1. Introduction

One of the ultimate goals of second language teaching (SLT) is to contribute to the development or improvement of second language (L2) learners’ ‘communicative competence’. In most extant models (Hymes 1971; Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983; Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell 1995), communicative competence is portrayed as a set of interrelated competencies or abilities, among which are what Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) label ‘sociolinguistic’ competence, what Bachman (1990) calls ‘pragmatic knowledge’ or what Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) name ‘actional’ and ‘sociocultural’ competencies. These refer, on the one hand, to the awareness of the sociocultural rules and conventions of usage of an L2, and, on the other hand, to the ability to assign specific meaning to words and utterances, recognise intentions in them and produce utterances that are appropriate to the sociocultural context where interaction takes place.

Kasper (1997) gathers such awareness and ability under the broader label of ‘pragmatic competence’. As a competence or abstract knowledge, pragmatic competence cannot be taught in L2 classes, but it can be well developed. Most L2 learners get a considerable amount of pragmatic competence for free because some pragmatic knowledge, such as the ability to infer indirectly conveyed messages, realise linguistic action indirectly or vary linguistic choices according to contextual constraints, seems to be universal and, therefore, easily accessible and extensible to similar contexts in the L2. Besides, learners can also transfer some aspects from their first language (L1) pragmatics into their L2, even if in the early stages of the L2 learning process they are not able to use some of those aspects because they lack the necessary linguistic means (Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Kasper 1997; Kasper and Rose 1999, 2002). For these reasons, the teaching of pragmatic aspects into L2 classes is extremely necessary and can be highly facilitative, as it can yield very positive outcomes and significantly influence learners’ performance in the L2. In fact, much extant research shows that instruction in pragmatics can be beneficial for L2 students (Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Kasper and Rose 1999, 2002; Garcés Conejos 2001; Kasper 2001; Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch 2002; Alcón Soler 2005, 2008; Rose 2005; Takahashi 2005; Takimoto 2006, 2008; Cohen 2008; Fukuya and Martínez Flor 2008).

One of the many benefits that pragmatic instruction may have is that it can help students avoid undesired ‘pragmatic failures’. Thomas (1983) described these as misunderstandings or communication breakdowns arising when L2 learners (i) select linguistic strategies that do not adequately convey the intended illocutionary force, (ii) transfer strategies from their L1 which do not have the same meaning in the L2, or (iii) behave in a way that is inadequate to the social context in which interaction takes place. Although in some cases pragmatic failures only have anecdotal consequences, in other cases their consequences may be fairly negative, as they may contribute to social stereotyping and affect social relationships. But, more importantly, pragmatic failures reveal that L2 learners’ level of pragmatic or communicative competence is not as desired or expected.

---

1 For Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), communicative competence consists of ‘grammatical’ competence, or the mastery of the L2 linguistic code; ‘sociolinguistic’ competence, or the knowledge of the sociocultural rules and conventions of use of the L2; ‘discourse’ competence, or the ability to produce coherent and cohesive discourse, and ‘strategic’ competence, or the command of certain means to compensate for possible communication breakdowns or to enhance communication. Later on, Bachman (1990) envisaged communicative competence as encompassing an ‘organisational knowledge’, which subsumes both a ‘grammatical’ and a ‘textual’ knowledge, and a ‘pragmatic knowledge’, amounting to being able to assign specific contextualised meanings to words and utterances and to recognise them as vehicles of their users’ intentions. More recently, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) proposed that communicative competence comprises a major competence called ‘discourse’ competence, which is the ability to select and arrange lexical items and syntactic structures to achieve well-formed spoken or written texts. Its development depends on the parallel development of three intertwined competencies, ‘linguistic competence’, ‘actional competence’, or the ability to recognise intentions in linguistic forms, and ‘sociocultural competence’, or the ability to produce utterances that are appropriate to the sociocultural context where communication takes place. Finally, in their model there is an overarching competence called ‘strategic’, which consists of the knowledge of some linguistic strategies to overcome communication problems and to achieve specific aims.
From Thomas’s (1983) description and from the works by some practitioners in interlanguage (IL) pragmatics and SLT (e.g. Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Meier 1997; Kasper and Rose 1999, 2002), which examine speech act realisation patterns by learners at different proficiency levels and show that learners differ from native speakers in the way they implement linguistic strategies and choose conventions of meaning and use to perform speech acts, it seems that the responsibility of pragmatic failure is solely attributable to the L2 learner’s interactive role as speaker and producer of utterances or stretches of discourse. However, many of the misunderstandings leading to pragmatic failures may originate in an inadequate or inefficient processing of utterances or fragments of discourse, and, therefore, in the learner’s performance as hearer and interpreter. Being pragmatically or communicatively competent in an L2 certainly involves displaying an adequate behaviour as speaker, but it must also necessarily involve showing an efficient and skilful behaviour as hearer. Needless to say, most models of communicative competence and practitioners in interlanguage pragmatics underline this fact (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Kasper 1997; Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Kasper and Rose 1999, 2002).

