Developing Pragmatic Competence in Vietnamese Learners of English

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Why the lack of sociolinguistic knowledge is a problem, and what might be done about it.

Learning a language means more than knowing linguistic features such as the rules of grammar or the vocabulary system. We must also know how to use a language in its social and communicative contexts. Even with a high level of language proficiency and goodwill, one cannot project a good image of oneself when lacking the ability to perform these language functions appropriately. Failing to take this into account, foreign language learners may create misunderstandings which are beyond their control. The mistaken messages they send or receive lead not only to breakdowns in communication, but also to bad effects within social relationships. When they commit such mistakes, learners are considered as lacking in pragmatic competence. As Thomas points out: “While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person.” This common problem can also be seen in Vietnamese learners of English.

The biggest problem Vietnamese learners of English have is their limited ability to communicate effectively with native speakers despite their good command of linguistic knowledge. Although they may have spent a long time studying English and done very well on exams, they still have great difficulty making themselves understood or interpreting properly what is said to them. What they need is not only to know about English but also to know how to use English properly. The purpose of this article is to investigate the reasons why Vietnamese learners lack this ability, in order to find out feasible solutions.

Reasons for the Lack of Pragmatic Competence

Of all the factors behind inadequate pragmatic competence in Vietnamese learners of English, the way in which English is introduced and distinctive cultural differences are the main reasons for the problem.

Although English as a foreign language has been taught in Vietnam for some years, sociolinguistics has not been introduced until recently. Some teachers are aware of the important role sociolinguistic features play in teaching a foreign language. However, many others are accustomed to the old way, and do not appreciate the fact that social competence should be part of students’ training, alongside linguistic competence. That is one of the reasons why Vietnamese learners of English who are quite good at grammar and vocabulary cannot communicate effectively with speakers of the target language.

In a study based on class-visit reports and questionnaires filled out by Vietnamese teachers of English at high schools in central Vietnam, Tran points out that 91.8% of teachers did not refer to situational contexts when teaching. In addition, 72.7% of examples of presented vocabulary and structures were context-free, with the focus on form rather than function.

Another factor, according to Tran, is teaching materials. Ninety-nine percent of teachers completing the questionnaire stated that current textbooks have only implicit explanations or no explanations of sociolinguistic aspects of English. There was a time when mechanical drills filled textbooks as a way to provide students with opportunities to practice. Then new textbooks following the communicative approach were introduced. Some were written by native English authors; others were designed by Vietnamese writers. The former have not really succeeded in assisting students with their social competence because they are not designed for Vietnamese learners; the latter, on the other hand, seem not to be helpful because they lack satisfactory descriptions of sociolinguistic features of the target culture. Tran gives the following example from the book English 6, written by Vietnamese authors for the sixth form of secondary schools in Vietnam. This is a dialogue between two English schoolgirls during the first day at the playground (Cao, Nguyen, Hoang, and
Tran, 1986, Unit 12):

Daisy: There's a new boy in my class.
Mary: What's his name?
Daisy: His name's Jim.
Mary: How old is he, Daisy?
Daisy: He's eleven.
Mary: How many pupils are there in your class?
Daisy: There are thirty.
Mary: How many boys and how many girls?
Daisy: Six boys and twenty-four girls.
Mary: Oh, there are many girls in your class.

Tran points out here that Vietnamese learners may believe that asking the age of a person, which is very common in Vietnam, is also common practice in English. From the study, it can be concluded that in Vietnam sociolinguistic features are not paid sufficient attention to in either teaching or curricula. Since virtually their only input comes from teachers and textbooks, students thus have little chance to be exposed to the target culture.

In terms of assessment, examinations and tests are not designed to assess learners' communicative competence. University entrance examinations mostly lack sections for speaking and listening skills. The main focus is to assess ability through exercises on grammar, vocabulary, reading, and composition. The grammar and vocabulary exercises are usually context-free, which encourages a mechanical application of what has been learned at school. Students are also required to do tasks related to discourse structure, for example, to put a jumbled dialogue in correct order.

