of linguistic theory, along with the semantic and syntactic aspects of this communication.

The formation of linguistic pragmatics is directly related to changes in the general orientation of foreign linguistics in the early 1970s, which are characterized as a transition from the study of language - a formal system abstracted from the conditions of its use, to the consideration of language as a means of communicative interaction carried out in a social context. The formation of the science of pragmatics was stimulated by the ideas of J. Austin, J. Searle, G. Grice, Z. Wendler and others.

Currently, there are three different, somewhat traditional, approaches to pragmatics, correlating not only with linguistic philosophy, as shown above, but also with formal logic and linguistic semantics. Differences in approaches are due to different ideas about the nature of meaning.

However, the existing diversity of areas of linguistic pragmatics cannot be reduced to one or more traditions. They are united by some initial ideas: 1) the key concept for an adequate description of linguistic communication is the concept of activity; 2) language is a means of dynamic interaction between communicants; 3) the functioning of language is inextricably linked with the situational context of its use.

On the question of the object of pragmatics, two concepts emerged, considered by Yu. S. Stepanov. On the one hand, it is recognized that pragmatics has its own subject; these are special, inherent only to its questions of study - "the selection of linguistic means from the available repertoire for the best impact." On the other hand, pragmatics in its "pure" form explores those problems that semantics and syntax study in a "hidden" form" (Stepanov).

Pragmalinguistics includes a set of issues related to the speaking subject, the addressee, their interaction in communication, and the communication situation. The main postulate of science is considered to be the statement of J. Austin: "The word is the deed."In this regard, linguistic pragmatics is more often identified as a field of linguistic research whose object is the relationship between linguistic units and the conditions of their use in a certain communicative-pragmatic space in which the speaker/writer and the listener/reader interact.

Main Body

Pragmatics in foreign language teaching is a field of study in applied linguistics that focuses on the use of language in practical communicative situations. It studies how to effectively use language to achieve specific communication goals, taking into account sociocultural and contextual factors.

Pragmatics in teaching a foreign language helps develop communication skills, understanding of cultural characteristics and rules of communication in a foreign language, and also contributes to the formation of students as competent and adaptive communicators in a foreign language environment.

Pragmatics helps students, become more competent and effective communicators in a foreign language. They learn not only correct grammar and vocabulary, but also how to use language in real-life communicative situations. Pragmatic skills include choosing appropriate communication strategies, interpreting nonverbal cues, adapting to different contexts, and understanding cultural differences in language use. The study of pragmatics especially helps students understand that language use involves not only lexical and grammatical rules, but also contextual, sociocultural, and pragmatic factors. They learn to recognize and analyze implicatures, idioms, tropes, allusions, and other pragmatic elements that may have special meaning in different situations.

Pragmatics, in undergraduate and graduate level studies, helps students recognize and understand sociocultural differences in language use. They learn to take into account cultural norms, expectations and stereotypes when communicating in a foreign language. This includes adapting communication strategies depending on the cultural context, taking into account non-verbal cues and respecting the cultural characteristics of interlocutors.

Students can study and analyze the pragmatic errors they make in communication. This helps them become aware of differences in language use and improve their communication strategies. In addition,

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students examine the cultural characteristics of their language of study, including pragmatic aspects, to understand their impact on communication. They can learn the nuances of greeting, conversation, compliance, politeness, and other culturally-based communication strategies.

D. Crystal believed that it is pragmatics that studies the speech act as a communicative action in its sociocultural perspective that should become the basis of the methodology for studying a foreign language, in connection with which he was one of the first to touch upon the issue of the formation of pragmatic competence among linguistic students.

Pragmatic competence is the most an important component of L. Bachman's model of linguistic competence. According to this researcher, it includes the ability to use language for expressing a wide range of functions, and also interpret illocutions in discourse in accordance with the sociocultural context, in which they are used. According to L. Bachman, in order to communicate well in a non-native language, pragmatic skills must be well developed. But, according to foreign methodologists, even students studying a foreign language at an advanced level, are not immune to pragmatic errors. Therefore, there is a need for training aimed at increasing level of pragmatic awareness of students. We also believe that a high level of pragmatic competence will make it possible to perform speech acts within the limits of one or another different situation without errors caused by the sociocultural and linguocultural characteristics of native English speakers, including the specificity of the picture of the world and communicative behavior that are not particular for non-native speakers studying English language and culture.

