영어어문교육 제7권 1호 2001년 여름

Learners' Sociolinguistic Behavior: In Search of Four Major Sources of Pragmatic Errors

Jaesuk Suh

(The Korean National University of Cultural Heritage)

Suh, Jaesuk. (2001). Learners' sociolinguistic behavior: In search of four major sources of pragmatic errors. *English Language & Literature Teaching,* 7(1), 35-49.

One of the areas of second language acquisition that enjoyed popularity in recent years is interlanguage pragmatics. The main reason for this popularity lies in the critical role of pragmatic competence in appropriate use of a target language. The aim of this paper was to examine L2 learners' pragmatic behavior in their speech act performance and determine main sources causing pragmatic difficulty. Four major sources of pragmatic errors were identified: linguistic proficiency, L1 transfer, waffling and teaching activities. Each source was discussed with empirical evidence in some detail, and teaching suggestions were provided for developing learners' pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms.

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the notion of communicative competence stimulated much research on functional, sociocultural aspects of learner language. Many applied linguists and materials developers have explored specific components of communicative competence in an attempt to assist learners in communicating in a way that is accepted by target language speakers. Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) were among the first in this line of research and proposed an influential, comprehensive model of communicative competence that has served

as a guiding principle in L2 learning and teaching during the last decades. As one component of the model, sociolinguistic competence or pragmatic competence has received much attention from researchers and teachers since this competence is held responsible for appropriate use of language. Recent research on interlanguage speech acts clearly shows that sociolinguitic competence does not originate from grammatical competence (Chen, 1990; Politzer & McGroarty, 1983; Walters, 1980).

Language learners with insufficient pragmatic knowledge are likely to misinterpret an interlocutor's message and unwittingly misuse language, violating social, cultural norms of a target community. As compared to grammatical errors, pragmatic errors may induce negative judgments of learners from target language speakers who see them as unfriendly, impolite, or even rude (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan & Reynolds, 1991). Therefore, in order to save face of both participants in conversation (i.e., a speaker's desire to be approved of by a hearer and a hearer's desire not to be interrupted by a speaker), maintain communication, and ultimately keep a good relationship with each other, it would be the best for learners to develop their proficiency which enables them to use a target language socioculturally appropriately as well as grammatically correctly.

Given the decisive role assumed by pragmatic competence in L2 use, and the definite need for students to attain this competence, the present paper placed focus on examining learners' pragmatic behaviors in the performance of speech acts and providing suggestions for helping them to achieve target-like pragmatic competence in L2 learning. To this end, through a review of studies on interlanguage speech acts in the literature, four main sources of pragmatic errors were identified, and based on them, suggestions were presented for better teaching pragmatic aspects of language in EFL classrooms.

II. FOUR MAJOR SOURCES OF PRAGMATIC ERRORS

1. A Need For an In-depth Analysis of Four Major Factors

A quick look at the literature on interlanguage pragmatics shows that there

have been numerous studies of L2 speech acts. One of the aims of these studies was to find out the similarities and differences between learners and native speakers of a target language in the production and comprehension of speech acts in context. Speech acts that have been investigated to date include requests, apologies, rejections, suggestions, complaints, and expressions of gratitude, among others. Learners who were asked to perform these communicative acts were found to experience difficulty executing them and differ from native speakers in form, content, and semantic formula (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Among many factors to account for learners' pragmatic behaviors in their speech act performance, four main factors were identified and considered in this paper: Linguistic proficiency, L1 transfer, Waffling, and Teaching activities. Particularly these factors are also major sources leading to pragmatic errors, so they need special attention in classrooms. Though they have been dealt with frequently elsewhere, there is a need for an in-depth analysis of them so as to not only let teachers gain a solid understanding of what is going on non-native speaker pragmatic behaviors, but better teach them the rules of speech acts.

2. Linguistic Proficiency

The speech act theory views language use as doing verbal acts for social interaction (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Speaking with language, we perform three major acts: act of simply stating state of affairs (i.e., locutionary act), act of doing something by producing an utterance expressing a speaker's intended meaning (i.e., illocutionary act), and act of affecting interlocutor's beliefs or thoughts (i.e., perlocutionary act). Among the three acts, a locutionary act is the most basic in that an effective, successful communication is based on grammatical, meaningful utterances. To L2 learners an illocutionary act is more important and more problematic to execute than any other act since an actual performance of illocutionary acts (i.e., speech acts) requires both a selection of L2-specific language forms and a consideration of social, cultural norms relevant to the realization of a given speech act in a particular context. Considering sociocultural norms involves assessing values of situational factors placed within a target community, which may differ from culture to culture. Consequently, learners need to be prepared to comprehend a speaker's intended

meaning of an utterance under a specific situation accurately and get their intended meaning across appropriately.

