

The Pragmatic Factor Affecting Speech Intelligibility of EFL Iraqi Learners of English

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Abstract

Linguists and specialists in the field of linguistics do assume that the knowledge of language is the base for learners in order to use it in different communicative tasks. This ,however, is not proved true all the time due to the fact that some learners have a sufficient knowledge about language, but they fail their tasks in communication. Consequently and to achieve reasonable understanding, intelligibility represents a vital point of consideration for English foreign language methodologists. What is noticed in this respect is that the Iraqi advanced learners do seriously undergo the serious problem of misunderstanding the communicative situation when they are involved in certain a communicative task with the native speakers of English. Thus, the present study emerges under the shade of such a phenomenon . Accordingly, it enables the researcher to obtain an insight into the learners' abilities and points of weakness in the speech intelligibility with the native speakers of English, since that the intelligibility of oral language represents one of the ultimate goals of learning foreign language.

Moreover, Nilson (2011:63) sees that “the teaching of listening comprehension as a skill is still overlooked in English language teaching” processes. The reason behind the learners' problems of listening comprehension is attributed to the fact that “universities{that teach foreign languages} pay more attention to linguistic competence including the English Grammar, reading and vocabularies” ,having away, on the other hand ,the multiple-processes and aspects that lie within the realm of listening comprehension such as speech recognition and interpretation. In this view, it is presupposed that these multiple processes such as the pragmatic factor do impede speech intelligibility and the awareness of them shows better intelligibility.

1.1. Objectives

This study at the first level aims at identifying what the particular problems that face our Iraqi EFL learners in understanding the native speakers of English. The results would be hopefully used to evaluate not only the learners concerned but also the courses in our Educational institutions. The study, also, aims at checking the students' knowledge of English at different levels definitely pragmatic levels. Finally, the study checks not only the problems of language knowledge ,but also the problem of how listeners focus on only one task. In other words, learners of a foreign language devote much attention to one task ,such as word meaning, and leave the other tasks, such as the supra-segmental features and the pragmatic interpretations, in a time where listening comprehension entails integrating information from multiple resources.

1.2 The concept of Intelligibility

In fact, there is no agreed upon definition on the constraints of intelligibility as a linguistic term especially when it is attached to comprehensibility and interpretability. In the past, intelligibility was investigated through measuring the level of sound recognition as transmitted via certain technical media such as telephones and telegraph codes. Whereas in the present time, it has been given a greater importance and value to be involved within the domain of linguists to measure the amount of understanding among people from different cultural and lingual backgrounds.

It has been already noticed that speech intelligibility is not a single process of just uttering words and phrases in sentences, but also the insertion of particular extra-linguistic elements is the natural case for the native speakers of a language. One of these insertions is presented by non-verbal acts. In this perspective, the resultant integration of many extra-linguistic features would surely increase in an approximately complete intelligibility.

Intelligibility, then, is defined by linguists in several ways. Actually, the concept of intelligibility is apparent, but each one tries to approach it from a different panel. For Nelson (2011:1), intelligibility includes those features whether linguistic such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, and non-linguistic like the cultural issues and gestures. Christiansen (2008:1) states that since speech is an exchange of linguistic elements between two people, intelligibility is the number of the linguistic units, such as syllables and words being understood by the listener in an interaction. In other words, it indicates how much speech is conveyed successfully in a partnership. Zielinski (2006: 23), on the other hand, puts it in this way:

I view intelligibility as involving speaker and listeners, and use the term to describe the listener's ability identifying the speaker's intended words. Intelligibility is therefore defined as the extent to which the speech signal produced by the speaker can be identified by the listener as the word the speaker intend to produce.

In this sense, intelligibility refers to the amount of understanding language-English language in particular. Therefore, it is seen as a task imposed on both the speaker and the listener. On the part of the speaker, he/she attempts to be as much understood as possible by the hearer. At the same time, the listener tries to be as much involved as possible in the task of apprehending oral language. This is what makes intelligibility to be a speaker-listener oriented. In this connection, intelligibility has drawn the concern of many linguists and researchers as a term of a wide range to be discussed within the ultimate realm of linguistics and communication in general.

Nelson (2011:1), considerably, makes a further distinction in which he extends the question of standards of what form of a foreign language should be taught is also important and it usually forms difficulty encountered by language users. This is clearly administered by Crystal's global language. He (2003:66) defines the notion of varieties as including "standard, pidgin and Creole varieties of English".

