METAPSYCHOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF COMPREHENSION

AND EPISTEMIC VIGILANCE OF L2 COMMUNICATION

IN INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT

1. Introduction

It is unlikely that anyone would question the teaching of pragmatics as being highly beneficial for L2 learners (Garcés Conejos, 2001; Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). Extant models of *communicative competence* highlight the importance of *pragmatic competence* (Kasper, 1997) in Second Language Teaching (SLT) and include it among the sub-competencies that learners must acquire or develop in order to be competent in an L2. Refining Canale and Swain's (1980) model, Canale (1983) included *sociolinguistic competence* and *discourse competence*. Pragmatic competence in Bachman's (1990) model was reflected in what she labelled *pragmatic knowledge*. Later on, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) subsumed it under *sociocultural competence* and *actional competence*.

Although pragmatics is included as one of the abilities and abstract knowledge L2 learners must develop, recent methodological proposals that deal with pragmatic

aspects of L2 learning/use in the classroom seem to concentrate mainly on speech-act production and behaviour (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). For instance, to work with speech acts Cohen (2005) proposes *learning* and *use* strategies, while Martínez Flor and Usó Juan (2006) propose a six-phase instructional sequence and Kondo (2008) suggests five pedagogical steps. With the notable exception of the works by Bouton (1990, 1994) and Kubota (1995) on learners' comprehension problems with implicatures, research on interlanguage and instructional pragmatics seems to have been chiefly concerned with raising learners' meta-pragmatic awareness of factors affecting their behaviour as L2 speakers, as attested by the works gathered in the volumes edited by Martínez Flor et al. (2003) or Martínez Flor and Usó Juan (2010), to name but two. Even though cognitive issues related to comprehension have traditionally received little attention, the concern of practitioners in the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Second Language Learning (SLL) and SLT has significantly increased over the past years thanks to the theoretical and empirical contributions from different paradigms (Vandergrift, 1999, 2005; Goh, 2008; Field, 2010; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari, 2010; Siegel, 2011; Blyth, 2012).

Within pragmatics a case in point is Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2004), which has enabled practitioners in the said fields to reinterpret some theoretical notions, observed phenomena, tendencies and facts in interlanguage pragmatic development from an angle centred on cognitive investment and cognitive gain (Foster-Cohen, 2000, 2004). In fact, the relevance-theoretic framework sheds light onto "[…] the psycholinguistic and metapsychological processes underlying the production and comprehension of language" (Jodłowiec, 2010:46), thus lending support to SLA theories concerned with selective attention and L2 learners' inferences (Maia de Paiva, 2003; Maia de Paiva and Foster-Cohen, 2004). Some pragmatists have applied it to account for specific cognitive aspects of interlanguage pragmatic development. Among them, Taguchi (2002) studied how learners interpret indirect replies; Liszka (2004) analysed L1 influence on L2 pragmatic processes when learners acquire the English present perfect; Žegarac (2004) explored the cognitive underpinnings of the acquisition of the English definite article by learners whose L1 lacks such determiner; Ying (2004) looked into how learners of English process syntactically ambiguous sentences, and Rosales Sequeiros (2004) delved into how they interpret VP-elliptical sentences. More

recently, Taguchi (2008) focused on the effects of working memory, semantic access and listening abilities on the comprehension of implicatures.

The relevance-theoretic view of communication and some of its notions have also proven insightful, illuminating and helpful for SLT (Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch, 2002). Relying on its wide-encompassing theoretical apparatus, some suggestions have been made to avoid some types of sociopragmatic failure and to improve learners' sociopragmatic competence (Padilla Cruz, 2001). The relevance-theoretic apparatus can also be incorporated to teach some of the effects of phatic discourse or what interjections contribute to communication (Padilla Cruz, 2005, 2010). Finally, it also facilitates a more accurate understanding of the role of genres in interlanguage pragmatic development (Tzanne et al., 2009; Ifantidou, 2011)[1].

Adopting a relevance-theoretic standpoint, this paper also endorses the view that cognitive issues related to comprehension must also be given attention in L2 classes and that addressing them may certainly benefit learners' interlanguage pragmatic development. Without denying that SLT should aim at enhancing their speech-act behaviour, this paper suggests that it should also foster metapsychological abilities

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[1] See Jodłowiec (2010) for a more complete review of implications of Relevance Theory for SLA studies.

that enable learners to be aware of how they interpret utterances, the problems they may face when doing so, their interpretive flaws and the misunderstandings likely to arise when they do not arrive at intended interpretations or process utterances in the most efficient manner. It assumes that learners' capacities or abilities as hearers may not be as accurate or sophisticated as those of natives (Goh, 1997; Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch, 2002; Boettinger et al., 2010; Ifantidou, 2011) –even if those of natives may obviously be impaired or hindered at times (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995)– and may be affected by factors such as level of sophistication as hearers in their L1 or L2 proficiency level.

L2 listening is a type of expertise in which learners begin with a reduced set of processes that require deliberate attention and intention but that may be automatized and develop into more complex operations through practice and training (Field, 2010). Indeed, it is a complex process where individuals do not only have to discriminate sounds, understand lexicon, analyse grammatical structures and interpret segmental and suprasegmental features, but also interpret utterances within the discourse-internal and external contexts (Vandergrift, 1999), which certainly demands effort and time (Blyth, 2012). Research has shown that learners vary in

terms of skillfulness, and therefore level of sophistication as interpreters, so that

more skilled learners deploy a wider number of metacognitive strategies –which

include listening for overall meaning, paying attention, focusing and looking ahead

when in difficulties, confidence in the ability to infer correctly, avoiding translation or

evaluation of comprehension– with greater flexibility, appropriateness and outcomes

(O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Bacon, 1992; Goh, 1998, 2000; Vandergrift, 2003).

Just in the same way as many pragmatic failures originate when learners do not

conform to some L2 linguistic behavioural standards, misunderstandings may

originate at both the explicit and implicit level of communication (Yus Ramos, 1999a,

1999b) because of learners' comprehension problems. Although many of them may

be funny, anecdotal or unnoticeable, others may, in contrast, have serious

consequences, as they may have a bearing on two of the perlocutionary effects of

communication: they may affect the beliefs learners might entertain and the

intentions they might attribute to their interlocutors (Wilson, 2011a, 2012).

Consequently, this paper contends that instruction in L2 pragmatics, and more

specifically, in cognitive issues connected with comprehension, should contribute to

developing or attuning an inherent critical stance towards communication in general,

towards the potential risks that communication in an L2 entails in particular and, for the purpose of this paper, towards learners' own capacities as hearers and interpreters of listening tasks in the L2: what Mascaro and Sperber (2009) and Sperber et al. (2010) term *epistemic vigilance*. This is argued to be fundamental for interlanguage pragmatic development.

This paper begins by briefly presenting some of the major claims of Relevance Theory about communication and comprehension. Section 3 then addresses learners' comprehension mistakes and argues that these may arise because of the *accidental relevance* or *accidental irrelevance* (Wilson, 1999) of interpretations as a result of learners' *naïve optimism* (Sperber, 1994). In brief, this processing strategy consists of the hearer's taking for granted other individuals' *competence* and *benevolence* as communicators, so that he may believe one interpretation that yields some cognitive reward at a low cost. Section 4 argues that pedagogical intervention in L2 pragmatics should endeavour to make learners more epistemically vigilant of the challenges of communication in a diverse language and cultural milieu. If their epistemic vigilance is successfully adjusted, it could prompt learners to opt for a more sophisticated processing strategy: *cautious optimism* (Sperber, 1994), which makes

hearers wonder which other interpretation they should have reached when comprehension problems are detected. Adopting a qualitative approach, this section also exemplifies the interpretive mistakes that learners in three instructional groups made at the explicit and implicit levels of communication in a series of listening tasks (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b) and suggests that such mistakes may be the consequence of their epistemic vigilance needing adjustments. Thus, this section seeks to suggest a relevance-theoretic analysis of comprehension problems observed in such tasks in order to show how epistemic vigilance might have contributed to their avoidance or to overcome them. Finally, this paper offers some conclusions and directions for future research.

2. Relevance Theory: major claims and postulates about comprehension

Assuming that "Human cognition is oriented towards the maximisation of relevance" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:260), Relevance Theory claims that comprehension is relevance-driven. Utterances generate expectations of relevance in hearers, i.e. expectations that the *cognitive effort* that hearers will have to invest to process them will be rewarded by cognitive benefits. These benefits are *cognitive*

effects: strengthening of previous information, contradiction and rejection of old information and derivation of new information from the joint interaction of the information utterances communicate and the information that hearers already possess (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995).

Expectations of relevance pervade and govern the whole process of comprehension, which involves both decoding and inference. The former is performed by the language module of the brain, and it yields a *logical form*, i.e. "[…] a structured set of constituents" or concepts (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:74). Decoding also involves syntactic parsing on sentential constituents. Once the logical form of an utterance is obtained, it is pragmatically enriched with contextual information. Pragmatic enrichment involves mental procedures such as reference assignment, disambiguation of syntactic material, conceptual adjustment or free enrichment of non-coded concepts. The result of these procedures is a fully-fledged propositional form, or the *explicature* of the utterance. This explicature may be embedded under a speech-act or propositional-attitude description, thus yielding the *higher-level explicatures* of the utterance.

Although the explicature may be what the speaker intended to communicate, it may act as input for further inferential processes in order for the hearer to arrive at some implicit content that the speaker might have intended to communicate, too[2]. Thus, the explicature becomes an *implicated premise*. But implicated premises can also be any other assumption manifest to the hearer –i.e. any other information mentally represented– which he has evidence to believe the speaker expected or intended him to exploit. Those assumptions make up the *context* the hearer uses in order to interpret the utterance and arrive at its *implicated conclusion*.

All these interpretive processes are not sequential, but happen simultaneously. When carrying them out, hearers follow the interpretive path requiring the least cognitive effort possible and giving rise to the maximum amount of cognitive rewards (Wilson and Sperber, 2004). If the resulting interpretation complies with these two requisites, it will be *optimally relevant* to the hearer, and he may conclude that it is his interlocutor's *informative intention*, i.e. the message the speaker intends to communicate and expects him to arrive at. Following the path of least effort expenditure and maximum cognitive benefit is the easiest and simplest processing

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[2] Following a relevance-theoretic convention, reference to the speaker will be made through the feminine gender, while reference to the hearer through the masculine gender.

strategy available to hearers, maybe some sort of default processing strategy. Sperber (1994) labels it naïve optimism. A naïvely optimistic hearer automatically presupposes that his interlocutor is *benevolent* –i.e. that she will not try to deceive him– and *competent* –i.e. that she has an adequate command of the linguistic system that she uses to communicate (Sperber, 1994; Mascaro and Sperber, 2009). Following this strategy, a hearer may believe without much questioning an optimally relevant interpretation to be the one that the speaker might intend to communicate and add its informational load to his set of beliefs. However, the hearer will only end up doing so if he really trusts the speaker and the information sources he accesses, and if he finds foolproof the different interpretive steps taken. Even if the hearer finds an interpretation optimally relevant, he may fail at any of those steps, and, still, misunderstandings may arise.

Humans have developed a certain capacity to check whether they can trust and rely on their interlocutors and information sources: epistemic vigilance (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010). This is a captious alertness to the credibility and reliability of communication and the participants involved in it, which leads hearers to adopt "[…] a critical stance towards the communicated information"

(Sperber et al., 2010:363). It is not the opposite of trust or some kind of automatic distrust; it is the opposite of blind trust (Sperber et al., 2010). As a mental module, its domain of operation is the information exchanged in communication and exploited in comprehension. Epistemic vigilance can also be characterised as some kind of caution towards our own abilities as interpreters and towards the interpretations we may reach, as we may follow inadequate interpretive routes or make errors at the interpretive steps described above (Padilla Cruz, 2013). It is ultimately responsible for whether or not hearers end up making specific attributions of beliefs and intentions to others and subsequently entertaining specific beliefs. For this reason, whether an interpretation is believed to be the speaker's informative intention and whether the information that utterances make manifest adds up to the universe of the hearer's beliefs, is contingent on that interpretation passing the filter of epistemic vigilance. In brief, epistemic vigilance could be said not to act as a final fault-finding checker of interpretations, but to operate at every step in comprehension: interpretive hypotheses about explicit content of utterances, about the implicated premises retrieved and about the implicated conclusion(s) reached.

3. Learners' interlanguage pragmatic problems

As to the study of non-natives' comprehension and production of speech acts and how their L2-related speech act knowledge is acquired, interlanguage pragmatics has investigated learners' acquisition, development and practice of a wide array of speech acts or functions of language (Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kasper, 1997). A plethora of studies on performance has shown that learners of diverse linguistic backgrounds make pragmatic mistakes when performing a wide variety of speech acts[3]. Such mistakes have been found to be mainly due to their deviations from target language speakers' linguistic behavioural patterns and standards. They may be *pragmalinguistic* in nature, for learners transfer L1 communicative strategies, simplify or overgeneralise the range of L2 communicative strategies, alter the expected order of or omit some discourse moves when accomplishing some speech acts, or use inadequate suprasegmental features. But learners' mistakes may also have a *sociopragmatic* origin. Unknowingly abiding by the rules of speaking and interactive norms of their L1, and naïvely taking them to have universal validity, learners may extrapolate them to their L2; alternatively, they

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[3] See Padilla Cruz (2013) for references.

may not adhere to the L2 rules and norms as a way to preserve and show a distinct identity (Thomas, 1983; Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). And communicative behaviour that deviates from the target language habits and standards may lead their interlocutors to draw undesired conclusions and eventually forge erroneous images of them. One of the consequences of all these types of mistakes is *pragmatic failure*, which, depending on interlocutors' benevolence, may have various interactive outcomes (Thomas, 1983; Olshtain and Cohen, 1989; Kasper, 1992; Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993).

In native-L2 learner interaction, the native speaker may be taken to be competent in the language and to do her best to guide the learner to the intended interpretation in the most efficient and effort-saving way. According to Sperber (1994:190-194), from a relevance-theoretic perspective communicative competence involves the speaker making it sure that:

- the information that she intends to communicate will actually be optimally relevant to her interlocutor,

- the pragmalinguistic and paralinguistic devices she selects to convey her message are contextually appropriate, and

- the hearer will reach the intended interpretation easily enough instead of another equally plausible interpretation that would detract from optimal relevance.

Nevertheless, the problem in native-L2 learner interaction is that it is the learner's communicative competence that may be at stake: he may not be fully competent, or as competent as assumed, in the L2 in actual interaction, above all if his proficiency level is low and/or he has not received much exposure to the target culture due to learning in a foreign context. This may have a bearing on his performance as a hearer and, consequently, on comprehension. Although his incompetence may be temporary or more persistent, in many cases it clearly evidences less sophisticated interpretive abilities than those of natives (Goh, 1997; Vandergrift, 1998, 2003; Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch, 2002; Field, 2010; Blyth, 2012), which may lead the L2 hearer to behave as a naïvely optimistic hearer on many occasions[4].

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[4] This paper does not conceive of natives and L2 learners as homogeneous groups, as there may be significant differences among their members due to factors such as age, gender, geographical provenance, level of education, socio-cultural background, field of occupation, etc., which may certainly affect interaction and, more importantly, interpretation. For the sake of simplicity, these two groups are assumed to roughly differ from each other in terms of communicative competence, given that their members may show distinct language knowledge, metalinguistic awareness and skills across contexts (Cook, 1992, 1999; Kecskes and Papp, 2000; Hall et al., 2006).

Learners may not only suffer perception or attention problems which prevent them from hearing or paying due attention to what their interlocutors say and, hence, prevent them from understanding at all. Also, learners may experience *non-understanding* (Brown, 1995; Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b) because, although they attentively listen to their interlocutors, they are still processing previous (stretches of) discourse and cannot concentrate on upcoming utterances (Brown, 1995:34). Their comprehension may also be totally or partially hindered by noise in the communicative channel, unclear or non-standard pronunciation/accent and obscure or uncommon vocabulary and jargon. But learners' less sophisticated interpretive skills may cause them to experience other comprehension problems at both the explicit and implicit levels of communication (Brown, 1995; Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b):

(i)   They may fail to arrive at the intended explicit content of utterances because of excessive reliance on linguistic input and bottom-up processing (Kasper, 1984; Goh 1997), inappropriate parsing and disambiguation (Brown, 1995; Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b), unawareness of procedural constraints imposed by some linguistic elements or expressions (Wilson and Sperber, 2004) or lack

of attention to some contextual sources like suprasegmental and paralinguistic features essential to capture illocutionary force.

(ii)   They may fail to reach some expected implicit contents, arrive at alternative implicit contents or reach unintended implicit contents because

- they do not take into account crucial contextual sources, like paralanguage and suprasegments;

- do not 'read their interlocutors' mind' and so are unaware of the appropriate interpretive context envisaged by them (Wilson and Sperber, 2004);

- do not restrict context adequately or unnecessarily expand it,

- lack some *cultural metarepresentations* (Sperber, 1996), *make-sense frames* (Yus Ramos, in press)[5] or *interactive knowledge* (Hayashi, 1996)[6] determining L2 use and values of conventionalised forms, or the content of

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[5] Due to the overlapping between the scopes of terms such as 'frame', 'script' or 'scenario', Yus Ramos (in press) proposes the term 'make-sense frame' to allude to information about the world and everyday situations stored and accessible as chunks. Make-sense frames include three types of information: *word-associated schemas*, or the encyclopaedic information linked to the referents of words; *sequence-associated scripts*, or the prototypical actions associated with some situations and places, and *situation-associated frames*, or the concepts accumulated regarding specific situations.

[6] Among the different types of knowledge that individuals store, Hayashi (1996:235) thinks that there must be one referring to communicative behaviours considered appropriate to some circumstances by specific sociocultural groups or communities of practice and to the type of language that should be used in such circumstances.

such knowledge varies from that of their interlocutors (Long, 1989; Shakir and Ferghal, 1991; Žegarac, 2009), or

- do not carry out top-down processing (Kasper, 1984; Goh, 1997)[7].

Unconscious of these problems, learners may behave as naïvely optimistic hearers: they would stop their processing of utterances upon finding an interpretation that satisfies their expectations of relevance –regardless of whether it is actually the intended one– and straightforwardly conclude that such interpretation is their interlocutor's informative intention. Hence, they would not question how they arrived at it and its feasibility, nor would they take up the effort of metarepresenting their interlocutors' intentions and beliefs, but simply exclude the possibility that there is an alternative, equally plausible, interpretation. Consequently, learners may either believe some interpretations that *accidentally* achieve an optimal level of relevance or stop their processing of utterances before reaching intended interpretations

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[7] See Goh (1997:363) for a list of problems her informants had during listening, as well as their obstacles to successful listening comprehension and development. As in the case of reading, individuals suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may experience comprehension problems when listening because of loss of self-control and self-regulation in executing tasks, difficulties to focus attention, susceptibility to distraction, attentional inflexibility, behavioural agitation, accelerated action and deterioration of certain automatisms, for instance (Alvarado et al., 2011).

because something in their interlocutors' communicative behaviour *accidentally*

appears irrelevant to them (Wilson, 1999). Ultimately, learners may end up making

erroneous attributions of intentions and entertaining wrong, inaccurate or ill-founded

beliefs (Wilson, 2011a, 2012), which may lead to an ubiquitous and pervasive

phenomenon not exclusively pertaining to interaction between native and non-native

speakers: misunderstanding (Thomas, 1983; Weigand, 1999; Yus Ramos, 1999a,

1999b; Zamborlin, 2007; Mustajoki, 2012). If learners' pragmatic failures unveil

various deficits in terms of pragmatic knowledge regarding their role as speakers of

an L2, their misunderstandings when performing as hearers may prevent them from

producing appropriate responses and, consequently, have an impact on interaction.

4. Epistemic vigilance in interlanguage pragmatic development

Epistemic vigilance enters the cognitive processes intervening in comprehension

as a checker of the credibility and reliability of communication that guarantees the

expected cognitive benefits from the interpretations and conclusions we may draw. In

ordinary conversation many misunderstandings may stem from a low epistemic

vigilance or temporary or recurrent failures in its adjustments, which result in

interpretive mistakes going unnoticed or the comprehension module not performing its tasks appropriately or in the most efficient way. But communication between native speakers and L2 learners may be significantly more liable to misunderstandings owing to the latter's level of communicative competence and/or low sophistication when processing utterances. Evidently, their sophistication as hearers in the L2 may be greatly determined by that in the L1 (Cook, 1992). If one of the purposes of SLT is to develop learners' communicative competence, if pragmatics is essential for an individual to attain that goal, and if both contextually appropriate performance and correct understanding are necessary to be pragmatically competent in an L2, pedagogical intervention should also put the spotlight on the unconscious, automatic, relevance-driven cognitive processes that learners carry out in order to understand contextualised utterances. This is needed in order to develop in learners a critical stance to the cognitive operations they perform in comprehension, the credibility and reliability of interpretations and the information they use in order to reach them. To put it differently, instruction in L2 pragmatics should contribute to the development of learners' epistemic vigilance towards communication in the L2 in order to create in them an alertness to the risks of

communication, but more importantly, to the flaws and mistakes that can affect their

comprehension and eventually hinder understanding. But a clarification is called for

at this point.

As a mental module, epistemic vigilance seems to be part of our genetically

determined equipment (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010)[8]. If so, the

goal of instruction in cognitive aspects of pragmatics should not be seen as endowing

learners with epistemic vigilance; this would evidently be an unattainable goal,

precisely because of its universal availability. L2 learners might apply epistemic

vigilance to communication regardless of whether the language used is the L2. As

multicompetent individuals, they are assumed to have a complex linguistic system in

which both their L1 and L2 are stored in the same brain areas, share the same

conceptualiser and make use of cognitive mechanisms such as inference or mind-

reading (Cook, 1992, 1999). Epistemic vigilance could be among them. Therefore, as

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[8] Research has shown that between the age of two and three children do not naïvely rely on any kind of communicated information, identify words inappropriately used, contradict and correct assertions that they believe to be false and prefer individuals whom they consider benevolent and competent on the basis of their own observations, past experiences and other people's reports (Clément et al., 2004; Koenig and Harris, 2007; Heyman, 2008; Corriveau and Harris, 2009; Mascaro and Sperber, 2009). Research has also shown that by the age of four children have developed an alertness towards dishonesty and incompetence and, therefore, can centre on the quality of other individuals' messages (Figueras Costa and Harris, 2001; Mascaro and Sperber, 2009).

in the case of a number of skills pragmatic competence depends on –e.g., the ability

to interpret indirectness or to adapt language to context (e.g., Kasper, 1997)– they

could transfer epistemic vigilance to communication in their L2 smoothly and without

much difficulty. If some L2 learners may have a more developed metalinguistic

awareness[9] than monolinguals (Cook, 1992, 1999; Kecskes and Papp, 2000), they

might also have a distinct, probably more accurate, metapsychological awareness of

comprehension –i.e. an ability to bring to consciousness, objectify and reflect on

interpretive routes followed and pragmatic material exploited when understanding

discourse– and a more critical stance to communication. However, as a consequence

of being brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural milieu as users of an L1, L2

learners might not successfully apply their epistemic vigilance to communication in

their L2 because their epistemic vigilance might need adjustments to perform its

tasks in a language and in contexts to which it has not been adapted as yet (Hall et

al., 2006; Pomerantz and Bell, 2007). This suggests that their epistemic vigilance

might need attuning to work with linguistic elements that may impose different

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[9] 'Metalinguistic awareness' refers to the ability to consciously and intentionally objectify, think, reflect on and understand the formal and functional properties of language by means of an array of constructs, rules, norms and patterns (e.g. Mertz and Yovel, 2009).

procedural constraints and diverse contextual/cultural information, just in the same way learners may lack executive control over some linguistic elements in some contexts (Bialystok, 1993). Such attuning would involve, for example, sensitising learners to the possibility that linguistic elements may trigger different procedures or they may lack certain contextual/cultural information.

Fine-tuning learners' epistemic vigilance should not be understood as working on a critical stance towards communication in general and their information sources in particular. It may require the development of a metapsychological awareness of comprehension in learners, some kind of ever-working tracker, which progressively facilitates the formation of a rational attitude towards themselves as information processors. In other words, fostering learners' epistemic vigilance should not exclusively focus on others as potential untrustworthy or unreliable communicators because of the quality of the information they supply, their intention to misinform or their skills as communicators. Rather, it should target learners themselves as interpreters, inasmuch as the interpretive steps they take in order to arrive at

optimally relevant interpretations may be incorrect[10]. This would also involve

preventing them from blindly trusting the (quantity and quality of the) information they

exploit and the conclusions they draw.

The (in)correctness of learners' interpretive steps may be evidenced by

misunderstanding, which surfaces in their responses to interlocutors and the

reactions of these (Weigand, 1999; Mustajoki, 2012). Through meaning negotiation,

interlocutors may attempt to spot comprehension flaws through backtracking,

reconstructing interpretive routes and contextual information, and clarifying speakers'

meaning. When communicative competence, and more specifically, interpretive

skills, may be at stake, pedagogical intervention should enhance learners' ability to

test interpretive hypotheses and critically monitor how they arrive at them.

Epistemic vigilance may trigger the rejection of interpretations that seem relevant

enough when individuals behave as naïvely optimistic hearers and the subsequent

switch to more sophisticated processing strategies (Padilla Cruz, 2012). On the one

hand, if individuals perceive that their interlocutors are not fully competent because

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[10] In other words, epistemic vigilance does not only target the final product of interpretive processes, but also monitors, examines, surveys or controls the different simultaneous steps to reach that final product.

their cognitive and communicative abilities may be (momentarily) diminished,

epistemic vigilance may encourage them to resort to cautious optimism (on cautious

optimism, see Sperber, 1994:192). This strategy prompts hearers to wonder which

other interpretation the speaker might have intended to communicate instead of one

that they must accept as optimally relevant because of diminished communicative

abilities or obscure style[11]. On the other hand, if individuals feel that their

interlocutors are deceptive, epistemic vigilance may trigger *sophisticated*

understanding (Sperber, 1994:194), which encourages hearers to wonder which

interpretation their interlocutors try to prevent them from reaching. The former differs

from the latter in the number of layers of metarepresentation required from the hearer

in order to arrive at the interpretation that should have actually be optimally relevant

or at the interpretation that the speaker seeks to prevent the hearer from reaching in

the easiest and least effort-demanding way: sophisticated understanding would

involve an additional layer of metarepresentation (Sperber, 1994; Wilson, 1999)[12].

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[11] More on this below.

[12] In fact, sophisticated understanding appears crucial in those cases in which the speaker on purpose
misguides the hearer towards interpretive hypotheses that must be revised in order to arrive at other
interpretations, as in some jokes (Curcó, 1995; Yus Ramos, 2003).

In particular, developing or attuning L2 learners' epistemic vigilance towards communication in the L2 would not only entail warning them about their potential interlocutors' level of competence –which may certainly be lesser than expected– or alerting them about their potential interlocutors' malevolence. If learners' interpretive sophistication is not high enough and so they follow naïve optimism by default and blindly trust the interpretations they reach without questioning them, fostering their epistemic vigilance would involve providing them with a critical awareness as to whether they should opt for a more sophisticated processing strategy that avoids misunderstandings: cautious optimism (Sperber, 1994).

A cautiously optimistic hearer assumes that, though his interlocutor is benevolent, her competence as communicator may be temporarily or more permanently affected by a wide array of factors –temporal constraints, lack of concentration, nervousness, anxiety, drunkenness, etc.– which prevent her from making her informative intention manifest in the most straightforward and least effort-demanding way. Nonetheless, in the context of SLT and SLA, a cautiously optimistic learner must also assume that it is not his interlocutor's level of competence that may be lower, but his own, above all, as regards listening comprehension. Thus, a cautiously optimistic learner should be

able to realise that the interpretation that he has reached and seems relevant enough may not be the one actually intended by his interlocutor. Consequently, he should be willing to engage in further inferential processes in order to abandon that interpretation and search for another interpretation which he has failed to recover due to comprehension problems and, more specifically, a low level of pragmatic competence.

As a "[…] special case of competent attribution of intentions" (Sperber, 1994:192), cautious optimism should enable learners to discard accidentally relevant or irrelevant interpretations originating from their own inaccurate mastery of the L2 system, which causes them to make errors when parsing, disambiguating or assigning reference. But accidentally relevant or irrelevant interpretations may also stem from failure to take into account specific contextual sources, lack of cultural information, differing interactive norms or diverse content in learners' cultural knowledge and make-sense frames. Ultimately, accidentally relevant or irrelevant interpretations may be due to scarce epistemic vigilance towards the information learners make use of, its contextualisation and the outcome of such contextualisation. If their epistemic vigilance is transferred or fostered, it would trigger

cautious optimism and this, in turn, would enable them to overcome unexpected and undesired interpretations liable to misguide them to wrong conclusions and to attribute certain intentions and non-occurrent beliefs to their interlocutors. Cautious optimism being triggered, learners would take up the additional effort to consider alternative hypotheses about explicit content or to expand their mental context by paying attention to extra contextual sources which may result in distinct, more plausible interpretations likely to correspond to those intended by their interlocutors.

What follows illustrates some of the comprehension problems that L2 learners in three different instructional groups experienced when doing some listening activities and interacting with their instructor –i.e. the researcher– during classes.

4.1. Learners' profile

The first group of learners was one class of 15 American university students of different undergraduate programmes doing an immersion study-abroad semester at the University of Seville in order to learn or improve their Spanish. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years. Although most of them had studied Spanish for one, two or three semesters in the USA, 4 of them had received no instruction at all. After taking a

placement test at their home university, they were placed at a beginner course intended to provide them with an A1-A2 level in Spanish[13].

The second group was a class of 57 second-year students of English as an L2 of various nationalities enrolled in different graduate programmes at the University of Seville[14]. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years and they had studied English for more than 12.3 years on average. They were taking a B2-level course in English and only 2 of them acknowledged having been to some English-speaking country. The students from Spain had already passed a B1-level test the previous year. Since the students of other nationalities were participating at different study-abroad programmes (e.g. *Erasmus*), and their proficiency level might have been assessed differently, their responses were not taken into account. This left 47 informants, who will be referred to as 'B1'. Their data was collected at the beginning of the academic year 2011-2012.

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[13] Reference to proficiency levels is made in accordance with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, which distinguishes six levels: A1 (elementary), A2 (beginner), B1 (intermediate), B2 (upper-intermediate), C1 (advanced) and C2 (proficiency).

[14] Of these, 31 were studying Hispanic Philology (21 Spanish, 4 French, 3 Italian, 2 German and 1 Japanese), 13 were doing French Studies, 8 German Studies, 4 Classical Philology and 1 Arabic and Islamic Studies, all of whom were Spanish.

The last group was one class of third-year students of various nationalities in the graduate programme in English Studies at the same university: 17 Spanish, 5 Polish, 3 French and 2 Italian. Their ages ranged 20-21 years and they had studied English for more than 13.6 years on average. They were taking a C2-level course in English for which they had had to pass a C1-level test the year before. For the same reason as above, the responses by students of other nationalities than Spanish were excluded. Of the 17 informants, 12 acknowledged to have been to some English-speaking country at least once for a minimum of one month. They will be referred to as the 'C1 students'. Their data was collected during the 2011-2012 academic year.

4.2. Materials and procedure

The listening exercises were *one-way* listening tasks which, as opposed to *interactive* ones, focus on comprehension and exclude meaning negotiation (Goh, 2008). They were taken from the course books students used (Kenny, 2002; Kerr and Jones, 2007) and consisted of recordings appropriate to their proficiency levels followed by multiple choice comprehension activities. They were done in class and students were asked to write down the rationale for their answers on a separate

sheet of paper, which the researcher then collected and analysed[15]. Also, there was a video activity devised by the researcher owing to the difficulties to find out recordings that could give rise to a specific comprehension problem. In it, 2 native speakers of English interacted with a Spaniard and accomplished a specific speech act. Students were told to identify with the Spaniard and to provide their reaction to the native speakers' verbal behaviour, as well as the rationale for it. This activity was also done in class and answers were collected and analysed by the researcher, too. When analysing the answers to these activities, the researcher examined the reasons the students gave for their choices and interpretations, with a view to understanding what had made them choose incorrect answers or understand communicative behaviour in a particular way. Thus, the researcher tried to elucidate the comprehension problem(s) underlying the students' perceptions and wrong choices.

In addition to these preliminary data-collection tools, some data come from direct observation of misunderstanding and comprehension problems students faced when

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[15] To be precise, students were asked the reasons why they chose a particular answer and to comment on any factor (intonation, stress, rhythm and pace, previous information, beliefs, etc.) that had a bearing on their choices. In the case of B1 students, they were even allowed to use their native language.

interacting with their instructor in class. Although not very representative in number, when noticed, students were asked to verbally report on what they thought the instructor had meant and to offer their rationale. The instructor took notes of them, which were subsequently analysed. As in the activities described, the researcher focused on the reasons why students misinterpreted him with a view to elucidating the underlying comprehension problem(s).

Owing to the low number of informants, the data reported on here must altogether be taken as an initial, exploratory, small-scale, qualitative study aimed at providing support for the explanatory potential and usefulness of the relevance-theoretic apparatus and the validity of some of its claims about comprehension[16]. Needless to say, a better appraisal of learners' actual comprehension problems requires examination of the reactions of a wider number of informants to other types of language samples in naturally occurring and authentic interaction, where meaning can be jointly negotiated. That could undoubtedly throw different results with greater validity and generalizability. Another limitation of this study is, as pointed out by an

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[16] Studies by Schmidt (1993), Rose (2000), Zamborlin (2007), to name but three, also have a low number of informants or deploy a qualitative methodology to collect data lending support to different theoretical claims.

anonymous reviewer, its overreliance on interpretation of single utterances or stretches of utterances and its overlooking of a more discursive approach. However, adopting such a perspective makes it possible to isolate cases, albeit stipulated, where a misunderstanding or interpretive mistake may arise, retrace what went wrong in the learner's processing and centre on how epistemic vigilance might have contributed to avoiding them.

4.3. Epistemic vigilance and comprehension problems at the explicit level

At the explicit level of communication, learners may experience the following problems (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b):

    a) Constructing alternative lower-level explicatures.

    b) Constructing unintended higher-level explicatures[17].

    c) Turning an intended explicature into an unintended implicature.

The lower-level explicatures that learners construct may differ from the intended ones when they do not correctly assign reference to referential expressions,

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[17] In relevance-theoretic terms, a logical form that is pragmatically enriched is a 'lower-level explicature', whereas a 'higher-level explicature' is the speech-act or propositional-attitude description under which a lower-level explicature may be embedded.

disambiguate sentences, restrict the meaning of lexical items or carry out free enrichment. Problems with reference assignment, for instance, were noticed in the American learners of Spanish when locating some objects spatially. At the beginning of a class two pens and two dictionaries were placed on two different tables by the instructor, so that one pair of them was closer to his table. The 4 students who had received no instruction in Spanish and 7 of the other students (73.3% in total) were observed to have difficulties to determine the referent of the demonstrative determiner *ese* (1) and the demonstrative pronoun *ése* (2):

(1) Dame ese bolígrafo, por favor.

[Give me that pen, please]

(2) ¡Coge ése de ahí!

[Take that one there!] (with unclear pointing to any of the dictionaries)

In Spanish, deixis operates on the basis of a threefold distinction, with adverbs and demonstratives determiners and pronouns pointing to objects in the vicinity of the speaker (*aquí/acá*, *este/-a/-o*, *éste/-a/-o*), the hearer (*ahí*, *ese/-a/-o*, *ése/-a/-o*) or none of them (*allí/allá*, *aquel/-la/-lo*, *aquél/-la/-lo*). American students hesitated whether those demonstratives actually referred to the objects on the table near the

teacher. Their epistemic vigilance did not check how reference was assigned or did not detect the inappropriateness of the resulting explicature, so it did not prompt cautious optimism. This would have led these students to pay attention to the manifest physical environment, the instructor's gaze direction or any pointing in order to infer if he actually referred to something or somewhere in his vicinity.

Problems in assigning reference were also identified among the B1 students during a listening comprehension activity in the following excerpt, where a location scout was interviewed about her work:

(3) *Interviewer*: What kind of work do you usually do?

Sophie: All sorts, I mean it very much depends on the kind of project you're working on. When I was starting out I used to do all sorts – and I used to work as a location manager as well – but *that side of the job* is just so stressful.

(Adapted from Kerr and Jones, 2007:162)

22 of the 47 students (46.08%) found it difficult to identify the expression "that side of the job" as referring to "being a location manager". In the same activity, the same group of students experienced further trouble in identifying "finding four different locations which are close to each other" as the referent of "that" in the last speech:

(4) *Interviewer*: So what are you working on at the moment?

Sophie: I'm looking at locations for a new big budget adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Interviewer: Ah, *Gulliver's Travels*?

Sophie: Yeah, it's going to be an epic –it's going to cover all four voyages– which means a lot of locations to find– and just to add a bit of spice, the studios have asked for them all to be within easy reach of each other!

Interviewer: *That* sounds like a tall order! (Adapted from Kerr and Jones, 2007:162)

18 students (38.29%) thought that the intended referent was *Gulliver's Travels*, 9 (19.14%) that it was "covering all four voyages", while 7 (14.89%) simply answered "what the studios asked for". Upon finding erroneous referents that seemed to satisfy their expectations of relevance, these students thought that reference assignment was completed successfully and in the most efficient way. The incorrectness of reference assignment went unnoticed by their epistemic vigilance, which should have verified how they carried it out. Upon detecting its incorrectness, epistemic vigilance should have enacted cautious optimism, which would in turn have encouraged these

students to scrutinise the preceding discourse in order to identify "being a location manager" (3) and "finding four different locations which are close to each other" (4) as the intended referents of "that side of the job" and "that" respectively. In the case of (3), it would also have prompted students to pay attention to the intonation of the troublesome element, a fragment constituting an independent tone unit owing to its parenthetical nature.

Regarding disambiguation, Ying (2004) illustrated that learners of English may have problems when deciding whether some syntactic constituents are to be interpreted in one way or another. With sentences like (5),

(5) The receptionist informed the doctor that the journalist had phoned about the event.

informants hesitated between a relative-clause reading (a), in which the receptionist informed the doctor whom the journalist had phoned about something, or a complement-clause reading (b), in which the receptionist informed the doctor that the journalist had called about something:

a. [The receptionist informed the doctor that the journalist had phoned] [about the event].

b. [The receptionist informed the doctor] [that the journalist had phoned about the event].

When wrongly disambiguating sentential constituents, learners formulated hypotheses about explicit content that appeared relevant enough to them, stopped processing and did not consider (an)other parsing(s) that was/were indeed the intended one(s). They were not epistemically vigilant, so they did not switch to cautious optimism or consider contextual clues such as intonation or world knowledge in order to correctly disambiguate multiple-reading sentences like these.

Comprehension problems also affect the construction of higher-level explicatures. Learners may construct unintended ones as a result of entertaining some beliefs which bias interpretation and cause them to assign illocutionary force erroneously. In the relevance-theoretic terminology, this problem stems from embedding the lower-level explicature of an utterance under an incorrect speech-act or propositional-attitude description and results in *puzzled understanding*: the hearer fully understands the proposition expressed by an utterance, but fails to grasp the speaker's attitude to it or the speech act she performs because of the saliency of some contextual assumption (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b).

During another listening comprehension activity, a number of C1 students showed hesitation in identifying the speaker's attitude when interpreting the highlighted sentence in the following excerpt:

(6) *Interviewer*: I think that comes over in the film, certainly, and in this extremely close relationship between Mrs Chang and Dai Dai. How did you find them in the first place?

Sarah: Well, it was an amazing story. I went to the Foundation and said, you know, 'I'm looking for some interesting examples of people who've bought these animals as pets?', and eventually, I heard about Mrs Chang and I was taken up to the fifth floor of an apartment block and I banged on the door, rather apprehensively as I wasn't sure what reception I would get. *And the door was opened, but it was opened not by Mrs Chang as I'd expected, because I looked down and there was this hairy beast looking up at me and I thought, 'I don't believe this', you know, 'this is definitely going to be a good story!'* (Adapted from Kenny, 2002:135)

The speaker in the recording had made a film about baby orang-utans and was being interviewed on a radio programme about the problems connected with their keeping

as pets. Students were given four possible attitudes: disgust, amazement, delight or fright. Of the 17 in the group, 4 (23.52%) concluded that the speaker was frightened because she had found a "hairy beast" looking up at her; 2 (11.76%) that she was disgusted because the door was not opened by Mrs Chang, and 7 (41.17%) that she was delighted because the film would be "a good story". However, they failed to understand the speaker's attitude as one of amazement.

Their epistemic vigilance did not alert these students that they should not rely on beliefs such as those mentioned. Therefore, it did not activate cautious optimism and they did not backtrack and scan preceding discourse and intonation, by paying attention to expressions like "it was an *amazing* story" and "I don't believe this", the concatenation of coordinate clauses repeatedly introduced by "and", its markedly fast and lively rhythm and the lengthening of vowels in words like "don't", "this", "good" or "story". Accessing linguistic and paralinguistic information along the lines suggested above would have been essential to construct a more adequate attitudinal description of amazement.

Accessing some beliefs as a consequence of unnecessarily extending mental context may also lead learners to arrive at implicit meaning which their interlocutors

do not intend to communicate, thus turning an intended explicit message into an

unintended implicature (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b). In another listening activity, C1

students were played the following extract, in which a man who had been married

twice talked about his weddings:

(7) I've been married twice, so I've had both a white wedding and one in a registry

office. When I got married the first time, we were, sort of, almost pushed into

the whole ceremonial thing by the family. I didn't mind the outfits themselves

actually, but I would definitely have preferred a more low-key affair. I was

hoping to stay out of the limelight as much as possible, being a rather shy

person. We got a lot of nice presents, of course, but even that didn't

compensate us for all the expense and hassle. So the second time, it was a

great relief to get the formalities over and done with in ten minutes in a registry

office, although we did think the actual ceremony could have been a little

longer, because it was nice […] (Adapted from Kenny, 2002:140)

Students were asked what the man disliked during his first wedding and were given

three options: (a) the way he had to dress, (b) being the centre of attention and (c)

receiving so many gifts. Even though the man explicitly stated that he "was hoping to

stay out of the limelight as much as possible" and was "a shy person", 6 students

(35.29%) chose (c). They acknowledged that they had concluded that the man was

critical about the amount of gifts as a result of finding too obvious the fact that the

man did not want to be the centre of attention. They had expanded their interpretive

context and looked for assumptions related to the reason(s) why the man had alluded

to the gifts, gifting practices or excessive amount of gifts in weddings or other social

events. Epistemic vigilance did not warn the students that such context extension

was unwarranted and did not enact cautious optimism; this would have led those

students to dismiss those assumptions and stop at the information explicitly

mentioned.

4.4. Epistemic vigilance and comprehension problems at the implicit level

At the implicit level of communication learners may experience the following

problems (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b):

a) Reaching alternative implicatures to those the speaker might have expected

them to arrive at.

b) Missing implicatures.

c) Turning intended implicatures into unintended explicatures.

Lack of, or access to, different cultural metarepresentations underlies learners' recovery of alternative implicatures[18]. This often happens when individuals from different cultural backgrounds face what seems to them rather 'peculiar' ways of complimenting or 'strange' phatic questions (e.g. Nelson et al., 1996; Arent, 2000). Access to different cultural norms about how to compliment, appropriate topics for compliments or amount of them also explains B1 students' reaction to the compliments in the dialogue below. They were played a video in which two Americans were visiting a Spaniard in order to see his recently refurbished and renovated apartment and they complimented him on different pieces of furniture:

(8) Spaniard: Ok, *voilà*! Welcome to my flat! This is the living-room.

Tracy: Oh my God, look at that chandelier! Isn't it amazing, Tiffany?

Tiffany: Oh, wow! I absolutely love it! I've always wanted one like this for my flat!

Spaniard: Glad you like it. It belonged to my grandma. It was at my parents', they kept it in the box-room and I borrowed it from them, hehe!

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[18] Due to their interpretive nature, the cultural metarepresentations of individuals belonging to some group cannot be said to be homogeneous as regards their content (Sperber, 1996).

Tracy: And isn't that chest of drawers a real wonder?

Tiffany: You can put so many things in it!

Tracy: So many things, yeah! By the way, I love that armchair. Where did you get it?

Spaniard: I bought it at a store in the centre.

Tracy: I see. It is a marvel and must be really comfortable. I bet you can have siesta on it, hehe! And the table lamp over there is another marvel! I definitely love your living-room!

Tiffany: Yeah, it's so cosy!

29 B1 students (61.70%) pointed out that the number of compliments looked a bit excessive, maybe insincere, and claimed that they would not make as many compliments on furniture or ask as many details.

Epistemic vigilance did not alert the students that the conclusions they had reached differed from what the speakers would allegedly have intended, as a consequence of processing the compliment sequence with cultural assumptions differing from those that might have determined the speakers' behaviour. Since epistemic vigilance did not trigger cautious optimism, the students did not look for

assumptions referring to the amount of compliments expectable or likely to appear in certain situations and the effects complimenters may intend to achieve, which would have enabled the students to arrive at adequate conclusions regarding the foreign speakers' intentions when complimenting, e.g. to be or appear nice.

Failure to arrive at intended implicatures was also observed when C1 students listened to the interview with the woman who had made the film about baby orang-utans. After the following excerpt, they were asked why Mrs Chang decided not to keep the baby orang-utan:

(9) *Interviewer*: So, why did this relationship have to be broken up? Why did pet and owner have to part? What was the reason?

Sarah: Dai Dai was by then seven years old and at seven Dai Dai was only an adolescent, she's going to live for at least fifty years and she's probably going to weigh at least fifty kilos and have seven times the strength of a full-grown man. Now Mrs Chang has a very small apartment, she had given up her job in order to look after Dai Dai, I mean, she was completely devoted to the animal, but she was finding it increasingly difficult to look after her properly. (Adapted from Kenny, 2002:136)

From the four given options –(a) "she was concerned about the future", (b) "she was in financial difficulties", (c) "she didn't have the necessary commitment" and (d) "she was losing control of the animal"– 5 (29.41%) chose (d) because of the high salience of assumptions about the animal's increasing weight and strength, whereas 7 (41.17%) chose (b) because they relied on assumptions about Mrs Chang having given her job up. The correct answer was (a), but epistemic vigilance did not alert the students about the unsuitability of assumptions referring to the weight and strength of the orang-utan or to Mrs Chang having given up her job. It did not activate cautious optimism and the students did not consider assumptions related to Mrs Chang finding it increasingly difficult to look after the animal properly, as well as the consequences this may have in the future owing to her age and personal situation[19].

Learners may also fail to arrive at implicit contents if they lack the necessary cultural or contextual information. In the video activity reported on above, the B1 students who found the American girls' compliments excessive or insincere owing to lack of cultural assumptions about compliment behaviour could not deduce

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[19] As an anonymous reviewer aptly points out, if option (a) had been phrased differently (e.g. "she was concerned about the future care of Dai Dai"), the students' answers might have varied. The incomplete or vague wording of this option might have been a limitation of the task design and might therefore have conditioned the students' answers.

implications about politeness. Lack of cultural or contextual information also prevented those students to grasp the humour in the following jokes:

(10)	There were four country churches in a small Texas town: The Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church and the Catholic Church. Each church was overrun with pesky squirrels. One day, the Presbyterian Church called a meeting to decide what to do about the squirrels. After much prayer and consideration they determined that the squirrels were predestined to be there and they shouldn't interfere with God's divine will. In the Baptist Church the squirrels had taken up habitation in the baptistery. The deacons met and decided to put a cover on the baptistery and drown the squirrels in it. The squirrels escaped somehow and there were twice as many there the next week. The Methodist Church got together and decided that they were not in a position to harm any of God's creation. So, they humanely trapped the Squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days later, the squirrels were back. But… The Catholic Church came up with the best and most effective solution. They baptized the squirrels and

registered them as members of the church. Now they only see them on Christmas and Easter.

(11)   Mom and Dad were trying to console Susie, whose dog had recently died. "You know", Mom said, "it's not your fault that the dog died. He's probably up in heaven right now, having a grand old time with God". Susie, still crying, said, "What would God want with a dead dog?"

To understand (10) students would have needed cultural assumptions referring to Catholic believers' lack of commitment or going to church only on special occasions, while to understand (11) they would have needed a contextual assumption referring to the little girl not believing in life after death. If students had been more epistemically vigilant and had behaved as cautiously optimistic hearers, they would have tried to infer, construct or search further for related assumptions.

Finally, misunderstanding may arise when learners stop their processing at the explicit level of communication and do not reach an intended implicit content. Thus, they treat an implicature as an explicature (Yus Ramos, 1999a, 1999b) because they do not add up to their mental context some expected implicated premises. As opposed to the preceding comprehension problems, this is due to accidental

irrelevance, as learners sense that their interlocutors only transmit already known information. B1 students were repeatedly observed to experience this problem when arriving late to class or showing up wearing shorts at the beginning of the academic year. Upon their entering the classroom, the teacher made questions and comments like the following:

(12)   Isn't it already 12.20?

(13)   Those shorts again, huh!

Obviously, his intention was to invite implicatures like (14) and (15) respectively:

(14) You are late to class again! / Don't be late to class!

(15) Don't come to class dressed like that! / You shouldn't wear shorts to come to

    class!

However, their responses included utterances like (16) and (17), but not apologies for their delay or their violation of classroom dress-code:

(16)   Yes, it is. / Yeah!

(17)   Do you like them? / Yeah, today is very hot!

Responses like these may be interpreted as willingness to engage in language play (Mugford, 2011) or unwillingness to engage with the face-threatening meaning

implicitly conveyed by these utterances. However, these responses may also unveil the students' not relating the explicit content of the teacher's question and remark to additional contextual assumptions. Upon reaching interpretations that seemed accidentally irrelevant, students stopped at those interpretations, without wondering if the teacher really intended to communicate something different. Their epistemic vigilance validated those interpretations because their inadequacy went undetected. Epistemic vigilance should have enacted cautious optimism, so that the students wondered which other interpretation the teacher intended to communicate and sought for additional pragmatic material that facilitates a different interpretation. In the case of (12), cautious optimism could have encouraged the students to look for premises referring to the time classes normally start or arriving late to class in order to reach the implicature that they should not be late to class. In contrast, in the case of (13), cautious optimism could have made the students to search for premises alluding to dress codes at the university or norms about expectable behaviour from students in order to reach the implicature that their outfit was not quite appropriate.

Accidental relevance and accidental irrelevance appear to hinder arriving at intended interpretations, and so may impede communication at both its explicit and

implicit levels. Instruction in pragmatics should also tackle the way learners

understand contextualised utterances and their potential or actual comprehension

problems in order to provide them with the necessary tools to avoid such problems or

overcome them. Thus, instruction would contribute to raise their metapsychological

abilities and a certain critical attitude to how they decode utterances, how their

expectations of relevance prompt them to exploit pragmatic material, whether they

can rely on such material, how they arrive at some interpretations and whether they

can trust the interpretations they come up with.

4.5. Fostering learners' epistemic vigilance

Epistemic vigilance checks the simultaneous steps in the interpretation process,

the believability of information sources, contextual material, the amount of such

material and the adequacy and accuracy of cognitive operations involved. As

speakers of an L1, learners may already have developed it and be ready to

incorporate it to their L2 pragmatics (Kasper, 1997), although it might need

adjustment to the L2 in some cases because L2 processing might be more

demanding. Learners do not only have to concentrate on discriminating sounds or

unpacking sentences (to avoid, for instance, syllabification or parsing mistakes), but also retain information in their short-term memory and relate it to adequate contextual information, at the same time they cope with speech rate to which they may not be used (Vandergrift, 1999; Field, 2010; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari, 2010; Blyth, 2012). Instruction should attempt to develop the necessary metapsychological ability that facilitates the development and fine-tuning of epistemic vigilance to the peculiarities of communication in the L2. Since the triggering of cautious optimism may be one of the effects of the operation of epistemic vigilance, working with L2 learners so that they become cautiously optimistic hearers might be a first step in this endeavour.

Research in SLA and SLT has proved the usefulness and helpfulness of a wide array of tasks to raise learners' awareness of issues related to L2 production when performing certain speech acts or interacting in specific contexts, such as role-plays, gap-filling exercises, interviews and, more importantly, verbal reports, discussions, debates and feedback about performance (Kasper, 2000; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). In an evasive and thorny area such as listening comprehension, researchers have stressed the need to acquaint learners with

metacognitive strategies to process input (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Vandergrift, 1999) and advocated for a metacognitive instruction which promotes their knowledge and consciousness of themselves as hearers, the peculiarities and demands of listening in an L2, and which helps them manage comprehension (Cross, 2011). Thus, Goh (2008) suggests two types of techniques to foster comprehension in listening:

a) Reflecting on listening in diaries and questionnaires.

b) A task sequence or *pedagogical cycle* consisting of (i) predicting, (ii) monitoring and (iii) problem identification and evaluation[20].

The interlanguage pragmatic literature also offers plenty of activities to improve learners' interpretive skills, some of which could be incorporated to teachers' praxis, specifically in the monitoring phase, with a view to working with learners' epistemic vigilance. These activities involve some sort of introspection or examination of cognitive processes, such as think-aloud protocols, verbal reports, exposure to situations where misunderstanding arises and discussions about its origin and likely

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[20] Goh and Taib (2006), Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) and Siegel (2011) have shown the benefits of this cycle of listening strategies, but Lynch (2009) and Renandya and Farrell (2011) have adduced evidence that extensive listening may be more effective.

causes (Goh, 1997; Anderson, 2002; Ojeda Álvarez, 2010). Through them teachers

could assist learners to reflect on the factors that they take into account or overlook

when misunderstanding occurs, verbalise possible thoughts or beliefs that they think

are manifest to them and on which they rely, other thoughts with which they relate

them and conclusions they draw. In these activities it would be essential to point out

where the misunderstanding lies, the factors that misguide learners to wrong

interpretations or those they do not pay attention to. Introspective activities may

contribute to fine-tune learners' epistemic vigilance of L2 communication and

comprehension if they sensitise them to the need to check the following interpretive

steps:

a) how they decode and parse utterances and assign reference, disambiguate

and carry out conceptual narrowing/broadening or free enrichment;

b) how they make hypotheses about implicated premises;

c) whether they can rely on the contextual/cultural information available to them

because of its quality or should search for alternative ones;

d) whether they should stop their processing at the explicit level of communication or enlarge their mental context by looking for additional information that enables them to arrive at some implicit content;

e) whether the conclusions they reach are credible.

Even if it might be difficult to put these exercises in practice with (very) young learners because of factors connected with age (e.g. lack of concentration, insufficient awareness, inability to verbalise thoughts, etc.) or their very cognitive demands, they might work well with older, more proficient learners, like teenagers or adults. Introspective activities may certainly sensitise them to the manifold risks that an extremely fast and subconscious process like understanding may involve. In doing so, such activities may also contribute to the creation of a consciousness of the importance of keeping track of interpretive processes. Although in these exercises it might be hard to bring to consciousness and retrace the exact interpretive routes followed, the thoughts or assumptions exploited and related in contextualisation, above all because that may be greatly mediated and influenced by different internal and external factors –such as the time intervening between processing and its retracement, the *ex post facto* nature of the process itself, memory limitations or the

enormous amount of information the mind might have accessed (Carruthers, 2009)–

repeating such exercises and creating that metapsychological consciousness may

progressively have some impact on the level of accuracy of the checks that learners'

epistemic vigilance must carry out.

5. Conclusion

Although anybody may misunderstand others and make wrong attributions of

beliefs and intentions because of their cognitive abilities, L2 learners may be prone to

more serious comprehension problems, above all if they are not aware of failures in

some cognitive operations and errors in contextualisation, do not move from the

explicit to the implicit level or simply stop at the former. If their interpretive skills are

not as developed as desired, misunderstandings might significantly hinder

communication and, in extreme cases, even erode their social relations. Instruction in

pragmatics should take good care of such skills and foster epistemic vigilance of the

information they process and how they manipulate it. When learning an L2, it is

essential to adopt a critical stance towards the (in)accuracy of performance as

hearers and develop the capacity to shift, if necessary, to better-suited interpretive

strategies in order to attain greater levels of communicative competence.

Communicative competence necessarily requires the development of pragmatic

competence. This can be taken to include the ability to generate discourse in the L2

that accommodates to the socio-cultural reality and takes into consideration context-

bound factors such as interlocutors' power and social distance, as well as the rank of

imposition and potential consequences of their actions (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Pragmatic competence must also comprise the abstract knowledge and skills which

enable learners to manage rapport through their new vehicle of communication, so

that they can succeed at defining, maintaining, enhancing or even destroying social

relationships with other individuals (Padilla Cruz, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Moreover, pragmatic competence must encompass the knowledge and strategies

needed to construct, project and negotiate the self-image and identity learners wish

to have as their socialisation and acculturation into the target community takes place,

as well as the ability to use language effectively with a view to achieving specific

short- and long-term goals, while co-constructing and negotiating meaning along with

other interlocutors in authentic situations (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Ishihara and Cohen,

2010). If, from a cognitive viewpoint, pragmatics also alludes to the abstract knowledge and its actualisation to comprehend language and to recognise the informative and communicative intentions of others in order to reach intended interpretations (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), pragmatic competence also requires a certain critical ability to retrace, reflect on, explicate, check out and test interpretive routes taken or discarded when arriving at specific interpretations (Ifantidou, 2011). It is precisely as part and parcel of that ability that epistemic vigilance must be incorporated in the broader picture of pragmatic competence as an essential capacity to monitor and question the adequacy of interpretive steps taken and processing strategies selected.

Since epistemic vigilance checks the reliability and suitability of beliefs and cognitive operations, and may trigger more sophisticated processing strategies when flaws are detected, making learners (more) pragmatically competent in an L2 –and hence (more) communicatively competent– must necessarily pass through making them individuals who can reflect on how they process utterances, make informed decisions about the (in)correctness of their interpretive hypotheses and, if necessary, abandon erroneous or implausible ones and switch to better-suited processing

strategies. In the realm of communication in an L2, the problem may be lack of adaptation or fine-tuning to the L2. Therefore, the challenge that instruction in cognitive issues must meet is to aim for the necessary adjustments to take place so that, with the passing of time, the accuracy of the unconscious and automatic operations that epistemic vigilance performs increases and learners become better interpreters. This is something that might certainly require some time and maybe training, just as arriving at intended implicatures (Bouton, 1990, 1994) or irony comprehension (Filippova, 2011; Wilson, 2011b). If the fine-tuning of epistemic vigilance indeed needed time, it would be convenient to investigate at which stage(s) learners transfer and/or improve that critical alertness to possible flaws in interpretive routes and to the suitability of processing strategies. Also, it would be illuminating to examine when adjustments in epistemic vigilance reach completion or if, on the contrary, epistemic vigilance might not end up as fine-tuned to the L2 and communication through it as with their L1.

If pedagogical intervention was necessary to foster epistemic vigilance, it would be insightful to analyse whether explicit or implicit instruction is better suited. Explicit teaching has been proved to be efficient with pragmatic aspects linked to production,

such as discourse markers, pragmatic fluency or performance of some speech acts (House, 1996; Rose and Ng Kwai-Fun, 2001; Martínez Flor and Fukuya, 2005), but implicit teaching has also yielded satisfactory results in pragmatic issues like deducing implicatures (Bouton, 1994; Kubota, 1995). Although there is still much debate about the adequacy of both approaches to teach diverse L2 pragmatic aspects (Fukuya and Clark, 2001; Alcón Soler, 2005; Takimoto, 2006, 2008), it could be enriching to explore if explicit assistance with introspective activities like those mentioned above can efficiently lead to the development of their metapsychological awareness and attuning of epistemic vigilance. Likewise, it would also be useful to see if either type of instruction is more efficient for specific ages and/or acquisition stages. In the opposite direction, it would finally be worth analysing if L2 learners' metapsychological awareness and the attuning of their epistemic vigilance can develop or take place on their own, through repeated exposure, without the teacher's assistance, to situations in which misinterpretations arise or through cultural immersion, as well as if the effects of these would last (Matsumura, 2007).

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