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Enhancing the role of pragmatics in primary English teacher training

ABSTRACT. Teaching EFL in primary school is no longer a novelty but firmly established in the education landscape throughout Europe and many countries worldwide. Primary English language teaching (PELT) is a unique branch of ELT insofar as it entails both the teaching of children and beginners. While PELT teachers and PELT teacher educators largely agree that this concurrence of ‘young plus beginning’ requires a focus on vocabulary, speaking and listening, introduced and practiced through songs, games, stories, roleplaying and embodiment techniques such as Total Physical Response, pragmatic aspects often take a backseat in PELT teacher training and by extension in the PELT classroom, even though it has been established that pragmatics instruction is necessary and feasible on all proficiency levels, right from the beginning. This article discusses possible reasons for this omission and illustrates with authentic examples why pragmatics should play a bigger role in the training of primary English teachers.

KEYWORDS: EFL, English Language Teaching, pragmatics, pragmatic awareness, language teacher training, primary school, Primary English Language Teaching (PELT).

1. INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen the widespread introduction of early foreign language teaching throughout Europe and other parts of the world, with most school curricula making the teaching of at least one foreign language compulsory at primary level (Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek 2006). Due to the heterogeneous linguistic landscape within the EU, there is a great deal of variation as to the chosen target language(s), but despite all local variation, English has transpired as the most dominant target language. This

is rooted in its status as a global lingua franca and the fact that most EU members are non-English-speaking countries. Accordingly, English in primary school is typically taught as a foreign (rather than second) language, which has created the need for a large supply of qualified and well-trained primary teachers able to teach EFL to young learners. Given the fact that most primary teachers are required to teach a wide range of subjects and cannot choose English as a specialization to the same extent as is often possible for secondary or tertiary language teachers, primary English language teaching (PELT) is typically carried out by non-native English-speaking teachers (non-NESTs). This constellation places very specific demands on the training of PELT teachers, which is a challenge that continues to require attention (Enever 2014). A part of this challenge is the fostering of the teachers' language competency so that they can serve as good L2 models and input providers, reduce L1 use to a minimum, and plan interaction tasks "in ways that could maximize FL production in both controlled and free practice events" (Enever 2014: 240).

In this paper I would like to argue that one crucial facet of language competency is frequently underrepresented in the training of PELT teachers and hence also in the PELT classroom, namely pragmatic competence, which denotes the appropriate and context-sensitive use of the target language in social encounters. The goal of this paper is thus to discuss the role of pragmatics in PELT with a view to highlighting its importance for PELT teacher training. I will first define what pragmatic competence is and then, with the help of authentic examples drawn from PELT teacher training in Germany, discuss what some reasons might be for the observed negligence. Finally, some suggestions for enhancing the role of pragmatics in PELT and PELT teacher training are presented. Although the examples are drawn from the German context, I expect that the issues addressed here are relevant for other regions as well.

1.1. Pragmatic competence in an L2

Pragmatic competence in a second/foreign language refers to the ability to use the target language's structural repertoire (grammar, lexis, prosody etc.) in a contextually and situationally appropriate fashion in order to understand the L2 in context and to achieve one's communicative goals (Barron 2003: 10). Such competence entails, on the one hand, pragmalinguistic skills, i.e. mastery of the linguistic forms that the L2 offers to realize particular intentions; and on the other hand, sociopragmatic skills, i.e. the knowledge of when to use which linguistic forms appropriately in social situations (Leech 1983: 11). Accordingly, pragmatic competence refers to the skill to apply the

word and structure knowledge one has gained in the L2 in actual communicative encounters to make oneself understood and to understand others, to uphold the flow of a conversation, and to establish and maintain social rapport. It is thus a fundamental aspect of communicative competence and has long been placed on a par with grammatical competence in descriptions of foreign language skills (e.g. Bachman & Palmer 1996). Consequently, in language teaching, pragmatic competence cannot and must not be considered

extra or ornamental, like the icing on the cake. It is not subordinated to knowledge of grammar and text organization but co-ordinated to formal linguistic and textual knowledge and interacts with 'organizational competence' in complex ways. In order to communicate successfully in a target language, pragmatic competence in L2 must be reasonably well developed. (Kasper 1997: para. 6)

The importance of targeting pragmatic competence in language teaching is further underlined by research on the relationship between pragmatic development and the development of grammar and vocabulary skills. The vast majority of studies confirm that pragmatic competence does not automatically evolve alongside lexico-grammatical proficiency, and that even very advanced learners produce pragmatically infelicitous responses unless taught explicitly (e.g., Martí-Arnándiz 2008). Glaser (2014) reports about advanced learners who, despite having had over a decade of EFL instruction, were never explicitly taught about pragmatic aspects of appropriate language use and thus employed a range of non-targetlike pragmatic patterns despite a high lexico-grammatical proficiency. In Pfingsthorn and Flöck's (2017) study, pre-service secondary EFL teachers, while overall advanced L2 users, were found to exhibit substantial difficulties in successfully identifying pragmatic violations.

