

A study of the Pragmatics of English in the Applied Linguistics School at PUCESE

Marlene E. Rengifo Obando

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Sede Esmeraldas

Email for correspondence: elisa95_8@hotmail.com

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Abstract

An analysis of the main difficulties related to pragmatics of the English language was done in the Applied Linguistics School (ALS) at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas (PUCESE). A descriptive and qualitative investigation was carried out by using the deduction and induction methods; besides, some techniques such as observation, survey, and test were applied to a population of 43 students of third, sixth, and eighth levels from the ALS where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The results revealed that the linguistic component investigated, pragmatics, is not taken into consideration at all, in the English language teaching-learning process. Learners, throughout the techniques employed, corroborated their lack of pragmatic competences of the English language when producing it. Several misinterpretations were noticeable in the test operated (Figure 3). This research coincides with a number of investigations done related to pragmatics. Those provided techniques and some materials to let learners be aware of the linguistic component studied. In this manner, a glossary was made for teachers and students of the ALS to be included as a didactic material to facilitate the English language teaching-learning process and to avoid possible misinterpretations.

Key words: pragmatics; English language teaching; Applied Linguistics; pragmatic competences; glossary

Introduction

The English language is considered one of the most important languages around the world. It is used for different purposes. People who speak English can easily travel to any continent and communicate without problems. Through the years it has become a global language and even established as official language in 57 countries. In Europe there are 3 countries which use the language in a formal manner. In America there are 14 countries; Asia 5 countries; while in Africa 21 and Oceania 14. English is spread around the world. In view of that, specialists on the teaching field have provided a great amount of methodologies and strategies for individuals who want to learn the language. Those have evolved considering the needs of the learners. Inside methodologies and strategies, linguistic components, such as pragmatics, have been emphasized in the didactic process. It is vital to interpret the language to respond properly to it. Nowadays, it is vital for students to handle certain competences to produce the language in an efficient way.

Herein complications arise, especially when learners are Spanish speakers. One of the difficulties is to get pragmatic competences, in order to interpret, and translate the language correctly. This is why, learners of a foreign language get confused with the real meaning of words and phrases in determined contexts.

Concerning the definition of pragmatics, it deals with words meaning, discourse meaning, and interpretation; not only of the speaker then also the receiver(s)'s interpretation (Blyth, 2010). Speakers must interpret the language, in order to produce it depending to the context or situation in which they are using it. Moreover, the improvement of pragmatic competences is the key in the English learning process to develop accuracy, fluency of the language; and avoid misunderstandings. In American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA, 2005) words, pragmatics is also called Social Language Use because it deals with different language functions that are produced in speech. Thereby, social language use means that hanging to the situation, speakers may use different language functions such as giving information, orders, questions, etc. Furthermore, the expressions and words the speaker uses to interact must have a correlation with the conversation. Finally, pragmatics is defined as the interpretation of the language in different social situations.

The English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners must develop pragmatic competences to put into practice the whole knowledge they have about the language. In so doing, they may use expressions / words correctly and mainly fitting with the context. As Brock and Nagasaka, (2005) have mentioned, the lack of pragmatic competences may obstruct communication. This is a main problem for Spanish speakers in the English teaching-learning process because they have misunderstandings of the language. Additionally, the causes of this problem may be: lack of background knowledge about the target language, social factors, and mother tongue interference.

The lack of pragmatic competences in Applied Linguistics students is a challenge for them, since the whole career is taught in English. Many times, there are some words, verbal phrases, or even expressions that giving to a particular context or situation have a different meaning. For instance, when the beginner learners listen to a phrase such as "I am feeling blue", they tend to think that someone is getting blue color, exempting it is not correct. This means that someone feels sad. This example shows the confusion some learners may have at the moment to interpret the English language. Henceforward, it would be good for teachers to know the main problems students devour at interpreting and translating the English language.

Thereby, the problem of the investigation is:

What are the main difficulties Applied Linguistics Students have in relation to pragmatics of the English Language?

