Effectiveness of Explicit Pragmatics Instruction in Developing Business Communication Skills: A Study of Teachers' and Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

Language is a means of communication, and pragmatics helps in understanding and using the language of real use. This study explores teachers' and students' perceptions of the inclusion of explicit pragmatics in the instruction of business communication contents to enhance learners' competence to produce effective business communication discourse. Qualitative-pluralistic approach has been used for data collection. Business communication course contents were taught with the incorporation of relevant contents from pragmatics, and afterwards feedback from 120 students was sought through open ended questions. Besides, ten instructors of business communication were interviewed to find out the need and feasibility of teaching explicit pragmatics in business communication classrooms. The results of this study show that explicit instruction of pragmatics is highly beneficial in learning the basic concepts of business communication. It is recommended that explicit instruction of pragmatics be made a compulsory part of teaching business s

Keywords: Pragmatics, explicit instruction, business communication, perceptions

Introduction

Linguistics scientifically studies language as a tool of communication from various angles and pragmatics deals with the language of real life use and addresses the communicative competence for the appropriate use of language for successful communication. The basic course contents of business communication skills on communication cycle, Seven Cs, intercultural communication, verbal and non-verbal communication, and interpersonal communication are vital to learn business communication in classroom(Chaney, 2005; Murphy, Hildebrandt, & Thomas, 2007). It is generally observed that the business graduates cannot communicate effectively when they join their professional careers after the completion of their academic qualification. Various empirical studies find that communicative contents can be better learned

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through explicit pragmatics, and pragmatics may be included in the classroom instruction of specific communication skills (Amaya, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Brock & Nagasaka, 2005; Ellis, 2004; Othman, 2011; Rose & Kasper, 2001). The instruction of relevant concepts of pragmatics along with the course contents may facilitate in learning language for specific purposes.

This study explores teachers' and students' perceptions of effectiveness of core concepts of pragmatics for developing students' pragmatic communicative competence. This study proposes that instruction of explicit pragmatics helps learners in learning the basic contents of business communication skills. The study is significant as it explores the critical role which pragmatics can play to enhance the professional communicative competence of business students.

Literature Review

Importance of Communication Skills for Professionals

Communication skills assist professionals in performing their jobs and making advancement in their career(Roebuck, Sightler, & Brush, 1995). Through improving language skills, future business professionals can compete effectively in the expanding global market(Orban, 1994, p. 422). Pragmatics assists learners in using "language appropriate to particular communicative events", in using "the relevant utterances necessary for being considered a competent conversant", and "interpreting meaning contextually"(Brock & Nagasaka, 2005, p. 18).

Importance of Pragmatics for Language Instructors

The knowledge of pragmatics can empower the instructors with the relevant cultural, social, professional perspectives. Delivering education in cultural context is vital in the present era (McCarthy, 2001, p. 125) to enable learners cope with challenges after the completion of their studies.

Significance of Explicit Knowledge of Pragmatics in Business

Pragmatics helps in learning "how-to-say-what-to-whom-when" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, p. 68)and is, expected to be helpful for business administrators to meet the communication challenges they encounter in their day-to-day interactions in diverse situations. The explicit knowledge of pragmatics helps communicators in behaving according to acceptable societal norms, linguistically as well socially(Othman, 2011, p. 101).

Major Segments in Pragmatics

Pragmatics deals with a triangle of three closely linked contributors: 1) speaker/encoder's intention, 2) contents of the contexts and 3) interpretation made by a competent hearer/decoder(Gauker, 2008). The encoders are supposed to "design their

utterances against the common grounds they share with their addressees—their common experience, dialect, and culture"(Schober & Clark, 1989, p. 211). "People understand each other in conversations by gathering evidence about each other's intentions"(Schober & Clark, 1989, p. 211). Pragmatic competence is associated with the learners' sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic skills.

Pragmatics and Language Functions

Language performs various functions through speech acts i.e. complimenting, requesting, complaining and apologizing, as well as through different type of discourse, and through speech events of different nature(Kasper & Rose, 1999). Pragmatics studies language from formal/informal and social perspective in a communicative event with a focus on those "factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others"(Crystal, 1987, p. 120).