Unless made aware of pragmatic differences between L1 and L2, learners tend to subconsciously continue to employ the pragmatic conventions of their L1, which may result in communication breakdown and/or the perception of the L2 user as clumsy or rude and/or their culture as defective (Gass & Selinker 2008: 289). The necessary process of expanding their pragmalinguistic repertoire "by adopting a new form-function mapping into their systems [...] is slow, unless learners are exposed to explicit correction, feedback, or modelling" (Taguchi 2010: 352). What derives logically from this is that pragmatics should be a vital component of any communicative EFL syllabus, and that EFL teachers need to be trained to teach pragmatic skills to their students. In the case of non-NESTs, this entails raising their own pragmatic awareness and training their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic skills to approach a targetlike level.

1.2. Pragmatic skills development in young learners

Research has further established that the pragmatics instruction is necessary and feasible from the beginning stages of L2 development. This is the most relevant proficiency level for PELT, since young learners are usually beginners. It has been established for quite a while that beginning learners can be successfully instructed with regard to pragmatic phenomena that are chosen in line with their level of language command (Kasper 1997). Although most relevant studies have been carried out with older learners, the existing findings for young learners point into the same direction. Ishihara (2013) reported about a pragmatic intervention study with nine-year-olds in Tokyo which successfully improved these young EFL learners' pragmatic awareness. Lee (2010) showed in a cross-sectional study with seven-, nine- and twelve year-old EFL learners that the development of their decoding of direct and indirect requests in the L2 mirrored their L1 pragmatic development. Similarly, Llinares García (2006) found for her five-year-old pre-school children that young EFL learners use the L2 for the same functions as their mother tongue, including calling attention, requesting or suggesting. The research thus suggests that young learners will have difficulty meeting their communicative needs if pragmatics is not considered in the instruction: "It is indispensable that learners be made aware of pragmatic issues of intercultural communication early on" (Flöck & Pflingsthorn 2014: 183).

2. THE NEGLECT OF PRAGMATICS IN PELT AND TEACHER TRAINING: EXAMPLES AND REASONS

Taken together, the research has thus established that pragmatic competence is a fundamental aspect of L2 mastery; that it does not develop on its own but needs to be specifically taught; that it is teachable from the beginning levels on; and that it develops alongside L1 pragmatic competence in young learners if included in the instruction. However, despite this evidence, pragmatics has, to my knowledge, received very little attention in the literature and research on PELT teacher education. Recent reviews of PELT teacher training such as Edelenbos et al. (2006), Enever (2014), Dausend (2017) or Kubanek (2017) do not mention it, and most of the (very few) articles that deal with EFL teacher candidates' pragmatic competence refer to the post-primary level (e.g. Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh 2008; Pflingsthorn & Flöck 2017). As the following first example illustrates, however, pragmatic competence is as important for primary EFL teachers as it is for higher levels.

2.1. Example 1: Forms of address

Virtually from the first EFL lesson on, children will need to address their teacher, choosing appropriate honorifics (unless the teacher establishes a mutual first-name basis, which is in itself a pragmatic choice). With male teachers, this is usually not too problematic, as there is only one form to choose from – *Mr*. With female teachers, however, a choice has to be made between *Mrs*, *Ms* and *Miss*. As young children may use the latter with either the teacher's last (*Miss Brown*) or first name (*Miss Helen*), there are four options. In our work with both pre-service and in-service PELT teachers we regularly find that there are insecurities as to the meaning and/or suitability of each, with quite a few not aware of the marital status-neutral option *Ms*. Of those who do know about this option, many are unsure about its pronunciation (/miz/), although mastery of the spoken form is, naturally, vital for successful classroom communication. I recall a classroom discussion of fourth-graders with their seasoned, unmarried English teacher, who explained her insistence on being called *Mrs* by saying that this was the modern, neutral form of address for women. While each female teacher certainly reserves the right to choose for herself the form of address she feels most comfortable with, this incident illustrates the inherent risk of transferring insufficient pragmatic knowledge onto the learners. During our seminars the teacher trainees are usually very grateful for and interested in the sociopragmatic explanations behind each choice for their future work. This underlines the necessity and significance of pragmatics instruction in PELT teacher training, even with candidates who are otherwise highly proficient in the L2, which is usually the case with our trainees.