Additionally, this problem of investigation leads other crucial questions such as:

What are some of the theories of pragmatics of the English language?

What are the main problems the Applied Linguistics students have at the moment of interpreting and translating the English language?

What didactic material could be helpful for students and teachers to overcome this problem?

Finally, this research is very valuable and useful for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners to develop the whole skills needed to be fluent in the language, as well to develop pragmatic competences in order to interpret the messages in a correct way so that it will not interfere or cause problems in the communication process.

Pragmatic problems

In the pragmatics field, the interpretation of the language should be done by means of its purposes. The intentions produced may vary accordingly to the language function. In the teaching-learning process, learners must handle them to figure it out the language. Consequently, there are three main skills to be considered in the pragmatics area to communicate. Thereby, when these skills are not handled by learners, they are, immediately, well-thought-out problems.

The interpretation of a language is perceived by verbal and non-verbal communication. ASHA, (2013) listed the commonest functions that languages use to lead into interactions. First, to use language for different purposes, such as: greeting, informing, promising, requesting, and forbidding. Second, to shift language along with the desires of the hearer or condition, like: speaking in a different way to a baby than to an adult, giving background information to an unfamiliar hearer, or changing the style depending on the audience.

Lastly, following rules for conversations as taking turns, presenting topics, staying on topic, restating when misheard topics, to use verbal and nonverbal signals, to use facial expressions and eye contact. By means of that, language is interpreted differently by the hearer. These communicative skills are acquired naturally and produced as well. Competences of the language are shown through these skills.

Teachers who follow the didactic process in EFL context may bear in mind the functions of the target language (TL). They have to deliver enough time explaining and practicing to communicate and let learners be clear on TL. When those skills are not developed in discourse, the lacks of communicative and pragmatic competences are palpable on learners. Herein, problems are noticeable when producing the language. In view of that, these skills should be taught so as to avoid problems when transferring the message.

Despite these skills are necessary in language output, this investigation is focused on the first skill. To use the language for different purposes is what non-native English learners are dealing with. They have to, at least, expertise this ability to have a productive output.

The Constructivism Theory

For teaching and learning a foreign language, a teacher may take into account different elements to improve all the skills a language requires. That is why, there are many theories that lead to teaching a foreign language, but the most important one is the Constructivism Theory. This is proposed by two main

psychologists, Vygotsky and Piaget. From Piaget's point of view, the constructivist theory means to provide a good learning environment, in that way learners may construct a meaningful knowledge.

On the other hand, for Vygotsky quoted by Ozer (2004), constructivism also refers to social constructivism because society and cultural factors play an important role in the learning process. These two points of view conclude that learning by doing is a meaningful way of constructing knowledge. Furthermore, Dewey, (1996; 40-50) considered as the father of pragmatism since the 30's, stated "We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience". This statement goes beyond the experience. It means that any experience cannot be meaningful if the learner does not realize it and goes deeply. Reflecting on what the learner is doing is how knowledge is constructed. For that reason, these theories are fundamental to consider in the English teaching-learning process.

Teaching pragmatics

Teaching a second language (L2) demands more strategies and methodologies to provide a meaningful teaching-learning process. The main aspect to take into consideration on teaching a L2 is its context. In Latin America, the English language is taught as a foreign language, in contrast to other countries such as the BANA (Britain, America, New Zealand and Australia) it is taught as a second language. Whenever the context is, the didactic process has to be done effectively. In Ecuador, the English language is taught as a foreign language (EFL) because the only place where learners have the opportunity to use their knowledge and apply their competences is the classroom. Through the years, the linguistics components have been playing a fundamental role in the National curriculum for teaching English.

Nowadays, pragmatics is placed in the Ecuadorian-in Service Teachers Standards and it is compulsion to include pragmatics in the lessons. Nevertheless, this linguistic component is not emphasized at all neither included in the unit plans. During lessons, teachers and students are focused only on pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar; even though, there are many intelligent and disciplined students, the didactic process fail as a consequence of lack of pragmatic competences. In Brook and Nagasaka words, students' abilities to interpret or to express communicative functions are limited. Despite the limitations learners have, there are more problems concerning the teaching process in Ecuador such as the lack of English teachers, additionally, those who are teachers have deficit of linguistic knowledge about the language.

