The necessity of teaching functions in the foreign language class

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Abstract
The ultimate goal of the teaching-learning process in teaching foreign languages is to acquire that linguistic component, which involves not only the grammatical competence, the cultural competence, but also the communicative competence. Pragmatics is that part of grammar which studies the way language is used, namely the stylistic or rhetoric competence. The paper insists on the necessity of developing functions within the framework of the foreign language class, that is the communicative competence – the kind of accuracy and fluency that a native speaker has in conversation.

Keywords: pragmatic, illocutionary, perlocutionary, locutionary, speech acts

Rezumat
Scopul final al procesului de predare-învățare în predarea limbilor străine este de a achiziționa acea componentă lingvistică care implică numai competența gramaticală, competența culturală, ci și competența comunicativă. Pragmatica este acea parte a gramaticii care se ocupă de modul în care este folosită limba, adică de competența stilistică sau retorică. Lucrarea subliniază necesitatea dezvoltării funcțiilor în cadrul orelor de limbi străine, adică competența comunicativă – acuratețea și fluența pe care un vorbitor nativ le are în conversație.

Cuvinte cheie: pragmatic, ilocuționar, perlocuționar, locuționar, acte de vorbire

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Introduction
The structure of words and (morphology) and sentences (syntax) have long been the focus of attention for linguists, who have also paid attention to their function, considering that people make use of different lexical-grammatical structures not only to build up messages for exchanging information, but also to serve more specific purposes: to make a request, to ask for help, to apologise, to encourage, to persuade, to promise, etc.

In his paper How to do things with words, linguist J. Austin launches as early as 1962 the idea that any communicative act involves an utterance or speech act (1). He sketches a distinction among speech act types, between locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts – broadly, the distinction between saying anything at all, saying something with a specific force (e. g., making a statement, asking a question, making a request) and the further effects of saying something with a specific force (e. g., getting an audience to believe something, getting them to tell you something, or getting them to do what you request). Hence a whole theory of speech acts evolved, which was resumed by John R. Searle (1969) and further exploited by K. Bach and R.M. Harnisch (1979) and later by Leech (1983).

Another important aspect of language has been highlighted by discourse analysts: linguistic choices for the purpose of conveying alternative meanings, a different view of how the world is organized, of social ideologies or cultural beliefs (2). Fairclough states that language is loaded with social, political and cultural beliefs since people use language to convey meanings for a certain purpose in a certain social context, placing themselves at the same time in the social organization according to their ideologies and power: “The conventions for speech acts which form part of a discourse type embody ideological representations of subjects and their social relationships.” (3).

Other researchers in the field of discourse analysis share this view of language mirroring social order and beliefs and go even further. Susan Strauss and Parastou Feiz sustein that the way people talk and write point to the way people think, the way they understand and
organize the world around them. Considering that language reflects a mere fragment of what lies below, they point to the connection between language and society as a whole. In their view "an utterance is not an utterance on its own; its meaning derives from a systematic, contextually situated whole"(4).

Since language is loaded with social and cultural beliefs, in what follows we will briefly present the scheme of speech acts, as it appears in K. Bach and R. M. Harnisch (5) and then we will try to highlight several of its implications for the process of teaching-learning foreign languages.

The scheme of speech acts
Speech acts are a central part of pragmatics, which is concerned with the meanings which participants in a discourse ascribe to the elements of a text on the basis of their interpretations of context.

In characterizing part of a text as a speech act, one is characterizing what the producer is doing by virtue of producing it – making a statement, making a promise, threatening, warning, asking a question, giving an order, and so on.

The scheme of speech acts is structured into three basic acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act, which must be seen as a unitary whole, since breaking them up leads to interrupting the act of communication.

The locutionary act is the simple act of uttering a word or a sentence. It starts with the use of an interjection ('tut-tut', 'chop-chop', 'bow-wow'), of an imperative form (Go there!/Come here) up to an entire sentence (It's raining./It's cold in here./The wind is picking up). The receiver's linguistic competence is brought in starting with this level.

For somebody who does not know the language, the locutionary act is only a phonetic act, a sequencing of incomprehensible vowels and consonants. Using the foreign language to an extent that is larger than normal with beginners produces fatigue, lack of attention, triggered by not understanding the meanings of words and phrases and finally results in the interruption of communication.

Here comes the skillful ability of the teacher who manages to make the student listen to and grasp the message conveyed in the foreign language. It pertains to the listening activities in which the teacher develops one of the four basic language skills in the acquisition of a foreign language: speaking, reading, listening and writing. The exercises used for practising the listening ability, which finally leads to comprehension, are various: minimal pairs, pronouncing words uttered at a quick pace, correlating words with images; other procedures are related to the patterns of stress and intonation employed in affirmative, interrogative and negative sentences, to mimicry and gestures, which play an extremely important role in communication.