Naturally, this way of evaluating plays a very important part in deciding the way of teaching and learning. Why should teachers bother helping students develop pragmatic competence when such a thing almost does not exist in the assessment criteria? Even if teachers realize the need to assist students in this area, they are reluctant to do so because their purpose is to prepare students to pass examinations. Learners attending evening classes at language centers also aim to get a certificate of language proficiency, which again is conferred based on exams that pay little attention to social aspects of the language.

Cultural Barriers to Pragmatic Competence

With respect to difficulties Vietnamese learners face due to cultural differences, Wise observes that because of the great differences in language, non-verbal routines, and cultural values between Vietnamese and Australians, her Vietnamese learners feel uncomfortable and often avoid communicating with native speakers. She notices that Vietnamese learners often lack the confidence to begin and maintain a conversation. The differences can be clearly seen in such areas as topics of conversations, degrees of directness, different assumptions about roles, and different practices in using language functions.

According to Le, due to an unclear distinction between “personal” and “non-personal” concepts in Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese people may create misunderstandings in cross-cultural conversations with Westerners. While inquiring about one's personal life is considered close and friendly among Vietnamese people, it is inappropriate with native English speakers who may find such behavior impolite.

The degree of directness in Vietnamese culture also differs greatly from that in English-speaking cultures. The use of indirectness in expressing disagreement is a Vietnamese cultural feature that could cause misunderstanding. Except in a close relationship, disagreement is avoided as much as possible. To Vietnamese, directness is not appropriate because it might damage a relationship. Brick and Louie notice this phenomenon and state that Vietnamese people, in order to keep harmony and avoid conflict, rarely express strong disagreement. Though they privately disagree, they may apparently express agreement. Feelings are not usually displayed; a smile may be used with various meanings. While to Vietnamese people it is very important to maintain relationships in this way, such tactful indirectness might be read by foreigners as insincere or dishonest.

Another significant cultural difference that affects speaking is the Vietnamese system of social relationships. According to Le, centuries of Confucianism in Vietnam has exerted a strong influence on the social relationship structure. Sex and age are the key factors in deciding the role of a member in a family as well as in society. Language use is affected by this concept of social role. Brick and Louie point out that the choice of language forms in Vietnamese is determined by the relationship between the speakers, whereas in English it is the “degree of disruption” instead of the relationship that mainly determines language choice. They also point out that the concept of respect rather than politeness is paid more attention to in Vietnamese and Chinese societies, where age, education, and social status play a key role in communication. As a result, Vietnamese learners, as seen by Wise, find it difficult to address people in...
English. To Vietnamese learners, with their complicated forms of address, it is impossible to express respect in English using the simple system of names and pronouns. Le believes that Vietnamese speakers may be embarrassed to use one pronoun for different people of different statuses. The custom of asking people’s age originates from the fact that Vietnamese people want to address others appropriately.

Cross-cultural studies on pragmatic aspects of English and Vietnamese reveal that although there are some similarities between the two languages and cultures, the many differences cause significant problems for Vietnamese learners of English (Dang; Ngo; S.P. Nguyen; T.B.T. Nguyen; V.X. Nguyen; Ta; Tran). Among many examples observed, Le mentions apologies and gratitude. To Vietnamese people, Australians overuse “sorry,” whereas to Australians the lack of “sorry” by Vietnamese speakers of English in some situations is considered impolite. The same is true with “thank you,” a frequently used expression in English which Vietnamese speakers use far less because they think that overusing the expression may come across as insincere.

Vietnamese learners of English tend to behave in accordance with Vietnamese cultural values when they come into contact with native speakers of English. This may result in misunderstanding, embarrassment, or discomfort, all a result of a lack of pragmatic competence. In what follows, a quick review of studies on the acquisition of pragmatic competence will be presented as the basis for suggestions with respect to Vietnam.