As for the development of academic reading skills along with others, it is necessary that EFL and ESL teachers, instructors or trainers consider the advantages of pragmatic texts to develop and assess communicative and socio-cultural awareness of students. Within the framework of a communicative approach to teaching a foreign language outside the environment of its natural functioning, it is impossible to study a language without spoken and printed authentic texts. Therefore, mastering pragmatic texts is necessary to prepare for solving real communicative problems in the case of being in the country of the language being studied, when it is important to obtain information for practical purposes in order to be guided by it in certain circumstances.

The ability of pragmatic texts to increase motivation for learning a foreign language is also important, since they themselves are proof that the language in them is used to achieve practical life goals by real people. Pragmatic texts are used for the purpose of orientation in a certain life situation, so there is a high probability that when traveling to the country of the language being studied, a person may encounter a situation where he will need to listen/read one of the types of pragmatic texts and use the necessary information. Thus, one of the advantages of this kind of texts is the practicality of their use.

The characteristic of the locality of a pragmatic text is manifested in the fact that it contains certain cultural characteristics of the country of the language being studied. Accordingly, students have the opportunity to get acquainted with part of the culture of a country they are interested in and learn something important about it for themselves. This is another advantage of using pragmatic texts in teaching foreign languages in comparison with the quickly outdated information contained in textbooks.

It is common nowadays read that the skills do not exist in isolation and that we should therefore teach and test the skills in an integrated manner. However, while it is a communicative reality that the four skills are used in combination-someone is listening every time we speak (even when we are talking to ourselves), every text we read must have been written by someone, and soon-there are still good reasons for treating each skill separately:

There are clearly times when the skills are used in isolation-we may read a newspaper without responding in any way, we may listen to the radio without speaking to anyone, we may write a diary which is not read, we may even make a spoken announcement without being sure that anyone has listened or even heard. In many communicative situations and in most testing items, it is clear that one skill predominates or that our part in the communication is driven primarily by one skill rather: than the others. It is pedagogically convenient to refer to each of the skills separately: There is a long tradition for teaching and testing the skills in ways in which one skill is dominant at any one time. Teachers and learners feel comfortable with this division and nearly all attempts at skills integration in public examinations have been rejected by teachers.

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Reading in so many ways, is a process of transferring information or extracting information from the text. However from the communicative viewpoints in English language training, reading is also to be seen as pragmatic process and communicative product, combining all the necessary linguistic and pragmatic backgrounds of the text reflected in specific context or situation.

While reading a text, the test taker or student has to complete or perform a number of psychological and communicative actions. For example, the reader has to focus on the headline of the text or usually needs to understand the writer's background if it is stated or even not given. Knowing something about the writer allows the test taker or the reader recognize the global setting of the context. As a result, the reader is able to build interaction with the source and builds general understanding of the text situation, making skimming quite fast as much as possible.

Another process in the testing of reading is setting purpose – getting to know the task environment, what the text or reading passages intends to test or assess, what specific questions should be immediately answered, what techniques, strategies and steps the test-taker or reader should take or adopt faster to complete the test quickly and effectively. The further stage would be to recognize and figure out how the text is graphically organized and what language tools or linguistic units/knowledge are represented, required, presented, removed from the text or passage lines, what word would complete the gap or best fit to cover the removed one(s) in case of ellipsis or well substitute for a long sentence in short in the passage with the same meaning, in other words, what grammatical words *(nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, pronouns and others)*, lexical sets *(words, collocations, phrase, prepositional phrase, idioms, specific, academic or technical words or general words and others)* are required and assessed in gap-filling, multiple-choice test, cloze tasks, completion tasks and others.