Explicit Instruction of Pragmatics

According to Lin (2007), "The education of pragmatics is necessary and important in our globalized world" (p.91). Similarly, Rose (2012) states that the knowledge of pragmatics facilitates professionals in making adjustments in specific social, cultural and cognitive situations for the production and comprehension of language. The courses on communication skills need to be enriched to enable the learners for their future professions(Korn, 2004, p. 589).

Implicature and Entailment

Implicature is a kind of inference drawn without extra information. Implicature is what communicators can imply, suggest or mean, apart from the actual words in an utterance (Cap, 2010, p. 211). Implicatures are generated when Gricean cooperative maxims are flouted. These include the maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. Entailment deals with the relationship between two interlinked statements, where the truth of one statement depends upon the truth of the other(Yule, 1996a). Entailment depends upon the language but implicature depends upon the conversational context.

Context and Shared Knowledge

Context contributes in formulating utterances and interpreting their pragmatic meanings. Natural languages are context dependent(Åkerman, 2009, p. 155). Context is also closely related to the shared knowledge of communicators. Besides the linguistic context, co-text and physical context also contribute to meanings. The surrounding words in a text attribute certain meaning to a specific word besides the effects of physical location, time and place(Yule, 1996b, p. 129).

Pre-existing Knowledge Structures

Communicators rely on their pre-existing knowledge structures for interpreting the unsaid or unwritten part of utterances, and familiar patterns and structures assist in experiencing similar structures(Yule, 1996a, pp. 85-86). These structures are called schemata. "A script is pre-existing knowledge structure involving event sequences"(Yule, 1996a, p. 86). Background knowledge structures are culturally determined and make cultural schemata(Yule, 1996a, p. 87). Pre-existing knowledge of the linguistic conventions formulate conventional schemata. Pragmatics can help in understanding the various dimensions of schemata and their underlying factors(Yule, 1996b, p. 62).

The review of the relevant literature establishes the importance of knowledge of pragmatics for effective communication skills. The review also shows that no study has been conducted to explore the opinions and perceptions of instructors and students of business communication. This study examines the opinions and perceptions of instructors and learners of business communication about the effectiveness of explicit instruction of pragmatics in developing business communication skills.

Methodology

Pluralistic qualitative approach has been used for data collection. The data have been collected through: 1) the feedback of 120 students of business studies in business communication skills classrooms, and 2) the opinions sought through semi-structured interviews from ten teachers of business communication. Purposive sampling technique was used and prior consent was sought from the participants. As the present study is qualitative in nature, the data have been triangulated for the sake of trustworthiness.
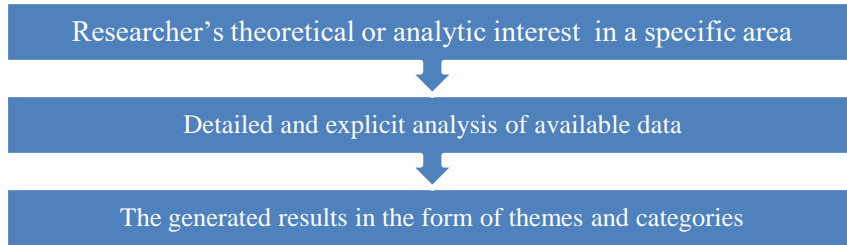
Procedure

The business communication instructors were interviewed on the following themes:

  i.   Aims of Business Communication Skills Courses
 ii.   Recommended Text Books and Course Contents
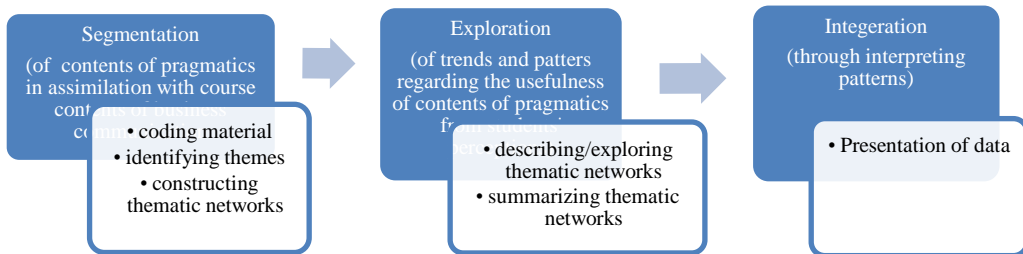iii.   Inclusion of Explicit Pragmatic Contents into Business Communication Courses