Developing Pragmatic Competence

Research on the Problem

To begin with, “transfer strategies” (that is, transferring sociolinguistic rules from one’s mother tongue) have been frequently noticed in research. As Coulmas points out (pp. 69-70):

"The risk is particularly high, that the foreign language user sticks to the underlying rules governing the usage of the corresponding phrases of his mother tongue. This kind of transfer of pragmatic rules from one linguistic system to another may lead to interferential mistakes just as any other transfer.

Similarly, Cohen finds that foreign language learners may go through a process of mental translation before performing a speech act, resulting in a negative transfer from the mother tongue. Holmes and Brown claim that if students are not consciously aware of the social context in which they are communicating, they are likely to adopt their native social and cultural values. This may result in giving unintentional offense.

Kasper sees, on the other hand, that adult learners automatically have some universal pragmatic knowledge and that some aspects of cultural values are positively transferable. Yet research in this area (Kasper; Fukushima; Tanaka, cited in Kasper) reveals that learners do not often use the valuable information they possess. Therefore, teaching can play an active role here.

Is Pragmatic Competence Teachable?

Regarding the teachability of pragmatic competence, Edmondson, House, Kasper, and Stemmer point out that “cognitive learning” plays an important role in the development of pragmatic competence in language learners. Olshtain and Cohen, Morrow (cited in Kasper), and Wildner-Bassett argue that pragmatic features can be taught. According to Cohen (cited in Kasper), it is possible to teach strategies for speech act realization to adult learners of a foreign language. At present, however, people do not know much about the natural sequence of the development of pragmatic competence in adult foreign language learners. As a result, at the moment syllabuses cannot be designed to assist such natural development.

Olshtain and Cohen (cited in Cohen), in their study on the role of instruction in the acquisition of apologizing skills, also claim that teaching does play an active role in the development of pragmatic competence in learners. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain compare learners’ responses to situations in which an apology is called for before and after training, and note the progress learners made after being trained.
At What Level Can Pragmatic Competence Be Taught?

To reject the idea that pragmatic competence can only be developed after learners have obtained a certain level of language proficiency, Wildner-Bassett, from a study on intercultural pragmatics and proficiency, points out that pragmatic routines can be taught even to foreign language beginners. Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay, and Thananart also share this view. This is very important in curriculum development and syllabus design because common opinion holds that pragmatic competence can only be developed after students have a basic command of grammar and vocabulary. But as Kasper points out, from the very beginning learners can practice pragmatic routines to help them manage standardized communicative events.

Metapragmatic Routines and Formulas

Addressing this issue, House concludes from her study that the acquisition of pragmatic competence includes routine memorizing. Routines contain the pragmatic knowledge of a community, and these formulas are necessary for everyday verbal communication. Schmidt (cited in House) comments that practicing and memorizing chunks play an important role in skill development. Errors that foreign learners make often come from the wrong application of stored chunks (Schmidt and Frota, cited in House).

Pragmatic oral performance failures in advanced learners, according to House, result from their inappropriate use of routines. However, metapragmatic information alone cannot directly give learners sufficient knowledge to enhance pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence can be improved, though, by giving learners explicit metapragmatic information, which is converted into a “procedural form of representation.”

House and Tateyama et al, when comparing two groups of students receiving explicit instruction (having a metapragmatic component alongside input and practice) and implicit instruction (having only input and practice, with no metapragmatic component), found that both groups developed their pragmatic competence, but the group receiving explicit instruction did better. House also concluded that the group receiving explicit teaching of communicative behavior was less affected by negative L1 transfer. The same result can be seen in Bouton’s study, wherein a group receiving instruction in complimenting did better than a group that did not.

Thus, although it is impossible to teach all language functions (Williams), the active role that teaching plays in developing learners’ pragmatic competence cannot be denied. As Thomas states (p. 96):

*It is the teacher’s job to equip the student to express her/himself in exactly the way s/he chooses to do so—rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborate polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being unintentionally rude or subservient.*

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Suggestions and implications for teaching have been included in many of the studies on the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Thomas emphasizes the need to develop students’ awareness of cross-cultural differences in communication. Teachers should pay attention to development of their students’ metapragmatic ability in order to enable them to analyze language consciously.

