TEACHING THE LANGUAGE OF APOLOGIES IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Viorica CEBOTAROS, *PhD,*
Faculty of Philology,
Alecu Russo Balti State University

Abstract: *Successful communication in a foreign language requires not only good linguistic knowledge. An important area is being able to use the foreign language appropriately, taking into consideration the norms of speaking characteristic of the foreign language culture. The article discusses the role of pragmatic instruction in TEFL, with a focus on apologies – a speech act that contributes to maintaining social relationships. After revealing some peculiarities of apologies in the Anglo culture, it offers some activities that contribute to raising learners' pragmatic awareness regarding the functioning of this speech act in English.*

Keywords: *apology, cultural norms, pragmatic competence, speech act.*

1. *The role of pragmatic competence in foreign language learning/ teaching*

The central goal of language pedagogy is the development of students' communicative competence. The current situation shows that although a great number of EFL learners possess the necessary linguistic knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) to express themselves in the foreign language, communication with native speakers of English may often fail. It happens because different communities vary in their production and interpretation of linguistic behavior. Breakdowns may occur in the interactions between native speakers (NSs) and learners with different levels of language proficiency, including advanced language learners. Such cases show that the EFL learners' linguistic competence seems to be insufficient for successful interaction with NSs. This leads to the idea that there is another important aspect of learning/teaching a foreign language which is just as important as the linguistic competence. This aspect, a component of communicative competence, is referred to as pragmatic competence and has been defined as the ability to convey and understand communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and language functions [2]. In other words, it represents the ability to use language appropriately in a variety of contexts. Thus, in addition to linguistic competence in the foreign language, learners need to acquire "the rules of appropriateness or, in other words, learning to "use" the language in an acceptable manner" [9, p. 53]. Since culture shapes the way a language is used, teaching a foreign language should involve discussions of cultural behavior. The task puts a tremendous burden on the teacher, who should interpret cultural behavior for which there are no explicit rules.

One aspect which was the focus of research into pragmatics and language teaching and which is troublesome to language teachers is speech acts. "Learners show significant differences from native speakers in the execution of certain speech acts and in conversational functions such as greetings and leave takings" [1, p. 21]. The difficulty arises from the issues teachers have to tackle when dealing with a certain speech act. The linguistic form is one of the easiest elements to deal with. However, teaching a speech act involves much more than just its linguistic form. It should also highlight the cultural peculiarities of this speech act: the contexts to which it is appropriate, the way context variables (the relations between speakers, the setting, the presence of third parties, etc.) influence its linguistic expression, its frequency of occurrence in a certain culture, as well as the appropriate responses to it. Since all these aspects may differ from culture to culture, EFL teachers should pay particular attention to them. Ignoring them in the EFL class may result in learners' being prone to failures in intercultural communication despite their advanced linguistic competence. Pragmatic failure can be of two types: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic. Cenoz and Valencia (1996) point out that

> In the case of pragmalinguistic failure the learner uses linguistic elements which do not correspond to native forms and can produce breakdowns in communication or socially inappropriate utterances. At the sociopragmatic and cultural level, the learner produces an inappropriate utterance because he/she is not aware of the social and cultural rules affecting speech act realization in a particular language [3, p. 51].

As pointed out by Bardovi-Harlig (1996), a learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show concomitant pragmatic competence [1, p. 31]. The term pragmatic competence is used

to refer to second or foreign language learners' ability to produce contextually appropriate communicative acts or to comprehend them. In regard to speech acts, pragmatic competence is understood to involve two types of knowledge: pragmalinguistic knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the linguistic resources required for performing particular speech acts, for example, the use of ability questions 'Can you/could you' or the bi-clausal structure 'I wonder if' for realizing requests, and sociopragmatic knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the sociocultural conventions governing language use [12].

In order to be pragmatically competent, foreign language learners need to know how to say what they want to say with the level of formality, politeness, and directness required in a situation, or sometimes not to speak at all and communicate intention only non-verbally. Learners' linguistic choice is influenced by context variables, such as speakers' relationship, role, setting, topics, and assumptions about what speakers already know or do not know, and perceived impact of their language on the listener [11].

Foreign language learners show significant differences from native speakers in language use, in particular regarding the comprehension and production of certain speech acts, such as greetings, leave takings, invitations, requests. The speech act of apology is not an exception. It may be considered more difficult than the other speech acts, especially due to the differences in the situations that require the production of an apology in different cultures.

2. Expressing apologies in English

The act of apology is called for when there is some behavior that violates social norms. The semantic criteria that need to be met by the apology act are an expression of regret and an acknowledgement of responsibility on the part of the offender. Although these criteria hold true across cultures, cultures may allocate the need to apologize and the degree of apology differently in different situations. As Coulmas points out, "even if a social situation under consideration is of universal nature, this should not lead to the premature conclusion that, in these cases, functionally fully equivalent formulae can be found" [4, p. 245]. Thus, in one culture coming late to a meeting might be considered a much graver offense than in another and therefore the type of apology used in each culture might be quite different.