This paper argues that many misunderstandings at both the explicit and implicit level of communication may result from L2 learners’ not very sophisticated processing of utterances because of their selection of a specific cognitive strategy. That strategy may induce them to regard first, unintended interpretations as optimally relevant and stop their processing when reaching those interpretations. For that reason, it suggests that, if one of the ultimate goals of SLT is to achieve communicatively or pragmatically competent L2 speakers, teachers should instruct their learners to resort to another cognitive strategy whose outcomes may be (significantly) better, for it may guide learners to actual intended optimally relevant interpretations. By resorting to that other cognitive strategy learners’ performance as hearers may enhance and, therefore, they may reach a higher level of communicative or pragmatic competence in their L2.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Firstly, it reviews learners’ responsibility in pragmatic failure as speakers. Then, it discusses their responsibility in pragmatic failure when their interactive role switches to that of hearers by showing the different types of misunderstandings that may arise at both the explicit and implicit level of communication and why those misunderstandings arise. Finally, this paper suggests how many of those misunderstandings and pragmatic failures arising at those levels of communication may be overcome by resorting to a cognitive strategy that involves a higher degree of sophistication.

2. Speakers’ responsibility in pragmatic failure

Over the past decades, practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT have analysed the causes of pragmatic failure by examining L2 learners’ performance when producing a wide variety of speech acts in many different interactive contexts which include greetings (e.g. Jaworski 1994), apologies (e.g. Cohen and Olshaim 1981; Olshain 1983; Blum-Kulka and Levenston 1987; García 1989; Harlow 1990; Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu 2007), compliments (e.g. Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols 1996; Nelson, El Bakary, and Al Batal 1996), refusals (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz 1990; Stevens 1993; Kwon 2004), requests (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1982, 1988; Blum-Kulka and Levenston 1987; Tanaka 1988; Færch and Kasper 1989; Harlow 1990; Hong 1997; Kasanga 1998; Lwanga-Lumu 2002) or the expression of gratitude (Harlow 1990; Eisenstein and Bodman 1993), to name just a few. Their investigations have mainly centred on L2 learners’ performance as speakers, and hence producers of linguistic action, and stressed the effects that L2 learners’ (inappropriate) linguistic behaviour may have upon their interlocutors. Those investigations have led practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT to draw insightful conclusions about the causes of pragmatic failure.

A commonly agreed upon conclusion is that pragmatic failure stems from developmental and proficiency factors, such as negative transfer of discourse stretches or linguistic strategies to perform certain speech acts or linguistic routines from the L2 learners’ L1. Such transfer is an undesired by-product of some L2 learners’ tendency to look for literal equivalents in the L2 of the strategies or routines they frequently resort to in their L1. Another possible cause of pragmatic failure is the overgeneralisation of the use of some L2 forms to contexts in which the native speakers of the L2 would not use them. Obviously, such overgeneralisation is linked to learners’ own perceptions of the necessity or convenience to perform some verbal acts or use some routines in some contexts, such as greetings, apologies or thanks, among many others; and those perceptions are influenced by their knowledge about when to use them in their native culture. Finally, pragmatic failure may arise when L2 learners use an inadequate prosody, for instance, when they use a falling tone instead of a rising tone to offer something, or because learners feel
anxious to communicate as clearly as possible (Thomas 1983, 1984; Tannen 1984; House 1990; Hurley 1992; Kasper 1992; Hale 1996, 1997). In addition to these causes, practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT have also pointed out that there are other factors that favour pragmatic failures. Those are learners’ lack of knowledge about the L2 culture, their excessive and restrictive usage of ‘textbook language’, which is not always suitable for some interactive contexts or learners do not modify to make it fit to those contexts, and the limited language to which learners are exposed in the classroom (Hong 1997; Kasper 1997).

As can be seen, when accounting for pragmatic failure, practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT seem to have limited a great part of their efforts and attention to the L2 learners’ role as speakers and producers of utterances in the L2. In doing so, they seem to have solely attributed the responsibility of pragmatic failure to learners’ interactive role as speakers. Regarding the relationship between pragmatic failure and L2 learners’ role as hearers, what can be found in the literature are basically comments and reflections on their possible or actual reactions to linguistic behaviours or conversational styles that deviate from what they would expect on some occasions or in their culture. Nevertheless, many pragmatic failures also arise as a result of an inefficient or inadequate processing of utterances. In effect, Thomas’s (1983, 93) very definition of pragmatic failure explicitly mentions that it may arise as a consequence of the L2 learners’ inability to understand what speakers say.

