The role of video conferencing in the development of pragmatic competence in Iraqi EFL university classes

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Abstract

The study aims at investigating the role of Video Conferencing on the achievement and development of Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic competence in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Kufa. The study attempts to answer the following questions: 1. What is the role of VC on the enhancement of pragmatic competence in Iraqi EFL classes? 2. What is the difference between students who attend VCs and those who do not concerning pragmatic and communicative abilities? As for the methods, the researchers select 80 EFL students at the mentioned department basing on a preliminary English test and randomly divide them into two groups, each with 40 students. The study employs one method in collecting the data: questionnaire (using discourse completion test). The current paper has come up with some important results and conclusions such as: VC students have been more pragmatically competent than other students; VC is a very useful tool of teaching pragmatic competence in EFL classes; and female EFL learners have been more pragmatically competent than males. Finally, a list of recommendations is presented, including: educationalists should prepare all facilities of enhancing VC techniques and centres in Iraqi Universities; teachers are encouraged to motivate students to attend VCs in their departments.

Key words: video conferencing, EFL, pragmatic competence

Introduction

Acquiring the communicative abilities in general and pragmatic competence in particular requires efforts from language teachers. One of the answers to the needs of the participants of the learning process is offered by pragmatics and social interaction via Video Conferencing (henceforth VC). Pragmatic competence consists of the knowledge that speaker-hearers use in order to engage in communication, including how speech acts are successfully performed (Ellis, 1992, p. 719). Koike (1996, p. 279) emphasizes the speaker's ability, and according to him, pragmatic competence lies in the speaker’s knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which influence the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts. Bialystok (1993) affirms that pragmatic competence entails a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in contexts. It includes speakers’ ability to use language for different purposes - to request, to instruct, to effect change.

As such, attention cannot be solely focused on the syntactic and semantic knowledge of language learners, but rather on the communicative function of language in different contexts. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to the real problem of our students: they have grammatical competence but somehow lack the ability of how to use language communicatively. Thus, they are not pragmatically competent. In this context, this study stands itself as an attempt to investigate the significance of using VC in teaching pragmatic competence.
Aims of the study

The present study intends to examine whether VC based approach compared to the classical approach would result in better communicative knowledge and performance. Owing to this premise, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of VC on the enhancement of pragmatic competence in Iraqi EFL classes?
2. What is the difference between students who attend VCs and those who do not concerning pragmatic and communicative abilities?

Review of literature

Pragmatic competence

Although the term "communicative competence" has been introduced by Hymes in the 1960's (Hymes, 1964), communicative and social competences have not been the focus of language teaching and learning until the 1970's (Krisnawati, 2011, p. 105).

Defining pragmatics is the key for understanding the meaning of pragmatic competence. Pragmatics is defined as the study of language use in context (Levinson, 1983; Kasper, 2001). Moreover, pragmatics can be classified into two major types: linguistic pragmatics which deals with the analysis of direct and indirect strategies of communication, and social pragmatics which means the study of the social perception of notions such as distance, solidarity, power and intimacy that are crucial to communication (Leech, 1990).

Types of competence vary along with the different levels of linguistic apparatus in language. Canale and Swain (1980) divide communicative competence into four kinds: grammatical competence (which involves the speaker's knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and semantics), sociolinguistic competence (which deals with the speaker's perception of appropriate language use), discourse competence (which involves the achievement of cohesion and coherence in spoken and written texts), and strategic competence (which includes the communicative steps used by speakers to make communication more felicitous). Similarly, Chomsky (1980) defines pragmatic competence as the speaker's knowledge of the conditions and manners of appropriate use of language. Afterwards, Canale, 1988; followed by Bachman, 1990) subdivides pragmatic competence into sociolinguistic competence, and illocutionary competence which is basically concerned with the speaker's knowledge of the achievement of different types of speech acts (See Byram, 1995). However, Bialystok (1993) includes discourse competence within pragmatic competence since he thinks that pragmatic ability must contain rules with which parts of texts come together to create coherent discourse.

