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Conversation in Foreign Language Instruction

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1. Introduction: Conversation - a neglected aspect of FLT

Conversation classes have become a major concern in today's communicative language teaching. However, there is no structured, generally accepted way in which to approach the teaching of conversation. For years, lack of pedagogical resources has led teachers to use their own intuitions in trying to promote learners' conversational competence. In this way, they either give students tasks such as role plays in the hope that learners will develop their interactional knowledge through participation, or highlight aspects they feel can be more difficult or problems experienced and reported by learners. In sum, researchers and materials writers can be said to have abandoned teachers as regards enhancing students' conversational knowledge.

However, as Richards and Schmidt (1983) point out, lack of conversational competence can have serious consequences for learners who engage in real interactions, since it is closely related to the presentation of self. I should add that knowledge of this type is also essential in the perceptions and interpretation of interlocutors' image. In Richards and Schmidts' words:

While the learner has intuitively acquired the principles of conversational discourse in his or her own language, conversational competence is just as important a

dimension of social language learning as the grammatical competence which is the focus of much formal language teaching. Transfer of features of first language conversational competence into English, however, may have much more serious consequences than errors at the level of syntax or pronunciation, because conversational competence is closely related to the presentation of self, that is, communicating an image of ourselves to others (1983: 149-150).

Theoretical and empirical research confirms the serious consequences of low conversational competence (see Thomas, 1983; Riley, 1989 and Kreuz & Roberts, 1993 on pragmatic failure; Kasper 1992, Bou 1998 on pragmatic transfer; and the following authors on different empirical instances of pragmatic failure: Beebe et al, 1990; Bou & Garcés, 1994; Bou et al, 1995; Bou & Gregori, 1999; Jaworsky, 1994; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, eds, 1993; Oleksy, ed, 1989, among others). More specifically, Bou & Garcés (1994) explore the presentation of self by Spanish non-native speakers of English engaged in interaction with a native speaker. Taking as objects of analysis learners' use of communication strategies, introduction of topics, use of discourse markers and degree of participation, the authors relate the emergent conversational patterns to the type of relationship established among interlocutors in terms of power and social distance and the different expectations in British and North American cultures. Bou & Garcés (1994: 58) conclude by highlighting the serious consequences that can be derived from lack of conversational competence:

[...] ya que la competencia conversacional está directamente relacionada con la presentación de la imagen y ésta con el equilibrio interactivo entre los interlocutores que debe ser mantenido para que la comunicación y las relaciones sociales se lleven a cabo con éxito.

Having underlined the importance of conversational competence, it is surprising that only recently have efforts been made at designing appropriate methodologies and structuring

and sequencing the contents of conversation classes (eg. Richards, 1990; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al, 1995).

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the content and methodology suitable to a conversation class. Both content and methodology should be based on research on Conversational Analysis and Pragmatics on the one hand, and studies on Pedagogy and Second Language Acquisition, on the other. I believe that the conversational issues to be taught should be framed and derived from a comprehensive model of communicative competence. In the following sections, I review the conversation issues identified in the literature and their relation to a model of communicative competence. Then, I explore methodological aspects and approaches to the teaching of pragmatic aspects of communication. Finally, I suggest exercises to practice the different conversational issues in foreign language instruction.

2. Conversational Issues and Communicative Competence

In a comprehensive paper concerned exclusively with teaching conversational skills, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994) identify four components in order to group conversational issues for teaching purposes. The four groups of conversational issues are:

- (1) *Conversational rules and structures*: This group deals with the formal properties of conversational organization, such as opening and closing sequences, turn-taking management – that is, use of turn-entry and turn-exit devices as well as turn-keeping and uptaking or backchannelling moves (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Kasper, 1986) -, introducing and changing topics, interrupting, and producing preferred and dispreferred second parts of adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Levinson, 1983).

