Cross-cultural pragmatic failure and the esl classroom

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CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC FAILURE AND THE ESL CLASSROOM

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DEDICATION

To Thabo, who gives me a purpose in life;

To Richard, who gives me direction in life.

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ABSTRACT

Language learning does not only involve the mastery of grammatical rules, it also includes the acquisition of the ability to use and understand language in context.

This paper looks at pragmatic competence in second language teaching and learning. In the past a great deal of attention was given to the teaching of grammar. The seventies saw a move towards the communicative approach to language teaching. For the sake of brevity and emphasis, this paper concentrates on one aspect of communicative competence: pragmatic competence.

Linguists agree that there is universality in human language. However cultures differ from one another, and it is in linguistic behaviour that part of the diversity is realised. When people of different cultures, and indeed, different languages, have to share a common language, there is a great possibility of communication breakdown between native and non-native speakers as a result of cultural diversity. This paper examines cross-cultural communication breakdown and the implications it has on the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of communicative approach to language teaching brought about a shift of emphasis in second language teaching and learning. Prior to communicative language teaching, emphasis was laid on the teaching of grammar. Mastery and internalisation of the rules of grammar was the primary aim in second language teaching.

This paper sets out to examine one aspect of communicative language teaching: pragmatic competence. Based mainly on the work of Jenny Thomas (1983), the paper attempts to establish sources of communication breakdown across cultures, referred to as cross-cultural pragmatic failure. The nature and origin of pragmatic failure are examined in order to find out what implications they have in ordinary ESL classrooms.

The first chapter looks briefly at the concept 'competence' in the study of language. The discussion narrows down from Chomsky's competence/performance distinction to grammatical and pragmatic competence. Emphasis is laid on pragmatic competence since cross-cultural pragmatic failure results from inadequate pragmatic competence.

Cross-cultural pragmatic failure is discussed in Chapter Two. The chapter examines Thomas' distinction between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Both types of failure are attributed to cross-cultural differences. Unequal encounter is briefly discussed as a limiting factor in the acquisition of pragmatic competence.

The last chapter deals with what pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure mean to a teacher in an ordinary second language teaching and learning situation. A few suggestions are discussed on what could be done to tackle pragmatic failure thus increasing pragmatic competence.

Finally, the paper is not an attempt to impose a foreign culture on non-native speakers. It merely points out the significance of pragmatic competence and the effects of pragmatic failure on non-native learners. Although emphasis is laid on pragmatic competence, it does not suggest that grammatical competence can be done away with completely. Textbooks used in most ESL classrooms are designed for the teaching of grammar. Without undermining the importance of grammar teaching, the paper attempts to establish the need for pragmatic competence in language teaching and learning. Howatt (1984:247) quotes Widdowson (1972) as saying:

> The problem is that students, especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use in normal communication ... (my own emphasis)

Communication breakdown across cultures does exist and it can be accounted for and therefore remedied, especially in a formal classroom where language is taught. This paper seeks to establish this argument.

CHAPTER I : COMPETENCE

Introduction

Language is the most distinct aspect of human nature. A culture is made complete and unique by its language. 'The possession of language, more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from animals' (Fromkin and Rodman, 1983:3). Almost all human life is characterized by language. People other than linguists and other practitioners and theorists interested in the study of language, tend to take language for granted. But knowledge of a language, be it first or second, does not simply happen. The ability to use language is a skill, a more complex skill than might appear on the surface. Fromkin and Rodman (ibid.) state:

> ... the ability to carry out the simplest conversation requires profound knowledge that speakers are not aware of.

The view of language acquisition and language use as a skill justifies the need for language teachers, be they first or second language teachers. Language teachers are there to help learners acquire and perfect their language skills. Knowledge of a language therefore implies competence. What then is this 'competence' in the study of language? This chapter sets out to look briefly at views held by linguists on competence.

Linguistics is rapidly becoming a complex discipline with theorists and researchers approaching it from varying angles according to their interest. Sociolinguists, psycholinguists, grammarians, teachers etc. all have different approaches to the study of human language. Each

draws from the theory of language data relevant to his/her subject of study. Similarly competence is seen from various points of view by different theorists. The emphasis is therefore not on what competence per se is, but on competence as seen from a particular perspective. For instance, a grammarian will be interested in grammatical competence. The exclusion of other forms of competence does not disprove their existence, but only serve to draw attention to the subject on focus. Besides, there is a lot of overlapping despite varying approaches. Distinctions are therefore made mainly for the sake of emphasis.

1.1 Competence and Performance

It is perhaps necessary to point out that just as there is a lot of overlapping in various theories of language, terminology also overlaps a great deal. A common term may be used by different theorists to refer to (slightly) different concepts. One such term is 'linguistic competence'. Thomas (1983) refers to the speaker's linguistic competence as comprising of both grammatical and pragmatic competence. Widdowson (1984:229ff) however defines Chomsky's linguistic competence as 'the language user's knowledge of rules for the composition of sentences'. Fromkin and Rodman also explain the concept as the speaker's knowledge of 'rules of syntax'. I shall refer to linguistic competence in the same way as Widdowson and Fromkin and Rodman while discussing Chomsky's competence/performance distinction.

The speaker's linguistic competence, according to Chomsky, is his knowledge of the sound system of a language as well as the knowledge of how the sounds and meaning of

words are related. The speaker's linguistic competence enables him to understand grammatical sentences in a language. The starring exercise given by Fromkin and Rodman as an example, demonstrates the speaker's linguistic competence.

Example:
1. He is printing a potret
2. They is worry about her
3. Mpho loves pants
4. Sindi argue Richard

If the language user successfully stars ungrammatical sentences, his/her linguistic competence will be reflected. According to the authors it is the speaker's 'intuition' that guides him in choosing the ungrammatical sentences. It is this intuition that Chomsky terms linguistic competence; all the knowledge that the speaker has about the grammatical rules of a language.

Crystal (1985:89) defines linguistic competence as:

> ... a person's knowledge of his language, the systems of rules which he has mastered so that he is able to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences, and to recognise grammatical mistakes and ambiguities.

The speaker's linguistic competence therefore, reflects his mastery of rules of grammar and sentence formation.

Chomsky contrasts the speaker's linguistic competence with his/her (speaker) linguistic performance. This distinction has been widely criticized for its lack of precise, clear-cut boundary. According to Chomsky, the speaker's linguistic performance does not always reflect his/her linguistic competence. Spoonerism is an example of linguistic behaviour that does not reflect linguistic competence. The user's performance may be affected by physiological or psychological factors. Although in theory a

speaker can produce an infinite number of sentences, physiological factors limit him/her to a few in a given time.

Reacting to the shortcomings observed in Chomsky's theory of competence, Hymes proposed a 'modified' version of competence referred to as communicative competence.

1.2 Communicative Competence

What is communicative competence, and how does it differ from Chomsky's linguistic competence? Part of Crystal's definition is quoted below in an attempt to answer this question:

> Communicative competence ... focuses on the speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur - what he needs to know in order to communicate effectively in socially distinct settings. (Crystal, 1985:59) (my own emphasis)

This notion of competence was a reaction to Chomsky's 'idealised' linguistic competence. According to Atkinson et al (1982:40), Labov's reaction to Chomsky's notion of competence was that there is no such thing as a homogeneous speech community. The social environment determines the speaker's linguistic performance. Most important to this discussion is Hymes' reaction. He argues that in as much as the well-formedness of a sentence is important, so is its being appropriate. The speaker's competence should therefore comprise both the knowledge of the rules of syntax and the ability to use and understand language in 'distinct social settings'.

Widdowson (1954) argues that the distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence must be made. He illustrates the distinction between the two by

differentiating between sentences and utterances. Linguistic competence has to do with generation of sentences and understanding of sense and denotation of grammatical sentences. Communicative competence is extended further to include the connotation of utterances.

> The sense and denotation of a sentence signal themselves whereas utterances refer to something out of linguistic forms. (Widdowson, 1984:233)

Reference is drawn from context.

The distinction between sentences and utterances is vital in the discussion of pragmatic competence. Theorists interested in linguistic competence pay specific attention to the sense of linguistic symbols. Those interested in communicative competence place greater emphasis on the force of utterances. Theories in social sciences do not often replace one another merely by being criticized and seen to be inadequately accounted for. Proponents of communicative competence do not altogether discard linguistic competence. Findings reinforce rather than replace one another.

Communicative approach to language teaching is an attempt by linguists such as, among others, Widdowson, Brumfit and Johnson, to deal with overemphasis on the teaching of grammar. This is the latest trend in language teaching that has resulted in a sizeable amount of literature being written on the subject. Widdowson (ibid) in particular sees acquisition of communicative competence as the responsibility of the language teacher rather than the linguist:

> The linguist can afford to concentrate on (linguistic) competence. He is not accountable to practical effectiveness. But the language teacher cannot so conveniently ignore capacity because it lies in the heart of language use.

(Capacity according to Widdowson is the way in which linguistic competence is activated in specific 'instances of language behaviour'.)

Roberts in Brumfit (ed.) (1986:56) identifies four areas which he refers to as components of communicative competence: formal competence, sociocultural competence, psychological competence and performing competence. His description of sociocultural competence seems to correspond with Thomas' pragmatic competence.

1.3 Grammatical Competence

The distinction between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence corresponds with that between linguistic competence and communicative competence.