Consequently, appropriateness is the base for achieving pragmatic competence, and it is the best way of enhancing second language (SL) learning (Meier, 1992). Pragmatic competence depends on the enhancement of the socio-cultural norms. Such norms are learnt by SL learners at an advanced level of competence in SL (Marowa-Hopkins & Strambi, 2005, p. 49).

Schmidt (1993) believes that there is no adherent relationship between the ability of pragmatic competence and the acquisition of grammatical competence. This proves that pragmatic knowledge can be a prerequisite for a successful communication, rather than grammar. Moreover, one can say that teaching pragmatic competence and strategies is not dependable on grammar teaching. Thus, pragmatic failure is more influential than the structural one; Amaya (2008, p. 12) argues that "pragmatic failures affect the interpretation of messages and sometimes block communication completely".

One of the problems in applied linguistics is the ability of teaching pragmatic competence and its relation to other linguistic abilities. According to some scholars (See Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1982), the norms of communication cannot be universal since they vary from one culture or community to another. On the contrary, Brown and Levinson (1978) assert the universality of some politeness strategies. However, successive studies prove that universality in this regard is impossible, for example, some languages are considered more tactful than others, for instance, Arabic has more indirect strategies (hence more tactful) in the performance of the speech act of criticizing than English does (See Obied, 2010). This has led some applied linguists to affirm the possibility of teaching
pragmatic competence. Kasper (1997) establishes that pragmatic competence abilities can be successfully taught through effective classroom instruction.

Cook (2001) and Mir (1992) criticize the artificial instruction which relies on the student-teacher talk. Such teaching neglects the realistic input. Thus, classes are in need for authentic and research-based materials for enhancing pragmatic competence. Similarly, Ohta (2001) emphasizes the importance of engaging students in real situations of face-to-face interaction with the native speakers. This is best achieved in Video Conferencing (henceforth VC) method of teaching, which is the topic of the following section.

**VC and Language Teaching**

Video teaching is the delivery of course content from one place where some or all of the students are physically in other locations, using technology to transmit audio and video signals between the sites (See Brade, 2007).

Schnurr & Smith (1995) states that VC became one of the main technological sources for education at all levels in different contexts. They add that "if VC is to enhance education, then it must be used appropriately and within context. It is necessary not only to examine the areas where VC can be used effectively but also to highlight its inefficient uses where found" (p. 5).

Webb and Murphy (2000) assert the effects of technological change on the educational practices adopted by institutions of learning. The prevailing attitude, they observe, has been one of preserving a traditional body of knowledge and the approach to teaching it, and simply, adapting to new technology. They highlight the need to rethink how educational programs are designed. Students seeking access to educational opportunities via increasingly diverse flexible learning environments should not simply be presented with a body of knowledge but encouraged to become active learners, capable of constructing and reconstructing their understandings in increasingly complex and dynamic fields of study and professional practice.

Luck (2003) thinks that VC can be adapted as one of the techniques of distance learning. This is due to the fact that it will cross out all the geographical and cultural challenges faced by learners. It will develop their communication skills with others. Moreover, this may lead to a new effective atmosphere for learning. She does believe that VC can be assumed as a tool for the replication of face-to-face teaching.

Using VC in the teaching process includes two sides: the physical setup (including room, hardware, and software) and the professional side (including presentation skills, dialogue/social interaction and other educational issues) (See Luck, 2003).

Thus, VC has great potential for learning in education and pedagogical progress. The potential falls in creating greater opportunity for dialogue which facilitates more effective learning than working in isolation. Dialogue may be between tutors and learners or amongst learners. However, the success of video conferencing may well be dependent on factors other than the technology. These factors range from Institutional issues, to cost, to student and tutors attitude to the technology. It is also highly dependent on the teaching methods adopted. There are many unanswered questions from an educational and psychological perspective. The technology is in a transitional state and many may feel it is currently unsuitable for education. This makes video conferencing highly challenging and exciting to some and a nightmare to others. Like the telephone in the past, we as users must learn how to make best use of VC. It may well be the next mode of communication to be universally accepted.

