Working with Formulaic Language as a Way to Evaluate and Improve EFL Non-Linguistics Students' Pragmatic Skills in a Culture-Specific Contextual Situation

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Abstract

The present article considers the learners' ability to understand and use formulaic language as an indicator of their pragmatic skills. Experimental data has been collected and analyzed to identify the current level of the learners' pragmatic skills and to reveal problems they face in culture-specific communicative situations. Classroom activities for developing pragmatic skills have been suggested.

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1. Introduction

At present foreign languages, especially English, become an important tool for communicating with people from other countries and extracting information from different sources. Therefore, the students must be prepared to use English in real communicative situations, which are usually culture-specific.

This inevitably results in teachers' and researchers' attention to other aspects of communication than correct use of words and grammatical rules. For example, M. Byram, B. Gribkova and H. Starkley (2002) claim that

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communicative competence includes not only grammatical skills but also social and cultural appropriateness of language use. According to I. Kecskes, 'individual prior experience and actual social situational experience are equally important in meaning construction and comprehension' (Kecskes 2014). A. Soboleva and O. Obdalova also state that 'people from different cultures take different perceptual experience as a premise' thus stressing the role of cognitive processes in intercultural communication (Soboleva, Obdalova 2014). Such interpretations of the process of communication have a strong impact on teaching and learning and draw teachers' and researchers' attention to the branch of linguistics which deals with communicative functions of the language and appropriateness of its use, namely pragmatics.

It is obvious that the ideas of pragmatics must be taken into account when teaching a foreign language as a means of intercultural communication. For this reason, many researchers insist on the inclusion of pragmatic competence, into the general structure of communicative competence. Unlike the grammatical competence associated with the knowledge of vocabulary, morphology and syntax, pragmatic competence is concerned with communicative intentions, relationships between participants of communication and the context of communication (Bachman 1990). Canale & Swain (1980) associate pragmatic competence with the ability to use the language in a contextually-appropriate way. Some researchers insist on differentiation between pragmatic competence in the first and in the second language (L1 and L2 pragmatics). The former is the result of language socialization, while the latter is associated with ability and willingness to accept socio-cultural norms of language use (Kecskes 2014). Therefore, it is L2 pragmatic competence that is of particular interest for foreign language teaching. L2 pragmatic competence is usually regarded as the ability to use and understand a language in a way which is appropriate to the socio-cultural context of communication (Kecskes 2014).

In our opinion, pragmatic competence is especially important for non-linguistics students because functional use of the language is more important for them than knowledge of formal rules. Basing on definitions and models of pragmatic competence proposed in literature (Bialystok 1993, Rose 1999, Barron 2003) we can identify skills and abilities L2 teachers should focus on. They include but are not limited to using language for realizing different communicative intentions; understanding real communicative intentions of the speaker; appropriate use of language units in different contexts; knowing the rules of combining utterances to form discourse.

On the other hand, teaching experience shows that teachers still tend to focus on semantic and syntactic properties of language units paying little attention to their use in real situations of intercultural communication.

In the present research we try to figure out whether technical students have pragmatic skills necessary for communicating in culture-specific situations and give recommendations on how these skills can be developed in the process of teaching English as foreign language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Objectives

Since there seems to be a contradiction between the importance of L2 pragmatic skills and the lack of attention to their development in non linguists, the present research aims at:

1) evaluating the actual level of the students' pragmatic skills;
2) identifying typical problems they face and common mistakes;
3) suggesting techniques for developing pragmatic skills in educational process.

2.2. Methods

The analysis of articles and monographs on pragmatics and intercultural communication served the methodological basis for our research. Corpus-based research was used when we worked on the problem of choice of relevant lexical units for further interpretation by Russian-speaking technical students. Experimental studies were conducted to investigate the process of interpretation of formulaic language by technical students, reveal possible difficulties and typical mistakes. An opinion-poll was conducted to find out whether the students understood the importance of pragmatic skills.

2.3. Research Design

The experimental study was conducted at Tomsk State University. The subjects of our research were second and fourth year students of the Department of physics and technology of Tomsk Polytechnic University majoring in nuclear physics and technology and electronics and automation of nuclear power plants. 19 people (16 male and 3 female students) took part in the experimental study. The ages of the subjects ranged from 19 to 21. According to the previously conducted placement test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise) 4 students had intermediate level of English, 1 student had pre-intermediate level and 14 students had elementary level.

The aim of our experimental study was to evaluate the actual level of the students' pragmatic skills. To do that we gave the students tasks that involved working with different types of formulaic language.

First of all, we organized a presentation where the students were familiarized with classification of formulaic language units. To show what types of formulaic language units are distinguished in modern pragmalinguistics we used I. Kecskes' formulaic continuum. So the learners became familiar with such types of 'chunks' as grammatical units, fixed semantic units, phrasal verbs, situation-bound utterances and idioms (Kecskes 2007). After delivering the presentation we involved the students into some practical activities including identification of different types of 'chunks' in culture-specific contexts and choosing phrases appropriate to particular communicative situations from a number of suggested variants. The main aim of this research stage was to make the students aware that word-by-word translation rarely helps to understand the meaning of a set expression and demonstrate that effectiveness of understanding depends not only on the literal meaning of the word, but the chain of words, and even more, on sociocultural context of the communicative situation. For example, when the students were asked to choose the phrase normally addressed to a person who sneezes, most of them chose the variant 'Be healthy' because it is the translation of the phrase used in the same situation in Russian culture.