Grammatical competence is the speaker's ability to use the rules of grammar correctly to generate and understand linguistic symbols. Roberts (ibid) refers to this concept as 'formal competence'. He further uses Di Pietro's subdivision; grammatical competence and idiomatic competence. For the sake of brevity Di Pietro's subdivision will not be used in this paper. Grammatical competence will be used to refer to the overall concept of formal competence.

Most textbooks designed for second language learning are in line with the need to equip learners with a mastery of grammatical rules. Learners are expected to learn and internalize the linguistic system of the target language. Second language teaching and learning therefore centres

around fluency; the learner's ability to use the rules of grammar. Until the seventies' move to communicative language teaching, fluency through grammar teaching had been the primary aim in second language teaching. Since grammar is rule-governed, grammatical competence can be successfully assessed by using the rules of grammar to determine the learner's competence.

Grammatical competence is consciously acquired through formal teaching. Drill exercises, substitution tables etc. are common methods in grammar teaching. Proponents of communicative language teaching reacted to overemphasis on grammar teaching. These theorists argue that fluency should not be the only aim in language teaching and learning. Since grammar has to do with formal structures of a language, emphasis will be on form and not on function. Learners are involved with the sense and denotation of linguistic structures. Communicative competence theorists maintain that language learning goes beyond mere form-structure and sense-denotation learning. Learners do not only learn to generate sentences. In fact, as Widdowson (ibid) points out, learners do not necessarily refer to their linguistic competence in situations that demand real language use. If, for instance a learner wishes to decline an invitation in real life situation, she/he does not refer to the grammatical rules of negation but to pragmatic principle of declining an invitation.

One strong criticism against grammar teaching is the teaching of structures out of context. For example when a certain structure is taught, learners drill sentences that

are isolated:

Concord: The boy eats a cake
kicks a ball
throws etc.

Communicative language teaching has introduced a move towards teaching structures in context. Emphasis is now being shifted from pure grammar teaching to an attempt 'to teach' pragmatic competence. (The verb is in quotes here because theorists do not say for certain whether pragmatic competence can be 'taught'. Perhaps 'help to acquire' is more appropriate.)

1.4 Pragmatic Competence

Jenny Thomas (1913) defines pragmatic competence as the speaker's ability to use language appropriately and to understand language in context.

Pragmatic competence is to communicative competence what grammatical competence is to linguistic competence. It is easier to explain pragmatic competence by contrasting it with grammatical competence. The distinction between grammar and pragmatics is the central point to works such as that of Leech (1983): Principle of Pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of language in use and it has to do with the force, connotation and function of utterances.

In order to communicate effectively in a second language, learners need to be able to understand the force and function of utterances. It is equally important that learners should be able to use the language appropriately in 'distinct social settings'. Inability to grasp the force of utterances or failure to use language appropriately is referred to as pragmatic failure. Roberts' description of sociocultural competence which matches Thomas' pragmatic

competence goes:

> ... knowledge of the language enabling one to go through the routines of the day ... observed in a given society and the linguistic protocols they entail. These will include such things as greeting people, introducing oneself, making excuses and apologies, thanking people ... etc. The language used to realise the sort of 'functions' listed, is of course very largely ritualised and highly predictable but actually learning it is the only one problem: another is learning when to use it, and here there may often exist marked contrasts between different societies.
> (p. 7) (my own emphasis)

The above quotation is a summary of what this whole paper entails. The emphasised terms are prevelant in the discussion. Realisation of functions, the learning and actual use, emphasis on contrast and differences in societies all form part of what is involved in helping learners to acquire pragmatic competence. Since most of the pragmatic failure observed results from the 'contrasts' - differences between what is appropriate in one society and not in another, this paper concentrates on cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

Pragmatics unlike grammar is principle not rule-governed. Leech (1980:5) states that principles are more socially than linguistically motivated. Theorists maintain that pragmatic principles are universal, but their application in language use differ from culture to culture. For instance one uses an indirect speech act in one language for a request because of what Brown and Levinson (1978) call 'social pressure' on language use - in this case the expression of politeness. But Brown and Levinson also observe that:

> In the case of linguistic pragmatics a great deal of mismatches between what is said and what is implicated can be attributed to politeness. (p. 2)

It is this cross-cultural difference that results in pragmatic failure and apparent pragmatic non-competence.

The fact that pragmatic competence is based on a subject governed by social rather than linguistic factors makes it difficult for theorists to lay down strict, rigid systematic rules for pragmatic competence. From the discussion above, it is noted that grammar is rule-governed and can be taught and learned in accordance with laid down grammatical rules. Leech (1980:4) however makes this observation about grammar:

> ... the claim that grammar is rule-governed in a strict sense is too strong: there are too many problems involved in defining what is grammatical for a grammar to be completely subject to yes-or-no application rules. But the relative success of grammatical formalizations in terms of rules ... has to be acknowledged.

Leech further argues that pragmatics has been used for quite a long time as a 'dumping place' for what could not be accounted for by grammar. But systematicity does exist in pragmatics and needs to be acknowledged just as rules of grammar are. Widdowson, Leech and Thomas all agree that pragmatics lacks the level of precision that grammar has and this in fact makes it difficult to be taught. The distinction between grammar and pragmatics is realised in terms such as principles/rules, function/form and utterance/sentence. Leech however considers terms such as 'principle' and 'function' as vague. This gives pragmatics a rather weak stance; that in fact it cannot be accounted for. Why then do theorists and practitioners bother to include pragmatics in language teaching and learning? Leech attempts

to justify this by saying:

> Terms like principle and function are vague, the regularitics we observe in pragmatics are weaker than those which we observe in grammar. But what is systematic, even if weakly so, needs to be studied and described. (p. 5) (my own emphasis)

Like Thomas, Leech also believes that pragmatic competence determines 'good linguistic behaviour'. The learner's pragmatic competence in a second language will enable him/her to use language appropriately as situations demand, and also to understand language in use.

Summary

The foregoing chapter has attempted to explain the concept 'competence' in the study of language. Chomsky's (initial) linguistic competence has been briefly discussed. Reactions to the shortcomings observed in Chomsky's competence led to a new concept: communicative competence. The two components of communicative competence, grammatical and pragmatic competence are distinguished from one another. This distinction is based on that between grammar and pragmatics.

Modern world is characterized by communication across the nations. Trade and diplomatic ties bind different nations together. The necessity for communication across cultures calls for a uniform language that can be shared to bridge the world wide communication gap. English for some reason has been chosen as an international language. By necessity English has become a second language in most developed and developing countries. English as an international language is therefore becoming a shared property, not only belonging to native English speakers, but

to other speakers too.

It is becoming a great debate whether English should be taught as English-English or English as a second language, or any other similar description. An attempt to answer this big question will not be made in this paper. The view that this paper takes is that English should be taught to non-native speakers in such a way that they are able to communicate effectively with native speakers and other speakers of English. Hence the emphasis on pragmatic competence. Without making English sound as THE model language, teachers need to make sure that learners are linguistically well-equipped to be able to choose for themselves whether or not they want to be appropriate. Learners must be given what Thomas terms 'informed choice'.

The next chapter closely examines cross-cultural pragmatic failure with special reference to English as a second language.

CHAPTER II : CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC FAILURE

Introduction

Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as the ability to understand language in use. Pragmatic failure occurs when the hearer fails to understand what the speaker means by what she/he says. Cross-cultural communication breakdown occurs mostly when the speaker and the hearer do not share the same cultural background. Pragmatic failure does not therefore come about between native and non-native speaker and hearer only.

One of the principal aims of teaching a second language is to help the learner to use the language effectively when communicating with native speakers and other speakers of the language. To function effectively the learner needs both grammatical and pragmatic competence in the target language. Grammatical competence is characterised by mastery of grammatical rules and systems governing the said language. Pragmatic competence is 'the ability to use language ... in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context' (Thomas, ibid).

Grammatical competence is reflected in the learner's ability to use language fluently as a result of correct use of rules of grammar. When the learner is able to use language appropriately in specific contexts, and when she/he understands language in use, then she/he has pragmatic competence. Rules that govern the grammar tend to be prescriptive while pragmatic principles vary across cultures. However, Leech's comment quoted in Chapter One of this paper

must be borne in mind; that claims about rules of grammar being strict and rigid are too strong.

Both grammatical and pragmatic competence form the learner's linguistic competence. (The term linguistic competence is used here as Thomas does; it does not refer to Chomsky's competence.) Most linguists who are concerned with pragmatic competence argue that grammatical competence has been emphasized at the expense of pragmatic competence. This bias is reflected in textbooks and other material designed for second language learners. For this particular reason, this paper attempts to concentrate on pragmatic competence; what it is, what the sources of pragmatic failure are, and what could be done to help learners acquire pragmatic competence. The distinction between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence is made in order to highlight the nature of pragmatic competence and to give special attention to pragmatic failure.

2.1 Pragmatic Failure

Riley (1984) explains pragmatic failure in this way:

> Pragmatic failure occurs when we fail in some way to understand a speaker's full intention in saying something. For some reason, we do not go successfully from what is said to what is meant. It is, therefore, an umbrella term covering a wide variety of communicative problems which prevent the successful grasping of the contextual meaning of an utterance.