Coventry (2012) summarizes why we use VC in the following points:

- Video conferencing should be used to facilitate the best of distance and conventional teaching. Distance learning is normally associated with more class materials and better preparation of teaching materials. Conventional with lectures and face to face meetings.
- Video conferencing provides a means to get both students and tutors to a central location, all be it virtually. In Australia the introduction of video conferencing has helped rural Institutes expand by 500%.
- Video conferencing does not support open leaning, students must still register and attend classes at preset times and progress at the pace established by the course.
• Video conferencing could lead the way for a dual approach, giving students more responsibility for their learning, working in groups, doing tasks, all of which would benefit conventional teaching, but video conferencing provides an opportunity to implement them.
• There is no firm evidence as to whether full two way or one way with audio or simply video tapes are most effective. Depends on the situation of the learner and whether true open (time and location) learning rather than distance (location) learning is required. (p. 11)

It should be mentioned that previous studies do not focus on the relationship between VC and pragmatic competence

Kufa University and adapting to new technology

In 2010, Kufa educationalists and stick holders were advocating the need to embrace new approaches to teaching in the move towards flexible and significant learning. They established VC centre and other subcentres for some Faculties during the successive years. Edwards, Webb and Murphy stated that "flexible learning is not about technology, but concerns the creation of a teaching and learning environment that makes best use of a variety of approaches, including…face-to-face sessions, print materials and online resources" (2000, p. 151). As outlined above, there is always the risk that if attention is not given to both pedagogical change and technological innovation, there is a tendency for the technology itself to become the driver of change.

Methods

Model for analysis (pilot sample)

The selected model is suggested to represent the pilot sample which represents the native speakers' ideal achievement in the same contexts of the test (See Appendix for the details of the test). This models depends on Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of American English Speaker's Handbook (2007, p. 1557-1566). The researchers have chosen ten communicative acts that can be considered as crucial for everyday communication. Now, some examples will be given to illustrate these acts:

Greeting someone:
- How do you do? (formal)
- What's up? (informal)

Expressing agreement:
- You're right.
- Absolutely!

Apologizing and responding to it:
- My mistake. (informal)
- Don't mention it. (formal)

Refusing suggestions:
- That's not for me.
- I don't think so.

More examples will be presented in the data analysis and discussion.

Participants

Participants include 80 Iraqi students from different learning levels in the Dept. of English, Faculty of Arts, Kufa University. They include freshman, sophomore, junior and senior students. 40 students (Group A) used to attend VCs held in the e-library or in VC room in the department (See Fig. (1)), 20 males and 20 females. Other 40 students (Group B) are selected to represent the students who do not attend the VCs, again 20 males and 20 females. The participants learn English as an FL. There is no separate subject named 'pragmatics' in the department, but pragmatic or communicative competence
is taught via the subject 'conversation' in grades one and two out of four years. The main method of teaching is the structural one because of the huge number of the students in the class; thus, the communicative approach is rarely used. Mostly, the student has a passive role in the lecture. This will not develop the active pragmatic competence and the interactive performance in learners. On the other hand, VC in the department is an effective method of teaching. The faculty has two main contacts with native speakers: the first is done with the American University of Rider; the second is with the American University of Kentucky. The Rider VC is achieved weekly and based on the following steps: introducing the attendants to each other, a summary of the topic by Rider participant, comments and questions between both sides, discussion for next topic. The topics include different kinds such as literature, culture, society and the like. This VC does not mainly focus on linguistic topics, but the interaction with natives will be a useful tool for language skills in students. The Kentucky VCs are few in number, but they focus on linguistic topics such as grammar, writing and so on. The interactive steps are similar to those of Rider: introductions, discussion of the linguistic items, analyzing exercises, comments and thanks. These VCs are useful for enhancing both grammatical competence and pragmatic competence.

Figure (1). Sample Pictures for VCs in Kufa University.
Data collection

The discourse completion test (henceforth DCT) questionnaire was chosen primarily because of its relative ease in being administered to a large number of informants. With well over 100 respondents, a data collection instrument such as audio or video recordings would have been extremely time-consuming and the large number of informants represented by the results of this study would not have been possible. A DCT was also preferable since it allowed hypothetical situations to be utilized since situations involving compliments from the wide range of interlocutors would have been extremely unlikely in naturalistic data. Golato writes that DCTs “are widely used in the fields of pragmatics, intercultural communication, and second language acquisition, mainly because of their simplicity of use and high degree of control over variables lead to easy replicability” (2000, p. 93). The downside of using hypothetical situations is well documented (which will be discussed in detail in chapter five) but ultimately the DCT used to collect the present data proved to be a successful and useful tool. The DCT format would also be familiar to them because they have typically sat many paper exams where they were required to write the answers down.