Whatever the problem could be, learners ought to get pragmatic awareness to afford a good performing of the target language (TL). For that reason, Brock and Nagasaka (2005) proposed the SURE steps. These are used by teachers in some countries. This acronym See, Use, Review, and Experience has become one of the most known strategies for developing pragmatic competences. In the first step, the teacher may help students to see the language in different contexts and explain the function of pragmatics in determined situations. The

teacher may explain in a detailed way the language functions and the variation of meaning of words in contexts. Second, teachers may develop activities through which students can use English in real situations. Students have to know how to interact based on previous explanations.

The most essential objective the teacher has to fulfill is to make students develop communicative competences; subsequently they can get logical fluency in the language. Third, teachers ought to do a feedback in order to make clear the pragmatics of the English language. Further, to make an indirect evaluation using cognate words or expressions so that students may have a clearer interpretation of those words. Finally, through experiencing and observing the role of pragmatics in the English language, it is vital to present videos, films, TV-shows, because with these authentic materials is how real communication is interpreted in different contexts or situations.

These steps are a good support to facilitate the teaching-learning process in order to carry out education. It is a strategy that permits the EFL learner to develop his/her language skills. Learners may improve their proficiency of the language by having opportunities to put in practice what they have been taught. So, these steps give students facilities to mature the competences required. It is a practical and easy strategy to add in lessons.

Previous Studies

To learn a second language is an ability for all human beings. Anyway, there are some issues related to this process. One of them is mainly related to pragmatics. Many authors have argued that pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that studies the meaning of the language in different contexts or situations in the act of communication. (Liu, s.f)

Moreover, to teach pragmatic competences is useful for EFL learners to avoid misinterpretations in speech. Its importance has been deemphasized in the teaching-learning process; some teachers are unfamiliar with this linguistic component. As a result, it is avoided in the didactic process. Some investigators have been awarded about this problematic in many parts of the world as well as in Ecuador.

A clear example of misinterpretation is the mother tongue (L1) interference, what Lopez, quoted by Cabrera, et al., (2014), mentioned. He has investigated the influence of the L1 (Spanish) in the English (L2) writing process. He put together 24 students during one semester to write papers with the purpose of make an analysis of how understandable the composition can be even if there is mother tongue interference. The results showed that Spanish influenced more on word order and use of cognate words. To such a degree that it interfere the English syntax as well as its interpretation. Thereby, this investigation showed that the writing process and interpretation are affected by the mother tongue interference.

Another problematic was found by Alcon, (2014) who carried out an investigation with sixty Spanish speakers from Spain to analyze how pragmatics can be developed by means of sending emails to English native speakers. She joined up the students in one academic year in six international language schools in South England. Thirty participants were instructed on e-mail requests, they were the control group. Whereas the other half was not coached, they were the experimental team. All of them first sent emails to their teachers and they collected them at four different times. Those emails were analyzed and corrected to regard any presence of pragmatic problems. Thereby, when they landed in schools in England they had to observe how their issues on pragmatics interferes performance.

Furthermore, in Latin America pragmatics is still a missing linguistic component in the English teaching-learning process. In Ecuador, through the years, the point of view of teaching a L2 (English) has changed radically. Today, it is essential to have qualified English teachers in the classrooms. So, teachers must be prepared to let learners be involved with the language as well as its cultural aspects. Learners must have a profile which determines their linguistic components knowledge of the TL. Sometimes, learners lack of an essential one, pragmatics. They do not have pragmatic awareness developed.