Communicative language teaching, the current trend in second language teaching methodology places a great deal of emphasis on language in use. Props or real life situations are brought to class in an attempt to enable learners to 'function' in the second language. But such real life

situations seem to be slightly idealised - according to my own observation. When learners are confronted with real life situations outside the classroom they may have to employ different communication strategies, different from those they have learned in class. For example, more often than not one goes into a shop and is hardly ever given a chance to greet but is asked straight away by the shop assistant if one requires any help. Some situations demand that participants get down straight to business without spending a few moments on pleasantries.

There does not seem to be a humanly possible way in which teachers can teach each and every possible 'context' to their learners. Misunderstanding between native and non-native speakers appears to be inevitable. Encounters between people of different cultural background do not always happen in specialised speech events where elicitations and responses are precisely predictable. How then can teachers help their learners to minimize cross-cultural pragmatic failure? Chapter Three of this paper will attempt to answer this question. Teaching pragmatic competence is by no means an easy task.

Grammatical errors made by non-native speakers are easily recognisable and can be accounted for. When marking pupils' written work, especially essays on creative writing, I, like most ESL teachers, look out for grammatical mistakes. Grammatical errors reflect the learner's lack of mastery of grammatical rules. Native speakers appear to be more tolerant and accommodating to grammatical errors than they are to pragmatic failure. According to Thomas (ibid),

grammatical errors reflect on the speaker's inability whereas pragmatic non-competence reflects on his/her personality. Tannen (1984) also made a similar observation after a cross-cultural misunderstanding of compliments between her and her Greek friend. She says: 'What I had interpreted as a personality characteristic was a cultural convention'. A person can be easily pardoned for violating grammatical rules but using language inappropriately results in a person being negatively labelled and nationally pigeon-holed according to negative stereotype such as; the cold Briton, the aggressive Afrikaner and the uncultured Coloured. Scollon and Scollon give a brief account of ethnic stereotypes resulting from cross-cultural miscommunication in Richards and Schmidt (1983).

To illustrate the difficulty that teachers have in correcting appropriateness, I shall use examples from two letters; one from Thabo my seven year old son, and another from Levi, a boy I taught in std 9 in Namibia:

(i) My Mather
Ke ithuta sekgoa jara e the me is sitting
outside the house
I learn English year this

(ii) Dear madam
We are getting on here on school

Thabo's errors can be identified and corrected straight away; they are grammatical. Wrong spelling and incorrect use of first person pronoun. But what about Levi's? The easiest way out will be to concentrate on grammatical error - the wrong preposition. But what about 'madam' and the introductory sentence? In both Oshiherero and Setswana it is compulsory to open a letter with: 'we are still keeping well

here at home (literal translation). Levi's command of English is excellent despite his being taught through the medium of Afrikaans all his school career. He is a bright and daring learner who likes to communicate with speakers of all languages in his multicultural environment. Being fluent however does not guarantee pragmatic competence. All Nambian pupils that I have taught call male teachers 'Masters' and female teachers 'madam'. I do not have concrete evidence for my suspicion about the origin of 'master' and 'madam', which are 'baas' and 'miesies' in Afrikaans. But they may be a result of pupils being taught by Afrikaans teachers who might have insisted on being called 'baas' and 'miesies'. In 1980, I worked at an agriculture college where I was always asked by whites looking for the vet where 'baas dokter' was. My task is to show Levi that it may be appropriate and compulsory in his culture to use openings such as the one he wrote, but that the same rule might not apply in other languages.

Pragmalinguistics and Sociopragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure does not only occur when the learner uses language inappropriately, but also when she/he fails to grasp what is meant by what is said. Indirect speech acts appear to cause a lot of pragmatic failure by their lack of 'straightforwardness'. Most speech acts are the same across cultures, they differ only in the force that they convey. For instance 'Can you VP' exists in most languages, but its force varies across cultures.

Thomas (ibid) distinguishes between two types of pragmatic failure: pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the speaker mismatches the pragmatic force of an utterance or when she/he inappropriately transfer speech act strategies. Sociopragmatic failure occurs as a result of misconception about what is appropriate in the second language speech behaviour. Pragmalinguistic failure is said to be 'language-specific' while sociopragmatic failure is 'culture-specific'. Since it is mainly cultural differences that cause cross-cultural communication breakdown, more emphasis is laid on sociopragmatic failure.

2.1.1 Pragmalinguistic Failure

A great deal of the English that learners acquire is done through their own effort. In the classroom learners learn aspects of grammar such as tense, vocabulary etc. When using the language in real life situations outside the classroom, especially to native speakers, learners are forced to use their own speech strategies. It is not surprising therefore that they end up mismatching pragmatic force of utterances. The tendency is for learners to use force: form correlation as a result of having learned the three main sentence types in class. Thus an utterance like: 'Can you clean the board for us Sipho?', will often be responded to verbally and non-verbally: 'Yes Miss' then the act of cleaning.

Speech acts, as stated before, are common across cultures, they only differ in the context in which they are employed and the force that they convey in those particular contexts. Learners not being aware of this will transfer their L1 speech act strategies into the target language. Most

African languages (in South Africa) have utterances which are mostly explicit performatives. In Setswana for instance one often says:

Ke kopa go botsa
I beg to ask

This speech act is not only restricted to instances similar to those in English where the speaker needs to say: 'May I ask ...' In English, at least in instances that I have observed, the speaker hardly ever expects a yes or no answer. Whereas in Setswana such an utterance will truly require a yes/no response from the hearer:

S: A nka botsa?
May I ask?

H: Ee/Nyaa
Yes/No

A native English speaker may be irritated when the speech act is carried over into English. The speaker may be stunned if the hearer does not respond and may think that the hearer is not interested in what she/he is saying. The hearer may be bored by what she/he perceives as unnecessary pauses in the conversation.

Politeness strategies are universal but their application is culture-determined. Linguistic realization of politeness in most African languages appear in the same form as the above example; explicit, elaborate performative which look like two speech acts in one. Malcolm Mackenzie (1986) uses Sefako Nyaka's example where a pupil 'politely' approaches a teacher and tells him that 'Official school is out, and it is our time now'. In this particular context that Nyaka observed, the teacher was being given an order

by a pupil, but even so the order came as a humble request. And the teacher who incidentally belongs to the same culture as the pupil understood the utterance as it was meant. In English, as in other languages, politeness may be realised in totally different linguistic behaviour. Leech (1983:110) gives an excellent example of what he calls 'Pragmatic Paradoxes of Politeness'. An utterance such as 'Let me carry your case' may be used by an English speaker not to offer help but merely as a form of politeness. Setswana may be rich with idiomatic language but a similar utterance said in Setswana does not have any other pragmatic force but that of offering assistance.

Thomas (ibid) attributes pragmalinguistic failure partly to teaching-induced errors. In classroom communication learners are expected to give elaborate answers in complete sentences. When this strategy is carried over, it often results in inappropriate propositional explicitness. Propositional explicitness may also result from L1 speech act strategies:

T: A ga wa dira homework gape?
Have not you done homework again?

P: Ee
Yes

T: Ee eng
Yes what

P: Ee mistress, ke dirile homework
Yes mistress, I have done

The negative form of the question makes it difficult for the learner to answer yes/no without using a complete sentence. Complete sentences are necessary in class to practice some structures such as tense and voice. The teacher is placed in

a difficult position to regulate classroom communication in order to avoid and minimise teaching-induced errors.

2.1.2 Sociopragmatic Failure

Cultural differences can be realised in a number of ways such as food, clothes and dances. In linguistics different linguistic behaviour often reflects cultural differences. Pragmatic parameters can be used to assess cultural differences. Such parameters as size of imposition, relative power that one speaker has over another, social distance between participants and the ranking of social values, to a large extent determine linguistic behaviour.

Some time this year a group of British teachers visited schools in the USA on a teacher exchange programme. Commenting on her impression of USA schools, one teacher said she was impressed by the 'status' that teachers have in schools. I also had a chance to visit schools in Britain and could not help noticing how different teacher-pupil relationships were from South African schools. To be honest, I found the classes 'free' but a bit chaotic. The teacher's power over his/her pupils and the social distance between teacher and pupil differ in a noticeable way in British, American and South African schools. Of all four pragmatic parameters mentioned above, relative power and social distance interest me most. I see in both these parameters a possibility of classroom encounter being unequal. This possibility I shall discuss later in this chapter.

It is in sociopragmatic failure that the question of 'appropriateness' is clearly illustrated. Sociopragmatic failure is perhaps the key aspect in pragmatic failure that

leads to national stereotypes. Since the perception of pragmatic parameters (or social variables as Brown and Levinson prefer to call them) is heavily culturally determined, members of the same culture will tend to enact similar or even the same linguistic behaviour. It is not surprising therefore that people become labelled with a negative national or ethnic stereotype.

Pragmatic Parameters and Sociopragmatic Failure

A native speaker's perception of social variables may differ to a great extent to that of a non-native speaker. This difference in perception may lead to unintentional communication breakdown. Brown and Levinson (ibid) consider social variables as factors determining the level of politeness that the speaker will use to the hearer. In cross-cultural interaction, differing perceptions may yield disastrous results of miscommunication. The following discussion examines sociopragmatic failure as manifested in cross-cultural perception of pragmatic parameters.