Instruments

The study employs one method in collecting the data: questionnaire (using discourse completion test). Here, one would like to explain how the scenarios are created. All situations were drawn from my experience with students. They are adapted to fit the model of analysis mentioned above. Each situation represented specific communicative act or function. The test includes 10 situations to help us in the statistic analysis. The responses will be analyzed according to the main variables of gender and groups. The answers are to be compared to each other in order to find out the differences between the two groups under study.

Data analysis, results and discussion

As noticed in Table (1) below, both males and female not attending VC have scored about 50% as acceptable answers, and almost same as unaccepted ones. However, males score higher ability in responding to apologizing (55%), than females. Moreover, females score higher ability in all other activities. They have been equivalent in disagreement and refusing advice. All participants, males and females show weakness while answering the questions of greeting and responding to apologizing. This defect can be ascribed to the inclination of students to mismatch the acceptable strategy or frame for the right situation. They are not approaching the talk under consideration in the light of the principles and the strategies of conversational styles and communicative skills. Moreover, it sounds that they have no definite tools to identify the situation because they lack face-to-face interaction with native speakers. They are not trained enough to predict, deconstruct, reconstruct and ultimately explore the correct meaning of the context by themselves. This is due to the fact that they are in need for authentic examples and situations in class activities and any other technical aids. It is inconvenient to approach a situation like guessing. Let’s consider the following answers as seen in Table (1).

Table 1. Group B’s Acceptable Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Greeting</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Agreement</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Disagreement</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Responding to apologizing</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Refusing suggestion</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interruption</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Refusing advice</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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</table>
1. Someone introduced you to his doctor in hospital. You greet him saying, *How are you?*

Actually, this answer is unacceptable. Simply, the students haven't examined carefully the given situation. They based their identification of the word 'greet'; however the question includes the word 'doctor;' and in this case, the situation is formal. Thus, their answer suits the informal. Moreover, according to the model selected, the acceptable reply should be:

- How do you do?

4. How would you say to a Prof. saying: I'm sorry?

*Thanks.*

*Oh! That's O.K.*

Again, the students mistook the acceptable answer. They were not sticking to the situation itself. Ideally, they are required to examine the context of situation. Both responses are unacceptable. The first answer is not a response for an apology. It is useful for a responding for an offer. The second is an informal response for apologizing. Again, the students neglected the word 'Prof.' which shows that the situation is formal. According to the model, a suitable answer would be:

- Don’t mention it.

It should be mentioned that social interactional use of language is included in pragmatic competence which is neglected by students here. While these aspects of the socially relevant language variations focus mostly on language users, their ethnicity, gender, social background, etc., there are some aspects which primarily focus on language use, reflecting particular contexts. The way people talk in court, in school, at business meetings, for instance, is more formal than the relaxed language they use at home or with people they know well. Similar differences are noticeable when we speak to people of a different age or social group. Such language variations, are generally known as style, or stylistic differences, although the term register is also used (See Connell, 1987).

As demonstrated in Table (2) below, there was a significant difference between Group A, who attend VCs and Group B, who do not. Group A class scored 80% out of the acceptable responses. That is, the VC participants affirmed more fluency and proficiency while answering the questions given. This means that they are more pragmatically competent. On the other hand, Group B demonstrated a clear weakness in responding to the same questions and situations compared to the experimental class. They scored about 50% acceptable replies. Their answers indicated lack of training and practicing English fluently. They seem unable to identify the right situation (formal/informal) or polite response (polite/impolite). Fig. (2) states that Group A scored 90% acceptable polite responses and 80% acceptable situational selections. On the contrary, Group B indicated only 33% and 38%, respectively. This can be attributed to the audio-lingual and structural approaches, which are highly adopted in Iraqi schools and even universities. They have led to deep-rooted linguistic mistakes and errors (For details about such approaches, see Cook, 2001). It is teacher–based method. It is not unclear that most of the fail is due to the negligence of the modern strategies of talk, communication and pragmatics. One of the findings that can be observed in this paper exhibits that females showed more faculties than males on both tests (See Tables (1 & 2)).