- (2) *Conversational strategies*: refer to the linguistic devices available for learners to deal with communicative problems caused by deficient L2 knowledge and to enhance fluency and efficiency in L2 communication. This level, therefore, groups together research into L2 communication strategies (Tarone, 1980, 1981; Faerch & Kasper, 1980, 1983; Bou, 1992) and into L2 strategies for the negotiation of meaning (Long, 1983; Scarcella & Higa, 1981; Young & Doughty, 1987). Devices mentioned include avoidance, paraphrase, approximation, appeal for help, asking for repetition and clarification, interpretive summary, checking comprehension and use of fillers.
- (3) *Functions and meaning in conversation*: this level deals with «the actual messages speakers convey and their purpose» (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994: 45). The authors mention language functions, the performance of indirect speech acts and implicit expression of attitudes towards those messages.
- (4) *Social and cultural contexts*: constitute the final group. It is concerned with the social and cultural constraints on language use. The factors mentioned are participant variables such as office and status, the social situation, social norms of appropriate language use, including the formal/informal continuum and degrees of politeness, and cross-cultural differences.

The work of these authors in structuring and delimiting groups of issues related to conversational competence in FLT is remarkable. However, this classification can be polished and improved by integrating it into a model of communicative competence adapted for conversation and addressing both production and interpretation processes.

Following Celce-Murcia et al's (1995: 5) claim that there is a «need for an updated and explicit description of language teaching areas generated with reference to a detailed model of communicative competence», I now turn to a brief revision of existing models of

communicative competence with the aim of selecting one that will incorporate the aforementioned conversational issues at the level of production and comprehension.

Canale (1983) identifies four components of communicative competence: grammatical, strategic, sociocultural and discoursal. (cf. Canale & Swain, 1980). In the same line, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) elaborate on this model and separate CC into five components: linguistic, strategic, sociocultural, actional and discoursal. In sum, they add «actional competence» to the previous model, although they also adopt an integrative view which implies that sociocultural, linguistic and actional competence all emerge from the central discourse competence, while the strategic component refers to all other competencies. This latter scope of strategic competence is based on Bachman's (1990) proposal.

I agree with Garcés (2000) in selecting Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence as a frame of reference for pedagogical purposes. This model is more parsimonious, understands linguistics as involving grammar and pragmatics and is based on a comprehensive view of the latter.

Bachman (1990) identifies two types of linguistic competence: organizational competence, which refers to the formal aspects of language and includes, therefore, grammar and text organization; and pragmatic competence, which includes illocutionary and sociolinguistic components and encompasses the relationships between signs and referents and between language users and context. Pragmatics, then, is a part of linguistic knowledge. Moreover, Bachman identifies a type of strategic competence that plays a role in all cases of communication. That is, strategic competence is not limited to problematic cases of communication, but refers to the stages of assessment, planning and execution that underlie the production and interpretation of language. I agree with this view of communication as strategic. I follow Leech (1983) who argues in favour of a rhetorical understanding of

language use. Language is treated as a means to an end, ie., strategically, in its everyday ordinary uses. Figure 1 is a partial representation of Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language use, in which knowledge of the world and linguistic competence converge on strategic competence in language use, which, through psychophysiological mechanisms, is attached to the context of situation:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| | 1.1.Organizational competence | 1.1.1.Grammatical comp. |
| 1. Linguistic competence: | | 1.1.2.Textual comp. |
| | 1.2. Pragmatic competence | 1.2.1.Illocutionary comp. |
| | | 1.2.2.Sociolinguistic comp. |
| 2. Strategic competence: | Assessment, planning and execution phases. | |

Fig. 1. Bachman's (1990) linguistic and strategic competence in actual communication.