1.2.1 Intelligibility, Comprehensibility and Interpretability

Intelligibility is sometimes approached through a comparison with certain crucial terms regarding speech processing stages. These terms are like comprehensibility

and interpretability, but each one has its own role in forming the shade of speech conveyance. For intelligibility, the reference, here, is to speech recognition as a segmental unit such as the word as well as the other elements of the sentence,(Kachru and Smith, 2003:61)

Comprehensibility refers to the recognition of meaning and in Kachru's(ibid) point of view, it "includes the hearer's crucial role in recognizing the speaker's intent". To check the comprehensibility of an utterance is to ask the listener to rephrase what is being said, or through asking him a question that requires information from what has been said.

Interpretability, on the other hand, indicates the recognition of the intent or the purpose of an utterance. It is a term in pragmatics which refers to the illocutionary force. Hence, the formula of speech encoding is completed by the existence of these three terms. Intelligibility, however, the cover term in language and linguistic discussions, because it shows the starting point of the ultimate understanding.

1.2.2 Intelligibility as a Communicative Value

Since intelligibility entails both the speaker and the listener in a context, it ,then , regarded the ultimate target for interlocutors to pertain a successful partnership. Gray and Wise (1959:16), cited by Grade (1969:45-46), show that if someone who gives no evidence of what is heard, the act of communication will not be completed. That is why we must have knowledge of what we heard and respond in the same way. It is ,therefore, evident that the partners usually seek for such feature for a successful interaction so that they would not appear passive or less competent. However, there are still some certain obstacles that hinder achieving this feature such as culture.

Principally, the intelligibility of language in its two forms-written and spoken- entails the knowledge of particular elements. Nelson (2011:29), conceptually, broadly tackles the problem of language variation. He thinks that variation in speech takes forms and realizations that might cause different sorts of problems. In other words, native speakers may say the same word in the same way repeatedly. But what is problematic, here, is the speakers from different dialects of English pronounce the same word differently. This is ,again, a very noticeable mismatch between what we hear and what we think that we ourselves produce so as to be intelligible to others,(Nelson ,Ibid). This ,actually, implies a great task imposed on the syllabus designers as well as teachers to make an accurate match between what is heard and what is said-input and output. In other words, the more there is a match between what is heard from the native speakers and what is being taught in the class,the much mutual intelligibility is captured in situation. That is why, intelligibility as a concept should take roles in foreign language teaching courses; and accordingly, much practice on listening with planned exercises should be concentrated.

1.3 Pragmatic Variables

This part of discussion is designated to deal variables that are imposed on an utterance in a context. Actually, there is a predetermined assumption about language as consisting of: a set of rules for which a set of expressions and a set of rules for deriving meaning. All these are sets to be conventional-limited and rather directive. This is, however, not enough as far as the mode of communication and people's role in modifying the utterance are concerned. Kachra and Smith (2003:19) comment on

this idea stating that "communication in general through language whether written or spoken-is a remarkably skilled social behaviour". This means that speech as an outcome from the speakers carries multi-directed meanings depending on different variations such as the context in which an utterance is said, as well as the attitude concerned by the speaker himself. More direct to the discussion, it is a common observation that what people say is sometimes completely different from what they intend to mean. For example, when someone says "it is hot in here", he doesn't intend to comment on the weather's state. He might be, however, requesting somebody to have the window opened (Kelly, Barr, Church and Lynch, 1999: 577).

Hatch (1992: 21) copes with this idea stating that "in order for communication to take place successfully, such messages have to be well interpreted". This is for Alagozlu and Buyukozturk (2009: 83) who state that an overall comprehension is imposed on the listener to relay not only the knowledge of words and syntax, but also the pragmatic concerns of the discourse. This attempt tried by the hearer either fails or succeeds due to many factors such as education, class and culture difference between the interlocutors. The inability to process certain bits of meaning is termed as cross-cultural pragmatic failure which assumes that the failure of transmitting meaning beyond an utterance is attributed to cultural background of both the speaker and the listener in a context.

1.2.1 Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure

In the view of the previous account, it is realized that the speech coming from the speaker is loaded with cultural characteristics to be coloring the message with directions of meaning. The fact that the same utterance can give two or more completely different meanings comprises an important question for language users in how to comprehend it: what type of key information for listeners to follow in order to arrive at the speakers intended meaning? There is, in fact, no proper answer to such a question. However, we can say that a message can be interpreted somehow successfully when it is aided by gesture movements.