At the next class the students were suggested to do a number of tasks on interpreting formulaic language in culture-specific situations of use. The activities aimed at investigating the process of interpreting formulaic language units by Russian-speaking learners of English. Special attention was paid to working with situation-bound utterances because these units are bound to particular the culture-specific context, which is very important for cross-cultural communication.

In Task I the students were to read 20 sentences or short dialogues and decide whether the expression in bold was an idiom, a fixed expression or an SBU. Task II involved working with10 American situation-bound utterances. The subjects were asked to explain the meaning of each SBU in writing or translate SBUs into their mother language. No context was provided in this part in order to compare the students' ideas with those expressed in task 3.

Task 3 involved listening to 10 short dialogs in which the meaning of each SBU (the ones from Task 2) was illustrated clearly enough for the learners to deduce it from the context. The students were asked to put down the translation of each SBU for the given context. The list of SBUs and the results of our research can be found in the next section.

3. Discussion of Results

The qualitative results of Task 2 for SBUs, idioms and fixed expressions are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 1. Identification of SBUs in contextual situations

Phrase	Right guesses	Wrong guesses	Not answered
Can I help you?	7	11	1
I am just looking	7	11	1
Get out of here	10	8	1
Can I help you…	8	11	0
Don't mention it!	10	9	0
be my guest	11	7	1
Welcome aboard	8	9	2

What can I do for you?	6	11	2
How do you do?	9	7	3
Come on	4	10	5
Piece of cake	10	6	3
Total	90	100	19

Table 2. Identification of idioms in contextual situations.

Phrase	Right guesses	Wrong guesses	Not answered
spill the beans	9	8	2
Cup of tea	8	11	0
when pigs fly	10	9	0
In the long run	7	8	2
Total	34	36	4

Table 3. Identification of fixed expressions in contextual situations.

Phrase	Right guesses	Wrong guesses	Not answered
To be frank	10	8	1
You know	8	10	1
all of a sudden	8	7	4
come into mind	3	13	3
so to speak	6	9	4
Total	35	47	13

We can see that the total number of wrong answers exceeds the total number of right answers for all three groups of formulaic language. Besides, some questions of Task I were left unanswered. It shows that the students' skills of identifying formulaic language units in contextual situations need improvement. On the other hand, we should pay attention to the fact that such results are quite predictable for non-linguistics students. They do not have enough practice of doing such tasks and some linguistic terms are unfamiliar to them. Moreover, in the case of non-linguists it is more important to understand and use formulaic language units in speech than to know what group they belong to. This is why the results of Tasks II and III are much more important for evaluating the level of the students' pragmatic skills.

Task II was probably the most difficult for the students to do because no context was provided and they had to use their prior experience or rely on associations. Qualitative analysis of the students' answers made it possible to reveal two main tendencies. The students give direct translations of phrases or stick to the translation they already know. For example, most of the learners think that 'come again' is a synonym of 'come back', while the phrase 'What's up?' is interpreted as 'Hello' or 'How are you?' The SBUs 'you bet', 'here you go' and 'give me a break' posed the greatest difficulty because there was not a single student who gave a more or less correct interpretation of these phrases without a context.

The results of this task are also important for evaluating the role of context in interpretation of SBUs by comparing its results with those of Task III.

The quantitative results of Task III are presented in a bar graph in figure 1.
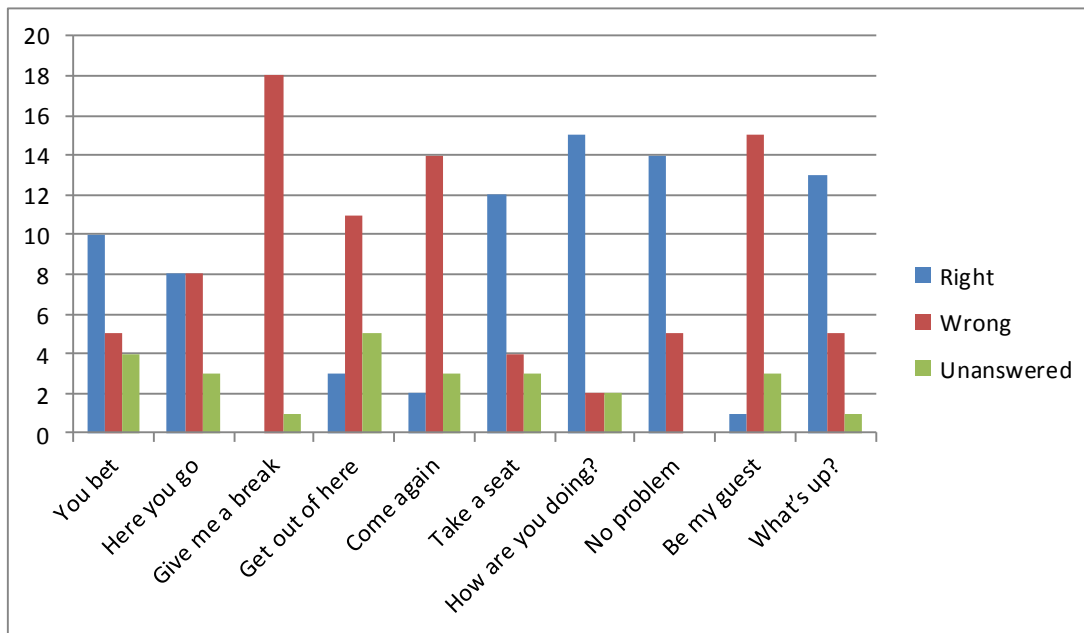
Figure 1: Task 3: translation of American SBUs in culture-specific contextual situations.

