On the Reliability of Discourse Completion Tests in Measuring Pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the results of the research study which primarily address the issue of speech act data collection during the research project, measuring the pragmatic competence in German and English foreign language students at the Faculty of Philology, University Goce Delchev in Stip, R. Macedonia. This study was performed with a discourse completion test (DCT) and was initiated as a contrastive study of the speech acts *requests, complaints* and *apology* - data obtained by testing German and English L2 learners. We intend to analyse, based on the results of our studies, whether the results achieved from DCTs as an instrument for measuring pragmatic competence may be inappropriate for collecting data, but more research is needed to show this conclusively. These studies do make some headway and they help to underscore the fact that more work is needed to extend the scope of speech act studies and refine the methodologies used in them.

Keywords: DCT; speech acts; pragmatic competence; L2 learners.

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1.   Introduction

The purpose of this work is to explore the instruments for measuring the pragmatic competence for L2 German and English foreign language learners. Many articles and publications on cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics focus on the assessing and analysing pragmatic competence in foreign language learners [2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 18, 31, 32]. The purpose of this study is to explore the instruments which we used for measuring the pragmatic competence in foreign language learners in order to develop their pragmatic ability. We focus on analyzing the DCTs as an instrument for measuring pragmatic competence, which we used in an ongoing research project at Goce Delcev University in Stip, Republic of Macedonia. We first define pragmatic ability; then we discuss data collection instruments and procedures; finally we give an outline and describe advantages and disadvantages of this instrument, which we experienced during our research study.

2. DCT as an instrument for measuring pragmatic competence

The instruments that we use for our research study to measure the pragmatic competence are designed largely by drawing on assessment and research instruments already in use [1, 8, 10, 14, 16, 17, 29]. We were led by Röver's statement [29] that "they have to be practical and their scores should allow defensible inferences about a learner's pragmatic knowledge". Three types of instruments were adopted: Discourse Completion Test (DCT), open role play, and introspective interview. In our analysis we focused on DCTs and try to examine its validity for measuring pragmatic competence, describing their advantages and disadvantages, too.

A Discourse-Completion Task (DCT) is a tool used in linguistics and pragmatics to elicit particular speech acts. A DCT consists of a one-sided role play containing a situational prompt in which a participant will read to elicit the responses of another participant. The instrument was originally developed by Shoshana Blum-Kulka [5, 6, 7] for studying speech act realization comparatively between native and non-native Hebrew speakers, based on the work of E. Levenston. DCTs are used in pragmatics research to study speech acts and find the medium between naturally-occurring speech and scripted speech acts. In comparing role-plays to DCTs, role-plays are considered to elicit data more similar to naturally-occurring speech acts, yet are considered harder to score, attributed to the influence of the interlocutors.

A discourse-completion task consists of scripted dialogue representing various scenarios, preceded by a short prompt describing the setting and situation. The prompt generally includes information on social distance between participants and pre-event background to aid the participant in constructing the scenarios.

DCTs are the most criticized, but the most frequently used type of instrument for measuring pragmatic competence. DCTs are attractive because they "elicit something akin to real-world speech act performance and because they are still somewhat practical despite the need for rating - at least they can be administered to large numbers of test takers at the same time" [23]. Although there are many claims that DCTs do not replicate reality, and people do not use DCT responses in the same way that they use language in real-life communication, there are certain aspects that can be assessed with this instrument. McNamara [23] points out that "although DCTs measure knowledge and do not allow direct predictions of real-world performance, they

can be thought of as measuring potential for performance, as knowledge is arguably a necessary precondition for performance".

The DCT that we used for assessing our language learners' pragmatic competence consists of three parts referring to the three distinct speech acts: requests, apologies and complaints. In constructing the section on requests, we referred to the studies of Blum-Kulka, & Olshtain [6], Economidou-Kogetsidis & Woodfield [12a] and Olshtain & Cohen [26]; for apologies we referred to Blum-Kulka & Olshtain [6], Ogiermann [25], and Trosborg [31]; while for complaints

we referred to Trosborg [31]. All situations involve some kind of conflict or social difficulty (medium or high offence/or medium or high threat for the speaker (S) or the hearer (H)) and would require elaborate facework to achieve the desired goals.