On the other hand, and through a long observation, Alagozlu and Buyukozturk (2009: 83) come out with an opinion that "in teaching a foreigner a second language, it has been long observed that while pragmatic aspects of language remain untouched", a primary emphasis is laid on its syntax and word-restricted decontextualized meaning in the target language. Such negligence is attributed to the idea that the pragmatic principles cannot be taught, but it is rather a competence in the speaker's mind. It is consequently thought that a proper practice on certain pragmatic elements and actual instances will be a helpful guidance for learners to build on their pragmatic competence because the disregard of them would lead to a serious failure. Such failure sometimes prevents communication as a social task to take place. For Jenny Thomas cited by Jingwei (2013: 75), the pragmatic failure is "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said". This implies that the pragmatic failure does not refer to the general wording and phrasing errors but rather to the failure to reach the expected results because of speaking improperly, expressing ideas in an idiomatic way!

The categorization of pragmatic failure is conceptually common among linguists: some divide it into interlanguage pragmatic failure and interlingual pragmatic failure.

Others think that pragmatic failure involves the aspects of culture-loaded words which refer to the word's subjective evaluation among people with the same culture which is untouched by people from different cultures; the sentence aspect referring to the grammatical and lexical usage and the discourse level which is closely related to the cultures and constitutions of communicator's native language (Jie, 2010:43). In addition, the differences in norms, traditions, beliefs and life style will naturally affect the special use of metaphors and indirectness in speech. Most of these acts are not common or universal among all cultures: this what consequently causes a communicative failure under the concept of pragmatic failure. The present study aims at a practical discussion of all these pragmatic and cultural variable through a practical set of test on the Iraqi foreign learners of English in order to come across the abilities of our learners in understanding English.

1.3 The Subjects

The subjects of the study were (50) fourth-year students for the academic year (2013-2014) in the Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Basra. There is no any regard for the variable of gender- males or females. Those students seem to face several problems of understanding in their interaction with the native speakers of English. Such problems include their limited language abilities; also because of their unfamiliarity with the pragmatic aspects. Moreover, the unbalanced practical level between the students' linguistic competence and their communicative competence can be the cause for such phenomena. In other words, those students used to use English in such a theoretical way to take part in lectures and to attend the exams. However, they fail task to use English in certain purposeful context with reference to the oral contact they make with the native speakers of English.

1.4 Data Collection

For carrying out a test conducted on the fourth-year student of the College of Education for Human Sciences 2013-2014, which follows listening comprehension procedures, the researcher has made a wide search of his data. Throughout his study-check and investigation, the researcher has traced his material in the head-way (Liz and Soars, 2003). The whole test consisted of two selected exercises including ten items in the aforementioned book. Together with a group of other related tests, this test has been exposed to a jury consisting of six professors who are specialists in the field of the study, (see appendix 2). The study also obtained a special content validity on the fourth stage students in the College of Arts.

1.5. The material

The material used for an oral test of listening comprehension, the following materials have been used for satisfying the study objectives:

- 1- A cassette player (computer).
- 2- Four loud speakers.
- 3- Sheets of paper.

1.6. Testing Pragmatics

1.6.1. Objectives

Pragmatics is the material of this study differentiator about the students' difficulties in their contact with the English native speakers. It is planned throughout this

exercise to examine the extent to which cross-cultural awareness can cause a serious hindrance in the understanding of a message which is linguistically accurate and comprehensible, but intentionally misleading and unintelligible.

1.6.2. Description of Procedures

The exercise consists of ten items. Each item is a pair of conversation between two people. Students are given a sheet of paper with options. They have to pick up the correct answer after they listen to the speakers' talk. They are, additionally, given the opportunity to have a look over the options so as to make them have hints about the conversation topic and situation. In this perspective, students are going to make a bound concentration on the required information asked by the given questions.

1.7. Presenting the Results

The approach followed in presenting the results of the test depends on the scoring system adopted in the study through the correct and incorrect answers obtained from each particular exercise. In other words, the scoring method followed in this study completely relies on its objectives. The researcher, in turn, has taken the opinions of a number of people who are concerned with the field of statistical analysis of the test. The results gained from this consultation have been directed to adopt the ratio of percentage as the only possible way considered in measuring the existence, and the ratio of difficulties-problems. This system is based on the following formula:

$$\text{Formula: } \frac{CA}{TN} \times 100, \frac{IA}{TN} \times 100$$

CA = Correct Attempts

TN = Total Number

IA = Incorrect Attempts

1.7.1. Results of the Test

The items of this part of the test are divided into five upwards –the correct attempts- and five downwards-the incorrect attempts. Each of the two groups is measured through the ratio of percentage for a complete grasp of the level. This is all explained in the following table:

Table (1) shows the results of pragmatics presented by the testees.