This research was a single group experimental study on the pattern of "one group posttest only" (with no control group) which is an "applied research to evaluate intervention effectiveness with individuals"(Gast, 2010, p. 13). These students were first taught course contents of business communication skills. Afterwards, they were explicitly taught relevant contents from pragmatics and were asked to answer open-ended questions on the usefulness of pragmatics in business communication skills. The process was completed in five weeks.

The students' responses on pragmatics have been analyzed through Attride-Stirling's (2001) 'theoretical thematic analysis'. This form of analysis tends "to be driven by a researcher's theoretical or analytic interest" in a specific area; it is "more explicitly analyst-driven"; and gives "a detailed analysis of some aspects of the data"(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The pattern of theoretical thematic analysis is portrayed in Figure 1 as under:

| Researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in a specific area |
| Detailed and explicit analysis of available data |
| The generated results in the form of themes and categories |

Figure 1. Pattern of theoretical thematic analysis

The students' responses have been presented in the form of figures and under their respective headings. Figure 2 below depicts the model for analyzing the students' responses.

Segmentation
(of contents of pragmatics in assimilation with course contents of business communication)
• coding material
• identifying themes
• constructing thematic networks

Exploration
(of trends and patters regarding the usefulness of contents of pragmatics from students' perspectives)
• describing/exploring thematic networks
• summarizing thematic networks

Integeration
(through interpreting patterns)
• Presentation of data

Figure 2. Model for analyzing students' responses. This figure has been developed from Attride-Stirling's (2001) "analyses employing thematic networks".

Results

1) *Teachers' Opinions on the Role of Pragmatics in Business Communication Skills*

The responses of the instructors are summed up as follows:

Aims of Business Communication Skills Courses

According to the instructors of business communication, the students of business studies are prepared for diverse business scenarios to perform their future roles as entrepreneurs, managers, team leaders, and other multidimensional roles.

Communication skills significantly add value in the students' academic learning. Effective communication skills assist business administrators in making advancement in their careers and grow their businesses. The instructors are of the view that business market is becoming increasingly glocal, and pragmatics enriched communication skills help business administrators in performing their roles effectively.

Recommended Text Books and Course Contents

The instructors reported that most of the course books recommended for business studies and business communication are written by foreign authors, and can only partially address the needs of contemporary indigenous organizations. The course contents devised for various subjects of business studies and business communication also have a reflection of the recommended/available course books. On the other hand, the students of business studies and other management sciences are prepared to work for local organizations after the completion of their qualifications. The instructors feel a need of reviewing and revising the course contents to handle the challenges which their students would face in their professional careers.

Inclusion of Explicit Pragmatics into Business Communication Courses

The instructors agreed that many course contents already have implicit reflection of pragmatics. Pragmatics is useful in producing desirable interpersonal skills. Since the courses on business communication skills aim at preparing business graduates for effective communication in their professional careers, therefore, the course contents may be made more effective through the inclusion of explicit pragmatics to enable business administrators to perform their tasks with improved interpersonal skills. The knowledge of pragmatics helps in understanding the relationship between linguistic forms and their impact on the users and assists in conveying the desired meaning in a specific context and assuming probable interpretations by the audience. The instructors opine that pragmatic competence of business administrators helps them understand the constraints of a communicative situation and communicate according to the sociolinguistic norms of society.

2) Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Pragmatics in Business Communication Courses

The results of the students' responses in regard to the open-ended questions are as follows:

1. How are contents of pragmatics (speaker's intentions, presuppositions, frame, listener's interpretation, differences as barriers/noise, shared context) helpful in understanding communication cycle?