As this first example has shown, pragmatic considerations are relevant for the young learner classroom from the beginning. In the remainder of this article, I attempt to identify three possible reasons for the observed neglect of pragmatics in PELT, and to illustrate with more examples why this situation needs to be remedied.

2.2. Reason 1: Pragmatics is perceived as expendable add-on

The first reason deals with the marginal role that is erroneously but frequently ascribed to pragmatics within the range of language skills. Vis-à-vis vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar, pragmatics still tends to be considered a dispensable accessory rather than an integral component of L2 mastery. Even though pragmatics research has established that pragmatic con-

siderations and principles lie at the core of language use in interaction, pragmatic phenomena are often disregarded in language teaching precisely *because of their inherent context sensitivity*. As Flöck and Pfingsthorn (2014: 195) explain, pragmatic choices, as opposed to lexical, phonetic or grammatical ones, defy straightforward rules of the ‘if X, then always Y’-type, and thus seem more difficult to integrate into pedagogical canons out of fear of overtaxing the learners – a concern that is especially relevant in the primary context. It thus seems understandable that teachers and curriculum developers typically concentrate on those aspects that seem more clear-cut, uncomplicated and easier to handle. Yet, as has been pointed out above, it does not do to rely on pragmatic skills to develop on their own once enough grammar and vocabulary has been built up, but they need to be taught concomitantly. In fact, as the two components of pragmatic competence – sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics – indicate, pragmatic issues are frequently interwoven with choices in syntax, vocabulary, morphology etc., and ignoring pragmatic considerations in the language classroom may result in teaching non-targetlike communication patterns, as illustrated by the following second example.

2.3. Example 2: How are you?

In naturally occurring conversations between English native speakers, *How are you?* typically forms a part of the greeting phase. Conversation Analyses have established that it usually functions as an opener and friendly acknowledgment of the other speaker rather than a genuine request for information, even though its surface appearance might suggest otherwise. Accordingly, it is typically met with short, formulaic responses of the *Fine, thanks* type that do not reveal much about the responder’s actual wellbeing. What is more, *How are you?* is typically reciprocal and thus returned by the responder. The resulting How-are-you (HAY) sequences of the type *Hi, how are you – Fine, how are you* are typical communication pattern of English conversations (Wong 2002: 43).

The phrase *How are you?* is usually taught early on and thus ubiquitous in the opening sequences of PELT classrooms. Very often, however, it is stripped of its two central pragmatic features. For one thing, it is not employed as a greeting in the sense just described but as the factual request for information it would *not* be in authentic communication. I have frequently observed in-service teachers use it as a kind of vocabulary revision activity, eliciting previously taught vocabulary on feelings and moods. This generates sequences such as *How are you? – I’m sad/angry/bored etc.*, which are in-

congruent with natural target language use. Secondly, the reciprocal turn is omitted, with the teacher neither modeling nor prompting it. Mostly, after eliciting one mood answer, the teacher turns to the next child, continuing the chain of question-answer dyads. The learners thus neither acquire the phatic function of this question, nor the targetlike reciprocity of HAY sequences.

Apart from imparting non-targetlike communication patterns to the learners, such teaching choices carry the danger of setting misleading examples to teacher trainees observing these classes. In fact, influenced by such models, some of our teacher candidates who had observed these lessons started to integrate this kind of lesson opening into their own lesson planning. Such a carrying-over of pragmatically inadequate patterns into the next generation is very closely linked to the second reason, namely the perpetuation of a teacher candidate's own language learning experiences.

2.4. Reason 2: Perpetuation of lack of pragmatics training

A second major reason for the lack of pragmatic awareness lies in the fact that (future) teachers tend to base their teaching subconsciously on how they were taught themselves. If, which is frequently reported by our students, their own EFL education did not explicitly target pragmatic aspects, they are often not aware of their relevance and/or do not possess the necessary L2 pragmatic skills to break this chain in their own teaching. This perpetuation of the lack of pragmatics training may take two possible trajectories (and combinations thereof, cf. also Cohen 2018).

