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6 Assessing L2 pragmatic competence

Abstract: This chapter offers an overview of key issues and current debates related to the assessment of second language (L2) pragmatics. It begins by examining definitions of pragmatic competence and how the underlying construct of these definitions affects how and what is assessed. This discussion is followed by a consideration of the dimensions of pragmatics that have been assessed and a review of assessment methods, highlighting recent innovations and the role of learner agency. The concluding section of this chapter suggests future directions in L2 pragmatics assessment.

Keywords: second language pragmatics, pragmatics assessment, pragmatics testing

1 Introduction

It is through assessment that teachers and researchers are able to collect information about what second language (L2) speakers know about a language, are able to do with the language, or have accomplished in a period of time (e.g., Kasper and Ross 2013). Assessment includes both traditional standardized testing, but also classroom-based assessment administered by teachers to determine learning outcomes in a particular setting and to support students' continued development (e.g., Ishihara and Cohen 2010). Although work on assessing L2 pragmatics goes back more than two decades, neither standardized testing nor classroom-based assessment of pragmatics has been widely implemented in practice (e.g., Taguchi and Roever 2017; Youn 2018). Large-scale tests commonly employed to measure global L2 competence such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview (ACTFL OPI) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) do not include assessment of pragmatics (Taguchi and Roever 2017). In the case of classroom-based assessment, a challenge that teachers face is that pragmatic skills are often not included in the foreign language (FL) curriculum or in textbook materials, so teachers are typically left to their own devices if they want to assess pragmatic competence in the FL classroom (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig 2017; Dumitrescu and Andueza 2018; Gironzetti and Koike 2016). The lack of attention to pragmatics is problematic given that this domain is one component of communicative competence (e.g., Bachman and Palmer 2010; Timpe-Laughlin, Wain, and Schmidgall 2015) and, consequently, if

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we do not assess pragmatics, we cannot obtain a full picture of L2 speakers' abilities. Further, there is a lack of research demonstrating that pragmatic competence is not subsumed under more general listening or speaking abilities. In this context, it is crucial to continue to develop and refine approaches to the assessment of various dimensions of pragmatics and the chapters in Section II do just that.

In order to contextualize and introduce Section II, the goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of key issues in the assessment of L2 pragmatics and to discuss the evolution of assessment methods from the early days of the field when Andrew Cohen and his colleagues pioneered the discourse completion task (e.g., Cohen and Olshtain 1981) to the present. The chapter will begin by examining how the underlying construct of pragmatic competence impacts what and how we assess in pragmatics. In terms of what aspects of pragmatic competence can be assessed, the chapter outlines various dimensions such as receptive and productive skills, oral and written modes, implicit and explicit knowledge, and pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic skills. We also highlight a shift in the field from an early focus on assessing single-utterance, isolated speech acts to the more recent surge in pragmatics-in-interaction studies, which analyze longer stretches of contextualized and co-constructed talk (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2019; Kasper 2006). The chapter then turns to how to assess pragmatic competence, describing various assessment methods and spotlighting recent innovations in these methods. We conclude by suggesting future directions for assessment in L2 pragmatics.

2 Key issues

An essential issue in the assessment of L2 pragmatics is defining both pragmatics and pragmatic competence (see Chapter 1, this volume), since various definitions of both terms have been put forth that reflect specific traditions (e.g., Schneider 2017). A broad view of pragmatic competence is that of Fraser (2010: 15), who defined pragmatic competence as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended." Some of the specific knowledge and skills that have been outlined as components in pragmatic competence include sociocultural knowledge about social norms and language use in different contexts, mapping of forms with the social meanings that they index, understanding implicit meaning, and being able to participate in extended discourse, among other aspects (e.g., Kasper and Rose 2002; Taguchi and Roever 2017; Timpe-Laughlin, Wain, and Schmidgall, 2015). The distinction between pragmalinguistic competence (i.e., being able to link specific language forms with their functions and meanings) and sociopragmatic competence (i.e., knowing in what circumstances and with whom specific language forms are culturally appropriate) has also been made to differentiate aspects of pragmatic competence. Although previous research has predominantly focused on productive skills in oral language, receptive skills (e.g., comprehension of implicit meaning) and writing skills are also aspects of pragmatic competence.