In this section, students' perceptions and preferences regarding the advantages of contents of pragmatics in understanding and performing communication cycle

effectively have been presented. Figure 3 shows relationship between concepts from pragmatics and communication cycle.
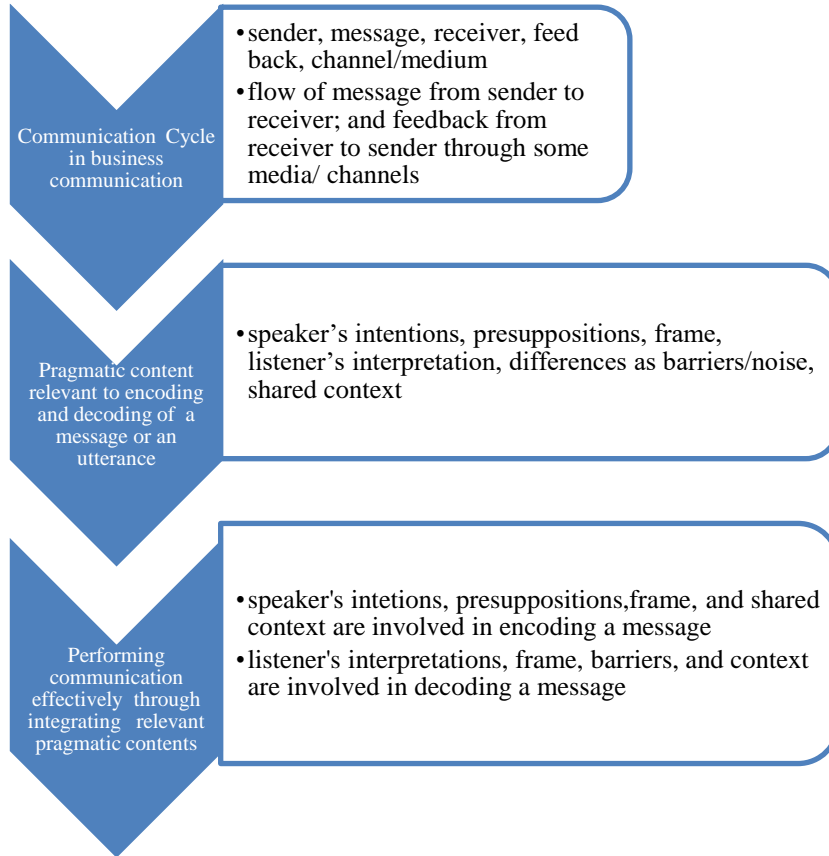
Figure 3. Relationship between concepts from pragmatics and communication cycle.

Sender's Roles and Responsibilities

The sender should consider his/her own and the receiver's frame before encoding and relaying a message. The receiver may interpret the message quite differently from what the sender intends to convey. The sender should understand the possible interpretations which can be made by the listener and make his/her intentions more obvious in an utterance. A sender should also consider the frame of a particular (his/her own and the receiver's) society.

Receiver's Roles and Responsibilities

The receiver should consider his/her own frame while decoding/interpreting a message as his/her biases may affect the decoding of the message. The receiver should understand what the sender has intended to convey through a message below its surface meaning.

### *General Considerations in Message Formulation*

Communicators of a communicative event may have different frames. Their frames can become barriers in successful communication. Shared context makes contribution in making message more meaningful. A message should be more detailed if there is less shared context and vice versa. Non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact etc.) are also helpful in interpreting the unsaid part of a sender's message.

Importance of Pragmatics

Pragmatics helps in understanding the back-story of every conversation and facilitates communication when the receivers are from different frames. Awareness of pragmatics assists in situational communication through making it audience oriented.