The first of these emerges from the *lack of alertness* to the danger of pragmatic errors which results from a lack of pragmatic training. A non-NEST who has not received pragmatics training is not only likely to lack knowledge of L1/L2 pragmatic differences but might also be oblivious to the basic fact that all languages differ in their pragmatic conventions. The reason is that people are not usually aware of the pragmatic conventions at work in their L1 but rather assume that these are universal principles of "good manners" or "common sense" shared by all "decent human beings" (Flöck & Pflingsthorn 2014: 195). Accordingly, they are not only likely to transfer their L1 patterns onto their L2, but also unaware of the risks that this transfer bears for social harmony and rapport management. Needless to say, without this awareness a teacher cannot be able to see and react to pragmatic infelicities resulting from transfer and thus not feel the need to prevent or correct these.

The second trajectory emerges from *insecurities* with pragmatic aspects that result from a lack of training. Such teacher candidates might well be aware of the importance of pragmatics, but their insufficient pragmatic

competence may lead to producing non-targetlike models (such as those described in example 2 above or example 3 below) or providing unbeneficial corrective feedback. This is insofar problematic as young learners mostly learn implicitly, i.e. from concrete L2 models and examples rather than rules, and that for this implicit learning, the quality of the input is even more important than with older learners, who additionally benefit from explicit rule-provision. In the PELT classroom, the teacher has been identified as the single most relevant source of input (Cenoz & Lindsay 1996: 92), which makes it highly unlikely that the influence of the teachers' L2 skills can be counter-balanced by other sources, especially when it comes to interpersonal and authentic classroom interaction.

On the whole, a non-NEST's own learner biography is thus likely to influence the pragmatic input provided in their own classroom as well as the importance the teacher attributes to pragmatic phenomena. This will, in turn, shape the pragmatic awareness and mastery of the next generation of language learners and language teachers. The following example illustrates how the lack of pragmatics training can shape a teacher's classroom language, which in turn becomes inadequate input for the learners.

2.5. Example 3: Classroom language

Classroom language is an integral part of any language lesson. By giving instructions and explanations, allocating turns, providing feedback and managing discipline, the teacher manages the classroom, provides opportunities for learning, and makes the lesson come about as a social and cognitive event. At the same time, these instances of L2 use provide opportunities for the learners to experience the target language as a meaningful, functional medium with which to 'get things done' and negotiate behaviors and relationships.

Needless to say, this can only effectively contribute to a targetlike language development if such classroom language is in line with the target language's pragmatic conventions. However, we frequently observe many of our teacher candidates to be insecure in this respect, displaying a tendency towards rather blunt and unmitigated language. *No, that's wrong* as a reaction to an incorrect student response or *Be quiet!* as the very first attempt at quietening the class down are cases in point. Apart from creating a rather harsh tone in the interaction with young children, it models communication patterns that deviate from targetlike classroom language, where the teacher would, in all likelihood, express these intentions more indirectly (e.g. *Uhm, good guess, but not quite right.* or *Everybody, please stop talking.*)

Instruction-giving is another frequent source of pragmatic infelicities. Giving young learners effective and well-paced instructions that are both linguistically and cognitively adequate is a challenge in itself, but even trainees who have mastered this particular challenge often have difficulties expressing the illocutionary force of 'I want you to do this' adequately. A major problem for our trainees is the overuse of the modal verb *should*, resulting from negative transfer of German *sollen*, which can mean both *should* and *be supposed to* and is often used in L1 German instructions (*Ihr sollt...*), especially when repeating instructions after student clarification requests. As a result, the teachers utter recommendations (*You should get into pairs*) rather than actual instructions (*Please get into pairs, I want you to get into pairs* etc.). While this example illustrates German-specific pragmatic transfer in teacher talk, no doubt teacher educators in other countries will have made similar observations for their respective L1s.

The discussions of these phenomena with our teacher trainees usually show both of the trajectories mentioned above. While the majority appreciate the information and want to use it to improve their classroom language, there are also a few who find it hard to take off their L1 lenses and to perceive the differences in illocutionary force and, by extension, to appreciate the necessity of changing their speaking habits. Needless to say, remedying the lack of alertness is usually harder than remedying the lack of pragmalinguistic skills, which underlines the importance of teaching pragmatic awareness early on.