Field (Tested Item)	Items number	Correct Attempts	Ratio in Percentage	Incorrect Attempts	Ratio in Percentage
Pragmatics	10	14	28%	36	72%

The preceding table has shown the students' responses to the exercise selected by the researcher which is devoted to measure the pragmatic awareness. The items selected are (10); the correct attempts are (14) out of (50). This degree scores 28% in percentage as a level. On the other hand, the incorrect attempts score (36); which is rated as 72% in percentage.

1.8. Discussion of the Results

In the light of the results arrived at, it is noticed that the domineering fact is the passive degree of the students' contribution to the test of pragmatics. The reason behind such a passive scoring seems to be quite vivid. When students are asked to interpret the meaning of the speakers' utterances, they directed their full focus and attention on the immediate literal meaning of the utterances and neglected the

pragmatic and the contextual clues to arrive at the meaning being conveyed. They, in other words, they engaged themselves with what the speakers say- words and structures; they; however, forgot about what the speakers could intend through their utterances. This is because of the poor knowledge about the target language culture as well as the disability to concentrate on the literal and social meaning at the same time.

1.9. Conclusions

1- The EFL Iraqi learners face serious problems of intelligibility on the level of pragmatics.

2- In the light of the preceding conclusion, the EFL Iraqi learners are seen bad processors of oral language. This, actually, correlates with the prescribed objective in this study, i.e. students pay attention to one particular aspect such as words meaning and neglect the supra-segmental and the pragmatic elements as absent from their competent comprehension.

1.10. Recommendations

1- The courses taught in Iraqi Educational institutions should be rectified with special practical reference to the supra-segmental features and pragmatic principles.

2- Special practice procedures should be adopted in which the learners are constantly exposed to the oral language by the native speakers with different dialects, vocabulary use and situation saviours.

Appedicy (1) the test sheet

Listen to the following pairs of conversation and identify the second speaker's attitude.

1-a-Pete. I crashed your car.Sorry.

b.Great. That's all I needed.Thank you very much.

a. He forgives him b.He is angry at him c.He blames him d.He is humorous about him

2-a-When you come on Saturday,we're going to have an ice-cream.

b-How exciting! I can't wait.

a-He accepts the invitation b.He refuses the invitation c. He is eager to have the ice-cream. d. He gives reason for his refusal

3-a- you know that guy Parkinson the millionaire?Apparently he's sent to prison for tax evasion.

b-Well ain't that a shame! My heart bleeds for him.

a.He feels sorry for him. b. He is pleased with his arrest. d. He wants to help him. d. He is indifferent about him.

4- a-I have finally understood how this machine works.

b- you're so clever,you are.I don't know how you kept it secret fo so long

a-He is surprised with his cleverness. B.He blames him c. He is humorous with him. d. He is asking him.

5-a- Mum Tommy's broken the vase!

b- Accedents will happen.

a.She is angry at Tommy b.She blames Tommy c.She excuese Tomy. d.She shows no attitude.

6-a- I just need to go back in the house and make sure I 've turned off the iron.

b-Better safe than sorry.

a. He accepts her idea d.He refuses her idea c.He thinks her exaggerating d.He has no idea

7-a- It's been raining non-stop for weeks!Do we need some sunshine?

b-You can say that again.

a.She accepts his question b.She doesn't understand his question c.She refuses his question. D. She is surprised with his questio.

8-a- Work's awful at the moment,and I have to go away on business this weekend.

b-Oh!Well. A change is as good as rest.

a.She feels sorry for him. d.She supports him c.She is surprised with him. d.She is indifferent about him.

9-a- I got a card from Jerry a week after my birthday!

b-Better late than never.

a. She blames jerry b.She forgives Jerry. c. She is neutral about Jerry. d. She is satisfying the speaker.

10-a-Took me ten years to build up my business.Nearly killed me.

b- Well.You know they often say No pain,no gain.

a. She belittles him b. She supports him c. She jokes with him. d She is indifferent about him.

Appendicy (2) Represents the Jury of the Study

Name

Field

Dr. Ala' H. Oda

College of Education, Dept. of English

Dr. Balqis Q. Rashid

College of Education, Dept. of English

Dr. Intisar Adnan

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Dr. Adi Thamir

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