Distinct communicative tasks in reading tests and tasks would be to match the purpose or function, line to the passage paragraph in multiple-choice or matching task, to write a short answer to complete the gaps using minimum or required words or to respond to questions as sentence-completion or written discourse test tasks using fast-typed and timed-response in proficiency exams or academic writing performance task, essay, report in proficiency as well as classroom continuous formal and informal assessment. Very frequent *reading tasks* on *pragmatic ability assessment* would be to recognize the *speech acts* around themes and communicative situation *(assertive, commissive, expressive and others, The author states, the author concludes, the author seems… the writer wants to… the writer intends…), implications (the author/writer implies…, making references (the writer refers to…, this/that in the line 4 in the paragraph 5 means/denotes, functions in the text (the writer agrees/disagrees, praises, complains, discourse markers (initially, later, finally, in conclusion, others), transitional devices with general and specific meaning in context (however, besides, in fact, although, though, in order to, while, whereas, when, if, unless, due to, since, as, thus, therefore, others).*

Very important stage of the reading assessment would be to spend some time summarizing all the actions taken to complete the test and respond to the questions using draft-analysis technique. The final steps would embrace summarizing all the performed actions in reading which can or should be retained in the reader's or test-taker's long-term memory allowing a student and reader to experience and produce in the test the knowledge of the topic and world or specific culture, knowledge of text plans, knowledge of the writer, knowledge of the language, and knowledge of the situation and language in specific use in terms of communicative setting. We are entitled to regard this very kind of approach to assessing reading in EFL learning and training as a pragmalinguistic and pragmadidactic approach in the light of literacy assessment based on not only on reliability and objective principles but also on validity and communication-interaction principles. To draw anology, we can refer to Douglas Brown (2010) and his revised approaches to assessment in literacy. Brown considers interactive approach to assessing reading with focus on interaction activities, such as read and discuss, read, explore and interact, read and share, read, present (academic presentations, other spoken or written products as a result of reading) and assess.

The dominant consideration for presenting well-developed and reliable and well-constructed readings tasks and tests in contemporary TESOL practices is to rely on developing authentic communicative tasks which are engaging and stimulating for the reader and test-taker. In this regard, R.West underscores the

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place of authenticity in literacy assessment by discussing the concept of authenticity with sample research analysis.

According to R.West, authenticity affects the task in several ways. First, it is evident that elementary learners are unable to follow the full content of an authentic text in its entirety. The usual solution to this problem in first- and second-generation tests of reading was to simplify the text. Third-generation testers, committed to authenticity of text, prefer to simplify the task, adjusting the comprehension level of the task rather than the language level of the text. This is, of course, what happens in the real world, where we-maybe able to extract very basic information from a newspaper in a language we do not understand (who won a football match) but not more detailed or complex information. So, tasks have been devised which demand a narrow range of understanding from *elementary* learners, and a fuller range from more *advanced* students.

Secondly, there has been a demand for more authentic tasks. What this means in testing terms is fairly straightforward in a test of writing-the task should be one that exists in the real world ("Write a postcard about a day at the seaside' is authentic, whereas 'write 200 words about a day at the seaside 'is not),or one that learners might reasonably be expected to carry out in the target language in the real world. What authenticity of task means in terms of tests of reading is more complex, and can be discussed in diverse directions.

As for marking reading tests based on accurate and reliable *testing method*s, *objective testing* or evaluation can be the most useful as the examiner or *assessor* to see the overall, *holistic or analytic* evaluation of the student's or test-taker's reading performance. There are few reasons for using *subjective scoring* when a range of effective objective techniques is available. However, the interpretation of the scores is open to debate – what do 76% or 16% out of 20 mean in real world terms? Or does, a score of 95% or 19 out of 20 indicate that the learner is a very good reader or that the reading test was a very easy one? There is no immediate response to these questions. Performance scales for reading exist and are in use with some tests as an indicator of real-world reading performance. However, as reading tests are not direct assessments of *language performance* (unlike writing), it is not immediately obvious how they can be equated with banded scale, for example, Band 9-2 in *IELTS proficiency* test or 120-60 *TOEFL proficiency* or other classroom exams.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the instructional and testing potential of pragmatic reading lies in the fact that they allow the formation of such components of foreign language communicative-pragmatic competence as sociocultural, sociolinguistic, pragmalinguistic and speech. The characteristics of pragmatic reading and assessment tasks that we have identified allow us to classify them as a special type of auditory/printed teaching aids, with the help of which foreign and English language teachers can imitate a real communicative situation in educational settings and testing and evaluation procedures, complementing and corresponding to the principles of communicative approach to teaching languages.

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