It is undeniable that many misunderstandings do arise as a result of learners’ incompetence as L2 speakers or their unawareness of interactive norms or principles operative in the L2 culture, but practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT should not lose sight of the fact that many misunderstandings originate as a consequence of L2 learners’ incorrect or deficient processing of utterances in the L2 (Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch 2002). If one of the aims of SLT is to improve or develop learners’ communicative competence in the L2, they should not only be taught or trained to be good speakers who can use the L2 in a way that optimally converges with native standards, but also to be good and fairly competent hearers who are able to process utterances and stretches of discourse in the most efficient way and grasp the interpretation that their interlocutors might have intended to communicate. Since learners’ role as hearers should not be dismissed or overlooked in teaching programmes, syllabi and classes, it is extremely important that teachers invest some effort and work to enhance learners’ interpretive skills. Certainly, this may increase their awareness of the many risks hovering over human communication and help them overcome some communication problems. By doing so, teachers will obviously contribute to bring up more communicatively competent L2 learners. The question that now arises is why it is necessary to achieve learners who are better or skilful hearers. This obviously requires a reflection on the enormous interactive responsibility they bear as hearers.

### 3. Hearers’ responsibility in pragmatic failure

People face many problems when acting as hearers and interpret stretches of discourse or isolated utterances. Brown (1995, 34) explains that, quite frequently, people do not hear or listen to speakers, so they cannot understand at all or correctly what they say. On other occasions, hearers may hear what their interlocutors say, but they may be so engrossed in the processing of (a) previous utterance(s) or discourse that they cannot process other subsequent utterance(s) or understand some part or the whole of a conversation. Still, on other occasions hearers do understand the words of an utterance and can parse the utterance correctly, but they cannot grasp some of its nuances or implicit meanings in a specific context and produce an appropriate response to it, maybe because they need more information. Actually, in the case of L2 learners, when it comes to recover some implicit meanings or implicatures, they do not merely need some more time than native hearers because they may process discourse more slowly, but it may take non-native hearers some years to be able to grasp some of those meanings and even continue their L2 learning process without being able to reach expected or intended implicit contents (Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Bouton 1994). Obviously, if native speakers of a language face the problems mentioned when processing utterances produced in their own language, when L2 learners behave as hearers, they may also find similar or more serious problems. In the case of L2 learners, such problems may become insurmountable barriers hindering efficient communication and leading to many misunderstandings, whose consequences may range from being just merely funny and anecdotal incidents, to some extent inherent to communication, to more serious or dramatic incidents that may prompt individuals to attribute to their interlocutors some intentions, beliefs, moods or personality traits.

Yus Ramos (1999a, 1999b) has proposed a classification of frequent misunderstandings when hearers interpret discourse, which can be applied to account for L2 learners’ comprehension problems. Following
the relevance-theoretic description of communication (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995), which, to put it simply, envisages utterance interpretation as an on-line process with two phases or continua –the explicit and the implicit– in which hearers decode utterances, obtain a logical form, enrich that logical form with pragmatic material to get the explicature of the utterance, embed that explicature under a speech-act or propositional-attitude description to build its higher-level explicature and relate the information the utterance makes manifest to other contextual material to reach its implicatures, this classification draws a distinction between those misunderstandings that occur at the explicit level of communication and those occurring at its implicit level.

Regarding misunderstandings at the explicit level of communication, L2 learners may face three interpretation problems. Firstly, they may face cases of 'puzzled understanding'. This misunderstanding arises when learners can fully decode an utterance and understand the proposition it expresses but, when they manipulate its logical form to construct the utterance higher-level explicature, the saliency of a contextual assumption or not paying attention to paralinguistic aspects of communication lead them to interpret the utterance in a different way from the one the speaker intended. In a more technical way, when puzzled understanding arises, a learner recovers an undesired higher-level explicature and, consequently, thinks that the speaker’s attitude towards the propositional content she communicates differs from her actual attitude towards that content. Thus, if contextual assumptions such as those in (1) are highly manifest to the learner, he may interpret an utterance like (2) as a criticism instead of as a compliment or just a phatic remark, which might have been the interpretations the speaker would have expected or intended. Therefore, the learner might construct the higher-level explicature in (3):

(1) (a) Mary does not like very short skirts.
(b) Mary has criticised short skirts many times.
(c) Mary has criticised people wearing short skirts many times.

(2) You have bought a mini-skirt!

(3) [Mary is critical about [my wearing a mini-skirt]].

In this case the learner might have also constructed the wrong higher-level explicature if he had not noticed the speaker’s admiration face or her gestures of approval. This misunderstanding may be the responsible of those many cases in which learners miss ironies. Thus, if a learner does not notice the final interjection in (4) or the paralinguistic features with which the utterance is produced, he may interpret it as a genuine statement instead of as a case of irony in which the speaker, far from believing that Thomas is a nice fellow, thinks the opposite or dissociates from that belief:

(4) Thomas is such a nice fellow, hum!