Various studies have described speech acts such as compliments (Holmes and Brown), giving directions (Scotton and Bernsten), apologies (Borkin and Reinhart), and thanking (Eisenstein and Bodman). But according to Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds, descriptions are not enough; there should also be approaches to develop pragmatic competence. Teachers should develop students’ awareness of pragmatic functions in language. These researchers suggest that students compare their own role-plays on a tape with real-life exchanges. Students might be asked to collect data from radio, television, or books, focusing on a certain speech act and comparing different ways of performing in different situations. Another way to develop students’ pragmatic awareness is to hold a class discussion in which students compare certain function in their native culture to the same in the target language (Levine et al, cited in Bardovi-Harlig et al).

Brick and Louie mention that although students may practice certain functions in class, they are unlikely to use what they have learned in real-life situations if they are not aware of the importance of cultural values. So teachers should understand students’ cultural presuppositions and what difficulties this might cause them in cross-cultural communication.

In her study, Takahashi (cited in Kasper) emphasizes the need to create an appropriate context for pragmatic input in the classroom. She also suggests that if
opportunities for practice outside the classroom cannot be provided, it is necessary to give students explicit instruction to assist them with their development of pragmatic competence.

Rose encourages teachers to use film to help raise students’ pragmatic awareness or to serve as a source of examples for explicit instruction. The writer points out that Hollywood films can be a good representation of language use in society. He describes a project in which different speech acts were collected from contemporary American films, then compared with studies of speech acts. (At this time, only complimenting had been compared, but the results were positive.) The use of films is encouraged due to the attraction they create, and the fact that they can go with any pedagogical approach. Holmes and Brown, when designing a series of exercises to boost learners’ sociolinguistic competence, emphasize the need to develop their awareness of those contexts in which there is likely to be negative transfer or interference; to encourage and promote their ability to understand meanings of exchanges socially as well as referentially; and to enhance their ability to take turns in conversations.

In a later study, Holmes and Brown suggest other activities and exercises including learning formulas and collocations, identifying possible topics, practicing forms of address, collecting and comparing linguistic data, role-playing, and discussing. In their view, the role of the teacher is to equip students with relevant knowledge and skills in order to express themselves effectively with their own language in the contexts of their choice.

Kasper suggests that language teaching help students locate second language social practices in communication in the right place and interpret them in the context of the second language community. Students should be given both referential and interpersonal tasks. Referential tasks assist students with vocabulary and strategic competence, whereas interpersonal tasks—for example, exercises to practice expressing gratitude—can help students succeed in social relationships. As seen by Crookall and Saunders, Crookall and Oxford, and Olshtain and Cohen, pragmatic abilities can be enhanced by providing students with opportunities to practice, using such activities as role-play, simulation, or drama.

Kasper summarizes that similar to acquisition of other types of linguistic knowledge, acquisition of pragmatic knowledge needs the same conditions, that is: relevant input should be provided; students should have their attention drawn to the input; and they should have opportunities to practice in order to develop good communication habits.

One controversial issue, as Wolfson points out, is how much sociolinguistic knowledge should be included in the classroom. In terms of teaching and materials, Wolfson warns against relying on the intuition of teachers and material designers for sociocultural information, as this has been proved to be inadequate and unreliable. Bardovi-Harlig et al note a case in which they compared textbook dialogues to authentic ones and found great differences. According to Olshtain and Cohen (cited in Cohen), some ESL textbooks provide a limited number of semantic formulas for a certain speech act without stating the appropriate use of each formula in their specific context. What is the role of teachers in that case? Bardovi-Harlig et al suggest that they carefully evaluate the authenticity of teaching materials, and if necessary, develop new ones.

