

How to Teach Request in Chinese Classroom

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ABSTRACT: *Request teaching has been a hot topic in interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition. Learning pragmatics is an important task for language learners to be a competent second language speaker. And pragmatic competence is as important as linguistic competence for a foreign language learner, it's important for teacher to enhance the students' awareness of speech.*

KEYWORDS: *Pragmatics; Language competence; Pragmatics competence*

1. Introduction

Language competence is divided into two areas consisting of “organizational competence” and “pragmatics competence” and learners need to be taught pragmatics. (Bachmen, 1990). Learning pragmatics is an important task for language learners to be a competent second language speaker

The definition of request is “illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is benefit of the speaker (Trosborg, 1995). It's often considered as one of the most face-threatening acts (FTA). As a face-threatening act, request is considered to be a hard task for second language learners to perform it in an appropriate way. Inappropriate request may make the requesting becomes offensive and impolite, the reasons maybe the culture differences, the first language transfer and so on. It's very important for language learners to learn how to request appropriately, and teacher should pay high attention to it.

Request teaching has been a hot topic in interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition; there are some experts have conducted many researches or papers which related to request teaching (Esther, 2001; Brady et al, 1994; Achiba, 2003; Elizabeth & Basturkmen, 2004; Cordina, 2008 etc.). The previous studies or papers showed that textbooks are inadequate for teaching speech acts and it's important to raise the learners' awareness, using more activities, choose the right teaching methods (inductive or deductive) and so on. There are some novel teaching materials or methods to improve the speech act teaching, for example, in Elizabeth

& Basturkmen (2004), they use 17 audio recordings of native speaker to teach the students how to make request appropriate and the feedback seems well. Learners prefer materials rather interesting (verbal, visual etc.) than the typed words in text book.

The aims of this paper are to illustrate some details of request teaching and investigate some feasible methods to teaching request. In this paper, I selected materials from an English textbook in junior school in mainland china; all the materials are aimed to teach how to make requests. I will describe and critique these materials specifically and show the improvements of it.

2. Materials

The materials I selected are all from the same unit, while in different sections. They are the learning materials in grade 2 in junior school in mainland china.

In the materials, the requesting expressions are most displayed by conversations, for example, “would you mind turning down the music? No, not at all”; “could you help me with my homework? Sure”. The conversations are happened in different situations and targets, but it’s really very simple, because the social relationship of a junior student is also very simple, what’s more, the situations are very familiar for junior students. For example, the request objects are parents, friends and sales; the situations are happen in school, store and home. The requesting expressions in these materials are very simple, the most frequently one is would you mind..., and it also included could you..., but not so frequently. Both of them are very polite and indirect. There’s another expression in these materials: you have to..., while this seems impolite, but it was happened in the conversation between son and mother, so it’s acceptable, too.

In this unit setting, the language goals are make requests; it’s the key point of this unit, so the unit is designed based on how to make a request. The texts are all conversations, because it’s easier for junior students to understand and acquire the target knowledge. There are four tasks in this unit according to how to make a request: match, listening, fill blank and make conversations. They are all focused on the request expressions; each of them is simple or limited. Two of the tasks are pick the right answers according to the pictures; it’s something like guess what the picture really describes, but not to choose the right expressions, because all the requesting expressions have been given or actually the same. But the task of pair work is good, students are require to make conversations by using “would you” “could you” and “have to” (the only three expressions in this unit), actually it’s role play, students can make conversations very flexible and acquire the three expressions quickly.

3. Critique materials

Generally speaking, the materials are suitable for grade 2 junior students. The author of this textbook chose three most common requesting expressions (would you, could you and you have to), it's the most familiar and frequent expressions for requesting. And they are appeared many times, no matter in textbook or listening transcripts, it can be useful for students to recognize and acquire it. The three expressions are very polite and indirect, except "you have to", but it only appear in the conversations between mother and son, and this one was said by the mother, the one who have more power, so it's acceptable. But if teachers are teaching this expression, teacher should explain it more specific; she/he could tell students this expression can suit for different social/ power status or really good friends, it's depends on the people you request to, this is very important for teaching for second language pragmatics.

The situations of these materials are very close to students' daily life, these situations almost happened to everyone, so it's easier for students to acquire the related knowledge. Because the situations are so familiar to students, the students can be activated and teachers could explain without so much difficulties, the students can image they are in that real situations, it's easier to acquire the request strategies.