A successful execution of speech acts presupposes sufficient linguistic resources of L2, and numerous studies of interlanguage speech acts well show a significant role played by linguistic proficiency in speech act performance. For instance, Trosborg (1987) studied the act of apologies by asking Danish learners of EFL and native speakers of English to engage in dyadic face-to-face conversations. Learners were found to differ from native speakers in the use of apology strategies due to a limited repertoire of linguistic forms in L2. In a study of the effect of explicit instruction on the learning of speech act rules, Han (1999) used a pretest questionnaire designed to elicit various acts including requests. The analysis of pretest data showed that most students made quite short, simple requests with few supportive moves and downgraders. This finding indicates that students did not seem to have sufficient linguistic knowledge which enables them to map their requestive goals into correct language forms. Similarly, Eisenstein & Bodman (1986) and Bodman & Eisenstein (1988) clearly demonstrated that grammatical knowledge and vocabulary played a key role in speech act performance because their subjects (learners of ESL) had a hard time expressing thanking.

In contrast to Trosborg (1987), Eisenstein & Bodman (1986), Bodman & Eisenstein (1988), and Han (1999), Takahashi & Beebe's (1987) study suggests that a high level of linguistic proficiency results in pragmatic errors. In their study of refusals, four different groups of subjects (i.e., Japanese native speakers, English native speakers, Japanese learners of ESL, and Japanese learners of EFL) performed their refusals in artificially contrived situations of discourse completion test. As compared to a Japanese native group, learners of both ESL and EFL in higher proficiency employed more L1 sociocultural rules in their refusals (e.g., formality in tone and philosophical statement) than those in lower proficiency. High proficient learners tended to transfer L1 Japanese pragmatic features into their refusals more often than low proficient learners because of superior linguistic knowledge. Even though much information is available on conditions under which L1 transfer occurs at the sentence level (for a full discussion, refer to Ellis, 1996), it is still unclear how linguistic proficiency triggers L1 transfer at the utterance level. However, it is quite certain that linguistic proficiency is one of the leading factors to influence L1 transfer in

speech act performance.

3. First Language Transfer

Research on second language acquisition has well demonstrated that L1 transfer is operative at the level of syntax, phonology, and semantics in sentences produced by learners. In addition, research on L2 speech acts provides plentiful evidence showing that speech act realizations are affected by L1 sociocultural norms. Such a phenomenon of using L1 sociocultural rules in L2 speech act performance is known as pragmatic transfer. Pragmatic transfer may lead to more serious errors than the sentence-level transfer since it can cause conversation breakdown. According to Kasper (1992), two different types of pragmatic transfer are at work in learners' utterances. One is pragmalinguistic transfer, and the other sociopragmatic transfer. The former has to do with using L1 linguistic forms in encoding an illocutionary force of a given speech act, while the latter results from employing L1 sociocultural norms in L2 speech act performance.

Considerable amount of evidence for pragmatic transfer is available in the literature. Cohen & Olshtain (1981) examined apologies by Hebrew learners of EFL and native speakers of English and reported the differences between the two in the use of semantic formulas because of the transfer of L1 specific language forms. House (1989) compared English marker *please* with its German equivalent *bitte* in the speech act of requests. The results suggest that German learners of English transferred their L1 requestive behaviors since, like native speakers of German, they used *please* more often than native speakers of English. Robinson's (1991) study provides a good example for sociopragmatic transfer. He was interested in determining mental, cognitive processes occurring during the production of refusals. During a study, one of his subjects (12 female Japanese learners of ESL) was shown to be hesitant to execute refusals since her parents taught her never to say 'no' in Japanese society. According to Robinson, "The memory of this lesson and the social responsibility it conveyed increased this subject's difficulty in making a refusal in a less familiar, American cultural context. Sociopragmatic transfer, then, prompted at least part of this subject's confusion over what to say" (p. 57). Another example for sociopragmatic transfer in L2 speech act realizations comes from Beebe,

Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990). In a study in which subjects (Japanese learners of EFL, native speakers of Japanese, and native speakers of English) made rejections to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions, learners provided indirect, unclear excuses, and produced statements of philosophy and principle in their refusals, which indicates the use of Japanese sociocultural norms.

