Socio-Psychological Determinants of ESL Pragmatic Competence in Nigeria

O. Fakeye David
Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract: The inability of Nigerian secondary school students' inability to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate (Pragmatic competence) has affected their overall communicative competence. It is therefore not surprising that misunderstandings and misinterpretations often characterize speakers' intention in utterances. Scholars have identified socio-psychological factors as major determinants of language proficiency which subsumes pragmatic competence. Hence, this ex-post facto research examined the socio-psychological determinants of pragmatic competence among 2,400 senior secondary school students in South-Western Nigeria. Three research questions were raised while pertinent data for the study were generated with the use of pragmatic competence test and questionnaire on socio-psychological determinants of students' pragmatic competence. The data generated ere analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The results revealed that: Socio-psychological factors to a large extent determine students' pragmatic competence; students home background, interest and verbal ability are the specific socio-psychological determinants of students. Pragmatic competence and they are effective predictors of students pragmatic competence. Based on predictors of student pragmatic competence. Based on these findings, it is recommended that English Language teachers should move beyond linguistic processing of meaning to pragmatic meaning in language teaching and learning, ad that authentic language samples must be used by English language teachers to provide practice for students in expressing themselves pragmatically, not just linguistically. English language teachers must also adopt teaching and learning strategies that will maximize pragmatic competence of the earners given the variations in their interest, verbal ability and home background.

Keys words: Socio-psychological determinants, pragmatic competence, verbal ability, interest, home background, linguistic competence

INTRODUCTION

English Language has become an indispensable tool through which Anglo-phone African countries engage ineffective and active communication with other people of the world and this has made the mastery of English language both in the spoken and written forms imperative (Oyejola, 2007). However, the quality and standard of the use of English among different segments of the Nigerian society leave much to be desired. For example, most Nigerian speakers of English often find it difficult to make correct interpretation of an utterance to reflect the intended meaning of the interlocutors. The result is that users of English language in Nigeria could not comprehend linguistic information beyond the vocabulary and syntax of the utterance (Fakeye, 2007). It is therefore, not surprising that misunderstandings and misinterpretations often characterize the native and non-native speakers' intention in utterances.

Scholars (Bouton, 1988, 1992; Rever, 2001; Taguchi, 2003) have identified non-conscious teaching of pragmatics at secondary schools as the cause of the problem. Thus, right from secondary schools, students are not consciously taught pragmatic processing skills as distinct from linguistic comprehension skills.

But the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) over the years to a large extent, excluded the study of linguistic acts ad the contexts in which they are performed (Cook and Liddicaot, 2002). This has accounted for the inability of Nigerian students' use of English language to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate and this has adversely affected the overall communicative competence of Nigerian second language learners of English.

In the views of Leinonen et al. (2003), meaning processing in English language learning and teaching should not be limited to linguistic information such as vocabulary and syntax; rather it must be extended to include contextual information such as the role and status of the interlocutor. The former is referred to as linguistic meaning while the latter is termed pragmatic meaning.

Pragmatic ability is the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983). The scope of pragmatics,

from the foregoing, is seen to cover context-dependent aspects of language structure and principles of language usage as it relates to socio-cultural and contextual meaning of utterances.

The importance of the pragmatic dimension in language ability and its role in inter-language development became a subject of empirical research only recently. This is because pragmatic rules for language use are often subconscious and even native speakers are often unaware of pragmatic rules until they are broken (Fakeye, 2007). He summarizes the justification for teaching pragmatics in second language classroom as follows:

- Learners show significant differences from native speakers in language use, the comprehension of certain speech acts, conversational function and conversational management.
- The consequences of pragmatic differences, unlike the case of grammatical errors, are often interpreted on a social or personal level rather than as a result of language learning process.
- In their contact with English language in and out of classroom, majority of learners apparently do not acquire the pragmatics of the target language on their own.

The teaching of pragmatics in second language classroom in Nigeria has not been given much attention. And as Kasper (1999) and Rost (2002) surmise, pragmatic competence refers t the comprehension of oral language in terms of pragmatic meaning. Pragmatic competence can be characterized as comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Thomas, 1995). Speech Acts', has to do with the speaker trying to do something or trying to get the hearer to do something while in conversational implicatures, the speaker expresses attitudes and feelings using-indirect utterances that must be inferred by the hearer (Rever, 2001). Therefore, the comprehension of pragmatic meaning can be differentiated from linguistic comprehension in view of the fact that it requires the listener to understand not only linguistic information, such as vocabulary and syntax, but also contextual information such as the role and status of interlocutor, the physical setting of the conversation and the types of commutative acts that would likely occur in that context (Rost, 2002).