The corresponding carrying out of the locutionary act as a first act of communication will determine the correct understanding of the form of the sentence (affirmative, interrogative, negative), of the topic of the sentence, of the action performed by it, as well as of those parts of the sentence which refer to the place and time in which the action takes place (6). Hence, the audio-visual means have to be used in such a way as to make the students avoid linking a certain image to a particular collocation. It is also important for the students to acquire the ability of asking questions and giving commands as the ability of answering questions and carrying out orders is not enough. Most students who are able to give correct answers have difficulty formulating questions and giving orders.

Any locutionary act, that is the simple act of communication, is closely related to the illocutionary act, the one that gives a certain intention to the utterance produced. Thus the command Open the window, please! can be given using a tone of request (implying doing a favour) or the tone of a proper order (implying annoyance or rebuke if the order is not carried out). The illocutionary act is characterized by a certain force (called the illocutionary force), which represents the speaker's capability of asking, of promising, of giving orders. The illocutionary act establishes as an unwritten law the spiritual and
intellectual relationship between the teacher and the student. We have noticed that the illocutionary force of the verbs to ask, to command, to beg is stronger if the verbs are used or implied in the Romanian language rather than in the English language, especially in the early stages of learning English. Moreover, the command Quiet! will be executed more quickly than the command Silence, please!, although they have the same linguistic connotation, while the command Shut up! will produce hilarity, being associated with particular humorous scenes from the movies viewed by the students. This can be accounted for by the failure of the linguistic connotation of the word in the mother tongue to be transferred to the target language.

If a simple utterance carrying intention manages to have an impact on the listener’s feelings, thoughts or actions, then the perlocutionary act is achieved. This presupposes the locutionary act and the illocutionary act, adding the force of the impact on the receiver.

The regular use in class of phrases, such as That’s correct!, Very well, Well done, All right, meant to encourage (illocutionary acts), acquires perlocutionary force if they achieve the expected goals and the students respond and manifest an increased interest in the foreign language.

On the other hand, a question such as What do you want? instead of What can I do for you? in a dialogue between a Romanian and an Englishman, even if it is not intended to offend (the illocutionary act losing its force), becomes nevertheless a perlocutionary act if the person to whom the question has been addressed feels offended by it. This depends on the culture knowledge of the foreign language used in the conversation.

Communicative competence
Many problems that may arise in the oral communication are the result of a lack of communicative competence or of a lack of the culture knowledge related to the culture of the target language. Speakers do not know how to start a conversation in a natural way. Sometimes they are too formal, at other times they are too informal, or even rude. The more fluent they are in the foreign language, the less they are likely to be forgiven for not choosing the appropriate language register. Take the following example in which a Romanian speaks on the phone with an Englishman:

Mike: Hello, I’d like to speak to Dan, please.
Dan: I’m Dan. Who are you? or Dan: You are not busy, Mr. Smith, I hope.
Mr. Smith: Yes, I’m very busy. I have a lot of work to do.

In the first dialogue, Dan answers the phone using the Romanian conversational routine, which sounds offensive to a native speaker; in the second exchange, the native speaker is unable to understand the illocutionary force of the Romanian speaker, his wish of being helped by him while Dan feels helpless on hearing the native speaker’s words, thinking that he does not want to assist him.

Intonation and stress can also change the meaning of what is said. Intonation is also closely related to politeness, and therefore to appropriacy. In normal speech outside the classroom, people will overlook grammatical inaccuracy and hesitancy, but if they feel that someone is being impolite, they are not so forgiving.

When two people meet in Romania, it is customary for them to ask all sorts of questions as to the state of their health, their income or the value of other goods they possess on the basis of a close relationship existing between them. Native speakers consider these topics to be private and may feel offended if they are asked such questions. The communicative competence does not mean just using the right lexical-grammatical patterns, it also means having the knowledge on the culture of the countries where the foreign language is spoken.

Focus on the cultural differences between countries in the foreign language class
Teachers should devote a part of each lesson to discussing the cultural differences between countries. This culture discussion can be based
on reading a culture passage and on several questions drawing attention to these differences. For instance, every culture has different rules about asking questions. In some countries, it is bad to stop the teacher during class. It means that the teacher did not explain something very well. In English-speaking countries (and in English classes), it is good – and important – to stop the teacher or another student. It means you are interested and are paying attention. In an English class, it is the student’s job to find if he/she does not understand. In your country, is it OK to ask the teacher questions? How do you feel about asking questions in English?