2. *What are the advantages of incorporating Gricean Cooperative Maxims in understanding 7Cs (completeness, conciseness, consideration, concreteness, clarity, courtesy and correctness)?*

The respondents view that Gricean cooperative maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner are closely associated with Seven Cs and they are a value addition to 7Cs. Observance of maxims minimizes misunderstandings in business correspondence, and helps to conduct business effectively and efficiently. The relationship between Gricean maxims and Seven Cs is shown in Figure 4.
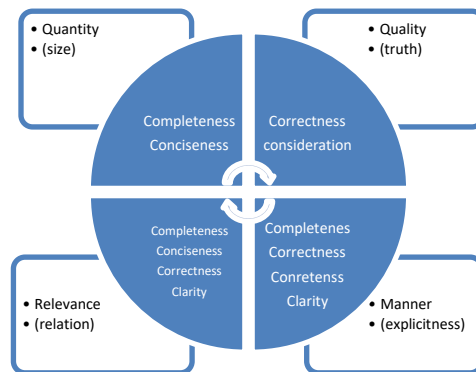
Figure 4. Relationship between Gricean cooperative maxims and Seven Cs.

Quantity

Quantity is associated with 'completeness' and conciseness' and helps in making a message comprehensive, of appropriate bulk and length, assists in better understanding of 7Cs for composing a brief message

Quality

Quality endorses fairness and honesty in business activities and communication, without anything doubtful or false in the both. Furthermore, quality helps in making a message reliable, trustworthy, and believable.

Relevance

Relevance adds interest in a message for receivers by making a message relevant to their needs. Relevance also helps one to analyze one's own communication whether it is appropriate or otherwise. Maxims of relevance assists in communication process while preparing/encoding and decoding a message.

Manner

A business message needs to be explicit enough to enable a receiver understand and act accordingly. Manner is closely associated with clarity and concreteness. Maxims of manner also helps in deciding the content-nature of a business message i.e. formal, semi-formal, and informal.

General Importance of Cooperative Maxims

Cooperative maxims are helpful in analyzing flouts of various standardized correspondence principles and causes and effects of such flouts in business communication. Cooperative maxims are of great value for business professionals in their day-to-day interactions.

3.   *What are the benefits of contents of pragmatics (schemata, frame, prototypical version, script, cultural schemata, direct and indirect meaning) in understanding ethnicity, cross-cultural differences, intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, verbal and non-verbal communication?*

The students' responses on the relationship between pragmatics and courses contents related to ethnicity, cross cultural differences, intercultural communication, and verbal and non-verbal are presented in Figure 5 below:
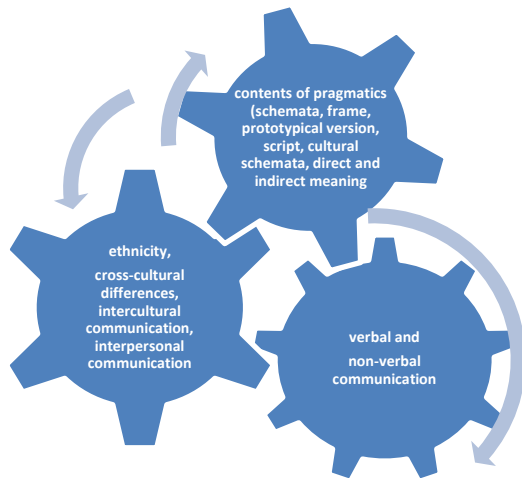
Figure 5. The role of concepts of pragmatics in verbal and non-verbal communication.

Schemata

Awareness of different cultures through schemata helps to fulfill communication purposes in business communication. Basic knowledge gained through our experiences helps in business communication. Cultural schemata help in intercultural communication.

Cultural Schemata

Awareness about others' cultures helps to interact and deal with them. Cultural differences are portrayed through dress, food, manners, education, language etc. Understanding of pragmatics may facilitate in interaction with the people from different backgrounds.

Frame

Frame is a fixed pattern that penetrates into daily matters and routine of individuals. An individual has his/her personal norms, and communicates accordingly. Background knowledge and beliefs influence what one perceives, thinks and acts. It is not necessary that all people of one culture think and judge alike. Some individuals use direct way of explaining and some use indirect way of explaining their standpoints.

Prototypical Version

Various cultures and sub-cultures may have their own patterns of what to state directly and what to state indirectly. Though culture is communal in its nature but individuals retain their own beliefs and behaviors. It is not necessarily that in one culture all individuals think, behave or communicate alike. Individuals have their own

patterns to communicate which may coincide with either their communal culture or their individual preferences.