Olshtain and Cohen proposed the notion of „speech act set". A speech act set consists of all the major linguistic and/or pragmatic strategies, any one of which would suffice as a minimal element to represent the particular speech act [8]. The speech act of apology, for example, can be performed in a number of ways: by using the relevant performative verb (e.g., "I hereby apologize"), by using the direct act (e.g. "I am sorry"), or by using an indirect one (e.g. "I didn't mean it"). The speech act set encompasses the maximal potential set of strategies available to the speaker for each speech act.

The apology speech act set (according to its development in Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) consists of five strategies:

1. An expression of an apology, whereby the speaker uses a word, expression or sentence which contains a relevant performative verb such as "apologize", "forgive", "excuse", "be sorry". While all languages can be expected to have a number of such performative verbs, some of these verbs will have a more conventionalized use than the others. An expression of an apology can be intensified whenever the apologizer feels the need to do so. Such intensification is usually brought about by adding suitable intensifiers (e.g. I'm really sorry, I'm really very sorry). The type of intensification chosen by a speaker is language and situation specific.

2. Acknowledgement of responsibility, whereby the offender recognizes his or her fault in causing the infraction. The intensity of such recognition on the part of the apologizer can be placed on a scale. The highest level of intensity is an acceptance of the blame: "It's my fault", or an expression of self-deficiency: "I was confused" / "I didn't see" / "You are right". A lower level of intensity in accepting responsibility is the expression of lack of intent: "I didn't mean to." Finally, the apologizer may not accept the blame at all, in which case we get a denial of responsibility, "It wasn't my fault".

3. An explanation or account of the situation which indirectly caused the apologizer to commit the offense and which is used by the speaker as an indirect speech act of apologizing. (The bus was late). The criteria for choosing the particular utterance is therefore semantic rather than formal. Given the context of the offense, the statement is intended to "set things right".

4. An offer of repair (I will buy you a cup of coffee), whereby the apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage which resulted from his or her infraction. This strategy is situation specific and is only appropriate when actual damage has occurred.
5. A promise of forbearance, whereby the apologizer commits himself or herself to not having the offense happen again (It won't happen again).

All of these strategies may function as an apology, but usually different strategies are combined, especially when the offense is more severe or one's responsibility for the act is undeniable. The first two strategies can be used in any situation. The final three are situation-specific.

The five major semantic formulas which make up the apology speech act set are available to speakers across languages, yet the preference for any one of these or for a combination of them will be culture-dependent and situation-dependent. Nonnative speech act behavior may sometimes contain utterances that are linguistically correct but that do not function appropriately in communication.

Languages tend to conventionalize the use of some specific or performative verbs. Thus in English, for instance, the verb "apologize" (I apologize for having done A) is used in more formal situations while "I'm sorry" is very frequent across situations. Certain lexical or grammatical forms become conventionalized within the colloquial use of the language and these are then chosen by most native speakers as the most frequent and acceptable forms [9].

When comparing apologies across cultures, Olshtain and Cohen found that "in cultures with a positive-politeness orientation, speakers tend to apologize less than in those with a negative-politeness orientation" [9, p. 60]. As a result, in such cultures fewer situations may actually call for an apology. For example, if you are late to a meeting in a positive-oriented culture, you might say something like, "You know me. I'm never on time", and this would be considered as an apology. In a negative-oriented culture, you might say something more like, "I'm sorry I caused you so much inconvenience," because you would respect the hearer's need for an apology more. As a result, speakers coming from more positive-face-oriented cultures may sound rude in more negative-face-oriented ones if they choose the indirect explanation rather than the expressed apology.

3. *Teaching the speech act of apology in EFL classrooms*

Holger Limberg (2015) has proposed a set of methodological principles for teaching apologies in the EFL classroom. These principles set the foundations for tasks that facilitate learners' acquisition of pragmatic competence [7]. A prerequisite for teachers is a basic understanding of the speech act, including its realization strategies, functions and some target culture specifics. There are several websites teachers can use to find information and materials on different speech acts.

Activities for developing pragmatic competence can be classified into two main types: activities aimed at raising students' pragmatic awareness, and activities offering opportunities for communicative practice [5]. Awareness raising activities are activities designed to develop recognition of how language forms are used appropriately in context. It is useful to present, share and discuss examples from cross-cultural (mis)communications [10]. Here is an example, taken from Larina (2010), which I use to raise my students' awareness regarding the functioning of the speech act of apology in the Anglo culture:

'Are you getting off?' – Communicative failures in the underground

During my first visit to London I had no idea that the conventional question which every Muscovite asks and hears repeatedly within a day could be inappropriate in the London tube. The passenger to whom I addressed this question ignored it, but when I repeated the question he turned around and looked at me with such surprise on his face, that I realized I might have done something terrible. As I could not find any explanation to this puzzling reaction I decided to ask the owner of B&B, where I was staying, who was an extremely friendly and helpful English gentleman, to give me an answer. But when I addressed him with the question 'David, could you please explain to me why the gentleman in the tube whom I asked whether he was getting off looked rather puzzled and perplexed', he looked at me with the face which expressed even greater perplexity. Then without being able to conceal his astonishment he asked 'Tatiana, but why should you know that?' It was my turn to get surprised.