(a) Imposition

Ranking of imposition has to do with the size of the imposition that the speaker makes on the hearer. In every society there are goods or things that are common and shared by people. These common goods I shall refer to as 'public' goods. Thomas (ibid) uses Goffman's terminology of 'free' and 'non-free' to distinguish between things with minimum or none degree of imposition and things with a high degree of imposition. One item may be free, public, common and shared in one culture and be considered non-free in another culture. Again the choice and level of politeness strategy will be

determined by whether the item in question is public or not.

I have not yet realised, even after a year in Britain, whether cigarettes are public or non-public items. It may be because most public places are non-smoking areas. In South African townships the smoking fraternity is very strong indeed. No fuss is ever made when one asks for a 'skuif' (fag). A complete stranger can say to who ever she/he sees smoking: 'skuif mfo' (fag brother) without the slightest fear of being impolite. In fact in most cases cigarettes are offered even before they are asked for. It might be interesting to note the size of the utterance itself: skuif - one single word. More often than not politeness utterances require elaborate speech acts. For example:

> Excuse me, can you offer me a cigarette please?
> Can I have a fag please? etc.

In South African townships this very free and public item is requested with as little an effort as possible. All the speaker needs to say is 'Fag'. The request seems even less 'polite' in Russian, to use Thomas' example:

> Daite sigaretu
> Give (me) a cigarette

In a culture where cigarettes are not public items it will require an entirely different speech act to ask for some than it does in the above examples. This might prove even more difficult if the item in question is altogether not public. If a speaker employs a speech act according to his/her cultural perception on size of imposition, she/he might be thought to be 'rude' or a similar description.

'Thank you' is a frequently used expression in English but in other cultures it is not. In some cultures 'thank

you' is limited to acknowledgement of the giver's pains or effort where the ranking of imposition is relatively high. To refer again to Tannen's example, her Greek host did not say thanks when she complemented him on the dishes he prepared but agreed with her that they were indeed excellent. Also in some African cultures one does not say thanks when offered medicine since medicine is considered a public item. I have also noticed while teaching in Namibia that stationery at school is public; the pupils' right not privilege. Still I expected my pupils to say thanks when I gave them stationery. Being a typical teacher that I am, I wanted to impose my own idea of giving thanks on them. Some of them did try, but the general feeling was that they were entitled to the stationery anyway, so why should they say thank you for something that was rightfully theirs.

Imposition ranking covers both material and non-material goods. It seems impossible for a learner to know exactly what is public and non-public in a foreign culture. For this reason, it is vital that learners be exposed to the foreign culture as much as possible. As I have mentioned already, it is quite difficult to teach pragmatic competence and to correct pragmatic failure. Nevertheless some native speakers have a way of dealing with sociopragmatic failure. Some time ago I overheard an exchange between a native lecturer and a non-native student:

K (non-native): How many daughters do you have?
T (native) : How many daughters do <u>you</u> have?

In a way T was trying to say to K: it is none of your business. In fact K was interrupting a serious discussion

between T and me. Not only was he interrupting our conversation he was asking for non-public information. When we resumed our discussion T did mention that K was asking a rather impolite question. Besides the social distance between T and K was considerably wide, which brings us to the next social variable.

(b) Social distance

In their discussion about women and language use, Brown and Levinson (ibid) cite the examples given by Labov and Milroy, two linguists who studied the use of linguistic variables in relation to social classes. Milroy particularly exploited social networks of her informants. Both linguists, as did others in the same field, realised that the speech of the informants was affected by the presence of the investigator. Speech tended to be more formal when directed to the investigator because of the considerable wide social distance between the investigator and the informants. (This observation gave rise to the 'Observer's Paradox' - a term coined by linguists to describe the investigator's interference). Similarly in interactions where social distance between participants is wide, their linguistic behaviour will reflect less positive politeness (Brown and Levinson: p. 31).

In a cross-cultural encounter where one participant observes a wider social distance and the other does not, there is bound to be sociopragmatic failure. The participant who observes social distance may appear cold and distant, whereas the one who does not may be seen as aggressive or rude or both. The question is: whose perception do

participants adhere to. The straightforward answer will be: negotiation. But in a thirty-minute encounter it might not be easy to negotiate differing views. The danger is, that half an hour may affect a person's entire life as observed in the so-called gate-keeping encounters.

The South African socio-political context does not do much to lessen the alien social encounter between native English speakers and non-native speakers, especially 'non-whites'. The country's racial laws are such that interaction between black and white is very limited. Social distance between races is marked and chiefly characterized by power relations with the white in the high position of employer, priest, doctor, etc. What significance does this have on the second language learner? It places the teacher in a difficult position of teaching learners what might appear as non-existent contexts. This particular instance is only mentioned here to highlight the plight that some teachers have in teaching pragmatic competence, the subject in itself is too wide and complex to be explained in this paper.

(c) Power relationships

Closely related to social distance is the power relationship between speaker and hearer. The relative power or authority that one participant has over another is culturally determined. In most instances the degree of social distance corresponds to a great extent with the amount of power. Thomas (ibid) writes:

> As Glahn (1981) pointed out, an asymmetrical power relationship exists between native and non-native speakers (whether the native speaker is conscious of it or not). Non-native speakers sometimes appear to be behaving in a pragmatically inappropriate manner (e.g. by being unexpectedly deferential) because they (rightly) perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage.

Whether it is entirely true that native-non-native encounter is unequal is debatable and will be tackled later in this chapter under unequal encounter. But there are instances where asymmetrical power relationship is observable such as in classroom encounter between teacher and learners. Again in this instance the amount of power perception differs from culture to culture and in fact from country to country. The example of a British teacher not failing to notice the 'status' of the American teacher is a good one. In South Africa teachers exercise a greater amount of authority and maintain considerable social distance between them and their learners. Politeness pronouns (see Brown and Levinson (ibid):p. 23ff) used in languages such as French and Afrikaans are linguistic realisations of both social distance and power relationships. The use of third instead of second person in some African languages as well as in Afrikaans also indicate unequal power relationships. Example:

Afrikaans: Het ma my geroep?
Did mother (me) call?

Setswana : A mme one a mpitsa?
Did mother (past) (subject) call
- Concord

In an interaction of asymmetrical power relationship the less 'powerful' participant will tend to lessen his/her contribution to the conversation. The more powerful participant who may not perceive the encounter as unequal

might be puzzled by the other participant's apparent lack of interest, coldness etc. such behaviour may even be interpreted as pragmatic non-competence, which may result in unintentional pragmatic failure and communication breakdown.

(d) Ranking of social values

The last social variable in this discussion is value judgement. Both Leech (1983) and Thomas (ibid) argue that values cannot be excluded from 'scientific account of language' (Leech, p. 9). Thomas says there is a need to distinguish between 'moral' principles and pragmatic principles. Along the same lines Leech states that principles may be moral or ethical and cites telling the truth as a moral imperative. But, says Leech: 'the reason for including it (truth) in a scientific account of languages is descriptive rather than prescriptive'.(9)

Leech and Thomas' justification for including values in an account of language is a response to the view commonly held by other linguists that the inclusion of values undermines objectivity. Values that are held high and strong by societies influence and often determine behaviour, including linguistic behaviour.

Principles or maxims (Leech does not see the distinction between the two as important since he says, according to Grice, maxims are a special manifestation of principles) operate in different levels according to different cultures. Sociopragmatic failures may occur when one speaker is not aware of how some ground rules operate in the other speaker's culture. This particular failure becomes evident when utterances are taken literally when in fact they are not

meant to be interpreted as such.

Sub-cultures such as university students or groups of gangsters often establish their own pattern of ground rules mainly to form a close-knit social network and to exclude non-members. Utterances such as: 'next time we meet I'll buy you a drink' are bound to cause a great deal of misunderstanding if interpreted literally. One lady was impressed by a colleague who helped her prepare for exams. When words apparently failed her, she said to the colleague: 'I'll buy you a present'. The man has ever since been asking for the present.

In Setswana the word 'maloba', which literally means 'the previous day' is used in many instances that do not necessarily denote 'the previous day'. The speaker can stretch 'maloba' as far as she/he wishes to. In most Setswana villages elderly people are monolingual. Working at a clinic once I noticed a lot of communication breakdown between patients and a white doctor. The doctor was fluent in Setswana but as a non-native speaker did not always understand how pragmatic ground rules operate in the language. So when a patient was asked when his/her ailment started, she/he would answer: 'Maloba'. The doctor would then become quite cross since the state of the patient's health would prove otherwise. Surely advanced TB could not have started the previous day. More often than not the patient will be scolded accordingly. Failure to operate according to expected level of pragmatic principles is often seen as behaving badly.

One other source of pragmatic failure is the differing

priority given to certain values. As to which principle is more important than which is culturally determined. In Setswana talking about one's achievements and abilities is taken to be self-praise and is ranked the lowest in the scale of value importance. When a Motswana adheres strictly to this strongly-held value system, she/he may be seen by members of other cultures as self-effacing or inarticulate. Modesty in Setswana ranks even higher than truthfulness.

Leech (ibid:150) says this about value ranking:

> ... our knowledge of intercultural differences ... is somewhat anecdotal: there is the observation for example, that some eastern cultures ... tend to value the Modesty Maxim much more highly than western countries, that English speaking culture ... gives prominence to the Maxim of Tact and the Irony Principle; that the Mediterranean cultures place a higher value of the Generosity Maxim and a lower value of the Modesty Maxim.