Script

Event sequences help to understand various happenings. Script is a scheme that may be applied differently by the people of different cultures. Frame, prototypical version and schemata help to assume the culture and ethnic background of communities.

4.   *How are contents of pragmatics (inference, reference, referring expression, presupposition, entailment, co-text and context) beneficial in improving business communication skills?*

Both sender and receiver are responsible for managing pragmatic aspects of their utterances. Figure 6 presents the participants' responses on the role of pragmatics in improving business communication skills.
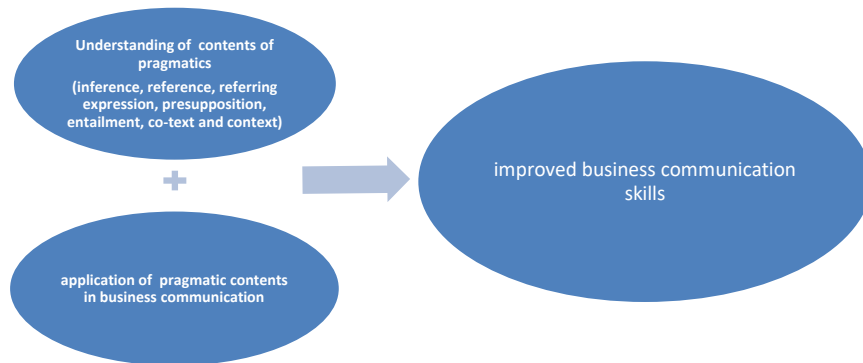
Figure 6. The impact of understanding and applying pragmatics on business communication skills.

The students' responses in this regard are presented below:

Inference

Inference is a cognitive process which helps receiver in interpreting the unsaid part of an utterance. Interpretations may depend on the context and co-text. Inference is a means to understand reference or entailment.

Reference

Reference helps to identify certain people, events, things etc. around us which lie in our communicative experience. Reference in a message should be easily understandable for the receiver. We attach references through referring expressions in the form of words and phrases we use for persons or things.

Referring Expression

Referring expressions provide hint for precise interpretation, and assist in identification. For example, the phrase 'class representative or CR' is used to identify a specific student among the whole class. A certain referring expression can only be understood within a certain community and rarely by an out-group. Both reference and referring expression are important to draw inferences.

Presupposition

While we speak or write, our utterances convey what we have presupposed. Presupposition depends on the knowledge of the communicators and contents of a message should be chosen carefully. Presuppositions help in supposing and assuming certain contents of a business message, and facilitate receivers in precise perception. If a receiver has already some information, the sender need not put that information in a message. Saying the utterance "Rida's dog is cute" includes a presupposition that 'Rida has a dog'.

Entailment

Entailment is to say something about someone or something e.g. 'Rimsha's dog is cute'. Entailment should be clear enough to understand. Entailments predict certain presuppositions, that is to say, presuppositions are reflected/conveyed through entailment. The entailment 'Rimsha's dog is cute' contains a presupposition that 'Rimsha has dog'.

Co-text and Context

Words change or lose their meanings when their context or co-text is changed or omitted. Co-text is formed through surrounding text of a word whereas context is formed through physical environment. Physical environment i.e. physical context plays a vital role in business communication as any communication or business transaction occurs in a specific physical context. Context provides certain specifications which help communicators converse accordingly. Context defines the status of a person. A person is an employee in office, whereas a son or brother at home. A sender has responsibility to convey information and knowledge to the reader through context and co-text. In case of shared context, a sender should avoid putting such information as is already known. Context provides the whole background about a word or a situation.