Heras (2014) did a deep study on the pragmatics of the English language in the third level of Linguistics in the University of Cuenca, Ecuador. He designed a handbook to enhance 31 students' pragmatic competences. During his investigation, he taught 40 expressions that in line to the situation have different meanings. Conversely, in the final test he did, students had a free topic to prepare and dramatize, save for they only use 2 of the 40 expressions. This result shows that teachers may take into consideration the pragmatics role in the English language, not only because it is included in the government policy, aside from it helps students to develop fluency in their speech.

In Esmeraldas, there are not purely studies related to this research. A recent study dealt with English 'false friends'. It was done by a student from the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas. He took tests and surveys randomly to students of different careers, of the mentioned university, who deal with the English language. Its purpose was to identify the commonest false friends that interfered interpretation of the TL because of mother tongue interference. The results demonstrate that learners have misinterpreted words in the test which look like Spanish words. I.e. *actually*. Spanish speakers tend to confuse this word with a parallel term '*actualmente*' in their mother tongue; in contrast, this word has a different connotation in English. Even though they look alike, their meaning is not the same. (Guevara, 2015)

In conclusion, these revisions support the problematic of this investigation. All of them argued that developing pragmatic competences is a fundamental parameter in the English teaching process; outside of this, it is sometimes avoided when this process plays a role. Its importance relies on Alcon and Lopez studies,

where the lacks of pragmatics hamper the act of communication. While Guevara recognizes that the lack of knowledge of one of the pragmatic components, false friends, interfere understanding of the TL. These researches contribute to the didactic field where pragmatics ought to be included to facilitate language output.

Method

This descriptive investigation was done to identify the commonest problems students have in the pragmatics of the English language. First, an observation was carried out, for a period of one month, in third and sixth level of the Applied Linguistics School. In the third level: Academic Writing and British literature were the principal subjects considered in this process. Each subject had a period of one hour. On the other hand, concerning sixth level, oral discourse was the main subject to notice the difficulties EFL learners may suffer in speech. Additionally, a scale was designed to measure the criterion established in the observation process.

Second, two instruments were elaborated to obtain reliable results. On the one hand, after two months, a survey was applied to collect essential data about students' troubles on the pragmatics of the English language. In this manner, the survey had five questions related to the general knowledge learners had in relation to the pragmatics of the English language. Close questions and multiple choices were question's techniques applied in the survey. On the other hand, a test was also taken after the survey application. It had three questions, each contained five items. There were a variety of testing techniques used to produce valuable, reliable and consistent outcomes. Filling in the blanks with words of a box provided, multiple choice, and completing were the techniques cast-off to develop the pragmatics examination.

These instruments contributed with reliability and effectiveness of the study done. The survey served to contrast both, the knowledge learners thought they knew with the information they really had; it is provided by the test outcomes. For that reason, it is core to make a distinction on the supposed data with the real one. So, the information gotten was as detailed as possible.

Type of investigation

This is a descriptive investigation, since this research labeled the problems students from Applied Linguistics School have in relation to the pragmatics of the English language.

Methods

This research followed the inductive and deductive methodologies. It was inductive because before to identify pragmatics complications, an observation was done. This observation was the first step of an inductive research according to Neuman, (2003). Additionally, it was qualitative, because this investigation leaded with some theories, as well as the quantitative method since these results were analyzed in order to implement a

solution. Moreover, it was also deductive because throughout the investigation process a hypothesis emerged. It is: Will students be aware of pragmatics by means of applying a glossary in their lessons? Besides, there were several studies and theories which provide reliability to this research. Thus, this deductive study was from the general to the particular or determined terms, as Pelissier 2008, p.3.stated.

Universe and sample

The Applied Linguistics School is formed by three levels: third, sixth, and eight as an overall of forty three students. However, in this investigation only the lower levels were taken into account.

Students from the third and sixth level of this career contributed with this investigation. Thirty one women and seven men. This career was chosen because learners will teach English as a Foreign Language. Their future students at schools may vary in level, ages, learning styles, and kind of intelligences in Esmeralda's city. That is why, they ought to have this knowledge about the pragmatics role in teaching the language.

