Pragmatic Factors Faced by Iraqi EFL English Learners in Impeding (Intelligibility) Speech Comprehension

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ABSTRACT:

It is widely believed by linguists and experts in the field of linguistics that having a solid understanding of language is essential for learners to effectively use it in various communicative situations. However, this is not always the case, as some learners may have a good grasp of language but struggle to communicate effectively. As a result, the concept of intelligibility is crucial for English foreign language educators to consider.

In particular, Iraqi advanced learners encounter difficulties in understanding communicative situations when interacting with native English speakers. This study aims to address this phenomenon by providing insights into the learners' strengths and weaknesses in speech intelligibility with native English speakers. The ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate effectively, and oral intelligibility plays a significant role in achieving this goal.

The study seeks to shed light on the challenges faced by Iraqi advanced learners when communicating with native English speakers, and it aims to provide valuable insights into their abilities and areas for improvement. By examining the factors that contribute to oral intelligibility, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities involved in foreign language learning and communication.

key words: (intelligibility, impeding, pragmatic factors, EFL, communicative value).

العوامل اللغوية التي يواجهها متعلموا اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق وتعيق فهم الكلام (الفهم اللفظي)

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الملخص:

من المعتقد على نطاق واسع من قبل علماء اللغة والخبراء في مجال اللغويات أن فهم اللغة بشكل جيد أمر أساسي للمتعلمين لاستخدامها بفعالية في مختلف الحالات الاتصالية. ومع ذلك، ليس دائمًا الحال، حيث قد يكون لدى بعض المتعلمين فهماً جيداً للغة ولكنهم يواجهون صعوبة في التواصل بشكل فعال. ونتيجة لذلك، يعد مفهوم الفهم اللفظي أمراً حاسماً يجب على مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية النظر فيه.

على وجه الخصوص، يواجه المتعلمون المتقدمون العراقيون صعوبات في فهم الحالات الاتصالية عند التفاعل مع الناطقين الأصليين باللغة الإنجليزية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى معالجة هذه الظاهرة من خلال تقديم رؤى حول نقاط قوة وضعف المتعلمين في الفهم اللفظي مع الناطقين الأصليين باللغة الإنجليزية. الهدف النهائي من تعلم لغة أجنبية هو القدرة على التواصل بشكل فعال، ويلعب الفهم اللفظي دوراً هاماً في تحقيق هذا الهدف.

يسعى البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على التحديات التي يواجهها المتعلمون المتقدمون العراقيون عند التواصل مع الناطقين الأصليين باللغة الإنجليزية، ويهدف إلى تقديم رؤى قيمة حول قدراتهم والمجالات التي يمكن تحسينها. من خلال دراسة العوامل التي تسهم في الفهم اللفظي، يهدف البحث إلى المساهمة في فهم أفضل للتعقيدات المتورطة في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية والتواصل.

الكلمات المفتاحية : (مصطلحات رئيسية: الفهم اللفظي، العرقلة، العوامل البراغماتية، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، القيمة الاتصالية).

1- Introduction

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 represent 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, Nelson (2011, p: 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 pragmatics factor do impede speech intelligibility and the awareness of them shows better intelligibility.

1-2 The Problem of the Study

Based on the references provided, it is evident that advanced Iraqi learners of English may encounter significant challenges in understanding and navigating communicative situations when interacting with native English speakers. This may be attributed to difficulties in comprehending pragmatic aspects, such as indirectness in discourse, speech act realization patterns, and conversation styles, which are crucial for effective communication. These challenges may lead to misunderstandings and hinder successful interaction in English-speaking contexts.

Therefore, much research on pragmatic variation has focused on differences in speech acts across cultures (Tannen 1981: Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, Holtgraves: 1997) and learners' understanding and performance of L2 speech acts (Kasper & Rose, 2003). Within languages, variability over time has also received a little attention (Sweetser, 1995, Traugott & Dasher, 2002). However, with the exception of gender (Tannen, 1994; Holmes, 1995), there has been little focus on intralinguistic variation involving macro-social variables (Barron, 2005, Clyne, 2006). The researcher offers a review of research impinging on linguistic pragmatics, for example, the pragmatics skills of disabled populations. The researcher reports on his own preliminary research of variability in the understanding and production of literal vs. implied meaning in native English speakers. The researcher proposes that there is a greater range of pragmatic variation than can be explained in the light of social macro-variables alone. Therefore; this research deals with twofold aspect in learning English as second or a foreign language.

1- It is about the analysis of impeding in the speech act comprehension faced the students known as "interference errors".

2- The effects of the contexts in the understanding of the meaning are the result of direct transfer or literal translation from **L1** (first language) or mother tongue language.

1- 3 The Aims of the Study

1. 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 hopefully use to evaluate not only the learners concerned but also the courses in our Educational Institutions.

2. The study, also, aims at checking the student's knowledge of English at different levels definitely pragmatic levels.

3. 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 interpretation, in a time where listening comprehension entails integrating information from multiple resources.