The next step in my approach to teaching conversation is to relate Bachman's (1990) components of linguistic knowledge with the conversational issues identified by Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994) discussed above. But before, I would like to clarify my approach to communication and pragmatics. I follow Garcés (2000) in viewing communication as meaning in interaction (Thomas, 1995) conceived from a socio-cognitive polarity. Thomas (1995) identifies two levels of pragmatic meaning. The first level, contextual meaning, refers to the assignment of sense and reference and to contextual disambiguation. To this should be added the process of enrichment identified by Sperber & Wilson (1986). The second level of pragmatic meaning refers to illocutionary force, including language used appropriately in a particular socio-cultural context. As Garcés (2000) remarks, social and cognitive constraints operate on language production and interpretation. Pragmatic accounts of the ways in which language use is socially constrained are found in Brown & Levinson (1987) or Fraser (1990), among others. A cognitive approach to pragmatics as verbal understanding is provided by Sperber & Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory. Although both approaches were seen as excluding each other in the past, recently, efforts have been made at studying how they complement each other. Escandell Vidall (1998) and Jary (1998) propose a cognitive understanding of politeness from Relevance Theory.

Understanding pragmatics as meaning in interaction, then, implies contemplating the socio-cultural and cognitive constraints on the processes of production and interpretation, as well as on the process of the negotiation of meaning.

If we now turn to Dörnyei & Thurrell's (1994) four groups of conversational issues and Bachman's (1990) view of linguistic competence, and bearing in mind the approach to pragmatics outlined above, we can re-classify issues as follows. The linguistic knowledge used in conversation is organizational and pragmatic. The organizational component of conversation refers to the relationship between signs and referents and includes knowledge of the grammar and knowledge of the text. Grammatical knowledge used in conversation, object of much foreign language teaching, must be adapted to include conversation-specific uses following Carter & McCarthy's (1995) suggestions about spoken grammars. The textual component deals with the formal and structural properties of conversation and is provided by Text Grammars and Conversational Analysis. Conversational pragmatic knowledge, with its social and cognitive constraints, must deal with the two types of relations already mentioned and is divided into illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence refers to the production and interpretation of linguistic functions and sociolinguistic competence refers to the production and interpretation of linguistic functions appropriately in a particular context of interaction.

A general view of the types of conversational knowledge integrated into the model of communicative competence explained so far would be the following:

1. Grammatical knowledge: is not taken into account by Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994), but includes the components that Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1995: 18) outline for their *linguistic competence*.
2. Textual knowledge encompasses Dörnyei & Thurrell's group 1 *conversational rules and structures*.

3. Pragmatic knowledge at the level of illocutionary competence includes functions such as making reference or Thomas' (1995) contextual meaning¹. I believe that the problems learners experience in expressing/interpreting contextual meanings and the (L2 communication) strategies used to compensate for these referential problems are to be dealt with at this level. Blum-Kulka & Kasper (1993: 4) confirm this view when they argue that communication strategies be considered one of the research concerns in Interlanguage Pragmatics. Therefore, we find here part of Dörnyei and Thurrell's group 3 *functions and meanings* and group 2, that includes strategies that deal with problems in the referential function.

4. Conversational pragmatic knowledge at the level of sociolinguistic competence includes Dörnyei & Thurrell's (1994) group 3, *functions and meaning in conversation*, from the perspective of their appropriateness to particular *social and cultural contexts* (group 4).

Summing up, as language teachers, we should provide our students with the four types of knowledge mentioned above as they are suited to conversational purposes. My aim in proposing the classification above was not to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of conversational issues. Rather, I have attempted to place conversational issues already identified in the literature within a broader framework of communicative competence, based on pragmatic theory, from which we can derive a teaching programme.

3. Direct and indirect approaches to teaching conversation

¹ I am aware of the difficulties that underlie a comparison of the various meaningful distinctions found in pragmatics such as the relationships between signs-referents and language users-contexts mentioned above, Thomas' (1995) two levels of pragmatic meaning or Sperber and Wilson's (1986) distinction between implicit and explicit meanings.