Figure 1 shows that the presence of context helped most students to understand the meanings of such SBUs as '*you bet*, and '*What's up?*'. Most of the answers were correct and different from those given in Task II. As for the phrase '*here you go'*, we can say that the context helped almost a half of the students to give a correct interpretation. The SBUs '*Take a seat'* and '*How are you doing?*' were interpreted correctly by most of the learners, probably due to the existence of similar phrases in the Russian language. In contrast, the majority of students failed to understand the meanings of such SBUs as '*give me a break'*, '*get out of here'*, '*come again'* and '*be my guest'*, which may be explained by the fact that there are no similar phrases in the Russian language and because the meaning of these units depend on authentic communicative situation and culture of which our subjects have not heard before. Such qualitative analysis brings us to an assumption that cultural differences are the main reason for incorrect interpretation of SBUs.

Analyzing our findings from a quantitative point of view, we can say that only 4 SBUs were understood correctly by the majority of the subjects. 3 of them have analogues in the Russian culture and only one was understood from the situation (we state it basing on the difference between the students' answers in Task II and Task III). As for the remaining SBUs (6 phrases), the majority of the students failed to understand their meaning. This suggests that the students would most probably make similar mistakes in real situations of communication with native speakers, which would inevitably cause misunderstanding. All this allows us to conclude that pragmatic competence is an integral part of a person's general communicative competence and the ability to understand formulaic language and use it in speech is a good indicator of its level.

The results of our experimental study also show that the general level of pragmatic skills of Russian-speaking technical students is rather low, although their motivation to improve such skills appears to be high. The latter fact can be proved by the results of the opinion poll we conducted after the experimental study. The learners were asked to answer 3 questions: 'Was it interesting to work with formulaic language?', 'Did you learn anything new?' and 'Would you like your teacher to pay more attention to working with formulaic language?' 100 per cent of the participants (14 students) chose the 'yes' answer for all three questions.

Below we give but a few examples of classroom activities that may be used for these purposes.

Matching and multiple-choice exercises are a good way to make the learners familiar with lexical items and to illustrate not only their correct use in communicative situations but also typical mistakes made by non-native speakers. For example:

Match each phrase (1-3) with the most appropriate response (a-c).

1)	Thanks!	a.	No problem.
2)	Would you like some coffee?	b.	You bet!
3)	How is it going?	c.	Fine, thanks.

Choose the correct answer to complete the situation:
_____. The floor may be slippery!

a. Take care!
b. Watch out!
c. Help yourself!
d. Here you go!

A good way to practice the use of SBUs in speech is acting out dialogues. There are different ways to organize such activities. The culture-specific context may be suggested in the situations (e.g. *Act out a dialog between a waiter and a customer using 5 SBUs*). It may also be constructed by the learners in the process of communication. For example, the teacher may give each student a card with several SBUs and ask them to use all SBUs in a dialog.

These exercises may be done by students having any level of general communicative competence. Technical students' levels of English usually range from elementary to intermediate. Elementary students may learn formulaic language together with other language units. The inclusion of the above-mentioned activities into learning process at this stage will help the students avoid inappropriate use of the language and misunderstanding. Intermediate students, who are already familiar with some examples of formulaic language, may improve their pragmatic skills by learning new language units and culture-specific contexts of their use.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of works on pragmatics and intercultural communication and the experimental study conducted within this research have brought us to the following conclusions:

1. It is difficult for non-linguistics students to identify the type a formulaic language unit. Wrong answers predominate in Task I where students had to differentiate between idioms, SBUs and fixed expressions.
2. The most common mistake students make when trying to explain the meaning of an SBU is word-by-word translation.
3. The learners may also rely on the meaning they are aware of, which is quite natural when no context is provided (Task II) but causes mistakes when they see a familiar phrase in a new context (Task III).

All the above-mentioned allows us to assume that working with formulaic language in the process of language learning may help the students to develop such skills as deducing the meaning of a 'chunk' from the context, recognizing communicative intentions of the interlocutor, using appropriate language units in culture-specific situations, combining utterances in a way appropriate to a particular culture-specific situation.

Classroom activities that may be used for developing these skills have also been suggested, although further experimental studies are needed to prove their effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

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