Data processing

The questionnaire was tabulated through the Formula of Percentage; in addition, the Manual percentage method was applied to collect information. The data was managed with Microsoft Excel software and tabulated as well.

Techniques and instruments

Observation. - During one month students were observed in order to identify the problems in discourse related to pragmatics.

Survey. - This was applied to students only. The survey provided 5 questions about the definition, importance, awareness, and issues of pragmatics. These questions served to detect students' knowledge about pragmatics.

Test. - It had ten sentences. Those questions were structured with some expressions and words that according to their context their meaning varies. So students had to translate those sentences into Spanish to show their pragmatic competences.

Nevertheless, if they did not understand a word in the sentence that interfere the translation, they were asked to circle it. In that way, a glossary could be built according to their weaknesses identified in the test; furthermore, words and expressions were added taking into account the most frequent used by native speakers. To implement this, the Word and Phrase corpus web page was used.

Results

Analyzing students' experiences on pragmatic problems, as it can be seen in figure 1, learners were asked about their experiences of misunderstandings when producing the language. Noticeably the 61% argued

that they sometimes have these problems when talking; meanwhile the 39% said they did not present this kind of problem. This means that the majority of the students present problems of misunderstandings.

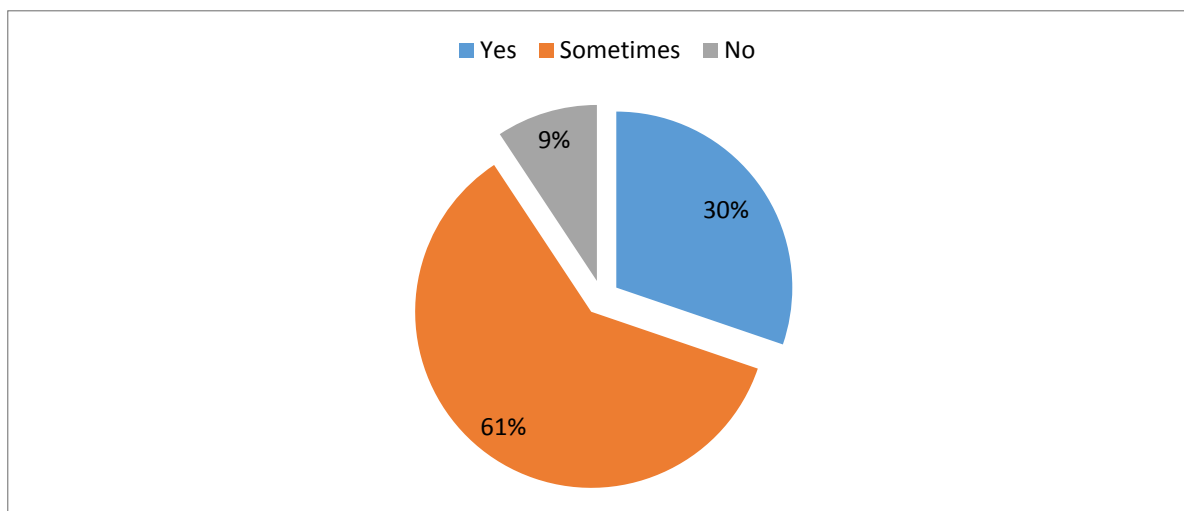


Figure 1: Students' experiences on pragmatic problems
Source: Survey applied to students

Analyzing the problems that hamper the English language Teaching-Learning process, as it is shown in figure 2, the principal ones were lack of background knowledge of the target language, followed by absence of knowledge and mother tongue interference.