5. *How is the knowledge of 'pragmatics' beneficial in improving business communication skills?*

The participants perceive that explicit instruction of pragmatics is helpful in improving business communication skills. Figure 7 developed from students' responses show the role of explicit instruction of pragmatics in business communication skills.
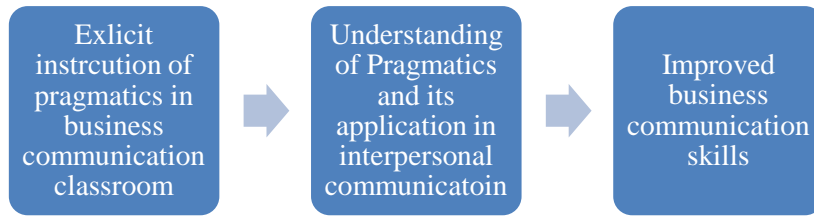
Figure 7: Impact of explicit instruction of pragmatics

Pragmatics harmonizes the communication between sender and receiver. Pragmatics helps to identify the influences on communication. Pragmatics helps business administrators in formulating messages and interpretations of received messages contextually. Pragmatics helps business administrators in determining and interpreting the unsaid part of a conversation. Both sender and receiver have assumptions; these assumptions may differ from each other's. Pragmatics helps business administrators to communicate with people through making careful assumptions about the people they interact. A sender makes assumptions about the receiver on the basis of his/her past experience regarding what the receiver can interpret. Pragmatics helps business administrators in realizing that a sender's intended meaning and the receiver's interpreted meaning may differ on the bases of their assumptions. Pragmatics helps business administrators in seeking, utilizing and delivering required bulk of information related to a business transaction, and thus it facilitates in making effective communication during various business transactions.

Audience is more important in a communicative event, and a sender is responsible to facilitate audience in making appropriate interpretations according to the sender's intended meaning. Pragmatics enables a receiver to interpret an utterance according to the particular context. Nonverbal communication has its contribution in communication process. Unsaid is unavoidable in communication. Unsaid part may be communicated through nonverbal communication. A sender may keep many things unsaid intentionally.

Discussion

The results on the importance of pragmatics for developing professional communicative competence among business students for their future corporate roles are supported by the literature(Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, 2013; Thill & Bovée, 2016). Thus, the courses of business communication need to be redesigned and modified to prepare the learners for the communicative situations they are likely to face in their professional lives. Explicit instruction of pragmatics is found beneficial in producing pragmatic competence among learners (Kasper & Rose, 1999) and it may facilitate in learning

business communication skills in diverse social, cultural and professional perspectives(Othman, 2011).

Explicit instruction of pragmatics is beneficial in diverse socio-cultural contexts and in understanding socio-cultural and other interpersonal communication differences (Riddiford & Joe, 2010) and likewise it can be effective in corporate communication in conveying and receiving business messages. Business communication proficiency developed through explicit instruction of pragmatics prepares business students for the required professional communicative competence. Explicit knowledge of pragmatics facilitates in understanding the variations of quantity, quality, relevance, manner, politeness, face, face saving acts, face threatening acts, extroversion, proficiency, verbal and nonverbal communication features and many other patterns from pragmatics which is also supported by Yule (1996a). Business is all about communication (Thill & Bovée, 2016), and pragmatics may facilitate in effective and appropriate professional communication.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the present study is that it includes data collected from instructors and learners of business students only. It could have been improved by including the opinions of the business administrators form the corporate sector. Moreover another weakness of the study is that the researchers used one group posttest design only in this study.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the results that inclusion of explicit pragmatics in the business communication syllabus plays an important role in preparing the students for their academic as well as practical success in their professional careers and real lives. Acquisition and afterwards application of pragmatics can be facilitated through explicit instruction in the classroom, both through teaching and classroom activities. Contents of pragmatics on speaker's intentions, presuppositions, frame, listener's interpretation, barriers/noise, and shared context are helpful in understanding communication cycle. Gricean cooperative maxims are of great advantage in learning and practicing 7Cs of business communication. Concepts of schemata, frame, prototypical version, script, cultural schemata, direct and indirect meaning are beneficial in understanding ethnicity, cross-cultural differences, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, verbal and nonverbal communication. Inference, reference, referring expression, presupposition, entailment, co-text and context are also beneficial in business communication.

Recommendations

The study recommends the inclusion of explicit pragmatics in the course contents of business communication skills to benefit the students of business studies for

the required communicative competence in their later professions. The contents of business communication courses should be modified according to communicative situations the learners are likely to face during their future professional careers. Further research studies can be conducted to find the effectiveness of explicit instruction of pragmatics in learning business communication through simulated case studies/ situations.

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