Current views of the teaching of pragmatic aspects of communication hinge on the dichotomy identified by Richards (1990: 76-77) about how to approach the teaching of conversation:

Currently there are two major approaches to the teaching of conversation in second language programs. One is an indirect approach, in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction. The second, a more direct approach, involves planning a conversation program around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation

From the indirect approach it follows that all that teachers have to do is provide students with opportunities for practicing interaction as naturally as possible by means of communicative tasks and activities. The main assumption then is that through interaction alone students will improve their knowledge of the language and their conversational skills. As Richards (1990: 78) puts it «it is not necessary (or even possible) to *teach* conversation in any real sense».

The main limitation of this approach is that it is not clear in what ways interaction relates to language learning, or what aspects of learning it promotes (Alcón, ???). Besides, another limitation points to the fact that in this view, only native speakers - or very advanced non-native speakers - can provide appropriate sociopragmatic input. But native speakers' pragmatic knowledge is mainly unconscious and their intuitions fallible (Schmidt, 1993) so they cannot be expected to offer explanations of a sociopragmatic nature if requested to do so by the learner. Finally, Richards (1990) also highlights that most communicative tasks under this approach are based on transactional discourse to the neglect of interactional uses of the language. This constitutes a severe limitation. Ordinary conversation has been claimed to be the most basic form of language use against which we compare and learn other forms of interaction. Following Lakoff (1989: 102-103) ordinary conversation (OC):

[...] is more than just one point on a discourse continuum. It has a privileged status: it is the form we all learn first, under the setting most conducive to comfort and familiarity, and the one we use the most. Hence it functions as a template for all others, which we experience in terms of their similarities to and differences from OC, and feel more or less comfortable with to the degree that they conform to our OC-based expectations

Neglecting practice in producing and interpreting language in ordinary conversation can also hinder our understanding of more transactionally oriented encounters. I agree with Richards' (1990:74) statement to the effect that «the ability to produce this kind of casual conversational language as well as to produce language appropriate for more formal encounters is an essential skill for second language learners». However, we must not forget that apart from producing language our learners also need to be able to make the right inferences. Therefore, in defending a direct approach to teaching pragmatic knowledge, I consider essential the skills needed to both produce *and interpret* appropriately casual and formal uses of the language in different contexts. Following a direct approach to teaching pragmatic aspects means that these skills are explicitly taught and incorporated in the programme.

Richards (1990: 84) concludes that the direct and indirect approaches are complementary and that a balance between the two «seems the most appropriate methodological option». While I agree with this integrative view, given the past neglect of explicit teaching I wish to focus particularly on the direct approach to teaching pragmatic knowledge thereby stressing its importance.

From the stance of the direct and explicit approach to teaching pragmatic knowledge we must consider Schmidt's (1993) insightful suggestions as regards the importance of

conscious attention to the pragmatic information to be acquired in the second language. In order for pragmatic learning to take place «attention to linguistic forms, functional meanings, and the relevant contextual features is required» (35). The author affirms that simple exposure to adequate sociopragmatic input is not enough for acquiring pragmatic knowledge: learners also need to attend to input forms and make generalizations about their functions and contexts of co-occurrence, as well as to be given explicit information by the teacher. Similarly, Bialystok (1993: 54) believes that adults may understand the forms and structures and have enough vocabulary to express intentions and yet make pragmatic errors. She suggests that this is because «they fail to attend to a social distinction that needs to be marked linguistically, or they select the incorrect politeness marker for the situation or the listener». Therefore, both cognitive approaches to the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge underline the importance of conscious attention to the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic information to be acquired.