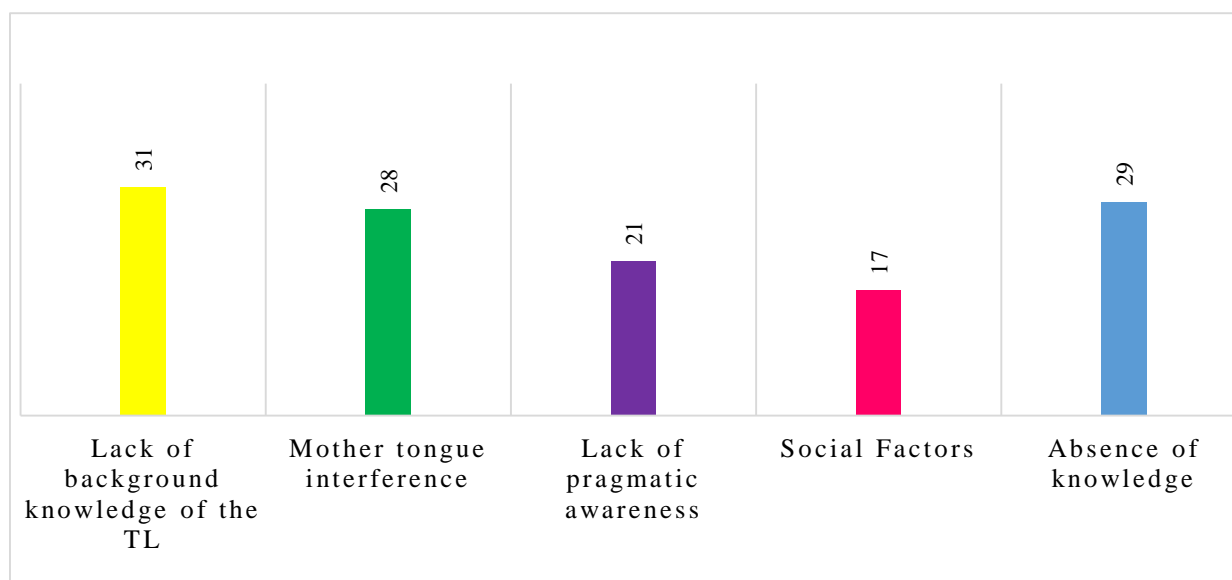


Figure 2: List of problems which hamper the T-L process
Source: Survey applied to students

To know pragmatic problems in the Applied Linguistics School students, a test was applied with different techniques provided. The results (Figure 3) showed that with the eleven words and expressions given

in the text, the majority of participants present difficulties on interpreting those utterances. In the first question, 'to bring home the bacon' and 'now and then' were the ones which present more incorrect answers. Furthermore, the second multiple choice question had more incorrect responses in the items: 'gives the floor' and 'a piece of cake'. Finally, in the last question where learners had to fill in the gap the seven utterances provided in a box; the majority of them had difficulties on completing the statements, to such a degree of letting everything in blank. However, the one which had more problems was 'to be wasted'.

The higher incidence is in the meaning of expressions such as: to bring home the bacon, now and then and to be wasted.