4. Waffling

One of the findings that we encounter frequently in research on interlanguage speech acts is learners' talking- or speaking-much behavior unlike native speakers of a target language. Such a universal tendency of non-native speakers to make their speech act realizations lengthy is referred to as 'waffle phenomenon', which Edmondson & House (1991) defined as "excessive use of linguistic forms ...to achieve a specific pragmatic goal" (p. 273-274). As the definition indicates, waffling is most likely to occur when non-native speakers are not fluent, or confident enough to determine appropriate use of form and meaning in attaining their communicative goal. Here is an example for non-native speakers' verbosity.

> (asking a student in a nearby room of dormitory to turn down the music)
> Non-native speaker:
> "Hi, I'm sorry. Time is very late. Do you finish your mid-term exam? Well, I'll take a big exam tomorrow, but I didn't study yesterday. So I have to study now, but I can't concentrate on studying because of your radio. Could you turn down the music?"
>
> Native speaker of English:
> "I am studying and your music is distracting me, could you please turn it down?"
>
> (Suh, 1998, p. 202)

As shown above, non-native speakers' talk-too-much behavior can make them

appear pragmatically deficient and lead to pragmatic errors since verbosity can distract interlocutor's attention from a request and as a result, weaken a requestive force. A non-native speaker might hope that making a lengthy request would reduce some degree of imposition of a request and make them sound polite.

Many researchers reported non-native speakers' verbosity in their studies of speech acts such as requests, and complaints. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) found a significant difference between native and non-native speakers of Hebrew in length of request realizations. Non-native speakers used more supportive moves in their requests than did native speakers. Learners of ESL in Rintell & Mitchell's (1989) study made their requests lengthier than English native speakers by using more restatements and longer supportive moves. In the same vein, Olshtain & Weinbach (1993) looked into complaints as performed by learners of Hebrew and native speakers of Hebrew and provided evidence that learners tended to make their complaints much longer than native speakers.

Also Han (1999) reported that her subjects (learners of EFL) became verbose with the more frequent use of supportive moves and downgraders after six weeks of instruction on speech act rules of requests. She cogently showed how subjects made their requests lengthy by comparing request realizations from pretest data with those from posttest data as given below:

> (asking a classmate to lend a notebook)
> Pretest:
> "I missed the class yesterday. Please lend me your notes."
>
> Posttest:
> "Judith, I'm sorry, but can you please lend me your notes for me? You know, I couldn't come to the class yesterday, because my uncle went to a hospital. After a quick look-over, I'll get it back to you soon".
>
> (Han, 1999, p. 138)

5. Teaching Activities (Teaching-induced Errors)

Selinker (1972) in his influential paper introduced the notion of 'interlanguage' and put forward five principal mental processes (i.e., language transfer, overgeneralization, transfer of training, learning strategies, and communication strategies) involving in interlanguage development. Among those processes, transfer of training did not draw much attention from researchers due in part to the fact that around the early 1970s, studies of various grammatical functors (i.e., morpheme studies) consistently showed that there seemed to exist a natural order of acquisition which all learners would follow regardless of age, gender, L1 background, and whether they have been instructed in a classroom setting, or not. In spite of serious methodological problems in this type of research (for a full discussion, see Ellis, 1996; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), a natural order of acquisition hypothesis enjoyed popularity and received considerable support (e.g., Fathman, 1975; Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982).

Then, one important corollary from the natural order of acquisition hypothesis is that type of learning environment (i.e., either classroom setting, or naturalistic setting) may not affect the formation of interlanguage. However, such is not the case since abundant evidence is available for the influence of learning context on L2 learning. It has been reported that part of interlanguage is built upon teaching environment, and that syntactic, morphological, and lexical features of interlanguage can be traced back to teaching activities (Kasper, 1982). Teaching activities, or transfer of training can also be observed at the discoursal, pragmatic level.

Teaching methods, techniques, and materials used during instruction can not only facilitate interlanguage development, but interfere with it. In other words, teaching-induced errors can occur due to a wrong application of knowledge learned from teaching activities including instruction, and learners have been observed to produce such errors at the utterance as well as the sentence level. They can be deviated from the norms of language appropriateness just as teachers mislead them to use wrong forms or expressions in a certain context, or textbooks they use provide defective pragmatic information. Kasper & Schmidt (1996) provided an excellent example for this case, showing that Japanese learners of EFL used *should* more often than *must* even when the

latter was appropriate in context because of their teachers' insistence that *should* has more politeness than *must*.