Secondly, when enriching a logical form in order to obtain the explicature of an utterance, learners may not correctly disambiguate some syntactic constituents or assign reference to some pronouns, indexicals or deictics because they select wrong contextual information. This may lead them to obtain an ‘alternative explicature’ that differs (significantly) from the explicature intended or expected by the speaker. This is what happens to some Spanish learners of English, whose native language distinguishes between proximal, medial and distal deictics –‘aquí’, ‘ahí’ and ‘allí’. They may not know how to interpret English ‘there’ if they are not looking at their interlocutor or miss some pointing and, consequently, have problems to discover is the speaker meant ‘a distant place’ or a ‘not-so-distant place’:

(5) A: Leave it there! [‘there’ meaning ‘upon the table’]
The hearer leaves a glass on a more distant shelf
A: Not there, but there!

This misunderstanding can also be observed in those conversations in which the speaker mentions a series of people, objects or animals and uses anaphoric pronouns. For example, in a conversation in which a speaker is talking about different guys she likes and resorts to a personal pronoun to refer back to one of them, the hearer may assign a wrong referent to it and not understand correctly the speaker:

(6) A: He is the one I love! [referring to a particular guy]
B: I didn’t know you were in love with Peter!
A: Oh, no way, Susie! Bob is the one I love!
Finally, many examples of this misunderstanding come from those intentional or inadvertent cases of syntactically ambiguous utterances in whose interpretation the hearer may carry out an erroneous disambiguation or come out with two equally possible and perfectly logical interpretations. Thus, in (7), what is dangerous, the planes that are flying or the act itself of flying planes?

(7) Flying planes can be dangerous [what is dangerous, planes that fly or the act of flying planes?]

Thirdly, learners may not stop their processing at the explicit level but continue it at the implicit level by expanding their interpretive context and accessing additional contextual information. This makes them turn the intended explicatures of utterances into ‘unintended implicatures’ and therefore recover at their own risk implicit contents which their interlocutors would not have expected or intended them to reach. This misunderstanding can be observed, for example, when a learner goes on with his processing of an utterance like (8), which the speaker produced as a mere phatic remark about the temperature of the room, and expands his interpretive context adding contextual information like that in (9). Including that information in his processing leads the learner to reach an unintended interpretation of the utterance as an indirect request (10) and, as a consequence, to make the offer in (11):

(8) Oh, it is cold in here!
(9) (a) It is cold in this room.
(b) The window is open.
(c) If the window was closed, the room would be warmer.
(10) My interlocutor might want me to shut the window.
(11) Shall I switch the heater on?

Concerning those misunderstandings at the implicit level of communication, when acting as hearers, learners may face two major problems. On the one hand, they may lack some contextual information essential for reaching an intended interpretation. This certainly prevents them from reaching implicit contents or, in Yus Ramos’s (1999a, 1999b) terminology, makes them ‘miss implicatures’. In a role play some of my B1 students were doing in class, I observed this misunderstanding when one of them (A), not knowing that his interlocutor (B) did not like the gay scene or was not very tolerant about homosexuality, invited the other to join him and his friends to go to a gay bar. The invitee’s response was not a clear acceptance or refusal of the invitation, but a very obvious remark for the inviter, which to some extent puzzled him and did not know how to take. The invitee’s response was so indirect for the inviter that, after a brief hesitation, he had to repeat his invitation because he missed the implicit content of the response, in this context a refusal, as the dialogue shows:

(12) A: Hi Peter! Great to see you here!
B: Hi Mark! Yeah! Great to see you too! Where are you going tonight?
A: Well, we are now here and we are going to have a beer. Later will go to Sacha. Will you like to come with us?
B: Oh, Sacha is a gay disco.
A: [pause, hesitation] Yeah! Will you like to come with us?

On the other hand, learners may interpret the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of their interlocutors on the basis of their own cultural knowledge, which may result in their reaching ‘alternative implicatures’. This sort of misunderstanding has been well exemplified in the plethora of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic failures illustrated in the literature, such as those arising when some Finnish students concluded that their Briton interlocutors’ small talk was some sort of intrusion in their private sphere motivated by wrongly assuming a certain degree of intimacy which did not actually exist (Reynolds 1995), or when some Americans interpreted what for them were fairly unusual greeting formulae and regarded their Arab interlocutors as insincere or flattering (Arent 2000). Those Finnish and American hearers’ erroneous interpretations arose because, as non-native users of the languages in question, they interpreted their native interlocutors’ behaviour against their own cultural knowledge or set of ‘cultural metarepresentations’ (Sperber 1996) regarding the amount of small talk permissible in some circumstances or acceptable topics for small talk, or how one should greet and be greeted. And, unfortunately, using those metarepresentations induced them to draw wrong conclusions.