Each culture determines which principle should be ranked high in the priority scale. However in spite of what is said by Leech and other linguists about the general observation of principle ranking in cultures, it does not necessarily mean that every member of the culture observes and practise the principle accordingly. Where one principle for example, generosity, outweighs others, it does not mean that every member of that culture is generous. Strevens in Smith (1987:177) says this about values in English:

> Not that all native speakers of English practise these virtues, but the language continually proclaims their existence and value.

Complete communication breakdown can occur if there is a strong conflict of value-ranking between speakers. Widdowson (1984) suggests that it is not always easy for a non-native speaker to conform to the value system of another language or

culture. Since it is in linguistic behaviour that such conflicts are realised, given time speakers can look into cross-cultural differences of value-ranking. To quote Strevens again:

> Value systems powerfully influence the rules of discourse in communication, and thus help to determine whether and to what extent there may be a cultural barrier between learner and target language.

Finally, wrong perception of pragmatic parameters is not the sole source of pragmatic failure. A great deal of communication breakdown however results from miscalculated perception of social variables.

2.2 Unequal Encounter and Pragmatic Failure

The degree of social distance between speakers and the amount of power that one speaker has over the other determine equality or inequality in an interaciton. Power plays a greater part in determining whether the encounter is equal or unequal. Inequality will be realised linguistically when the powerful speaker dominates and controls the interaction.

Culture and context determine perception of power relationships. A host of factors such as age, sex etc. can determine the degree of social distance between speakers. In formal institutions such as the army, the rank and status that a person holds will determine his or her amount of authority in relation to others. In schools power relationships between teacher and pupil(s) is prescribed by the context. As I have remarked in the above discussion, teacher-pupil relationships in Britain differ from those in South Africa. In South Africa teachers have relatively higher status and more power than teachers in Britain. South

African teachers maintain a considerable social distance between them and their learners.

In my own context, and in America perhaps, classroom encounter is unequal, with the teacher in a powerful position and the learners in a less powerful position. In an instance such as this then, the teacher does most of the talking that occurs in class. She/he initiates talks, controls turn-taking, changes and ends topics etc. Appendix I has extracts of classroom interaction recorded and transcribed for Zululand University student-teachers. One extract deals with factual (textbook) knowledge in class, the other with personal information. I have deliberately selected the extracts as such in an attempt to show that teacher-talk is not only dominating in formal lessons, it does so even in less formal lessons.

Classroom exchange as a highly specialised speech event may not serve as an ideal example of real communication, but in some ways it is. In Namibia and in rural areas of the Northern Cape (South Africa) pupils hardly ever come into contact with native speakers of English. The classroom, and even, only the classroom, where instruction is in English, provides the only opportunity for learners to use English. Reports such as those compiled by Chonco reveal that the high rate of failure in most subjects is attributed to lack of command of English. Teachers whether they are native or non-native are expected to be more knowledgeable and to have competence in the language they use to teach. Learners look upon their teachers as sources of knowledge. A teacher of English becomes in a way a representative of the language

she/he is teaching.

To use Thomas' quotation again; non-native speakers 'perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage' when they interact with native speakers. If this is true and indeed so in ordinary interaction, what more then in asymmetrical power relationships where the native speaker has more authority over the non-native speaker. Instances such as these are those between native lecturers and non-native students, native doctors and non-native patients (such as the one I have cited of doctors and Batswana patients). Less confident non-native speakers sometimes even make grammatical errors they are aware of without self-correction. For some reason native speakers are thought to be tolerant to such errors and expect them (errors) anyway. In a not-so-friendly unequal encounter with a native speaker I found myself repeatedly using the words 'dub' instead of 'record'. I assumed that the native speaker knew that I was not competent in the language and would naturally accommodate the error.

Thomas (1988) observed that subordinate speakers in an unequal encounter make very limited contribution in an interaction. Dominant speakers for example, teachers and lecturers employ devices such as 'discoursal indicators' and 'metadiscoursal comments' to dominate the interaction. In the same article Thomas remarks that in an unequal encounter the subordinate speaker's contributions are not only minimized, they can be ignored, misconstrued or both. By ignoring the subordinate speaker's contribution, the powerful speaker decides what is relevant and what is not relevant in the interaction. The following interaction took place

between a native lecturer and a non-native student some time this year.

Lecturer: You must all be ready by ...

Student : (Hears but does not see the lecturer and assumes that it is one of her class-mates. After a while:) Oh, I am sorry, I thought you were X ...

Lecturer: I don't care whether you call me X or whatever, but I say tomorrow you must ..

The lecturer in this case was dismissing whatever it was the student wanted to say. The student could not have argued further without violating Leech's (1983) Politeness Maxim. Because of the structure of asymmetrical power relationship, the student could not point out that in fact she meant to apologise by the utterance 'I am sorry I thought you were X ...' - hence I was not giving you your due attention. Many similar examples occur in class daily where teachers have almost unquestionable power and authority over pupils. Pupils must be seen, not heard.

Distorted rehearsals and paraphrases are another feature that Thomas (ibid) observes in unequal encounters. Malicious gossip use a similar technique in spreading rumours. Reported speech in cases like these is hardly ever a fair representation of what was initially said. The pragmatic force of the initial utterance is twisted to suit the reporter's wishes. In an unequal encounter it becomes extremely difficult for the subordinate speaker to challenge the distortion. Attempts such as 'That is not what I meant ... Yes but I did not mean that ...' are sometimes thwarted by 'I don't argue with children. Do as I tell you ... Why don't you shut up and listen' etc.

Having established at a rather lengthy discussion what unequal encounter is, what then are the observable areas of pragmatic failure and restricted pragmatic competence in unequal encounter?

(a) The learner's unrealised potential

If classroom communication is indeed teacher-dominated, very little chance will be given to learners to realise their pragmatic competence potential. If one participant is allowed little or no manoevre in a discourse, his/her pragmatic competence will be obscured. The dominant speaker will appear to be the most competent.

In a traditional classroom where learners are expected to talk only when talked to, natural conversation will be limited. The nature of classroom discourse is therefore very likely to stifle acquisition of pragmatic competence.

(b) Power associate speech act

Pragmatic competence is stifled in unequal encounters but pragmatic failure also occur in asymmetrical interactions.

In her article 'Cross-cultural Discourse as Unequal Encounter' 1984, Thomas identifies two sources of pragmatic failure. The one is associated with use of power associated speech acts, the other with confusion of metalinguistic comment with metapragmatic comment.

In certain contexts when the performative verb appears on the surface structure of an utterance, more force is conveyed than when the performative verb is not explicit. For example:

1. I warn you not to come nearer
2. Don't come nearer

By uttering (1) the speaker may minimize the hearer's option. Utterance (1) will therefore convey force with similar strength as:

3. I order you, not request you ...
4. I tell you, not ask you ...

Explicit performatives that carry strong force are used by speakers in more powerful positions than speakers in less powerful positions. It is pragmatically acceptable for a teacher to say: 'I order you to leave the class' but it could sound grossly inappropriate if a pupil were to say: 'I order you to give me a C' to his/her teacher.

The use of explicit performative in some cultures is quite common and is not necessarily related with power. In an unequal encounter a subordinate speaker is not expected to use power-related speech acts. This goes for both explicit performatives and imperatives. Indiscriminate use of explicit performatives may reflect apparent pragmatic non-competence. Again to use Thomas' (1983) example, if a Russian says 'Give me a cigarette', he may be considered by a native English speaker as rude or aggressive.

The use of power-related speech acts is in fact a result of transfer of speech act strategies discussed under pragmalinguistic failure. Unequal encounter makes the use of power-related speech acts more conspicuous. A non-native learner of English as a second or a foreign language can hardly be expected in all fairness to reflect 'good linguistic' behaviour. It requires a lot of insight from the teacher to work out that the miscalculated use of

power-related speech acts is not deliberate.

(c) Metalinguistic comment as metapragmatic comment

Pragmatic failure can occur when a speaker's metalinguistic comment is interpreted as metapragmatic. When the non-native speaker's question on the sense of the utterance: 'What do you mean?' is interpreted as a question on the force of the utterance: 'What do you mean by X?' (Thomas, 1984). The following exchange is an example of such misunderstanding:

MPX: Well, the Home Office cannot offer her political asylum ...

Y : I don't understand what ...

MPX: Why not? our country is not a dumping place you know

(Context: MPX and Y were talking about Y's friend who was seeking political asylum in MPX's country. Y did not understand the meaning of 'asylum' but was thought to be questioning the reason for his friend not being helped.) Although this example is invented, it does show how pragmatic failure can easily occur between native and non-native speaker in an unequal encounter.

Apart from Thomas' observation, I have also noticed that metapragmatic comment can be construed as metalinguistic. To use my earlier example again; when I made an utterance carrying the force of: 'I apologize for not giving you your due attention', the native lecturer interpreted it literally as 'I call you X'.

As I have already indicated, it would not have been pragmatically acceptable for me to have said: 'I meant Y not Z'. In an unequal encounter politness appears to take

precedence over other principles.

The above discussion reveals that unequal encounter reveals stiffled pragmatic competence and unintentional pragmatic failure. The Politeness Principle seems to allow and even justify this. The last chapter of this paper will look at ways of dealing with this pragmatic non-competence that results from what appears to be 'inevitable' power relationships. Power relationships at schools are sometimes a reflection of the country's entire social set-up. In her article 'Critical Linguistics and the Teaching of Language', 1986, Hilary Janks says:

> Where groups in society have achieved a dominant position their meanings are likely to be heard more frequently and to have greater power ... Linguistic analysis can provide tools to deconstruct the language ... Such deconstruction attempts to show that meaning is not fixed or given but constructed.