The culture discussion could focus attention on issues having different meanings across cultures: gestures in different countries/rules and laws/popular ways of staying healthy and keeping fit/What products does your country sell around the world?/What kind of descriptions have good and bad meanings in your culture?/Do you introduce yourself in order to meet new people in your country?/What jobs/tasks around the house do you think are the most unpopular in your country?/Customs about time differ greatly around the world/What do young people in your country like to spend money on?/What kinds of things do parents and young people disagree about in different countries?/Headlines in English language newspapers can be difficult to understand. What is difficult to understand in newspapers in your language?/The things people do in your country to help the environment and so on.

People from different societies and cultures mean and do different things by what they say. They have different ideas about politeness. So, as foreign language learners, our students need to know how to:

• get their messages across;
• get things done;
• be polite;
• avoid judging other people according to their own set of values, beliefs and traditions;
• deal with the unexpected.

In order to avoid unwanted responses from a native speaker, caused not by offensive intentions, but by a certain degree of linguistic conversational incompetence, it is absolutely necessary that teachers should build up automatic expressions to be used in polite conversations in the target language.

Given the restricted context of learning a foreign language, the perlocutionary act gets loaded with an immense value as it can become the verbal support of motivation for learning. The mimicry showing annoyance, the poor marks given in haste in most cases take the students away from studying seriously, making them indifferent to the goal of learning a foreign a language, that of attaining the communicative competence at the highest level. On the contrary, expressions such as ‘Very well’, ‘Well done’, ‘You’ve made a lot of progress lately’ stimulate the students’ interest in acquiring the target language. Much emphasis is put on the importance of a positive emotional environment in the foreign language class since positive emotional involvement leads to effective learning.

**Concentrating on functions**

Within the main skills there are a large number of functions. This is a term which describes the language one needs to communicate and express oneself in different situations, which often overlap and reinforce one another. Concentrating on functions gives a chance to deal with the difficult matter of appropriacy. It is important that students should acquire as many words and phrases as possible. Equally important is that they should master the grammatical structures specific to the foreign language they study. But most important of all is that they should choose the vocabulary and adopt the grammatical structures that are most suitable for the different real-life situations.

The following is a list of some functions which determine the way students need to form or react to language when speaking, understanding, reading or writing: greeting and introducing yourself; asking for and giving information; giving and understanding instructions; giving and understanding messages; making and replying to requests, offers and suggestions; agreeing and disagreeing; persuading; refusing; asking for
and giving directions; inviting; thanking; congratulating; describing, comparing and contrasting people and things; describing processes; expressing surprise; expressing doubt and certainty; making appointments; making enquiries; expressing sympathy; reassuring; encouraging; apologising; complaining; criticising.

All the following ways used for inviting someone out are correct, and all might be said fluently. The important thing is to choose the appropriate one for the person you are talking to:

‘Do you fancy going out for dinner on Saturday?’ / ‘Could I invite you to dinner on Saturday?’ / ‘I was wondering if you might be free for dinner on Saturday?’

Here is an exercise recommended by Michael Swan and Catherine Walter for teaching this kind of point (7):

Match the questions and answers. You can find more than one answer to each question.

QUESTIONS
1. Sorry to trouble you, but could you lend me some bread?
2. Could you lend me a dictionary?
3. Could you show me some black sweaters, please?
4. Excuse me. Have you got a light, please?
5. Could you possibly lend me your car for half an hour?
6. Could I borrow your keys for a moment?
7. Could I borrow your umbrella, please?
8. Have you got a cigarette?

ANSWERS
a. I think so ... Yes, here you are.
b. I’m sorry. I need it/them.
c. Sorry, I don’t smoke.
d. I’m afraid I haven’t got one.
e. I’m sorry, I’m afraid I can’t.
f. I’m afraid I haven’t got any.
g. Yes, of course. Just a minute.

Look at the questions again; find two very polite questions and two very casual questions. If, from the outset, the teacher decides the particular kinds of practice his students need, he can then blend them with his teaching of structure, idiom, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Conclusion

Only when the three aspects of the speech acts are covered in the teaching-learning process of a foreign language, can one consider that the act of communication has been fully achieved and that the proper acquisition of the communicative competence has started.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that the act of speech acquires specific values when it is applied to the acquisition of a foreign language. While the locutionary act and the illocutionary act have a greater instructive value, the perlocutionary act has a formative one. Blending together these two sides of the educational process results in obtaining the communicative competence (the grammatical, cultural and communicative abilities brought together), which is the goal of the didactic activity. The goal in the acquisition of a foreign language is gapping the bridge between two such different civilisations and cultures. Foreign language teacher success can be measured most obviously by how much their students learn and how well they manage to interact in real-life situations. The aim is to help learners become independent of teachers, so that learners can use what they learn and continue to learn on their own.

References