2.6. Reason 3: Lack of adequate teaching materials

The lack of appropriate pragmatic information and input in regular text books has been lamented frequently for post-primary levels (see Glaser 2014: 15–18 for an overview), and this problem is no less acute for young learners. Although PELT curricula typically stress the importance of oral communicative competence, textbooks are more often than not oriented towards 'structures of language' rather than 'structures of use'. A case in point is the presentation of the short answer patterns *yes, I do* - *no, I don't* as equal options to react to queries about likes and dislikes. While this is certainly unproblematic from a grammatical point of view, it is not judicious from a pragmatic perspective as it does not reflect the rules of language in use. As Conversation Analysis has established, in interpersonal communication *no*-type answers are often dispreferred responses and marked linguistically as such (Carroll 2011). Hesitation, hedging and/or indirectness are employed as face-work to wrap the incongruent factual information into a layer

of rapport management (Pomerantz 1984). The sequence *Do you like mushrooms? – Uhm, not really, no.* is thus much closer to a targetlike realization of the *no*-option than *Do you like mushrooms? – No, I don't.* In fact, this latter, direct form corresponds more to language patterns that native speakers use when communicating non-cooperation or impatience. Accordingly, presenting it as the default response for friendly encounters means providing structurally correct but pragmatically inadequate input.

This claim is not seldom met with scepticism, and the danger it portrays seen as exaggerated. The argument is that the children would be overtaxed by these extra frills, that the most important goal at this stage is to master the basic structures, and that the fine-tuning will come later. This does, however, take us back full circle to Reason 1 above. There is ample evidence that such 'fine-tuning' will NOT automatically come later unless specifically taught, which is hardly ever the case. And if it is taught, or noticed during a stay abroad, the learners have to undergo a frustrating and difficult un-learning of language patterns they were taught early on. Hence, in order to avoid this situation and to assist PELT teachers in the imparting of pragmatically appropriate communication skills from the beginning, teaching materials reflecting actual language use are necessary.

3. INTEGRATING PRAGMATICS IN PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHER TRAINING

I hope to have shown with the Reasons and Examples taken from authentic teacher education episodes that it is vital to integrate pragmatic awareness and competence into the training of primary English teachers on a par with their other language skills and the knowledge of literature, culture, and linguistics. Such pragmatics training needs to address both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects of the target language, ideally in an L1/L2 contrastive fashion, to make the trainees aware of pragmatic transfer, to improve their mastery of targetlike communication patterns, and to help them identify pragmatic violations.

That this is possible and effective has been documented by Povolná (2012). Her course for pre-service and in-service teachers, both for primary and secondary schools, aimed at fostering pragmatic awareness, improving pragmatic strategies and promoting skills in evaluating learner performance. The teachers overwhelmingly appreciated the instruction and found it very relevant for their work, as the following testimonies show (Povolná 2012: 156):

To be honest, firstly I thought I would never ever include some principles of Pragmatics into my English lessons at primary school. Fortunately... I have

changed my mind. Now, after participating in your course I really enriched my own feeling for language.

At the beginning of the course I thought it was not as useful for me as it revealed during and at the end of it... I would like to say that pragmatics is a very interesting and useful science and opens up the door for deeper knowledge of English.

Accordingly, enhancing the role of pragmatics in PELT teacher training is feasible, useful, and highly called for. From the previous discussion it has transpired that (at least) the following three factors are involved in the effectuation of this change:

1. A general acknowledgement of the role of pragmatic phenomena in the teaching of young language learners and the importance of contextualizing language use from the start. Rather than postponing pragmatic aspects to higher levels, appropriate communicative patterns need to be imparted right from the start, especially in light of the strong oral focus in the young learner classroom.
2. The inclusion of courses on pragmatics into the curricula of PELT teacher training to complement general linguistics/culture/literature instruction and language training courses. This will help produce teachers who are a) sensitized to the significance of pragmatic skills and b) aware of the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic conventions of the target language as well as L1/L2-specific differences. By imparting these pragmatic skills to their learners, these teachers will help break the spiral of neglecting pragmatics in EFL instruction.
3. Teaching materials that feature pragmatically appropriate L2 input and that provide opportunities for the development of pragmatic awareness in young learners.

PELT and PELT teacher education should not shy away from including pragmatic competence as one teaching goal. After all, children in primary school have already developed the understanding that certain kinds of talk are 'appropriate' and 'polite', and that other manners of speaking are 'not okay.' L2 instruction can and should build on this pragmatic awareness the young learners have already developed and equip them with the respective skills in their foreign language, too – in order to truly fulfil our goal of teaching communicative competence.

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