Asymmetrical power relationships in society are reflected in such formal institutions as schools. Chapter Three takes a closer look at ways in which pragmatic failure in classrooms, whether deliberate or not, can be minimized.

Summary

The foregoing chapter was an attempt to establish what pragmatic failure is and what the causes of pragmatic failure are. Thomas' distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure helped a great deal in understanding this relatively difficult concept.

The next and final chapter looks at the implication that pragmatic failure has on ESL classrooms.

CHAPTER III : CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have attempted to establish what pragmatic competence is, what might cause pragmatic failure and what might result from unintentional pragmatic failure. This chapter focuses on what could be done in a normal ESL classroom to minimize pragmatic failure and to increase the learner's pragmatic competence.

The learner's inadequate pragmatic competence will be revealed when she/he fails to grasp the force of an utterance and also when she/he is unable to use language appropriately in real situations. Wolfson in Richards and Schmidt (1983:62) says this about second language learners:

> In addition to the problem of misunderstanding the meaning or function of what is said, language learners face the equally serious problem of having their own speech behaviour misunderstood by native speakers with whom they interact.

Learners of a second language therefore have potential problems of understanding as well as being misunderstood. Constant communication breakdown between learners and native speakers or other speakers of the target language may lead to the learner losing interest in acquiring the second language. Teachers therefore have a great responsibility of helping learners acquire pragmatic competence.

It has been observed by linguists that teaching grammar is easier than attempting to teach pragmatic competence. Thomas (1983) says this about the difficulty of 'teaching' pragmatic competence:

> Firstly, as Widdowson (1979:13) has pointed out, pragmatic description has not yet reached the level of precision which grammar has attained in describing linguistic competence. Secondly pragmatics - language in use - is a delicate area and it is not immediately obvious how it can be taught.

In both Chapters I and II, I discussed the distinction that linguists make between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The main difference between the two being that grammar is rule-governed whereas pragmatics is principle-governed. Grammar rules can be taught to learners in a straightforward sort of way, but pragmatic principles are culturally determined and 'socially motivated' and thus difficult to teach. The lack of precision that Widdowson refers to makes pragmatics difficult to approach.

Cultural diversity is the main source of cross-cultural communication breakdown. Pragmatic failure is triggered by the learner's lack of awareness of the differences between his/her culture and that of the language he or she is learning. Fluency in a second language does not necessarily guarantee appropriate linguistic behaviour. Cultural diversity realised in linguistic behaviour raises questions such as whose culture should determine behaviour. In instances where the learner uses speech act strategies from his L1, for example 'I want a pen' instead of 'Can I have a pen please' there is bound to be pragmatic failure of some kind. It would appear as if the learner's culture is pragmatically inadequate to deal with situations that require the use of 'Can I VP' speech act. This is not the case however, since principles are said to be universal across cultures.

A person's culture consists of value systems, beliefs and convinctions. These aspects are difficult to question and assess since they form the foundation of one's cultural identity. This also makes the teaching of pragmatic competence difficult. It is not easy to accept the challenge and assessment raised againt one's personal beliefs and convictions. The teacher is placed in a difficult position of recognising and accepting the learners' culture and teaching them to be aware of the differences in the culture of the second language. The teaching of pragmatics therefore becomes an apparent battle-field of culture priority: whose culture should be given preference, the learner's or the target language's? An attempt to answer this question will be made later in this chapter.

One of the problems that often face the teacher of English as a second language is the one referred to in Chapter I: English-English or English as a second language. At the English Academy conference held at the University of Witwatercrand (South Africa) in September 1986, one of the main issues debated on was whether English should be taught as a second language or as a language. Academics who were against the concept of 'second language' argued that it carries a notion of 'second class citizenship'. English they said, should be taught as English and not as a second language. It was not quite explicit though what the academics meant by 'English-English' or even English as a language. But from the arguments one could deduce that 'English as English' meant teaching learners to use language in the same way as do native speakers, not only as a language

to learn so as to get by. Whether the emphasis was to be on fluency or on appropriateness or both was not made clear.

Pragmatic competence entails the ability to use language as native speakers do, to flout principles at will and to be appropriate as one chooses to. The danger of overemphasis on appropriateness cannot be overlooked. Too much emphasis on appropriateness at the expense of recognition and respect for the learner's culture can have negative effects on second language acquisition. Teachers are not out to produce black Englishmen, or in Beneke's term 'fake Anglo-Saxons' (1981:91). Learners are not 'pygmalions', putty put into teachers' hands to be shaped according to the teachers' ambitions and desires.

In South Africa there is a constant debate on whether or not black children should be sent to the so-called multiracial schools. Most reasons given against such a move are political. But one very clear argument against sending black children to poredominantly white schools is that the black children's culture is not catered for. These children, it is claimed, spend their school days in an entirely different culture and this makes it difficult for them to relate to their peers in the black community. I once overheard a child from a 'multiracial' school repremanding her mother for speaking too loud. In African cultures children do not speak that way to elders, let alone their own parents. Keen observers of these children say that some children often tilt their heads to remove imaginery long hair in a fashion that white children do. These children do not only copy the language, but typical white behaviour too.

Much as teachers of English do not wish to be held responsible for such outcomes, a strife towards pragmatic competence cannot be totally ignored. The disadvantage of being pragmatically non-competent, I am convinced, outweighs by far possible negative outcomes of overemphasis on pragmatic competence. Cultural differences do exist and cannot be easily ignored. In fact cultural barriers between learner and target language can hinder the learner's progress. How then can the teacher deal with such cultural barriers? And to pose Beneke's big question, 'Is there a chance, then, of not being a culture monster or a fake Anglo-Saxon?' Strevens (ibid) says:

> ... through greater understanding and wisdom on the part of the teacher who can thereby assist the learner to accept the existence of cultural differences while reducing negative effect on his learning. (p. 176)

Dealing with the problem : A few suggestions

3.1 Pragmalinguistic/Sociopragmatic Distinction

To refer back to the quotation from Thomas, it is not easy to teach pragmatic competence because of lack of 'precision' in linguistic description. The current English Teaching Syllabuses do not have laid down rules on the teaching of pragmatic competence. It is not surprising therefore that most, if not all ESL teachers concentrate on the teaching of grammatical competence only.

Unlike grammatical competence, pragmatic competence is not yet explicitly taught to learners. Assessment of pragmatic competence is not <u>the</u> issue in second language teaching. This does not mean however that learners do not reflect inadequate pragmatic competence in their attempt to

use the target language. When learners fail to behave in accordance with expected linguistic behaviour, they run a risk of having their personality negatively described. Also when learners fail to grasp the force of utterances in some contexts, they may be seen as being uncooperative.

In order to correct inappropriate linguistic behaviour, teachers need to know what the real source of the failure is. Hence the need to distinguish between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. Wolfson in Richards and Schmidt (1987:72) says that rules of speaking are taken for granted by native speakers and only recognised '... when sociolinguistic patterns are not followed ...' As mentioned already, pragmatic failure reflects badly on the individual's personality; his or her character, not the level of his competence, is critized.

The distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure is necessary because it guides the teacher in 'diagnosing' the source of pragmatic failure. Precise diagnoses is a prerequisite for appropriate, exact remedy. Most teachers concentrate on grammatical error when assessing learners' language, especially written work. Errors resulting from lack of pragmatic competence are ignored since they cannot be readily accounted for. One reason for employing this 'avoidance' strategy may be because most non-native teachers share the learners' culture they (teachers) may be able to work out intended pragmatic force from otherwise inappropriate speech acts or utterances. The other problem may be that it becomes extremely difficult to correct pragmatic failure when the source is not known. 'I

know that the sentence is wrong, but I cannot pin-point exactly where the mistake is, besides the grammar is flawless.' To say this to the learner or simply to say 'This does not sound English' is extremely inadequate. The learner deserves more than mere vague explanations, especially if his grammatical competence is without fault.

3.1.1 Pragmalinguistic failure

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs as a result of mismatch of pragmatic force or transfer of L1 speech strategies into L2. If the teacher successfully identifies the learner's error as either, correction will be easy and precise. Correct diagnosis facilitates remedy. The teacher is thus in a position to explain to the learner why she/he corrects what might appear on the surface as correct. Learners need to know that pragmatic competence is as important a part of language learning as grammatical competence.

L1 interference is the main source of pragmalinguistic failure. Utterances that may be syntactically and semantically the same in L1 and L2 may carry different pragmatic force in each language. Some utterances carry more 'weight' in one language than they do in another. In Setswana for instance, 'See you soon' does not carry the same pragmatic force as it does in English. The pragmatic equivalent of 'See you soon' in Setswana is:

Re tla bonana
We shall see each other

but

Ke go bone ka bonako
I you see conjunct soon
See you soon

carries the literal meaning of 'I must see you soon, not later', or 'I really need to see you before long'. For some reason that I have not thought of yet, I always substitute 'See you soon' for 'I shall see you X' where 'X' is the precise time, day or a specific period when I shall see my learners. Avoidance and substitution may help to minimise the use of such confusing utterances. Learners however, need as much exposure to native-like language usage as possible. Sooner or later they are bound to be confronted with utterances that are deliberately avoided in class and may not be able to deal with such 'unfamiliar' expressions.