Suggestions for Vietnamese Classrooms

With respect to Vietnam, since learners have little chance to be exposed to the target culture, special attention should be paid to materials. As mentioned above, teaching materials used in Vietnam are not adequate in terms of providing sociolinguistic information. As an implication arising from his study, Tran suggests that there should be cooperation between native-speaking textbook designers and Vietnamese writers in the creation of curriculum for Vietnamese learners. At present, while waiting for such materials to come into being, it would be more appropriate to use textbooks written by native-speaking authors and to adapt or supplement them when necessary.

Teachers should pay attention to development of their students’ metapragmatic ability in order to enable them to analyze language consciously.
Since teachers and textbooks are the main sources to which Vietnamese learners turn for input, it is necessary to think carefully about teacher qualifications in regard to sociolinguistic knowledge. Teachers should be equipped with a good knowledge of the target culture. In order to have qualified foreign language teachers, teacher training courses need to include a sociolinguistic and cultural component. Furthermore, teachers should be aware of changes in the target culture, as well as of new techniques for incorporating culture into the language classroom.

Learners should be made aware of the distinct differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures. Film, radio, and television should be used when other ways to expose learners to the target culture are lacking. As Richards and Schmidt notice, students’ failure in communication often comes from their surface focus on structure, without sufficient attention paid to speech acts and functions. Teachers need to point out that knowing when to use language, how, and to whom is of great importance. For example, in English “thank you” is needed to express gratitude, even between members of a family, whereas in Vietnamese it is not used as frequently since it might in some situations be considered distant or cold.

According to Richards and Schmidt, students also need to learn which speech acts are considered threatening in the target culture. One example is the use of a compliment. In Vietnamese, a compliment such as “You look fatter these days” is totally acceptable when paid to a thin person, whereas in English, it is not at all a compliment, but an insult. Similar structures may exist, but the effect they create is not the same. Another example is that “Where are you going?” is a normal greeting in Vietnamese, but in English it comes across as nosy. Brown and Levinson (cited in Richards and Schmidt) emphasize the need to draw students’ attention to the social relationships established in a community. Social role is simply not as significant for language choice in English as in Vietnamese.

In Wise’s view, it is possible to develop foreign language beginners’ intercultural communicative competence with the help of their first language. With explanations in Vietnamese, her learners were able to identify the context of communication and choose the appropriate language used in each context. Her experience of teaching communicative skills to Vietnamese learners reveals the importance of considering the cultural presuppositions of both Vietnamese and target culture communities. Taking Wise’s findings into consideration, perhaps Vietnamese and native-speaking English teachers should be paired in team teaching situations.

It is not sufficient to provide learners only with relevant input; what is more important is to give them opportunities to practice. If possible, it would be useful to let students take part in different activities and record their performance. Then a feedback session could be used to analyze errors. To this end, a learner-centered curriculum and less teacher-directed interaction should be encouraged. To promote such changes, evaluation and assessment need to be reconsidered in view of the larger goal of communicative competence.

**Conclusion**

Within the limits of this article, the planning and realization of lessons on language in use cannot be discussed in much detail. As a teacher of English, my greatest concern is how to help learners become competent enough to achieve their communicative purposes. To start doing what should be done, I think, teachers of English in Vietnam need assistance from resources beyond their own individual effort. In raising the issue of developing pragmatic competence in Vietnamese learners of English, I hope to promote discussion and research that will contribute to solving the problem.

**References**


Cohen, A.D. “Developing the Ability to Perform Speech


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Spot Photo

Give this photo and exercise suggestions to students desiring extra practice, use it in tutoring situations, or collect it and other photos for classroom use.

This picture is from an island near Nha Trang. Briefly tell a partner about one of your recent trips or vacations.

Orally or in writing, give instructions on how to do a popular swimming stroke, such as the backstroke.

With a small group, work to create a tourist brochure for Nha Trang. Make sure it would help attract many tourists to visit the beaches there.