The literature on teaching-induced aspects of interlanguage pragmatics has been underrepresented. Only a few studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Kasper, 1982; Loerscher & Schulze, 1988) deal with the effect of transfer of training on pragmatic, discoursal behaviors of L2 learners. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) examined requestive behaviors of native speakers of Hebrew and learners of Hebrew, and showed that learners referred to contextual information on items of discourse completion test and incorporated it into their request realizations. Such a tendency was explained by the fact that during classroom instruction teacher urged learners to make their sentence completed. In an effort to describe and analyze politeness behaviors of German learners of English in foreign language classroom, Loerscher & Schulze (1988) found that both teachers and students seldom used any explicit politeness expressions in their utterances. Researchers attributed such behavior patterns to the fact that teachers were unaware of a key role the notion of politeness assumes in everyday interaction, so they did not provide their students with a chance to practice politeness strategies in classroom interactions.

Kasper (1982) proposed that foreign language classroom should be dealt with as a critical factor in interlanguage development, and divided teaching induction into two types: primary and secondary teaching induction. Primary teaching induction occurs when students are given incorrect, deviant L2 norms from either teacher or teaching materials. Secondary teaching induction occurs when the ways in which students practice L2 rules lead to psycholinguistic processes that in turn produce inappropriate rule formation. Further, she showed how the two types of teaching induction influence non-native speakers' discoursal performance with data from face-to-face interactions between German learners of English and native speakers of English. According to the analysis of data, primary teaching induction was operative since learners selected inappropriate registers and did not use modal verbs in appropriate ways because of their textbook or course book. Also learners used rising intonation for declarative functions and tended to respond in a whole, complete sentence, which indicates the influence of secondary teaching induction, and can be traced back to classroom discourse norms.

III. TIPS FOR BETTER TEACHING PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF L2

For the actual realization of a given speech act, first, a speaker must determine to attain a specific communicative goal. Second, under a particular situation in which a speech act is performed, speaker needs to evaluate contextual variables (e.g., social status, familiarity, age, gender, and degree of imposition, among others) in relation to interlocutors. Third, speaker with the evaluation in mind maps his/her intended meaning into linguistic forms. As illustrated above, performing speech acts presupposes two different types of abilities: sociolinguistic ability and sociocultural ability (Cohen & Olshtain, 1994). Sociolinguistic ability indicates the ability of encoding linguistic forms for expressing a speaker's intended meaning while sociocultural ability means to know about appropriateness of performing a particular act in a specific situation, assess contextual factors involving interlocutors, and use politeness strategies and formality appropriately according to situations. Hence, given the two abilities needed for speech act performance, it is obvious that teachers of EFL should help their students to focus on developing both abilities harmoniously.

In other words, students need to have a sufficient repertoire of language forms and vocabulary, not to mention a wide range of strategies for a given speech act that fit into a variety of situation. As for ungrammatical use of language forms, it is desirable that students receive corrective feedback from teacher or peers in the way that they do not get hurt. Concerning the prevention of negative transfer of L1 sociocultural norms, one way is through providing students with circumstances which naturally encourage them to compare native speakers' realizations of a specific act with their own realizations in a particular context and to make them find out the differing cultural aspects of language use between L1 and L2. In doing so, students are likely to enlarge their insight into a target culture which contributes greatly to the overall development of sociocultural ability. Such circumstances can be created by inviting a native speaker of English into classrooms who presents an L2 culture-specific topic and discusses it with students, or by watching documents or movies containing cultural aspects of two languages.

Regarding waffling, as stated earlier, since it can make students pragmatically deficient and at the same time, reduce an illocutionary force of an act, students' talking-much behavior should be considered as inappropriate use of language

and corrected by promoting students' sensitivity to verbosity. Finally, in relation to teaching-induced errors, teachers themselves need to continue to increase their pragmatic knowledge and keep it updated by actively participating in in-service training courses and conferences, subscribing to journals and magazines, and visiting English-speaking countries if possible. This in turn would enable teachers to select textbooks which do not contain incorrect, in appropriate information on both sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of L2, and to develop their own teaching materials with up-to-date information on L2 learning and use.

IV. CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper was on examining language learners' sociolinguistic behaviors by looking through four main factors which assume a critical role in speech act performance. These four factors (i.e., linguistic proficiency, L1 transfer, waffling, and teaching activities) are also major sources of pragmatic errors commonly found in research on interlanguage speech acts. For a successful performance of acts, various suggestions were provided for assisting learners in increasing their pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms. In light of the fact that the ability to not only express meaning grammatically correctly, but get it across in socioculturally appropriate ways is central in language use, teachers of EFL need to make their students aware of the importance of developing pragmatic ability, and to provide classroom environments where they are encouraged to use the L2 under a variety of context for functional, communicative purposes.