Most ESL textbooks are designed for the teaching of grammar. In order to assist learners to acquire pragmatic competence the teacher needs to be very innovative. Learners need to understand why pragmatic failure occurs at all. It should be pointed out to them that semantic and syntatic equivalence does not necessarily imply pragmatic equivalence. A class reader can be used to identify sentences with potential pragmatic force mismatches. Learners can then with the assistance of their teacher work out the correct pragmatic force of the utterances. This is by no means easy since it is not always easy to find more than one example in a relatively long passage. But this could well be a first move towards the right direction.

Speech act strategy transfer is a more frequent form of pragmatic failure than force mismatch. Pragmatic force mismatches occur mostly in instances where the learner is in a hearer/addressee position. Speech act strategy transfer is observable when the learner is in a speaker/addressor

position. From my own observation, it is miscalculated perception of pragmatic parameters that plays a major role in choice of speech acts. For instance directness and indirectness may be determined by perception of social distance and power relationship.

Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when learners use speech act strategies that do not realise the same linguistic behaviour in L2 as they do in L1. To use Thomas' (1983) example again; imperatives are used in Russian indiscriminantly when, for example, asking for directions, cigarettes etc. So instead of saying, 'Could you please tell me ...' a Russian speaker will say, 'Tell me ...'. The Russian will sound rude and pushy to a (native) English speaker without intending to.

Thomas (ibid) attributes some causes of pragmalinguistic failure to teaching-induced errors. She refers to Kasper's (1981) findings of teaching-induced errors; some teaching material and classroom discourse encourage pragmatic failure. In Chapter II I gave an example in Setswana where propositional explicitness may cause pragmatic non-competence. The use of elaborate utterances which are appropriate in L1 may be inappropriate in L2. Again to use the example I cited in Chapter II, asking a question, in Setswana is always preceded by 'May I ask ...' to mark politeness. In English this may be a violation of Leech's Principle of Economy (1983:67).

A great deal of effort is required of a teacher in dealing with pragmalinguistic failure resulting from teaching-induced errors. Evaluation of teaching-induced

errors involve self-assessment of the teacher's own classroom techniques. It is quite a difficult task, for example, to try to control propositional explicitness. Some questions do require complete sentence answers and others only 'Yes or No'. But the inconsistency will confuse rather than assist learners.

To reduce speech act strategy transfer, politness marking in L2 that does not correspond with that in Ll could be identified and closely looked at by both the teacher and the learners. Unfamiliar speech act strategies such as the use of 'Can you VP' need to be taught to learners. A critical look at classroom techniques could help the teacher to identify areas of potential failure influence.

3.1.2 Sociopragmatic failure

Sociopragmatic failure was discussed at length in Chapter II. Thomas (ibid) believes that sociopragmatic failure is a more delicate area of pragmatic failure than pragmalinguistic failure. Not only is the learner's linguistic competence brought to question, his/her value system, beliefs and convictions are also challenged.

Perception of pragmatic parameters; power, social distance, size of imposition and the ranking of values, have been seen to differ from culture to culture. The teacher needs to take a closer look at the apparent sociopragmatic failure reflected in the learner's speech in relation to his/her (learner) perception of social variables. For example, if a learner says, 'I want a pen', the teacher could examine perception of size of imposition regarding school stationery in the learner's Ll. The learner's utterance

should first be assessed from a point of view of the learner's culture. An utterance such as the example above, may be inappropriate in one culture but perfectly acceptable in another.

Since it is the learner's system of beliefs that is being challenged, a great amount of tact is required of the teacher when dealing with sociopragmatic failure. The learner does not want to be made to feel that his culture is inadequate to deal with some linguistic realisations. The teacher should not attempt to change the learner's perception of social variables, but only point out differences. It is practically impossible for the teacher to give learners a catalogue of culturally different perceptions on all differences. However, pragmatic parameters could be used for common daily used utterances to assess differences. Examples:

(a) Ranking of imposition: which items in the learners' L1 are 'free' and do they correspond with free items in L2. For instance is medicine free in English as it is in Sezulu.

(b) Social distance : which speech acts does the learner employ when interacting with people who do not form part of his/her social network - direct or indirect speech acts.

(c) Power : how does the learner perceive power relationships between himself/herself and people of higher or lower social status. Is there any difference in the learner's use of language when conveying similar force to people of different power status.

(d) Value assessment : which values in the learner's culture are ranked high in the scale of value importance. Is there

any conflict observed between his/her L1 topmost values and those of the second language.

Attempting to help learners acquire sociopragmatic competence is not an easy task for a teacher. Most lessons concentrate on the teaching of concrete grammar rules, such as rules of negation, concord etc. Classroom communication in fact limits free natural language use. Much of pragmatic non-competence is revealed in less formal lessons such as oral lessons, or in interaction with teachers on matters outside formal lesson material. Sociopragmatic failure is therefore not an everyday phenomenon in a classroom, but when it does occur it is so striking it cannot be missed. Since pragmatic failure in general reflects on the learner's character, sociopragmatic failure can easily be attributed to the wrong source; the learner's personality. It can thus be ignored and no corrected. 'I want my essay' could immediately be interpreted by the teacher as a sign of impertinence. A learner who addresses the teacher in imperatives and direct speech acts may be seen as rude. Some teachers may even feel that they are not responsible for the learner's 'moral' education. But how much of this is 'moral' and how much is simply inadequate pragmatic competence?

Pragmatics per se does not form part of the laid down English syllabuses. It therefore requires a great deal of flexibility from the teacher to introduce to the pupils such concepts as pragmatic parameters. The teacher could introduce these 'difficult' notions to the learners in such a way that they (learners) understand. More important for learners is to understand that perceptions differ and are

culturally determined. Emphasis is not that much on copying linguistic behaviour as it is on understanding and accepting cultural differences.

The danger that might lie in the use of pragmatic parameters is that the teacher might tend to impose his/her own ideas on learners. The main objective should therefore be to identify differences in perception and to allow learners to choose for themselves what perception they want to adhere to. Attempting to forcefully change the learners perception altogether does not serve the purpose.

3.2 National or Ethnic Stereotypes

Scollon and Scollon (1983) discuss at length the four aspects of discourse that reflect cross-cultural differences. Speakers from different cultural background have differing expectations about turn-taking, topic control, information structure and schemata (frames). Cultures differ for instance in who should initiate the talk in an interaction, who should change and control the topic etc. Communication breakdown is likely to occur when one speaker does not behave according to the expectations of another in a discourse. For instance a speaker may be seen to 'over-use' or 'under-use' his/her turn to speak. If either happens she/he may be considered uncooperative or distant and cold.

Thomas (1983) says that learners need to be taught to look closely at discourse patterns so as to note significant differences in their discourse pattern and that of the second language. Usually in a face to face interaction facial expressions are used to try and stop or invite contribution from the other participant. These expressions could be

accompanied by verbal ones. Some participants use interjections to draw the speaker's attention to turn-taking chance. The speaker may or may not recognise these hints.

In some cultures the discourse pattern is controlled by the 'privileged' participant. Privilege may be marked by a host of factors such as authority, social status, age and sex. Culture determines which of the factors is associated with discourse control. In one society it may be age that plays a major role in discourse control whereas in another it may be social status. In their discussion about 'women and language use', Brown and Levinson seem to dispute the claim that women are more polite than men. To them the power factor is more significant than sex. They observe that:

> An obvious testable corollary of this reductionist claim is that when women are in positions of high authority vis-a-vis some interlocutor, we should expect these women to be less polite than speakers of lower status of either sex. (p. 31)

This does not disprove the observation that in some cultures communication interaction or general conversation is controlled by men. They seem to have freer access to full participation in discourse than women. It is not often the case for instance that jokes are told by women in an all-sex interaction. A woman who tells dirty jokes in public is bound to be treated as an exception to the rule. If a man from a culture that allows men to dominate interactions were to interact with women from a culture where sex does not determine topic control, he will be seen as rude and aggressive if he tends to control the discourse. Worse still, the man's apparent aggressiveness might be attributed to his ethnicity or nationality.

Linguistic behaviour is the main cause of national stereotypes. Mere verbal encounter with one or two people is sufficient to label the whole nation. Colonists refer to Africans (native Africans) as unreliable and a host of other negative descriptions not so much because of some act of unreliability, but merely by the use of language which is misinterpreted. Culture binds people together as an ethnic group, society or nation. Language is one strong bond that is shared by members of the same nation or ethnic group. It is therefore not surprising that people are given national stereotypes because of their linguistic behaviour.

Learners need to examine linguistic factors underlying national stereotypes. It is in their linguistic behaviour that Americans are seen as 'insincere', Britons as 'cold', Germans as 'aggressive' and Africans as 'unreliable'. Ethnic stereotypes are common within nations too. For example in South Africa, Afrikaners are seen as aggressive, the English as insincere, Coloureds as uncultured etc. Only when learners understand factors underlying national stereotypes will they be able to realise why pragmatic failure occurs when it is not intended. National stereotypes are difficult to deal with because they are hardly ever objective. Other people's national character is judged in relation to a person's own thoughts about his/her own culture. Even 'established' linguists and academics cannot easily shed subjectivity, as in these examples taken from Tannen (ibid):

> (p. 194)
> ... there are frequent reports of frustrations by Americans because <u>polite Japanese</u> never say no.
> (my own emphasis)

('polite Japanese' is not in quotation marks in the text, so I gather it is Tannen's own description.)