---

2 This dialogue has been transcribed from class notes and grammatical mistakes have been preserved.
The misunderstandings so far presented are due to ‘accidental relevance’ (Wilson 1999). Utterance interpretation is a relevance-driven activity in which the hearer tries to satisfy his expectations of relevance. In these misunderstandings the way in which the speaker formulates her verbal contributions (e.g. their complexity, the appearance of some deictics or referential elements), her selection of a type of utterance (e.g. an ambivalent response instead of a direct, straightforward one) or her unusual behaviour in a specific social context (e.g. an infrequent way of greeting) lead the hearer to an interpretation that prima facie appears to him relevant enough. However, that is not the interpretation that the speaker intended to communicate. In some cases, the hearer stops at that unintended interpretation because his expectations of relevance have made him assign reference to some of the elements of a logical form or disambiguate some of its syntactic constituents in a certain way. In other cases, the hearer’s expectations of relevance are not very complex or sophisticated and, therefore, do not prompt him to enlarge his interpretive context by accessing contextual assumptions that would have been fundamental for reaching the actual intended interpretation that the speaker would have intended or expected him to reach. Finally, in other cases, the hearer’s expectations of relevance have induced him to access specific contextual or cultural information which, along with the information conveyed by the utterance, has made him reach a wrong interpretation.

In addition to misunderstandings due to accidental relevance, there are others that originate as a result of ‘accidental irrelevance’ (Wilson 1999). Cases of accidental irrelevance arise, for instance, when a hearer thinks that the speaker only transmits information that he already knows or when the speaker makes a slip of the tongue (Wilson 1999). Likewise, many learners can also misinterpret utterances or discourse because they feel that the interpretation they reach is not relevant enough and, therefore, search for an alternative interpretation that appears to them optimally relevant or do not go on with their processing. As in the case of misunderstandings due to accidental relevance, learners’ misunderstandings due to accidental irrelevance happen at both the explicit and the implicit level of communication.

As regards the explicit level of communication, noise in the communicative channel, a bad pronunciation, a strong accent or difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary may prevent the hearer from understanding correctly or result in what Yus Ramos (1999a, 1999b) calls ‘non-understanding’. Thus, when a non-native speaker of English is describing a person and talking about what that person normally does, the problems she has with that person and how she gets on with that person (13), a learner of this language might find irrelevant the last sentence of this fragment of discourse in the context in which he is processing it because of the speaker’s bad pronunciation of the intended word ‘nosy’ as ‘noisy’. That bad pronunciation might have surprised the learner, who could regard the adjective he hears as completely unrelated to the preceding description of the individual in question and wonder why the speaker is qualifying him as ‘noisy’:

(13) He is always looking at what I am doing, seeing the exercises I give to the teacher. He is also very curious and wants to know… wants to see my notes, the books I take from the library… eh, he is very [nɔзи] (instead of [nɔузи]).

As concerns the implicit level of communication, a learner may think that he already knows the information that his interlocutor communicates by means of an utterance and conclude that his interlocutor may not have any other intention than making that information manifest to him. This would prevent the learner from reaching an implicit content that the speaker would have intended him to reach. Thus, in Yus Ramos’s (1999a, 1999b) terms, the learner turns an intended implicature into an ‘unintended explicature’. This may happen when a learner only interprets an utterance like (14) as a phatic remark as a consequence of being already aware of the fact that he is indeed late. The awareness of that fact would prevent the learner from reaching a further implicit content that his interlocutor may have intended to communicate, such as a warning, a complaint or a reproach (15):

(14) You are late again today!
(15) Don’t be late again!

These are some of the misunderstandings that may arise when L2 learners interpret utterances or stretches of discourse produced in their L2. The question that now follows is why such misunderstandings arise. Researchers have formulated some hypotheses about their possible causes and ventured some explanations related to the activation of mental frames and the selection of processing strategies, such as ‘bottom-up’, ‘top-down processing’, ‘one-meaning processing’ and ‘multiple-meaning processing’ (e.g. Kasper 1984). This notwithstanding, it could be argued that, in the case of L2 learners, many
misunderstandings arise because the level of sophistication of their processing is not adequate and they use a simple processing strategy: ‘naïve optimism’ (Sperber 1994).

Naïve optimism is the easiest and simplest processing strategy available to hearers. Apart from believing that the speaker is benevolent and will not deceive him, a naïve and optimistic hearer believes that the speaker is competent in the language she uses, so he takes for granted that the speaker knows its rules and conventions of usage, will try to avoid misunderstandings and will try to guide him to optimally relevant interpretations. When following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, a naïve and optimistic hearer reaches an optimally relevant interpretation, he will not think of possible alternative interpretations, as this would detract from relevance. However, this should not rule out the possibility that a naïve and optimistic hearer reaches an interpretation different from the one the speaker intended.

When processing utterances, hearers decode them, obtain logical forms that they subsequently enrich, construct higher-level explicatures and draw contextual implications. Following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, naïve and optimistic hearers, and many learners in general for the purpose of this paper, enrich the logical forms of utterances, assign reference to referential expressions or disambiguate syntactic structures in ways the speaker might not have foreseen because they do not pay attention to some contextual information. In other cases, naïve and optimistic hearers resort to contextual information that their interlocutors might not have wanted or expected them to use in order to embed the lower-level explicature of the utterance under an inadequate speech-act or propositional-attitude description, which makes them misunderstand their interlocutors’ attitude towards the propositional content of utterances or what their interlocutors are doing when saying their words. In other cases still, naïve and optimistic hearers lack some knowledge or do not broaden their mental context with further assumptions, which would have led them to the actually relevant interpretation, but stop their context construction at some point that makes them interpret utterances differently.