With the absence of this vital aspect of communicative competence, secondary school students pragmatic competence has been left to chance and it is to a large extent determined by socio-psychological variables surrounding the students. Researchers have identified some of the factors that generally affect the level of comprehension of spoken ad written texts in English language as verbal ability (Ajayi, 2004; Komolafe, 2006), Interest (Oyejola, 2007; Adebiyi, 2006) Attitudes (Komolafe, 2006) Parental education (Maduabuchi, 2006), Home background (Komolafe, 2006) among others. It is, therefore, pertinent to examine how these socio-psychological variables influence senior secondary school students' pragmatic competence in Nigeria.

The problem: Most Nigerian secondary school students exhibit gross deficiency in pragmatic ability to interpret utterances correctly to reflect intended meaning of the speakers. Scholars have attributed this ugly phenomenon to certain socio-psychological factors on the part of the students. Hence, this study examines what socio-psychological factors determine pragmatic competence of senior secondary school students in south Western Nigeria.

Research questions: The study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- To what extent is pragmatic competence of Nigerian Senior Secondary School students determined by socio-psychological factors.
- What specific socio-psychological factors determine Nigerian.
- Which socio-psychological factors will predict students' pragmatic competence?

Scope of the study: A total of 24 senior secondary schools randomly selected from all the six states constituting the South West geopolitical zone of Nigeria were involved in the study with four schools randomly selected from each state.

Significance of the study: The findings of this study will be significant in many respects viz: the study is a radical shift from the traditional concern of language teaching and learning for vocabulary and syntactic interpretation of meaning to the concern for pragmatic comprehension of utterances. Also the study will sensitize the English language teachers and students to the need to differentiate pragmatic competence from linguistic competence as two important abilities for achieving overall communicative competence. And finally, the quality and standard of use of English among Nigerian secondary school students will ultimately improve with the findings of this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design: The study is an ex-post facto research. This is because the researcher had no control over the independent variables which are the socio-psychological factors affecting pragmatic competence. Hence, no variable was manipulated.

Population and sampling: The target populations of this study are the senior secondary school students. Specifically, a total of 24 secondary schools were randomly selected from the six states constituting the South West geo-political zone of Nigeria (with four schools from each state) 50 senior secondary school III students were randomly selected from each school making a total of 1,200 students who participated in the study.

Instruments: Two main instruments were used in the study namely, Pragmatic Competence Achievement Test and Questionnaire on Socio-Psychological Determinants of Pragmatic Competence (QSPDOPC), Pragmatic Comprehension Achievement Test (PCAT) was a 50-item Multiple Choice Test based mainly on speech acts and conversational implicatures in recorded tape. The QSPDOPC contained 25-items that elicited responses on socio-psychological factor affecting Pragmatic Competence.

Validity and reliability of the instrument: The PCAT was constructed with the inputs from experts in language testing and it was trial-tested using test-retest reliability yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.84.

The Questionnaire on Socio-Psychological Determinants of Pragmatic Comprehension (QSPDOPC) was a 25-item questionnaire based on modified Likert-scale. It elicited responses from students on Socio-Psychological determinants of pragmatics comprehension. A Crombach Alpha reliability test was used for the questionnaire and a value of 0.76 was obtained.

Procedure: The study covered a period of 6 weeks. The six weeks was used to conduct pragmatic listening comprehension test across the 6 states in the South West geo-political zone of Nigeria. In the test, 5 spoken dialogue extracts were tape-recorded and played for students listening. Three of the dialogues were conversations between a teacher and a student. One dialogue was a conversation between 2 students while the last dialogue was a conversation between a trader and a buyer in a shop. After listening to the tape-recorded dialogue, students responded to the 50-item multiple-

choice test. After the test, the QSPDOPC questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and collected on the spot. Only 1176 questionnaires were recovered.

Data analysis: The responses of the students to the questionnaire were calibrated with a view to determining those factors with high frequency. In addition, the performance of students in pragmatic competence test was correlated with their questionnaire responses with a view to determining which factors account for students' pragmatic competence.

RESULTS

Demographic data analysis: Table 1 shows that 1,176 students participated in the study across 6 states in Nigeria-15.3% were from Ekiti State, 16.7% were from Osun State, 17% were from Oyo, also Ondo, Ogun and Lagos had 17% students each.

Majority of the students were from monogamous families (52.7%), while 36.6% were raised in polygamous families. One hundred and five percent of the students failed to disclose the type of family they were from.

Table 2 shows that majority of the students have fathers that attended tertiary institution (46.6%), 15.6% of the fathers attended secondary school, 15.5% of them had father that attended primary Education while 10.6% had father that had no formal education while 12.2% of them did not disclose the educational level of their father.