The DCT that we used in our analysis consists of eighteen situations, six for each speech act. Each situation represents differing degrees of power, social distance and degree of imposition. Each task is followed by a blank space within which the subject writes his/her response, as in the following example:

You are in the baggage reclaim area and pick up your suitcase from the conveyor system. A woman approaches you and says that you have picked up her suitcase. You look at the suitcase that you are holding and you realize that it is not yours. In response you say:

The DCT was piloted with 15 students. The main purpose of this phase was to show if the students will find the situations acceptable, suitable and similar to real-life situations; if they will find the instructions sufficient to be able to decide how to formulate their speech acts; and if the instructions will trigger the required speech act.

Based on students' feedback, the items were revised before being used among larger population. The students' remarks showed that some of the situations needed further explanations about the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in terms of length of friendship, closeness, frequency of contact, etc. For example, in the Ride home situation, the participants found it not clear whether the people have communicated previously and how close their relationship was. There were two situations that many of the students did not understand and had to be rephrased (Term paper, Down payment). There were also a few problems with vocabulary so explanations of the problematic items were included (dent in the fender, down payment, baggage reclaim, luggage rack).

Table 1 summarises the number of DCT responses and role plays for each of the levels in English and German foreign language learners.

3.   Disadvantages of DCT

We try to analyse the advantages as well as the disadvantages or the weak points of this instrument, following the view of Kasper and Dahl [19] in their paper *"Research methods in interlanguage pragmatics"*. They describe the DCT at the lower level of data collection method due to its weaknesses compared to other data collection methods. According to them, the DCT is the major data collection method in interlanguage research,

but at the same time is also a much criticized instrument for measuring pragmatic competence. They also state that this instrument is limited in the authenticity of the given situations, but at the same time it initiates productive answers.

Brown and Levinson [9] in their book "Politeness" indicate that the hypothetical nature of situations in DCTs simplify the complexity of interaction in real life situations. They stress that what people claim they would say in the hypothetical situation is not necessarily and exactly the same what they actually say in the real life situation. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford [2] in their monograph *"Pragmatics and language learning"* describe that DCTs present narrower range of semantic formulas and fewer strategies than the natural data provoked by the real life situation.

Table 1: Number of DCT responses and role plays: B2 and C1 levels

	Apologies/ Entschuldigung	Requests/ Aufforderung	Complaints/ Beschwerden	Total/ Total
B2				
DCT responses/DCT-Antworten (49 students)	277 154	275 156	265 145	817 455
Role plays/Rollenspiele (49 students)	31 11	41 8	45 3	117 22
C1				
DCT responses-DCT-Antworten (31 students)	185 17	185 18	186 18	556 53
Role plays/Rollenspiele (31 students)	21 /	27 /	21 /	69 /

In addition, DCT does not present the extended negotiation which commonly occurs in authentic discourses and authentic situations, as a result of the absence of interaction between interlocutors. Rintell and Mitchell [28] in their book "Studying request and apologies: An inquiry into method" investigate the result received from the DCT and the role-play. They found that in situations provoked by role-plays, the communicants use longer

answers than from written answers used in DCTs. It means that DCTs cannot establish comprehensive features in a certain speech act. Considering the weak points and the disadvantages of the DCTs, it is important to take into consideration the model design of DCT so that the quality of the data can be improved. Billmyer and Varghese [4] in their book Applied Linguistics describes the idea of redesigning DCT. According to them by redesigning DCT, its adequacy to approximate authentic discourse can be improved. In dealing with this issue, they carried out a validation study of DCT by enriching the contextual detail of DCT prompts in request act. They find that enhancement does not affect the strategy and the amount of syntactical and lexical devices. However, a result indicates that improving DCT prompts produced significantly longer and more elaborated requests. [24]

4.   Concluding remarks

The DCT and role play scenarios elicited requests, apologies and complaints are most frequently used methods for measuring pragmatic competence in L2 learners. These speech acts are very frequent and of great importance in everyday communication. In particular we focus on analysing the realization of the head acts (request, apology or complaint) and their internal modification (mitigation or aggravation) as well as their supportive moves (external modification).

DCTs are still most frequently used and most frequently criticized instrument for measuring pragmatic competence. More specific research and discussions are needed in order to improve the instrument design and instrument model in order to get an effective and efficient instrument. Yet, the researchers are fully aware of the advantages and disadvantages of this instrument, and they should make all necessary attempts to enhance the quality of this instrument so that they can improve the validity of the research studies.

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