REFERENCES

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1996). Pragmatics and language teaching: Bringing pragmatics and pedagogy together. *Pragmatics and Language Learning Monograph*

Series, 7, 21-39.

Bardovi-Harlig, K., Hartford, B., Mahan-Taylor, R., Morgan, M. & Reynolds, D. (1991). Developing pragmatic competence: closing the conversation. *ELT Journal, 45,* 4-15.

Beebe, L., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. Scarcella, E. Anderson & S. Krashen (Eds.), *Developing communicative competence in a second language* (pp. 55-73). Boston, Mass: Heinle & Heinle.

Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1986). Too many words: Length of utterance and pragmatic failure. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 8,* 165-180.

Bodman, J., & Eisenstein, M. (1988). May God increase your bounty: The expression of gratitude in English by native and non-native speakers. *Cross Currents, 15,* 1-21.

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching testing. *Applied Linguistics, 1,* 1-47.

Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. Richards & R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-27). New York: Longman.

Chen, S. Q. (1990). A study of communication strategies in interlanguage production by Chinese EFL learners. *Language Learning, 40,* 155-187.

Cohen, A., & Olshtain, E. (1981). Developing a measure of socio-cultural competence: The case study of apology. *Language Learning, 31,* 113-134.

Cohen, A., & Olshtain, E. (1994). Researching the production of second-language speech acts. In E. Tarone, S. Gass, & A. Cohen (Eds.), *Research methodology in second-language acquisition* (pp. 143-156). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dulay, H., Burt, M., & Krashen, S. (1982). *Language two.* New York. Oxford University Press.

Edmondson, W., & House, J. (1991). Do learners talk too much? the waffle phenomenon in interlanguage pragmatics. In R. Phillipson, E. Kellerman, L. Selinker, M. Sharwood Smith, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Foreign/second language pedagogy research: a commemorative volume for Claus Faerch* (pp. 273-287). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Eisenstein, M., & Bodman, J. (1986). 'I very appreciate': Expressions of gratitude by native and non-native speakers of American English. *Applied*

Linguistics, 7, 167-185.

Fathman, A. (1975). Language background, age and the order of acquisition of English structures. In M. Burt & H. Dulay (Eds.), *New directions in second language learning, teaching, and bilingual education* (pp. 33-43). Washington D.C.: TESOL.

Ellis, R. (1996). *Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford University Press.

Han, J. I. (1999). Teaching speech act rules of request. *English Teaching, 54*(4), 121-144.

House, J. (1989). Politeness in English and German: The function of please and bitte. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House & G. Kasper, (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 96-119). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Kasper, G. (1982). Teaching-induced aspects of interlanguage discourse. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 4,* 99-113.

Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research, 8,* 203-231.

Kasper, G., & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 18,* 149-169.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1976). An explanation for the morpheme acquisition order of second language learners. *Language Learning, 26,* 125-134.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Long, M. (1991). An introduction to second language acquisition research. New York. Longman.

Loerscher, W., & Schulze, R. (1988). On polite speaking and foreign language classroom discourse. *International Review of Applied Linguistics, 26,* 183-199.

Olshtain, E., & Weinbach, L. (1993). Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 108-122). New York: Oxford University Press.

Politzer, R. L., & McGroarty, M. (1983). A discrete point test of communicative competence. *International Review of Applied Linguistics, 21,* 180-190.

Rintell, E., & Mitchell, C. (1989). Studying requests and apologies: An inquiry into method. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 248-272). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Robinson, M. (1991). Introspective methodology in interlanguage pragmatics research. In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Pragmatics of Japanese as native and target*

language (Technical Report #3) (pp. 27-82). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii at Manoa, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics, 10,* 209-231.

Suh, J. S. (1998). Interlanguage requests by Korean learners of English as a second language. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Indiana University, Bloomington.

Takahashi, T., & Beebe, L. (1987). The development of pragmatic competence by Japanese learners of English. JALT Journal, 8, 131-155.

Trosborg, A. (1987). Apology strategies in native/nonnatives. *Journal of Pragmatics, 11,* 147-167.

Walters, J. (1980). Grammar, meaning and sociocultural appropriateness in second language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology, 34,* 337-345.

서재석
한국전통문화학교 교양학과
323-812 충남 부여군 규암면 합정리 430번지
Tel: (041) 830 - 7294
Email: jssuh@nuch.ac.kr

Revised version received in June, 2001