As a way of putting into practice the idea of consciousness-raising among students in the classroom context, Schmidt (1993) suggests designing tasks that will direct learners' attention to the chosen information thus activating the processes that promote the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. He also describes the type of explicit teaching the teacher should do:

Explicit teacher-provided information about the pragmatics of the second language can also play a role in learning, provided that it is accurate and not based solely on fallible native speaker intuitions. Explicit teaching is often more efficient than attention to input for identifying the pragmalinguistic forms of the target language. (Schmidt, 1993: 36)

In fact, House (1996) tests the importance of teacher's explicitly giving metapragmatic information in a longitudinal study and finds that although explicit teaching does not

translate into a direct development of learners' pragmatic fluency in instructional situations as regards their responding behaviour, explicit information provided by the teacher plays a very important role in promoting pragmatic knowledge. In her words:

[...] metapragmatic information is essential in counteracting negative pragmatic transfer and promoting the use of a more varied and more interpersonally potent repertoire of different discourse lubricants, discourse strategies, and speech act realizations, thus increasing learners' pragmatic fluency. (House, 1996: 249)

Awareness-raising tasks and teachers' metapragmatic information should be genre-specific. I agree with Carter & McCarthy's (1995: 144) suggestion that «a more genre-sensitive description of the spoken language» constitutes «the most useful resource for teachers and learners of English».

Summarizing, I have argued in favour of a direct approach to teaching conversational pragmatic knowledge. The main points to bear in mind in the teaching of pragmatic knowledge are: (i) to make learners conscious of the information to be learnt; (ii) to provide adequate metapragmatic information; (iii) and that this information should be suitable to the genre the language is being used for. In the following section, I intend to discuss several exercises relative to the textual and pragmatic (illocutionary and sociolinguistic) components of conversational competence.

4. Components of conversational competence: methodological proposals

Following Bachman (1990), I have identified the following components of conversational competence: organizational competence, which includes grammatical and textual knowledge, and pragmatic competence, which encompasses illocutionary and sociolinguistic knowledge. In this section, I would like to suggest practical exercises to

approach the teaching of certain aspects of conversational competence, bearing in mind the above mentioned methodological issues.

The grammatical knowledge needed in conversation will not be dealt with here. However, teachers should be aware of the need to supplement or even change traditional grammatical descriptions with considerations of conversation-specific grammatical points, such as the use of ellipsis or left dislocation and topical information, as described in Carter & McCarthy (1995: 141), who claim that: «language teaching which aims to foster speaking skills and natural spoken interaction should be based upon the grammar of spoken language, and not on grammars which mainly reflect written norms».

The teaching of organizational textual competence for conversation has received more attention in the last decade (e.g., McCarthy, 1991; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Alcón XXXX; Alcón & Usó, 1998). For example, Alcón (XXXX) focuses on telephone closing sequences and presents a series of tasks. Taking as starting point a real example of a telephone closing, the teacher provides explicit information on the sequential structure and the linguistic and interactional mechanisms present. Then students are asked to reformulate the original example. Students' new examples are, in turn, commented on by the teacher, who provides feedback; McCarthy (1991) and McCarthy & Carter (1994) deal with the notion of naturalness in second language communication, and Alcón & Usó (1998) present activities to practice gambits, turn taking and topics and suggest general ways of directing students' attention towards features of spontaneous spoken language and face work, therefore helping learners become familiar with what naturalness in interaction means.

In relation to the ability to perform and understand language functions, that is, at the level of illocutionary knowledge within pragmatic competence, language teaching materials have incorporated the idea of language functions and present exercises as regards giving

opinions or agreeing and disagreeing, etc. These will be commented on below, when their sociolinguistic appropriateness is also taken into account. As regards sense and reference assignment, Brown & Yule (1983: 45) present an excellent activity, the eye-witness account of a car crash, in which learners with limited proficiency are asked to describe a picture of a car crash and identify the setting, participants involved and structure the events in time. Learners practice different aspects of contextual meaning (time and person deixis, for instance) in making it clear what is happening and who is doing what to whom.

Another aspect of conversational competence that is included in illocutionary knowledge refers to traditional L2 communication strategies and to strategies for the negotiation of meaning. Dörnyei & Scott (1997) carry out an extensive review of proposed definitions and taxonomies in this branch of Interlanguage Pragmatics research. Most of the strategies identified in the literature concern referential communication problems and how to solve them, either individually or as a result of negotiation.