> (p. 193)
> Americans as a group tend to ignore or even rail against indirectness. We believe that words should say what they mean and people should be accountable only for what they say in words.
> (my own emphasis)

Many a linguist have used the well-known example of 'We must get together soon' and shown how non-native speakers interpret this as literal. So much for 'railing against indirectness'. Or is this another example of American insincerity?

3.3 Classroom Communication

The teacher, as remarked earlier (see Chapter III) controls most of the interaction that occurs in class. This leaves very little time for learners to interact freely amongst themselves in their own language, let alone in a second language. However there are rare occasions when strict boundaries of turn-taking and topic control are relaxed. When teacher and learners discuss topics outside the formal lesson material, conversation becomes relatively free. 'Free' classroom interaction could be recorded and analysed to see how much of the discourse was controlled by how many members of the group. By analysing classroom interaction, the teacher may discover a lot about his/her influence on the learners communication in general.

In the discussion about unequal encounter I suggested that classroom interaction stiffles pragmatic competence. Using Kasper's examples, Thomas concludes that classroom discourse can be partly responsible for pragmatic failure as

revealed by inappropriate use of propositional explicitness. Holmes (1983:97) says:

> The teacher-pupil relationship is an asymmetrical one; the teacher is older and more knowledgeable than the pupils. The teacher is expected to be in control, to preserve an appropriate social distance from pupils, and to instruct and inform children: to teach them the body of facts and skills the society values.

This view of a teacher as a know-all makes him/her a very powerful controller of the classroom; almost placed on a pedestal high up out of the learners' reach. It is no wonder then that most of the teacher's directives will be commands. Holmes further says this about teacher directives:

> ... utterances intended by the teacher as <u>suggestions</u>, such as 'Would you like to do a puzzle?', will almost certainly be heard as <u>commands</u>, given the social constraints on classroom interaction and the form of social relationship between teacher and pupil.
>
> (my own emphasis)
>
> (p. 112)
> Children apparently acquire the necessary sociolinguistic competence very rapidly, and do not often misinterpret the function of the forms they hear. Nor do they mistake the force of the teacher's directives. They soon recognise the power and the pervasiveness of the teacher's control in the classroom.

Classroom atmosphere from Holmes' description appears to be almost regimental. The teacher sits or stands in front of a row of attentive learners giving instructions that cannot be interpreted as anything else but orders and commands that they are. Holmes also observes however that misunderstanding does occur in the classroom in spite of (or perhaps because of) 'social constraints on classroom interaction'. She cites an example of pupils putting up their hands despite not knowing the answer when the teacher says: 'Hands up'.

There is a marked difference between interaction outside the class and classroom communication. Learners learn to master and internalize rules of classroom interaction. Similarly in learning the second language, learners need to learn rules of communication of that particular language.

Teachers need to take a closer look at their classroom techniques so as to examine any possibility that might stifle the learner's acquisition of pragmatic competence. Critical self-assessment requires a lot from a teacher but if done for the sake of learners it is well worth the effort.

3.4 Exposure to Real Native-Non-native Interaction

The learner's pragmatic competence can be boosted by exposure to native-non-native encounters. Important as national or ethnic cliques are, they sometimes rob the learner the opportunity to have first-hand experience of other languages, especially the language she/he might be learning.

In contexts similar to that in South Africa interaction across race is characterized by a lot of tension. It is almost impossible to have young learners mixing with native speakers of a language they are learning. However 'impossibility' is a relative term. In the words of my tutor: 'If people in B.F. can do it, everybody else can'. Teacher should seize the slightest available opportunities to give their learners the aid they need, be it at church gatherings or during educational excursions.

Summary

In this chapter I have tried to look at what pragmatic failure means to a second language classroom, especially an

ESL classroom. The discussion, and indeed the whole paper, was not meant to be context-specific in the strict sense of the word, however 'limited' my experience might force it to be. I have made a few suggestions derived mainly from work by linguists in the subject:

1. Pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatics distinction (Thomas)
2. National Stereotypes (Scollon and Scollon)
3. Classroom Interaction (Holmes)
4. Exposure (Thomas - partly)

This was by no means an easy task since pragmatic competence is a fairly difficult concept in second language teaching. However, the subject is quite thought-provoking and indeed needs more attention than it has so far received.

CONCLUSION

I set off to write about the concept 'Pragmatic Competence' and to examine the implications that Pragmatic Failure has on the teaching and learning of English as a second language. I discovered through reading that Pragmatic Failure is much more complex than might appear on the surface.

The main difficulty that I encountered while attempting to write on Pragmatic Failure was that very few literature deals with the subject per se. In fact in all the reading that I have attempted to cover, only Jenny Thomas and Peter Riley write on the subject exclusively. Their approaches are obviously not entirely the same.

The second difficulty is that of terminolgy used in literature. Common terminology, as I have remarked in the first chapter, is used to refer to (slightly) different concepts. This results from a subject being approached from varying points of view by different theorists. When defining concepts such as linguistic competence and grammatical competence, there is such a lot of overlapping that it is very difficult to draw a concrete line which distinguishes the two. However, it is not that easy for a student to conclude that since the distinction is hazy, the concepts mean one and the same thing.

The third difficulty and perhaps the most problematic is emphasis on cultural differences. Since it is precisely cultural differences that cause communication breakdown, it is necessary to emphasize them in the discussion. However,

this emphasis tends to give the target language the status of THE model which the language learner must strive to attain. Through the discussion I often felt like I am giving the second language - English - a sort of a paternalistic status. English appeared to be the language that should determine the learner's linguistic behaviour. The L2 native culture determines what is appropriate and what is not in linguistic behaviour. This approach seems to leave the learner's own native language in a position of less importance and inadequacy to deal with certain linguistic realisations.

However, a great deal could be learned and benefit teacher from research done in Pragmatic Competence. the main aim of teaching pragmatic competence is not to make learners mimick a foreign culture and become 'fake Anglo-Saxons'. It is mainly to help them to be aware of cultural differences that cause communication breakdown, to expect and accommodate such differences so as to have a free and informed choice in the actrual use of the target language. Cultural barriers, as Strevens states, need not hinder the learner's progress in language acquisition.

The use of pragmatic parameters in acquisition of pragmatic competence however important, should not be seen as the only approach. Brown and Levinson (ibid:p. 16) quote Rosaldo's observation that:

> Pragmatic parameters may be too simple to capture the complexities of the ways in which members of different cultures assess the nature of social relationship and interpersonal behaviour.

It is indeed difficult in social sciences to make absolute conclusions about concepts. There appears to be

possible counter-examples looming somewhere for every conclusion made. But phenomena in linguistics showing some systematicity, as Leech says, need to be acknowledged and studied. Brown and Levinson agree with Rosaldo that there may well be other factors determinging linguistic behaviour such as presence of an audience. Pragmatic parameters however prove a useful device in assessing cultural differences of perception.

There is yet another possibility that I observe in pragmatic failure. Apparent pragmatic non-competence may be just a transitory stage in the language learner's language. In the same way as learners learn social rules operating in the classroom, they can learn sociolonguistic rules of the target language through sufficient exposure to the language. Not every apparent pragmatic failure therefore, should be considered damaging and hindering the learner's progress. It may be a stage that a learner goes through en route to pragmatic competence.

Finally, this paper does not suggest that the teaching of pragmatic competence can take over completely from the teaching of grammatical competence. Equal emphasis and attention should be given to both forms of competence for successful second language teaching and learning.

APPENDIX

T : Right, now let us look at the altitude. 1
(Teacher writes 'Altitude' on the blackboard.)
When we were talking about contour lines 2
we said a contour line is a line on a
map representing the height of ground above sea level.
Right, we can also say a contour line is 3
a line on a map representing the
altitude.
What is altitude then? 4
What is altitude? 5
(2)
We said a contour line is a line on 6
a map representing the height of
ground above sea level.
And I say we can also say a contour 7
line is a line on a map representing
altitude.
What is altitude then? 8
(2)
Concluding from what I said.
Yes. 9

P : Altitude is the height above sea level.

T : Altitude is the height of ground above 10
sea level.
Is the way ... or the way we measure 11
ground above sea level ... sea level.
How we see or we use altitude to 12
see how high the ground is above
sea level.
You remember when we talked about 13
the Xhosa plains.
We said they are just on the same level 14
as the sea.
But as you move up the slopes the 15
altitude increasing ... increases.
There is an increase in height. 16

(p. 30) Geography lesson.

T : How do you spend your time?

P : I spend my time on doing sports.

T : You spend your time on sports ...
doing sports.
Good.
How do you think you <u>should</u>
spend your time?
What is the <u>right</u> way to spend
your time?
(2)

P : I spend

T : I should

P : I should spend my time on (2)
reading.

T : Reading.
Okay, that all right.
Why do you think you should
spend your time reading?

P : Because (4) Because it is (2)
practice for the examination.

T : Right, because it is practice for the
examinations.

(p. 23) English Oral Lesson.

Extracts taken from 'English Competence for Teachers: Workbook I', University of Zululand: Faculty of Education.

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