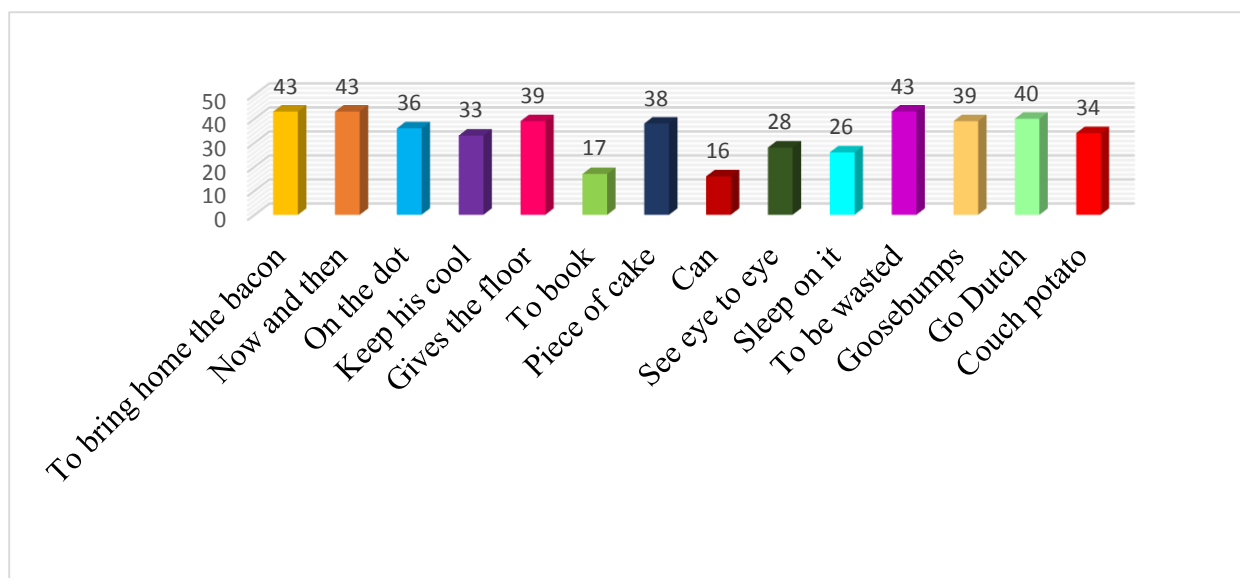


Figure 3: Pragmatic problems in the applied linguistics school
Source: Test applied to students

Discussion

Linguistic components are essential when learning a foreign language. Pragmatics, which studies the interpretation of languages, is the key to use it appropriately. This investigation was aimed to analyze the main difficulties Applied Linguistics students of third, sixth, and eighth levels have in relation to pragmatics of the English language at PUCESE. Its results demonstrated that they have many problems related to the linguistic component studied. It was realized their difficulties on interpreting the English language in the teaching-learning process through the techniques used like, survey, test and observations.

Several investigations have contributed to the development of pragmatic competences in EFL learners. On the one hand, language output is always interfered by the L1. It could be noticeable with Lopez' study. He

coincided that pragmatic competences cannot be developed at all by EFL learners because of their mother tongue (L1) interference. That is why Brock and Nagasaka (2005) proposed the for SURE steps; in which learners can be reinforced with the contents twice to be meaningful. These studies revealed that pragmatics has been taken place in the teaching-learning process for EFL learners to use and interpret the language correctly.

On the other hand, despite the double reinforcement on context it has been proved that learners can present the lack of pragmatic competences when using the language in real contexts. Alcon (2014) revealed that either if learners do not present misinterpretations of the English language when writing; they will present pragmatic problems when producing the language orally. It is independently of their good competences on grammar. It was also proved by means of this investigation. Many learners were categorized as the best students of the career; however, those good students also present problems when interpreting the target language studied. So, to get accuracy and fluency of a foreign language linguistic components are needed.

These investigations have contributed significantly to this research because of their close relationship to the problematic which affects the communication process. This pragmatic problem is seen all over the globe, where learners are non-native speakers and learn a second language (L2); to such a degree that linguists took place to solve this problematic. In view of this problem which hamper the teaching-learning process, Heras (2014) designed a handbook with 40 expressions whose meanings vary, so that learners of the University of Cuenca, Ecuador can be aware of pragmatics of the English language. As well as Guevara (2015) who elaborated a pamphlet with false friends for PUCESE teachers and students. Those authors contributed with didactic materials to help EFL learners solve this fundamental difficulty.

The present investigation revealed the problem is also present at the Applied Linguistic School with a vast number of misinterpretations of the English language. In view of the results gotten in this research, the elaboration of a didactic material for the Applied Linguistics students emerges from their need of developing pragmatic competences. It is a glossary to be included in their teaching-learning process. It consists of a list of words and expressions, with some examples, with their real interpretation of the English language. In doing so, it can be included at the Applied Linguistics School as a didactic material which serves to interpret the language adequately.

Conclusions

The main pragmatic problem identified at the Applied Linguistics School is related to language use which carries out the appropriateness of the language production based on situations.

Linguistic components, such as pragmatics, have to be emphasized in the English language teaching-learning process.

Applied Linguistics learners at PUCESE have lack of pragmatic competences of the English language.

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