If learners process utterances and discourse stretches using this cognitive strategy and may make mistakes when understanding them, their misunderstandings may evidence that their level of communicative competence is not good enough or as desired because they do not behave as competent and sophisticated hearers. Then, L2 teachers may wonder how they could avoid those misunderstandings, which may have negative repercussions on the perception of their students as communicators in the L2, and thus enhance their communicative or pragmatic competence as hearers.

4. Overcoming misunderstandings and pragmatic failures

One of the problems that pragmatic failure poses for SLT is certainly how teachers can help L2 learners avoid or overcome misunderstandings resulting from an (incorrect) interpretation of utterances. As has been seen, learners may not select the most appropriate processing strategies, rely only on the linguistic evidence or select the most adequate context to process linguistic data. This may induce them to opt for the first interpretation that comes to mind. Perceiving it to be optimally relevant, learners may believe that it is the interpretation the speaker intended to communicate.

In order to avoid pragmatic failures and improve learners’ communicative competence in their L2, practitioners in IL pragmatics and SLT have made many calls for greater efforts to raise learners’ ‘pragmatic awareness’ or ‘metapragmatic abilities’ in formal language instruction by means of a wide array of activities (e.g. Sharwood Smith 1981; Thomas 1983; Di Pietro 1987; House 1990; Olshtain and Cohen 1990, 1991; Chick 1996; García 1996; Kasper and Rose 2002; Davies 2004). Those activities include role plays where students practise different speech acts or discourse aspects, exposure to situations where misunderstandings arise, explanations and discussions about the causes of misunderstandings, etc. Those activities, however, mainly focus on learners’ performance as speakers, so what happens with their role as hearers and interpreters of linguistic data? Obviously, this interactive role should not be forgotten.

As speakers, learners play an important, active role in pragmatic failure because they may be responsible for messages that do not fit the interactive context or are pragmatically ill-formed. But they should also be conscious that, when their interactive role switches to that of hearers, they do not play a passive, but another very active role in communication, as they bear the enormous responsibility of interpreting messages correctly (Brown 1995; García Conejos and Bou Franch 2002). If utterances mean what they are taken to mean, that is in many cases the hearers’ sole responsibility. For this reason, L2 teachers should alert their learners of the risks of comprehension in order to make them more competent hearers. If their aim is to make learners communicatively or pragmatically competent in the L2, teachers should also train them to be fairly competent hearers who should not always believe first interpretations
to be the ones intended by speakers. Teachers should work with students to make their interpretive strategies more complex and, therefore, develop a cognitive strategy that involves a greater degree of sophistication than naïve optimism. This more sophisticated cognitive strategy enables learners as hearers to reject apparently relevant interpretations. Sperber labels it ‘cautious optimism’ and defines it as “[…] a special case of competent attribution of intentions” (1994, 192).

In SLT learners must be trained to become cautious optimistic hearers in order to be able to attribute to their interlocutors the intention to communicate interpretations that would have achieved an optimal level of relevance and they would have probably reached more directly and with less cognitive effort, instead of other interpretations which they must accept as the most relevant ones because of their interlocutors’ inaccurate or insufficient command of the L2 (in case learners interact with other non-native speakers of the L2), reduced cognitive abilities or displaying a behaviour that obeys different interactive principles. Cautious optimism is necessary because, as hearers, L2 learners often focus excessively on the linguistic form of utterances, only process them bottom-up or top-down, do not select appropriate interpretive contexts or stop their processing at the explicit level. Cautious optimism is also essential in those cases in which learners do not take into account contextual elements and factors that may have favoured alternative interpretations instead of those they reach and consider to be their interlocutors’ informative intention. Becoming cautious and optimistic hearers, learners might develop more complex interpretive skills that would enable them to avoid the undesirable consequences that pragmatic failures might have, above all if they take erroneous interpretations to evidence certain intentions, beliefs, moods or personal traits on their interlocutors’ part.

Exploiting cautious optimism, learners may cope with pragmatic failures originating from accidental relevance and accidental irrelevance at both the explicit and the implicit level of communication (Wilson 1999). When learners behave as naïve and optimistic hearers, they accept interpretations appearing to them relevant enough and they identify those interpretations with their interlocutors’ informative intention. In contrast, when learners behave as optimistic and cautious hearers, their processing may reach a higher level of sophistication, which empowers them to face those cases in which their interlocutors’ (linguistic) behaviour ostensibly but inadvertently induces them to draw unexpected or undesired conclusions. Cautious and optimistic L2 learners can reject apparently relevant interpretations that lead them to conclude that their interlocutors’ informative intention is rather different from the one they actually have and can take into account information from different ‘contextual sources’ (Yus Ramos 2000) in order to enrich the logical form of utterances in the right direction, embed lower-level explicatures into more realistic higher-level explicatures or, if necessary, expand their mental contexts so as not to miss expected implicatures or recover intended ones. In some respects, cautious optimism can be seen as a strategy that prompts hearers to access different contextual sources in order to formulate differing, but equally possible interpretive hypotheses that guide them to alternative interpretations. As a consequence of the formulation of those hypotheses, cautious optimism makes it possible for hearers to maintain the presumption that their interlocutors are benevolent and do not have certain intentions, entertain certain beliefs or have a personality which they do not actually have.

