

Speech Acts and Politeness Strategies in an EFL Classroom in Georgia

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Abstract—The paper deals with the usage of speech acts and politeness strategies in an EFL classroom in Georgia (Rep of). It explores the students' and the teachers' practice of the politeness strategies and the speech acts of apology, thanking, request, compliment / encouragement, command, agreeing / disagreeing, addressing and code switching. The research method includes observation as well as a questionnaire. The target group involves the students from Georgian public schools and two certified, experienced local English teachers. The analysis is based on Searle's Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies. The findings show that the students have certain knowledge regarding politeness yet they fail to apply them in English communication. In addition, most of the speech acts from the classroom interaction are used by the teachers and not the students. Thereby, it is suggested that teachers should cultivate the students' communicative competence and attempt to give them opportunities to practise more English speech acts than they do today.

Keywords—English as a foreign language, Georgia, politeness principles, speech acts.

I. INTRODUCTION

NOWADAYS mastering a foreign language is genuinely a great challenge not only for a student but also for a teacher. Language learners need to be equipped with proper communicative competence to achieve successful communication among the native speakers and users of the target language. As one of the functions of a language is to convey meaning, it is indispensable for language users to know how to utilize various grammatical or lexical units for effective and rational interaction. A great number of studies confirm that knowing only grammar or vocabulary is insufficient to be a competent language user. Language is not just about syntax and lexis [1]. A student regarded as an excellent language learner may fail whilst communicating with native speakers of the target language. Things may even go wrong if the interlocutors come from culturally different countries and do not possess the same cultural background. Communicative competence involves both language competence as well as pragmatic competence [2]. The former includes vocabulary, pronunciation, word formation, spelling and sentence structure; as for the latter, it refers to the practical use of the language and choosing the proper utterances in the given situation. Different scholars have different models and components for communicative competence [3], [4], though the division proposed here is more

flexible and convenient to exploit.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Speech Act Theory

As a language learner has to possess, in tandem, a good grammatical and lexical command and succeed in communicating functionally, a teacher is required in a classroom to focus on developing both competences in order to make a student be successful in foreign language acquisition and usage. In conceptualizing and studying a language speech act theory plays a significant role as it increases the perception how a language works when used by interlocutors in different context in contrast to the Chomskyan approach, which assumes that grammatical competence is sufficient to create an unlimited number of utterances on the basis of acquired linguistic categories and systems. However, for successful communication, a course of communicative competence has to be complemented [5]. The speech act theory that is regarded as revolutionary in pragmatics and currently in the pedagogical practice as well was first introduced by John L. Austin in his work *How to do Things with Words*. He distinguishes constative utterances used to describe something, to constate if the statements are true or false and performative utterances, those used to describe speech acts. He also puts forward three kinds of forces an utterance may have: 1) locutionary, i.e. the literal meaning, 2) illocutionary, i.e. intended meaning. By the sentence 'it is cold here', the speaker may assert, or suggest, or request something. 3) perlocutionary, a force that 'often produces certain consequent effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or the speaker, or other persons' [6]. Speech acts are often associated with illocutionary meaning of the utterance as they are the uses to which language can be put in society. Austin also proposes 'felicity conditions' which are necessary for successful communication. Austin's successors tried to improve and systemize the approach. Following Austin, J. R. Searle classified speech acts into five categories:

- representatives (assertion, claim, report, conclusion)
- directives (suggestion, request, order, command)
- expressives (apology, complaint, thank, congratulate, welcome)
- commissives (promise, threat, refusal, offer)
- declaratives (decree, declaration, christening, marrying)

Searle also proposes the notion of indirect speech acts in which 'the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers rationality and inference on

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the part of the hearer' [7].