Table 1: Distribution of students According to State and type of home

Variable	F	(%)
State where student reside		
Ekiti	180	15.3
Osun	196	16.7
Oyo	200	17.0
Ondo	200	17.0
Ogun	200	17.0
Lagos	200	17.0
Total	1176	100.0
Type of home		
Monogamy	620	52.7
Polygamy	432	36.6
No response	124	10.5
Total	1176	100.0
Total	1176	100.0

Table 2: Distribution of students Base on Father and Mothers' Educational Background

Educational levels			F	(%)
No formal Education	120	10.2	224	19.0
Primary Education	184	15.6	180	13.6
Secondary Education	180	15.6	160	13.6
Tertiary Education	548	46.6	488	41.5
No Response	144	12.2	144	12.2
Total	1176	100.0	1176	100.0

Table 3: Summary of multiple regression analysis (Composite Effect)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	Sig. (P)	Remarks
Socio-Psycho-factors	0.338	0.114	0.110	30.124	0.000	Significant

Dependent Variable: Pragmatic Scores

Table 4: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis (Relative Effects)

| Variable | Unstandardized coefficient | | Standardized | | | |
	β	Std. Error	Beta (F)	t	Sig. (P)	Remarks
Contact	2.347	0.864		2.717	0.007	
Parents' Education	0.105	0.061	0.052	1.710	0.087	
Home Background	0.337	0.077	0.140	4.348	0.000	
Students' Interest	0.163	0.043	0.117	3.753	0.000	
Students' Attitude	-0.233	0.021	-0.369	-11.280	0.000	
Verbal Ability	0.512	0.088	0.162	5.790	0.000	

Dependent Variable: Pragmatic Scores

Large proportion of the students have mothers that attended tertiary education (41.5%) 13.6% had mother that attended secondary 13.6% attended primary and 19% had mothers that had no formal education.

Research question 1: To what extent is pragmatic competence of SSS students determined by Socio-Psychological factors?

Table 3 shows that the coefficient of determination is 0.110 (Adjusted R^2) which gives the proportion of variance to be (Adjusted $R^2 \times 100$) = 11.0%. This proportion of variance is the composite effect. The 11% implies that 11% of the total variance (change) in the pragmatic competence of students is accounted for by the socio-psychological factors examined in the study. The table also shows that the effect is significant (F = 30.124, p<0.05).

Research question 2: What specific socio-Psychological factors affect pragmatic competence of SSS students?

Table 4 shows that parents educational background contributed insignificantly to the students pragmatic competence (β = 0.052, t = 1.710; p>.05). But home background contribute significantly (β = 0.140, t = 4.348; p<0.05), students interest also contributed significantly (β = 0.369, t = 11.280; p<0.05) and verbal ability (β = 0.162, t = 5.790; p<0.05) also contributed significantly each to the pragmatic competency of the students.

Research question 3: Which of the Socio-Psychological factors would predict the students' Pragmatic Competence

As shown by Table 2, the socio-psychological factors that contributed significantly to the student's pragmatic competence are home background, Students' interest and verbal ability of the students; while parental educational background contributed insignificantly.

Therefore, the socio-psychological factors that could predict the pragmatic competence of the students are those that contributed significantly to the pragmatic competence-Home background, students' interest, students' attitude and verbal ability.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal that students' pragmatic competence is to a large extent determined by Socio-Psychological factors. This finding accords perfectly with the submissions of Garcia (2004), Cook and Liddicaot (2002) and Koike (1996) that Socio-Psychological factors determine to a large extent students performance in language tasks.

The results further show that home background, Interest and Verbal ability are specific Socio-Psychological factors that affect pragmatic competence of Senior Secondary School students these findings substantiate the important contributions of these socio-psychological factors to Senior Secondary School students pragmatic competence. These findings corroborate those of Rost (2002), Taguchi (2003) and Thomas (1995) in which verbal ability, interest and home background were identified as vital variables that affect language learning. While explaining the role of verbal ability in language leaning, Cook and Liddicoat (2002) explains that as language learners acquire greater proficiency, the ability to process contextual knowledge simultaneously with linguistic knowledge becomes automatized. Hence, comprehension of pragmatic meaning represents a different set of skills to a greater degree for low verbal ability group due to their lowest level of language proficiency.

Finally, the results of this study further show that of all the socio-psychological factors, home background, students' interest and verbal ability would predict students pragmatic competence because they are those factors that contributed significantly to their pragmatic competence in this study. This accords perfectly with the findings of Adebiyi (2006), Fakeye (2007) and Ojetola

(2007) who found in separate studies that interest, verbal ability and home background are noticeable students' personal variables that affect their performance in language learning tasks.

- Pragmatic competence of Nigerian secondary school students has not be sufficiently investigated considering its importance in the overall communicative competence of English language learners. This study, therefore, is a giant stride in that direction as it examined the specific Socio-Psychological factors that determine Nigerian students' pragmatic competence.
- The implications of this study are numerous Language teachers in Nigeria should use authentic language samples to provide practice for the students with low native speakers express themselves pragmatically, not just linguistically. They should also adopt effective teaching and learning strategies that would maximize students' pragmatic competence perspective of their home background, verbal ability and interest. Finally, language teaching and learning should go beyond linguistic processing to meaning to include pragmatic meaning.

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