The role play (make conversations) is really a good task to examine the students' output of the speech act acquire. With the three given requesting expressions, students can make various conversations. In the process of make conversations, it's the best way to know whether the students are really grasping the three requesting expressions or not.

While, there are also some weakness in these materials. At first, these materials don't raise the students' awareness of request enough. In the text, there's no significant difference between any request expressions, the reply seems the same with each other, and all requestees in the conversations are reply readily. If only focused on the text, students would feel that there's no difference between these three expressions or any request strategies, if they need to request something, they can use any of them, but actually, there are some differences between them.

Second, there are some inaccurate and inadequate pragmatically models in these materials, the materials are too limited. For example, "would you mind ...?" is a request expression which is highly indirect and politeness, but in the beginning of this unit, almost every request was expressed by this phrase, although the request target is friends or neighbors. (Social status is equal). And in the role play task, the orders are actually happens in the same participant relationship. These will be a disadvantage when teacher express the differences between the differences of some request expressions. And the useful models are too limited, only three. The materials' writer can provide some more common or significant models in the text, while all the situations are only focused on the situation of request the other people to do something, but not included the request for myself. For example, can I...,

could I..., May Ietc, they are all commons, and need to used frequent, but the materials ignore this important part.

4. Suggestion and Improvement

As discussed above, the most obvious weakness of these materials is that the dialogue didn't reveal the differences of these request expressions and it's too limited for only three request expressions. It's better to add some more request expressions and provide the different responses in dialogue to illustrate the differences of these expressions. For example, A: would you mind to help me to clean the window? B: of course; A: You have to help me to clean the floor now. B: do yourself, I have no time etc. In the process of teaching these dialogues, learners would have a sense of which expressions suits which group people, it will be understandable for them to make appropriate requests. Social status and social distance is two important variables in teach speech act. And I designed three more activities for request teaching: watch several segments of a film, role play, DCT (discourse complete task).

According to Kasper & Rose (2001), one of the reasons why teacher need to teach pragmatics is to raise learners' awareness. It's necessary to raise students' pragmatic awareness in teaching politeness routines. (Sohn, 2001). The aim of raise learner's awareness is to expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2) and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use (Zohreh, 2005).

I think the best way to raise learners' awareness of request is to let the students observe the speech act in a various given settings or materials (inductive approach). But the materials in this textbook are too simple to raise the students' awareness of request act, except for teacher presentations, but I don't think it's a good way to raise the awareness; it could be boring for learners. It's better to provide some new materials when teaching this speech act and watch a film can be a good way to raise learner's awareness. According to Kenneth (1997), the aim of watch a film is not to teach explicitly the various means of making a request, but rather to expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of the target language and provide them with analytic tools to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use. The native film or cartoon could be a good materials, it's interesting and the data is authentic to some extent, it's the dialogue happened in reality, it's common for native speakers to use this to make a request, and the response of the requestee is more authentic than the text, it's helpful when learners organize their own language use. It's better to watch a simpler film's several segments and then give the transcript to ask them pick out the request and request response to compare what's the differences of each request strategies. (The script is in appendix 1)

Role-play (deductive approach) is also need in teaching this speech act (request), there is only one role-play, the context is too easy and orders are too limited. So I'd like to develop another role play section by myself. The aims of this role play are to make students know how to make request in an appropriate way and examine the

students' pragmatic level. It should include various partisanships, for example, student to teacher, classmate to classmate, daughter to mother etc. Try to make the situations is different, interesting and close to students' life. (The detail of the role play task is in Appendix 2).

The last one activity I want to add is a DCT task (deductive approach). Byon (2006) showed that DCT can raise student awareness in aspects of many ways, and pragmatic competence is a vital point in any foreign language learning. The DCT can be a good method for rise students' awareness, and the activity can be view as homework, teach could inspect how much students acquired this pragmatic knowledge. I want to use the DCT form designed by Boyn (2006), because this DCT form is close to students' daily life, and there are many targets of it, the social distance or status is different in each question. What's more, the results of his research showed that most participants rise their awareness of pragmatics according to this DCT, so this one can be available and suitable. (The DCT form is in Appendix 3)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, pragmatic competence is as important as linguistic competence for a foreign language learner, it's important for teacher to enhance the students' awareness of speech. As a face threatening act, request should be indirect and polite, it's important for learners understand how to make appropriate request. And one aim of teach pragmatics is to rise learners' awareness, there are many activities can be used to rise learners' awareness (Conversation analysis, film, DCT etc.). In request teaching according these materials, I think the most useful activities are watching a film, role play and completing a DCT form

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