B. Other Theories and Their Role in Language Learning

On the basis of the speech act theory some other approaches have been developed, such as Leech's Politeness Principle [8] and Grice's Cooperative Principles [9]. The politeness principle implies that people should minimize the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize the expression of polite beliefs. As for the Cooperative Principle, Grice introduces four maxims with sub maxims, which the interlocutors must follow to avoid misunderstanding and be successful communicators. These maxims involve the following: quality, quantity, relation and manner. Brown and Levinson extended the politeness theory, proposing bold-on record, off record, negative and positive politeness strategies [10]. As the conception and realization of speech acts and politeness principles are different across cultures, language learners definitely need to know certain rules and norms of the target language. Otherwise they may fail in understanding the members of the culturally different society due to the fact that what is acceptable and normal in their native language may sound rude and unacceptable for the foreign community. Thus, a language teacher is required to take these facts into consideration and draw the students' attention to the cultural differences and the peculiarities of the target language. To illustrate, thanking in Georgian is not as common as in English and often, Georgian people say thank you when they are really thankful. However, this does not mean that the people themselves are rude. On the contrary, Georgia is regarded as one of the most hospitable nations, especially in the west of the country [11]. Thus, those Georgians learning English should pay attention to this cultural distinction and make requests or use other kinds of speech acts properly so as not to sound rude. Surely, it is the teachers' responsibility to transmit the information to the student. From the observation as a school teacher, students are unable to practise polite requests in English because of two factors: The first is cultural difference between English-speaking countries and Georgia, and the other is a lack of knowledge about how to make such requests. Brock and Nagasaka [12] suggest that teachers can raise students' awareness of pragmatics in English. For instance, by using certain activities based on Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies students will get acquainted with making polite requests in the target language.

III. PRESENT STUDY

The goal of this paper is to investigate EFL school children and teachers' communicative competence, precisely to what extent they practise politeness strategies and the speech acts of apology, thanking, request, compliment /encouragement, command, agreeing /disagreeing, addressing and code switching.

IV. METHOD – PARTICIPANTS, INSTRUMENT, PROCEDURE

In the first stage of the research, a total number of 100 students of 5-12 grades (35 boys and 65 girls) from three secondary schools from the Georgian town of Kaspi were

invited to answer a mixed questionnaire with Likert questions, multiple-choice answers and an open-ended question. The next step was EFL teaching observation in a classroom with the 4th and 12th graders with a total number of 108 students and two experienced, certified local English teachers.

V. RESEARCH RESULTS

A. Survey Results

The questionnaire focuses mainly on revealing how well the teachers and the students apply politeness strategies in the classroom. The data show that 65% of the students strongly consider themselves polite towards teachers and 60% agree with the statement that they show respect towards other classmates. In addition, approximately the same number of students (67%) is definitely sure that teachers demonstrate deference to the students and all of them agree or strongly agree that the teachers often use the politeness markers 'please' and 'thank you' while communicating with them. In case of borrowing a pen from a friend more than half of the students (55%) claim they would use the phrase 'give me a pen, please' rather than positive (7%) or negative (20%) politeness or bold-on record (18%) strategies. As for the off-record strategy, none of the students would use it for a request. For discipline recovering in a classroom, 92 % of the students think that the teacher should use the phrase 'Be quiet, please'! Instead of the bare imperative, 'Be quiet'! (6%), an interrogatively expressed request-'Will you be quiet'? (6%), or 'Shut up'! (0 %) As for how they would ask the teacher to come to their desks, all of them use polite ways, either imperative with mitigation 'please' (54%), or indirect ways, requests expressed by questions (46%).

These survey results reveal that Georgian schoolchildren possess the sense of certain rules in terms of politeness, however from teaching experience it can be said that while communicating in an English classroom, the students rarely use the proper utterances. As a matter of fact, it was necessary to observe the teaching process in a classroom to document the situation vividly.

B. Observation Results

The first striking and easily noticeable peculiarity of the lessons was the fact that the classroom was largely dominated by the teacher. Most of the speech acts used at the lessons were exploited by the teachers. The students mainly responded to the teachers' questions and instructions. The teachers trying hard to make the teaching process as pleasant as possible often used positive reinforcement. The speech act of compliment / encouragement was used by the teachers nearly thirty times in one class period without any compliment responses from the students at all. The teachers gave compliments not only while appreciating students work or ability; they underlined some of the good qualities of the students as well. For example, before discussion about friendship, the teacher used such a phrase: 'I know that you are very friendly, children'! The teachers often expressed their happiness regarding the students' success with an exaggerated intonation. Such a positive attitude obviously

encouraged the students and increased their motivation, which reflected positively on classroom management.

Similar to compliment, the thanking responses were practiced by the teachers. They mainly used the form 'Thank you very much' rather than 'thank you' or 'thanks'. The function of this speech act intended to have an appreciation benefit followed by the function of conversational opening, stopping, changing, closing and leave-taking. For example, in the 12th grade, at the end of the class, the teacher thanked the students for their effort during the lesson. She also thanked the students after finishing one activity and before starting another. In addition, while thanking, the teachers used exaggerated intonation for creating positive learning environment.