Teachability of these problem-solving strategies has become a controversial issue. Bialystok (1990) and Kellerman (1991) write against teaching communication strategies on the grounds that what we should teach is language and not mechanisms to deal with linguistic problems. On the other hand, Dörnyei (1995) addresses this issue directly and argues in favour of the usefulness of teaching these mechanisms. I believe that since these strategies are also available to native speakers and problems of different sorts are usual in conversations among native speakers, more problems are to be expected in cross-cultural encounters and therefore promoting the use of these mechanisms among learners is highly beneficial in order to keep the conversation going.

Several researchers have focused on teaching different strategies. For example Rost & Ross (1991) suggest exercises to practice requests for clarification. Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991)

present tasks that promote the use of fillers, message avoidance and topic shift, and also paraphrase. Finally, Willems (1987) provides very useful exercises on approximation and paraphrase.

The last aspect of conversational knowledge refers to pragmatic competence, more specifically, to sociolinguistic knowledge. At this level, teachers and learners must focus on what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour or what Leech (1983) calls sociopragmatic behaviour, the end of the pragmatic continuum closer to society and the world (Thomas, 1983). Teaching sociolinguistic competence in terms of functions appropriate to different social and cultural contexts has centred around the notion of speech acts. As Meier (1997: 21) points out:

The results of much of this speech act research have, in turn, found their way into ESL/EFL pedagogy in terms of formal markers of politeness (e.g. lexical items, syntactic structures), degrees of politeness or formality as measured by directness, semantic speech act sets, and characterizations of entire cultures in terms of politeness.

The author is highly critical of this approach and states that «research invoking Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness in order to determine "rules of politeness" should not form the bases of the teaching of "politeness phenomena" in foreign and second language pedagogy» (1997: 21). While it is true that a change is needed as regards the methodology used in teaching sociolinguistic competence, my main objection to Meier's work is that she totally refuses to use a remarkable framework such as Brown and Levinson's (henceforth, B&L) model of linguistic politeness on the grounds that the model needs to take into consideration research findings and undergo a revision. I agree with the author that one cannot apply B&L's model as it was initially conceived in 1978 but I believe that from an adequate perspective, it still constitutes the tool learners need to develop sociolinguistic

awareness. As Garcés (personal communication) points out, we cannot expect learners to identify the linguistic encoding of social relations in contexts of interaction without first providing them with the specific linguistic tools to analyze social interaction.

Therefore, I believe that it is from the theoretical framework of Linguistic Politeness theory that we should approach the teaching of the social aspects of pragmatic competence. I understand politeness as contextual appropriateness (Fraser, 1981, 1990) and regard it as the linguistic encoding of social relations in interaction (Garcés, 1991, 1995).

Furthermore, I believe that teachers should use a contextual and interactional version of Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of linguistic politeness and that this constitutes the tool learners need in order to become aware of the suitability of different linguistic forms in different contexts of use or genres, depending on the type of social relations established among interlocutors. Garcés et al, 1992; Garcés & Sánchez, 1998; and Gómez Morón, 2000 make similar methodological claims.

I would like now to develop a practical exercise that aims at teaching politeness devices and promoting pragmatic knowledge in general. Based on the idea that the best way to approach the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge centres around awareness-raising, explicit information provided by the teacher, and information which is genre-sensitive, I suggest providing students with authentic texts from different genres.

The objectives of this task are manifold: (i) raise learners' awareness of the different uses of linguistic devices that accrues from variation in the sociological variables from one genre to another; (ii) facilitate means of comparison; (iii) promote discussion and reach conclusions; discussions and conclusions should be teacher-guided or, at least, contrasted with - and always supplemented by - information provided by the teacher; (iv) encourage

learners to observe situations, to become ethnographers when they have to engage in real encounters, in such a way that they develop the ability to identify particular linguistic choices appropriate to new situations and can participate in these new situations confidently. This activity, therefore, also promotes autonomous learning.