Regarding misunderstandings due to accidental relevance, at the explicit level of communication a cautious optimistic learner may be able to overcome cases of puzzled understanding by wondering whether a previously entertained belief like the one in (1) above is right. If he feels that it is not, he can discard it, expand his mental context and access other new or not previously entertained beliefs like those in (16). Those assumptions would lead him to reach another optimally relevant interpretation (15) of an utterance like (2) above, in whose processing the learner might have previously constructed a higher-level explicature that would not have captured the speaker’s actual attitude towards its propositional content. To do so, the learner can take advantage of contextual sources, such as the utterance intonation; paralinguistic features, such as the speaker’s gestures or facial expression, or encyclopaedic information about people and their likes and attitudes, among others:

(16)  
(a) Mary might have changed her mind about skirts.  
(b) Mary may like mini-skirts.

(17) [Mary admires/praises/likes [that I have bought a mini-skirt]].

Similarly, in the case of (4), where the learner may miss the irony, exploiting the interjection\(^3\) as well as other paralinguistic information might have resulted in the right ironic interpretation of the utterance.

---

\(^3\) According to Wharton (2009), interjections encode a procedural meaning that guides hearers in the construction of higher-level explicatures.
Thus, by assessing the suitability of the assumptions with which he processes an utterance or paying attention to additional linguistic or paralinguistic elements, a learner may have a more accurate or realistic appraisal of the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition her utterance communicates.

In those cases in which an L2 learner recovers alternative explicatures that differ from the intended ones, behaving as a cautious optimistic hearer, the learner may sense that the reference he assigned to some linguistic elements of an utterance or the way in which he disambiguated some of its syntactic constituents does not correspond to the way in which the speaker might have expected him to do those operations and interpret her utterance. Therefore, a cautious and optimistic learner may realise that he did not choose the adequate contextual information and enlarge his interpretive context in search for the intended reference or the right sense of an utterance. In the examples above (5-7), had learners been cautious and optimistic, they would have broaden their interpretive contexts by taking into account contextual sources such as the physical environment manifest to them or some pointing in order to re-assign reference to the deictic ‘there’ in (5), by searching for encyclopaedic information about the speaker and the people she might like or love, or by looking in the preceding discourse in order to find out who the actual beloved is in (6), or by accessing encyclopaedic assumptions about planes and flying in (7). In those ways, learners would have reached the actual intended interpretations of the utterances in question.

In turn, in those cases in which, behaving as a naïve and optimistic hearer, a learner turns an intended explicature into an unintended implicature, a cautious optimistic learner can realise that his context expansion was unnecessary or unwarranted. Consequently, he may attribute to his interlocutor the intention to communicate only what the utterance means at the explicit level and dismiss the implicit content he derived at his own risk. A cautious and optimistic hearer may discard assumptions such as those in (9) and probably process the utterance with a lesser amount of contextual information. In this way, he may stop his processing of a phatic comment like (8) at the explicit level and not look for unintended implicatures (10), which would have made him interpret (8) as an indirect request.

Concerning misunderstandings owing to accidental relevance at the implicit level of communication, in those cases in which a learner misses implicatures because he processes discourse as a naïve and optimistic hearer, cautious optimism may have helped him realise that his interlocutor might not have intended to communicate just the interpretation he reaches, but something else. As a cautious and optimistic hearer, the learner might have felt that the speaker might have intended to make her utterance optimally relevant under some other interpretation. Hence, in example (12), behaving as a cautious and optimistic hearer, a learner would have expanded his context by adding contextual assumptions like those in (18), which would have guided him to the actual optimally relevant interpretation his interlocutor might have expected him to reach (19):

(18)  
(a)  B is heterosexual.  
(b)  B may not like the gay scene.  
(c)  B may not be very tolerant about gays.  
(d)  B may not like the sort of people going to gay discos.  
(e)  B may not like the music played in gay discos.

(19)  
(a)  B will not join us to Sacha.  
(b)  B rejects my invitation to join me and my friends.