According to the results, the request forms were practised by Georgian EFL teachers much more than the students. The prominent focus was made on the use of imperatives, especially on the lower stage of teaching for the purpose of classroom management. In such cases the teachers imposed and created pressure on the students. As Ide [13] and Blum-Kulka [14] propose, politeness is determined by interlocutors' status, power and social level, the formality of the situation (formal or informal) and varies from culture to culture. In past years, Georgian society placed teachers in a very powerful position and the students were required to obey them in every situation. Nowadays, the situation has changed, and Georgian teachers are expected to form a friendlier learning environment. However, in discipline in the lower stages of English acquisition the use of bare imperatives work more than other types of politeness strategies. Sometimes the imperatives were accompanied by the explicit politeness marker 'please' to modify the instructions. The teachers also used indirect questions expressed by request questions: 'Can you tell me which the third day of the week is'? As for the students, they only practised permission directives when they needed permission to do something, such as exiting or entering the classroom. 'May I come in'? In case of request responses, the students used the compliance responses and none of the non-compliance responses.

Teacher: 'Tsira, can you add any other information'?

Student: 'Yes, friendship is the most important thing for people.'

The results revealed that the speech acts of apology were the least frequently employed by the interlocutors at the lessons. The teacher said 'Mary, I am sorry,' when one student was answering her question while she was giving some instructions to another student.

It is worth mentioning that the teachers often used indirect ways for error correction, i.e. instead of direct indications to the mistakes, the teachers preferred to say the correct versions themselves. This strategy can be considered very effective in terms of gaining sympathy from the students because it reduces the chance that other people will notice and concentrate on the mistakes. Thus, the teachers managed to correct the errors without threatening the students' social image.

As for the speech acts of command, the findings showed that the teachers tried not to use them frequently and if applied, they were followed by mitigation devices. The teacher used the command without softening when the student deliberately avoided speaking English while communicating with her. The teacher concluded that code switching was not necessary as the student possessed the proper language competence to communicate in the target language instead of native. So, she said strictly and loudly 'In English'!

Code switching is mainly used at the lower stage of teaching when the students lack of proper language competence. While communicating, the teachers tried to apply basic English, while the students mainly used Georgian. As for the higher level of education, the students were expected to communicate in English rather than in their native tongue.

The other linguistic expression used in a classroom interaction was addressing, for which the teacher mainly chose to address the students with students' first names rather than unspecified markers or surnames. ('All right, Temuri, go on', 'Tamta, come'). The strategy shortened the distance between the interlocutors caused by status difference.

Interpersonal function markers such as agreement, disagreement, checking understanding and confirmation were mainly used by the teachers. However, the students also applied the speech act of agreement, when the teachers asked if they agreed with the idea expressed by their classmates. The words 'Ok', 'all right', 'yes', 'yeah', 'aha', and 'of course' were used by the teachers for confirmation.

C. Discussions and Suggestions

The findings reveal that the target teachers have a good command of English. Both of them are certified and possess the theoretical knowledge in language teaching. They try to make the teaching process less stressful for the students for which they use different strategies involving verbal or non-verbal elements. Although the teachers try to establish a friendly relationship with the students, they also maintain some kind of distance that in some respect is necessary from the perspective of maintaining discipline and classroom management. The speech acts used at the lessons are used by the teachers, while the students perform mainly in responding to teachers' instructions, questions and encouragement. The survey show that the students know some pragmatic rules, such as how to request politely; however, from the observation findings, they practice none of these acts. It gives ground to the assumption that they may also fail to use the proper linguistic units in real life situations. What is the alternative? It is supposed that in the initial stage, it is the teachers' responsibility to improve students' language competence, not forgetting about the importance of pragmatics in language learning process. To achieve these goals, teachers should pay more attention to the students' involvement in the teaching-learning process; they should concentrate on activities that will provide their engagement in real-life situations. Various authentic materials from the native speech community such as English movies, TV shows, news bulletins and so on will give the students the chance to get cultural experience and enrich

their communicative competence in the target language. Then they can role-play some dialogues or speech elements which will enable them to activate the passive knowledge. Practice makes better, so schoolchildren need more practice using the foreign language in a classroom!

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper deals with the use of politeness strategies and different speech acts in an EFL classroom context. As the data show, Georgian students need to practise English speech acts in real life situations. Teachers should attempt to raise their students' awareness of basic pragmatic issues, like politeness because the cultural difference between English - speaking communities and Georgia may lead Georgian students to misunderstanding and consequent failure in communication with native speakers of the target language!

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