Identifying and Understand Pragmatic Failures in Portuguese Foreign Language by Chinese Learners in Macau

Authors : Carla Lopes

Abstract : It is clear nowadays that the proper performance of different speech acts is one of the most difficult obstacles that a foreign language learner has to overcome to be considered communicatively competent. This communication presents the results of an investigation on the pragmatic performance of Portuguese Language students at the University of Macau. The research discussed herein is based on a survey consisting of fourteen speaking situations to which the participants must respond in writing, and that includes different types of speech acts: apology, response to a compliment, refusal, complaint, disagreement and the understanding of the illocutionary force of indirect speech acts. The responses were classified in a five levels Likert scale (quantified from 1 to 5) according to their suitability for the particular situation. In general terms, we can summarize that about 45% of the respondents' answers were pragmatically competent, 10 % were acceptable and 45 % showed weaknesses at socio-pragmatic competence level. Given that the linguistic deviations were not taken into account, we can conclude that the faults are of cultural origin. It is natural that in the presence of orthogonal cultures, such as Chinese and Portuguese, there are failures of this type, barely solved in the four years of the undergraduate program. The target population, native speakers of Cantonese or Mandarin, make their first contact with the English language before joining the Bachelor of Portuguese Language. An analysis of the socio - pragmatic failures in the respondents' answers suggests the conclusion that many of them are due to the lack of cultural knowledge. They try to compensate for this either using their native culture or resorting to a Western culture that they consider close to the Portuguese, that is the English or US culture, previously studied, and also widely present in the media and on the internet. This phenomenon, known as 'pragmatic transfer', can result in a linguistic behavior that may be considered inauthentic or pragmatically awkward. The resulting speech act is grammatically correct but is not pragmatically feasible, since it is not suitable to the culture of the target language, either because it does not exist or because the conditions of its use are in fact different. Analysis of the responses also supports the conclusion that these students present large deviations from the expected and stereotyped behavior of Chinese students. We can speculate while this linguistic behavior is the consequence of the Macao globalization that culturally casts the students, makes them more open, and distinguishes them from the typical Chinese students.

Keywords : Portuguese foreign language, pragmatic failures, pragmatic transfer, pragmatic competence
Conference Title : ICLLCS 2016 : International Conference on Language Literature and Cultural Studies
Conference Location : San Francisco, United States
Conference Dates : June 09-10, 2016