Quite similarly, in those cases in which L2 learners observe that their interlocutors’ behaviour deviates from the behavioural patterns captured in their cultural metarepresentations and derive alternative implicatures, had those learners been cautious and optimistic, they would have realised that the conclusions they had drawn were the result of having resorted to some (cultural) assumptions. They may sense that the content of those assumptions significantly differs from that of the cultural knowledge motivating and regulating their interlocutors’ behaviours. Consequently, they could reject those assumptions and consider others which could lead them to different interpretations or they could simply realise that their interlocutors’ behaviour follows other behavioural patterns, so their conclusions were unwarranted.

As regards misunderstandings due to accidental irrelevance, optimistic and cautious learners may notice the apparent irrelevance of some interpretations and ask themselves which (other) interpretations their interlocutors could have expected them to reach so that their utterances would have in fact achieved an optimal level of relevance. Cautious optimism may be decisive for overcoming cases of non-understanding, too. Perceiving that an utterance or a part of an utterance that he is processing does not make much sense in the context where he is processing it, an optimistic and cautious hearer may ask himself what the speaker might have meant by means of that utterance and may access a suitable context...
that leads him to an optimally relevant interpretation. Thus, in the case of a fragment of discourse like (13) in which an incorrect pronunciation leads the hearer to regard a part of it as unrelated to the preceding discourse or as irrelevant, a cautious and optimistic hearer could search for contextual or encyclopaedic information referring to the person being described or alternative adjectives for describing him/her. In that way, he may conclude that what his interlocutor meant in that context was not ‘noisy’, but ‘nosy’, that this mistake was due to a deficient pronunciation and that it was not his interlocutor’s intention to characterise the person mentioned as ‘noisy’.

Finally, when a naïve and optimistic learner turns what should have been an intended implicature into an unintended explicature because he finds the utterance irrelevant or his expectations of relevance make him stop his processing at the explicit level, a cautious optimistic learner would go one step further. Facing an apparent case of irrelevance, the cautious and optimistic learner would invest the additional cognitive effort required by a possible context expansion and consider more contextual assumptions, which may render the utterance optimally relevant under some other interpretation. In the case of (14), a cautious and optimistic learner could incorporate to his interpretive context assumptions referring to arriving late to class, the starting time of class, his teacher’s desire not to be interrupted when lecturing, etc. Then, he could relate those assumptions to the assumptions made manifest by the utterance and other contextual assumptions and obtain cognitive effects that would indeed turn the utterance optimally relevant under an interpretation such as (15).

5. Conclusion

It is true that learners’ performance as speakers may be the cause of many undesired pragmatic failures and misunderstandings that may have unpredictable consequences not only for interaction, but also for the perception of the speakers as individuals. But learners’ performance as hearers equally plays an essential role in pragmatic failure and misunderstandings, as they are in charge of interpreting linguistic data and behaviours. In most cases, those misunderstandings may be the by-product of processing utterances on the basis of a simple cognitive strategy such as naïve optimism, so a more complex and sophisticated strategy, cautious optimism, may become a helpful and useful tool that may help learners avoid or overcome them. It encourages learners as hearers to take into account further contextual material and to engage in further inferential processes after having realised that some apparently relevant or irrelevant interpretations may not be the interpretations that their interlocutors might have actually intended to communicate. For this reason, in order to enhance learners’ performance as hearers –and, therefore, in order to improve their communicative or pragmatic competence in the L2– they should be stimulated not to accept first interpretations coming to mind. In other words, learners should be instructed to search for those alternative interpretations of utterances which are indeed optimally relevant and may correspond to the interpretations their interlocutors intend to communicate. Therefore, it would be advisable that teachers make learners aware of this strategy, which may significantly contribute to solve pragmatic failures and misunderstandings arising from accidental relevance or accidental irrelevance, at both the explicit and implicit level of communication.

In some cases, cautious optimism may also prevent learners from attributing to their interlocutors potential ‘prefailure’ beliefs or intentions (Field 2007) which would have allegedly motivated behaviours that are perceived to deviate from the learners’ own standards. Such attribution would be justified as an attempt to find reasons underlying their interlocutors’ behaviour or as an attempt to find a rationale for some responses that may puzzle learners. And such attribution, regrettably, could end up in the hearer drawing unwarranted conclusions that could induce him to an erroneous appraisal of the other individual’s beliefs, intentions, mood or personality. Training learners to be cautious and optimistic hearers, teachers can progressively make them understand that their interlocutors’ behaviour may obey different cultural principles in some circumstances or that their level of communicative competence in the L2 is far from what would have been desirable or expected, which causes them to make the mistakes they make. Cautious optimism, therefore, will significantly contribute to the development or improvement of learners’ ‘epistemic vigilance’ when using their L2, which Mascaro and Sperber (2009) characterise as a necessary critical attention to the believability and reliability of communication. If such critical attention is fundamental for interaction in one’s L1, in contexts where interlocutors are not fully competent in an L2, are unaware of the L2 interactive principles, behave guided by their L1 interactive principles, display some influence from their L1 or do not process utterances in the most efficient way, it may be essential to avoid or overcome possible communication problems and, in extreme cases, avoid virtual interactive conflicts.
References

—. 1993.