1- 4 The Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that:

1. Iraqi EFL University learners face difficulties in understanding English context due to various pragmatic factors. The first factor includes the difficulties which are inherent in the nature of the English system at the levels of phonology, morphology and syntax. The second factor relates to the processes of interference (or transfer), and literal translation.

2. A significant number of Iraqi EFL learners at the university level make mistake especially in interpretation of speaking and writing in the second language.

3. The students face more difficulties in listening and writing at the simple and advanced level when trying to encounter English speakers and context.

1-5   The Limits of the study

The study will abide to the following limitations:

1. University learners at their different years in the Department of English, College of Education, University of Wasit during the academic year 2020-2021.

2. Identify, classify and analyze impeding of speech comprehension made by those learners.

1-6   The Significance of the Study

This research presents and comments on the importance of the speech comprehension in the acquisition of English as a second language. Thus, it concentrates on some of the important factor that shows the part that pragmatic plays role an important in the process of learning a foreign language. It is hoped that this study will be of value in the following aspects:

1. Identifying the main source of pragmatic impeding.

2. Finding ways to limit these impeding.
3. Facilitate the specialist in the field of curriculum to set up a system that can limit these factors.

1-7   The Procedures of the Study

To achieve the aims of the study, the following procedures are going to be adopted:

1. Presenting a theoretical background concerning pragmatics.
2. Selecting a sample of Iraqi EFL university learners as subjects for administrating a test.
3. Carrying out a statistical study of the testees' responses to locate the troublesome spots, and decide their difficulty rate.
4. Analyzing and classifying the errors committed by Iraqi EFL university learners.
5. Evaluating the existing course.
6. Analyzing the students' errors (interlingual and intralingual).
7. Conducting a post- test for both experimental and control groups.
8. Results, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions will be put forward.

2- The Concept of intelligibility

In fact, there is no agreed upon definition on the constrains of intelligibility as a linguist term specially 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 telegraphic 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-linguistics elements is the natural case for the native speakers of language. One of these insertions is presented by non- verbal acts. In this perspective, the resultant integration of many extra-linguistic features which 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, p: 1), intelligibility include those features whether linguistic such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, and non- linguistic like the cultural issues and gestures. Christiansen (2008, p:1) states that 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 (2000, p: 23), on the other hand, puts it in this way:

> I view intelligibility as involving speakers and listeners, and use the term to describe the listener's ability identifying the speaker's intended words. Intelligibility is therefore defined as the extents 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 tires 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 researcher as a term of a wide range to be discussed within the ultimate realm of linguistics and communication.

Nelson (2011, P: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 administrated by Crystal's global language. He (2003, p: 33) defines the notion of varieties as including "standard, pidgin and Creole varieties of English".

3-1- 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, the reference, here, is to speech recognition as a segmental unit such as the world as well as the other elements of the sentence, (Kachru and Smith, 2003, p: 61).

Comprehensibility refers to the recognition of meaning and in Karchru'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 discussion because it show the starting point of the ultimate understanding.

3-2- 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, p: 16), cited by Grade (1969, pp

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 what we heard and responded 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, p: 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 intelligibility to other, (Nelson, ibid). this, actually, implies a great task imposed on the syllabus designer 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.

4. Pragmatic Variable

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 peoples' role in modifying the utterance are concerned. Karchra and Smith (2003, p: 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, p: 577)."

Hatch (1992, p: 21) copes with this idea stating that "in order for communication to take place successfully, such messages have to be well interpreted". This is Alagozlu and Buyukozturk (2009, p: 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.

5. Cross – Cultural Pragmatic Failure

In the view of the previous account, it is realized that speech coming from the speaker is loaded with cultural characteristics to be colouring the message with direction of meaning. The fact that the same utterance can give two or more completely different meanings comprising an important

question for language users on 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, p: 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, p: 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 refers to the word's subjective evaluation among people with the same culture which is untouched by people from different culture the sentence aspect referring to the grammatical and lexical usage and the discourse level which is closely related to the culture and constitutions of communicator's native language

(Jie, 2010, p: 43). In addition, the differences in norms, traditions, beliefs and life style will naturally affect 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 variables 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.

6. The Subjects

The subjects of the study were (20) fourth – year students for the academic year (2020 – 2021) in the Department of English, college of Education for Human Sciences, University of Wasit. 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 parts in lectures and to attend the exams. But, however, they fail task to use English in certain purposeful context with reference to the oral contact they make with native speakers of English.

7. Data Collection

For carrying out a test conducted on the fourth – year students of the College of Educational for Human Sciences 2020 – 2021, 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 fore mentioned 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 study.

8. The Material

The Sheets of paper are materials that have been used for satisfying the study objectives.

9. Testing Pragmatics

9-1 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 unintelligible.

9-2 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 having 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.

10. Results of the Test

10-1 Discussing the Result

In an overview into the results presented earlier in the statistical method, 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, engaged themselves with what the speaker say – words and structures; they; however, forget 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.

10-2 Conclusions

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

2- In the light of the preceding conclusions, the EFL Iraqi learners are seen bad processors of oral language. This, actually, correlate 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.

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