The conventional Russian question turned out to sound too personal in the English context. Asking such a question I unintentionally intruded into the personal space of the

passenger who was standing in front of me, as if I had asked him something like 'Excuse me. Where are you going?' or 'Why are you going there?' or 'What are you carrying in your bag?' [6].

Students are invited to reflect on what was wrong in this interaction and what is appropriate to say in such cases in their own culture and in the Anglo culture.

Another way of introducing a speech act and encouraging students to think about how it functions is to examine that function in their own language and culture. When teaching the speech act of apology, I ask students the following questions:

- When was the last time you apologized?
- Why was it necessary to apologize?
- Whom did you apologize to?
- What exactly did you say when you apologized?

At this stage they speak about apologizing in their mother tongue. We discuss aspects related to both sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. The first three questions refer to sociopragmatics (reasons for apologizing, what is considered an offense, the seriousness of the offense, information about the recipient of the apology). The fourth question refers to pragmalinguistics. We look at the language that has been used in that particular situation. Students say what linguistic constructions they used to apologize. After listening to the full text of the apology, students are invited to identify what else was said except the direct expression of apology. Thus, inductively, they derive the strategies that form the apology speech act set (explanations, accepting responsibility, offers of repair, promises to refrain from similar things in future). My next question is why they did not use just an expression of apology and why they considered it necessary to add other things. The aim of this question is to lead students to the idea that in order to restore the harmony between the interlocutors it is often insufficient to use an expression of apology on its own. In most cases, the expression of apology is accompanied by other strategies (explanation, accepting responsibility, offer of repair, promise not to do it again). We also have a discussion on whether these additional strategies can be used in all the cases. By analyzing contextual factors (type of offense, the setting of the interaction, the relationship between interlocutors) students come to the conclusion that some strategies (expression of apology, accepting responsibility) can be used in all situations, while others (explanation, offer of repair, promise of forbearance) are situation-specific.

In the next stage learners acquire an understanding of forms and functions of apologies in English. An initial exploration of English norms and functional varieties of apology expressions can be gained through listening to audio recordings, watching short videos or reading and discussing English dialogues than contain apologies. If audio-recorded scenarios are used, students can be asked to identify the apology type, explain why it was uttered, and how the offended person reacted towards the apology. With video recording, in addition to the above mentioned aspects, it is possible to analyze the non-verbal aspects (face expression, eye-contact, body language) and how they contribute to the success of the apology. When working with written dialogues, it helps if every dialogue is followed by questions which draw the students' attention to the language used to restore the equilibrium between the participants. Students may be asked to identify the strategy as well as the modification devices used. To show how the context influences the choice of apology strategies, the contextual factors of the apology scenarios can be manipulated (e.g. apologizing for being 30 minutes late rather than 5 minutes/ apologizing to a professor rather than to a friend), students having to decide whether a change of the context would lead to a change in the linguistic expression of the apology. A good resource in this respect is Allie Patricia Wall's book "Say it naturally. Verbal strategies for authentic communication". Here is a dialogue taken from this book:

In Ms. Lowery's office at the accounting firm:

Ms. Wilson: I apologize, Ms. Lowery, but I'm running a little behind schedule. May I bring you the contract tomorrow instead of today?

Ms. Lowery: That's fine. I won't need it until late tomorrow afternoon anyway. But please make sure I have time to review it before my 4 o'clock meeting tomorrow.

What do you think:

1. If Ms. Lowery were angry at Ms. Wilson, she might have replied differently. Give at least two examples of how she might have responded if she hadn't accepted the apology and the excuse.

2. If Ms. Wilson had wanted to reassure Ms. Lowery that her tardiness was not going to be a habit, what could she have added to her apology? [13, p. 166]

The following BBC youtube video can be useful (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= qR34I4S9qUA). As dialogues are discussed, learners explore the variability with regards to syntactic forms, realization strategies, modification devices and response types to apologies.

Having discussed the pragmalinguistic aspect of apologies (the strategies used to apologize), we turn to the sociopragmatic aspect, which is highly important, especially in intercultural communication. Breaches of social behavior differ in different cultures. What is considered an offence is culture-specific. While keeping somebody waiting for five minutes may be regarded as a serious offence in cultures in which time is a value, it may not require an apology in other cultures. Students need to be aware of typical situations requiring apologies, existing cultural differences in speakers' perceptions regarding values such as time or space and how these differences affect peoples' apologetic behaviour. Such a discussion helps learners become aware of the risk of miscommunication in intercultural interactions.

The awareness raising stage is followed by the production stage, in which learners practice the interactive structure of apology situations (the perception of the offence, sometimes followed by a complaint, then an apology which can consist of several turns, and finally a response, again possible realized through several turns). This can be done through role plays.

4. Conclusion

In order to communicate appropriately in English, students should develop pragmatic competence alongside other language skills. Developing students' pragmatic competence is very important, since cultural differences can lead to negative pragmatic transfer, resulting in inappropriate behavior and speech. By giving students the knowledge and tools they need to develop their pragmatic competence, we can help them to communicate more effectively and confidently in English.

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