Table 2. Group A & B's Acceptable Responses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td>Group A</td>
<td>Group B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Greeting</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Agreement</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Disagreement</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Responding to apologizing</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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5. Refusing suggestion

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<td></td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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6. Interruption

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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7. Refusing advice

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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</table>

In addition, VC males score higher ability refusing suggestion and greeting questions than VC females do. Any way, females score higher ability in all other activities.

The findings indicate that using VC as a new method of teaching language results in a significant effect on the performance of EFL learners' communicative interaction leading to pragmatic competence.

The following answers of Group A show proficiency, nearly, in all activities given:

2. Your teacher advised you of changing your report title. You agree with him saying:

- I agree with you.

According to the model, this answer seems acceptable since it is suitable for this formal situation indicated by the item 'teacher'.

3. Express your disagreement with a classmate about the new dorm.

- You've made your point, but I can't.

This response made by Group A is an acceptable disagreement because it suits the informal situation as well as its being polite. However, some of Group B's replies has been as follows:

*Where did you get that idea?*

This response fits the situation at hand, but it is impolite according to the selected model. Politeness is one of the stylistic markers of felicitous communication. Stylistic differences have been mainly studied with reference to the addressee – their age or social group. For sociolinguists especially interesting has been the issue of politeness, the notion developed by pragmatists, which refers to showing awareness of other people's public self-image (face) and can be manifested as positive (showing solidarity) or negative (accepting another's right not to be imposed on) (See Brown & Levinson, 1978). In communication, speakers make appropriate linguistic choices in the light of their relationship to the addressee, in order not to make them uncomfortable. In all societies there are sociolinguistic rules for, for instance, polite acceptance or refusal, greetings, conversation topics, forms of address, and these differ cross-culturally. What is acceptable, even desirable linguistic behaviour in one society may be unsuitable, even taboo in another. Thus, EFL learners should be taught on how to be polite in L2. The use of VCs with natives would help this function.

It is evidently that modern strategies of VC and its face-to-face communication train students to be producers than negative listeners. Through practicing, they improve rapidly to be more polite; they are progressing towards semi-nativity.
Figure 2. Groups' Responses Analyzed in the Light of Politeness and Situation Principles

Relating these findings to the original argument and question of the study, one can see that the students who have tried to attend more VCs are more communicative than those who have neglected the idea. Although it is optional for the student to attend the VC or not, we see some active students attempting to develop themselves in a variety of pragmatic and social contexts. This proves that VCs are useful tools in the enhancement of the student's exercise and practice of the pragmatic activities.

Conclusion

In the light of the results and findings mentioned above, some concluding remarks have been arrived at. VC students have been more pragmatically competent that other students. VC students show more knowledge about how to be polite in their interaction. VC students prove to be more attentive to communicative situations than others do. VC is a very useful tool of teaching pragmatic competence in EFL classes. Generally, female EFL learners have been seen to be more pragmatically competent than males.

Recommendations

1. Educationalists should prepare all facilities of enhancing VC techniques and centres in Iraqi Universities.
2. Teachers are encouraged to motivate students to attend VCs in their departments.
3. Curriculum developers are expected to include VC in the class activities during syllabus description.
4. VC centres should evoke communication with native speakers of English as well as international English departments.
5. VC holders are supposed to list more cultural and social activities in their sessions.

References


Appendix

The Test

Hello participant: male ☐ female ☐

What would you say in the following situations? Please, write what you may say in real interaction.

1. Someone introduced you to his doctor in hospital. You greet him saying:

2. Your teacher advised you of changing your report title. You agree with him saying:

3. Express your disagreement with a classmate about the new dorm.

4. How would you say to a Prof. saying: I'm sorry?

5. Refuse a father's suggestion to take a medicine.

6. Your friend is speaking. How could you interrupt him?

7. Your sister advised you to ask for a new dress for a party. You refuse the advice saying: