

Introduction

The character of global communication is changing due to multifarious reasons of social, technological or even political nature. The taxonomy created by Howe and Strauss (2000) and by Chester (2002) differentiates between various age generations – baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials (Generation Y), and Generation Z, and each of them seems to constitute a unique group thinking, working, living, and communicating in its specific and age-appropriate way.

Generation Z has gained the reputation of being the most IT-literate group and the one that enjoys the privilege of easily accessible second language education. This kind of education is commonly introduced even at the kindergarten level (e.g., in Poland, it is a norm to introduce second language classes even to three-year-olds). As a result, this is probably the second generation after Millennials (at least in the post-communist countries) that derive pleasure from the unlimited and free choice of second language education, that is getting more and more accessible through web-based courses, programmes, learners and teachers resources, etc. (Dronia, 2020). Thus the average command of foreign language usage (and English specifically) among this particular age group is much higher than it used to be before. However, the importance of the context and hidden meaning for the correct interpretation of a communicative act is crucial in successful L2 communication. Pragmatic competence is undeniably one of the most fundamental yet commonly overlooked competences in the second/foreign language classroom. The status and the dominance of grammatically and lexically-oriented activities are always taken for granted, and their role in developing one's language accuracy is barely questioned. For some reason, though, even relatively advanced non-native speakers of English still find it difficult to produce native-like pragmatically appropriate utterances. Pragmatic competence encompassing such abilities as using the language for different purposes, understanding various intentions, and last but not least, choosing and connecting appropriate utterances in order to create a discourse (Bialystok, 1993) is rarely placed in the limelight of classroom attention.

Thus, such negligence commonly contributes to students' inability to behave appropriately and conform to different social situations requiring both verbal and non-verbal behaviour adaptations strategies (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Dronia & Garczyńska, 2017).

This book intends to shed some light on the problem of second language communication from sociolinguistic, pragmalinguistic, and cross-generational angles. The prime objective, however, is to look closely at the generation that is youngest, and which therefore has not yet been well researched. Generation Z is the generation now entering universities. Theoretically, being young and fully exposed to the second language (English) from early in life, they stand a great chance of becoming successful users of this language. Nevertheless, recent studies (cf. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2019) on advanced users of English indicate that at least in internationalised higher education, the students would probably rely on English as the *lingua franca* (with its grammatical, lexical, and phonological limitations) rather than using its more advanced form, far more appropriate in the context of academic learning.

The primary objective of this study is to describe Generation Z Polish students of English as second language users – not only to assess their language proficiency level, but also their problems in communication. One's communication efficacy, however, rests on the development of pragmatic competence. Therefore, particular emphasis is placed here on describing this process, as it seems that this ability is not sufficiently developed and may even be increasingly neglected. To understand the phases of pragmatic progress among Polish Generation Z advanced users of English, one should have a closer look at many other interconnected factors, such as linguistic mastery and sociocultural variables significantly affecting L2 learning, but also understand the learning context as well as other propensities pertaining to this particular age group.

The studies on cognitive processes employed while performing speech acts are very limited, and to the best of my knowledge, there has been not even one of them conducted on Polish users of English. Thus the longitudinal study described in the empirical part of this book (from Chapter 4 onwards) intends to examine students' pragmatic development by analysing their thoughts while performing requests, reacting to compliments, and apologising. The choice of those speech acts is deliberate, as all of them may evoke face threats. Requests and apologies place themselves in the context of "socially vulnerable situations," where one either has to ask someone for a favour or express regret for causing

some harm. This in itself may be already demanding (even for advanced users of a second language) not only in terms of the choice of appropriate linguistic resources, strategies used, etc., but also in terms of stress and various emotions it conveys. Additionally, the acts of requesting and apologising may be determined by differing cultural norms, constraints, and expectations (cf. Chapter 3). Different cultural attitudes towards a particular speech act are also clearly visible in case of compliments, as not every culture finds it easy to accept them. This idea, together with other cross-cultural pragmatic differences, is discussed in the Chapter 3 and later juxtaposed with the findings gathered from the research project (Chapters 5 and 6). The corpus collected through the implementation of WDCTs and WRVPs enabled us to conduct content and statistical analysis. The former focuses on identifying the most common themes and patterns, and the latter examines the corpus based on some software – LIWC 20 and SAILEE (receptiviti.com) and Grammarly application – and Flesch-Kincaid readability test. The findings gathered allow us to draw further conclusions concerning the development of the pragmatic and linguistic competence of the respondents.

The book is divided into theoretical (Chapters 1–3) and empirical part (Chapters 4–6). The first chapter, which focuses on the nature of communication acts, discusses particular variables that affect the process of information exchange. It also highlights some factors (such as anxiety and inhibition) that pertain only to L2 communication and can, in turn, significantly contribute to overall communication efficiency. Cross-cultural differences affecting communication quality are also discussed therein. English philology students should represent a very high level of achievement (C1 or even C2); that is, they should possess the ability to use the second language for various intents and purposes with both fluency and correctness. Such L2 users should exercise communicative competence and interactional and pragmatic awareness to be able to partake in various cross-cultural encounters. Thus this part intends to describe different proficiency stages that L2 students may represent; however, particular attention is paid to the characteristics of C1 and C2 levels and the description of pragmatic competence. The second chapter characterises age generations in terms of their prevalent features, the values and norms they hold, and their communication preferences. Special attention is paid to Generation Z as this is the cohort whose members took part in the research described in the empirical part of the book. The chapter additionally attempts to provide some educational perspective and describe this age group specifically as second language learners.

The intention of Chapter 3 is to briefly discuss sociopragmatic variables that may significantly contribute to effective second language communication. The chapter starts with some suggestions concerning the future of communication preferences when English has already become a lingua franca, attempting to determine “global” or universal features of politeness that a second language user may rely on in communication. It then moves on to intercultural communication and various barriers that may impact its effectiveness. The chapter primarily focuses on the concept of pragmatic competence and then on cross-cultural differences (Polish and English) visible in some speech acts – requesting, responding to a compliment, and apologising. The aim of this comparison is to juxtapose the ways Polish and English native speakers produce those speech acts and illustrate some potential areas of pragmatic divergence.

Chapter 4 introduces the empirical part of the book. Along with specifying the research objectives and tools used (three questionnaires distributed among Polish students of English belonging to Generation Z, a set of three WDCT scenarios, Written Retrospective Verbal Protocol, and a test in pragmatics), it also provides some biographical information concerning the subjects as well as the process of research implementation.

Chapter 5 presents the data gathered from the respondents and analyses it to assess their general second language level and the development of pragmatic competence specifically. The data obtained from three questionnaires (pre- and post-study questionnaire and a pragmatic comprehension questionnaire) and the results of WDCT scenarios and WRVPs enable us to finally characterise Polish Generation Zers as second language learners. The last part of the book presents general conclusions stemming from the research and verifies the development of the generation’s linguistic and pragmatic competences. Last but not least, it also provides the limitations of this study and some areas for future research.

At the time of writing, the world is in the grips of a pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This has led to massive disruption in all forms of education, including L2 teaching. Traditional classroom lessons have been replaced by alternative, mainly online forms of teaching such as those taking place via Skype, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, or simply text-based channels like email. This change of contact form will have significant and far-reaching consequences.

The youngest of generational groups partaking in the research study has already demonstrated a clear preference for online communication channels

(the data gathered before the coronavirus outbreak are displayed in the empirical part of the study). Now, when the whole world is forced to live in a cyber reality, and most forms of teaching have been transferred there, too, one may assume that this preference will only get stronger. Hence it is equally impossible to predict how this situation will affect Generation Z's soft skills and the ability to maintain real-life communication. Unfortunately, sad and ominous as this prospect may seem, we can only hope that the consequences of the lockdowns for face-to-face communication will not be as long-lasting.