One activity consists in the presentation of two authentic texts from different genres. I am going to illustrate partially this activity with examples taken from two transcripts of real interaction in British English taken from Cheepen and Monaghan (1990: 171-184) - one is casual conversation among friends and the other is a job interview. The first step could be to give them minimal information about the people involved and let students read through the two texts with one aim: to discover the sort of relationship among participants. Then they would have to discuss with partners and with the teacher what they have discovered about participants in both interactions. During the discussion, the teacher could introduce the notions of power, social distance, affect and the notion of genre, and explain to the learners that social factors constrain our linguistic choices in different ways. Thus, learners can begin to understand the aim of this exercise.

In these texts the relationship between participants is, broadly, as follows. In the casual conversation, there are two adult hosts and their child, and two incomers. The male participants are friends and colleagues at the workplace but the four people cannot be said to be close friends. However, the situation is informal, the relationship symmetrical - they are all equals - and there is no excessive social distance: since the men are friends, there is a certain degree of familiarity and affect. The relationship and the goal of the encounter - to spend the evening together - create the expectation that participants will orient themselves towards the expression of solidarity (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

In the job interview, on the other hand, there is one interviewee and four interviewers. The relationship is asymmetrical - the interviewers have institutional overt power over the interviewee. However, the interviewee has certain covert power since the interviewers need to cover a job vacancy and she may fulfill their need thus becoming the interviewers' colleague in the near future. This is the reason why she is voluntarily, and temporarily, in that subordinate position: to get the job. Therefore, there are complex power differences. Besides, since the interviewers and the interviewee had never met before, there is great social distance and lack of affect. Furthermore, the goal of the interview, to get to know the job candidate, give her the job description and, above all, assess her suitability for the post, entails that the interviewers will perform face threatening acts such as asking questions that will give the interviewers enough information to evaluate the candidate. They will also perform directives - although hypothetical - with regard to what she will have to do if she is given the job. The formality of the situation, the differences in power, the existence of social distance and absence of affect, together with the goal of the genre create the expectation that participants will orient themselves towards the expression of deference (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

Learners should reach the conclusion that in the casual conversation extract, as equal participants, they can all do nearly the same amount of talking and of the same type (telling anecdotes, joking, giving opinions, etc) except for those acts that derive from the role of hosts and guests eg. only the hosts will offer drinks and food and will welcome guests. In contrast, in the job interview, the conversation is in control of the interviewers, who will initiate topics, ask questions, decide topic shifts and even when the interview should finish.

In the course of this teacher-students discussion, the teacher may need to provide culture-bound information she may have not expected to give. As Brown & Yule (1983: 40) point out «a great number of cultural assumptions, which would be normally presupposed, and

not made explicit by native speakers, may need to be drawn explicitly to the attention of speakers from other cultures». In this way, text-based discussions increase awareness and understanding of social and cultural similarities and differences.

The next step in the analysis would be to ask students to focus on linguistic means that function as expressions of solidarity and deference. In this sense, having two texts is very useful since this permits one to establish comparisons. Learners' attention could be directed towards various linguistic forms and their different functions. For example, comparing the exchange of greetings in both texts and the terms of address used among participants²:

(1) [C (host) and G & T (incomers) have already greeted each other. J (male host) comes in]

C: +right -- would you like a +

J: +hallo+

G: hi

T: *hallo*

C: *would you like* a glass or ...

(2) I: this is Mrs C. let me introduce you to these (inaud.) this is Mrs S. the •
personnel assistant

C: *how do you do*

S: *how do you do* .pleased to meet you

K: +how do you do+

C: +how do you do+

I: +(inaud.)+ principal personnel office and Mr D who is senior *admin officer*

D: *hello* . +how do you do+

C: +how do you do+

² Conventions used: ** and ++: overlapping speech; . : short pause. Cheepen & Monaghan (1990: vii)

I: please have a seat Mrs C

C: thank you -----

Cheepen & Monaghan (1990: 172, 178)

Right from the beginning, the type of politeness system used in both interactions becomes apparent: while the solidarity system - with participants using positive politeness/involvement strategies - is operating in the casual conversation, the deference system is observed in the job interview, with participants exchanging negative politeness/independence strategies (B&L, 1987; Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

Another important difference in both texts is the use of supportive techniques: from more neutral backchannels, to supportive minimal responses that include repetitions and exclamations of emotion, to the high-involvement collaborative creation of meaning with simultaneous talking and cooperative interruptions (Stubbe, 1998; Garcés & Bou, 2000):

(3) [talking about the site of a car crash]

C: it's terrible terrible patch that it's ever so dangerous

G: well the thing is isn't St Albans worth it when you get there *cause I mean I think I I*

J: *oh it's beautiful place*

C: *yeah*

T: *I think so as well*

G: Think St Albans is the most lovely +(inaud.)+

T: +yeh*

C: I'm addicted to it

G: oh yeh

C: absolutely *addicted*

J: *when I* +come through here with •m Reginald Perrin+

C: +I wouldn't go anywhere else+

Active listening and the emphatic supportive comments in example (3), where participants emphasize common ground, contrast with the type of active listening found in the job interview, where neutral backchannels such as *mm*, *yeh*, *right* are more frequent and collaborative turns with simultaneous talking scarce. Learners may also compare participants' simultaneous talking above with the interviewee's (C) interruption in the extract below:

(4)

S: and . there'll be it's just a small group • within that particular off . office . •m
your duties mainly would be sort of collecting . stamping in . *distributing*

C: *yes when you say a* small group excuse me interrupting you

S: mhm

C: how many are you talking about

In discussing both texts, teachers could direct learners attention to other politeness strategies: in the casual conversation extract, all participants tell stories and contribute to the conversation with jokes and laughter. Telling personal anecdotes and joking is practically absent in the job interview. Focusing on the use of discourse markers such as *well*, *now* and *right* explaining their social, discourse-regulatory and cognitive functions and also on who uses them also constitutes an interesting teaching activity. In the same line, the use of mitigating devices such as *sort of*, *a bit* or *you know*, *I mean* etc can become a very interesting object of discussion for learners and teachers alike.

In sum, I put forth that Linguistic Politeness Theory is an optimal tool in order to teach, explain and understand social interaction and what constitutes appropriate linguistic

behaviour in different genres. I have argued how, by analyzing texts from two genres from a linguistic politeness perspective, teachers can promote learners acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. I would like to suggest that texts from different genres like the ones utilized here can also be used in promoting other aspects of conversational competence, grammatical, textual and illocutionary, besides sociolinguistic knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Since conversation classes constitute nowadays an object of utmost importance in communicative language teaching and given the relevance of promoting learners' conversational competence, especially if one looks at the possible serious consequences for the presentation/interpretation of coparticipants' image, I have attempted to develop a theoretical framework for use in dealing with conversation in foreign language instruction. My theoretical perspective is based on pragmatic theory. I have followed Bachman's (1990) model of communicative competence and have adapted it for conversational purposes. I have also integrated relevant issues identified by Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994) into this model of conversational competence. From this theoretical stance, I have argued in favour of a direct approach to teaching conversational competence, based on making students aware of the type of knowledge they have to acquire and on teacher-provided meaningful metapragmatic information, suitable to the genre object of study. Finally, I have discussed practical exercises that would cover different aspects of conversational competence. More specifically, I have directed the reader to existing proposals for exercises at the level of textual and illocutionary knowledge and, after arguing in favour of the usefulness of Linguistic Politeness in teaching sociolinguistic competence, I have developed a task guided by the methodological principles discussed above aimed at promoting learners' sociolinguistic knowledge in conversation in an instructional setting.

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