2.1 Theoretical frameworks and assessment

The way that L2 pragmatics and pragmatic competence are defined is crucial to assessment because theoretical orientation influences the target constructs. The earliest work on the assessment of L2 pragmatics was grounded in speech act theory (e.g., Searle 1976), which resulted in a narrow focus on communicative actions at the utterance level in spoken language. This approach further involves an etic perspective (i.e., the analyst interprets the intentions of the participants), does not look beyond individual utterances in isolation, and reflects a "rational actor model" or "rationalist approach," which conceives of an ideal speaker who acts rationally to achieve communication goals and who possesses a static base of knowledge and skills that are not affected by the interlocutor or by the sequential unfolding of an interaction (e.g., Kasper 2006; Kasper and Ross 2013). In this theoretical framework, the target construct are speech acts, which was operationalized in assessments that tested L2 speakers' ability to recognize or produce socially appropriate speech acts at the utterance level.

An example of early pragmatics tests that adopted what has been termed the rationalist approach are those developed by Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995). Hudson et al., for instance, in their ground-breaking test battery, assessed the speech acts of apologies, refusals, and requests using a variety of item types. Apart from multiple-choice questions, the test included both written and oral discourse completion tasks (DCTs), that is, an item in which test-takers are given the description of a situation and then asked to write or speak what they would say in response. Hudson and his colleagues also included role plays (i.e., spontaneous simulated oral interactions) in their battery, but they only examined the specific speech act in question, not the entire interaction. For the DCTs and role plays, pragmatic competence was measured using various criteria including production of the appropriate speech act, amount of language provided, formality, politeness, and directness.

Some have argued that the speech act framework under-specifies pragmatic competence, reducing the target construct in assessment to isolated communicative acts at the utterance level (e.g., Roever 2011; Scheider 2017). Consequently, various authors have worked to broaden the construct of pragmatic competence to assess features beyond speech acts. Roever and colleagues (e.g., Roever 2005, 2006; Roever, Fraser, and Elder 2014), for example, developed a series of web-based tests to assess both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic skills related to L2 speakers' ability to recognize formulas, understand implicature, judge pragmatic appropriateness, and provide a turn in a multiple-rejoiner DCT. These efforts expanded the focus from a small number of isolated speech acts to other aspects of pragmatics, as well as began to examine speech acts in more extended discourse.

More recent work in L2 pragmatics assessment has gone even further in its focus on pragmatics in interaction. This discursive approach to L2 pragmatics theorizes that pragmatics is an interactional phenomenon and that pragmatic competence includes being able to participate in extended interaction and to accomplish social actions in the unfolding discourse context (e.g., Kasper 2006; Kasper and Ross 2013; Roever and Kasper 2018). This view is grounded theoretically in traditions such as interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis (CA), approaches which take an emic perspective – that is, they focus on how the participants themselves orient to the talk, not the analyst's interpretation – and conceive of pragmatic meaning and social actions as jointly accomplished by the participants, rather than solely the performance of an individual rational actor (e.g. Kasper 2006; Kasper and Ross 2013; Mori and Nguyen 2019). Within a discursive approach, the construct of pragmatic competence is expanded to L2 speakers' ability to produce speech acts in their sequential context, to co-construct meaning with others, and to use interactional skills such as turn-taking, alignment, and repair (e.g. Roever and Kasper 2018). The assessment method employed in this tradition has typically been role plays (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2018). Grabowski (2009) and Youn (2015) are two researchers who have designed role plays to assess pragmatics skills in extended discourse.

2.2 Assessment methods

As theoretical orientations have shifted over time, so too have assessment methods. Written DCTs with a single turn that were intended to elicit speech acts in spoken language dominated early work on L2 pragmatics. While DCTs are still a widely-employed method, role plays have become more common as the focus has changed to examining interactional skills and pragmatic actions in extended discourse. Written DCTs have been critiqued for producing data that do not serve as strong validity evidence for making inferences about pragmatic competence (e.g., Youn and Bogorevich 2019). Research has indicated that written DCTs do not always capture the same range and types of strategies that are found in real-life interactions, nor does the written mode reflect characteristics of oral speech such as hesitation, repetition, and prosodic and nonverbal information (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013; Golato 2003; Kasper 2008; Yuan 2001). Furthermore, written DCTs elicit what test-takers think they would say and draw on their explicit knowledge (i.e., knowledge of which a person is conscious and aware), rather than their implicit knowledge (i.e., rapidly accessible knowledge of which a person is unaware), that is, what they would actually do in a spontaneous oral interaction (e.g., Kasper and Dahl 1991; Bardovi-Harlig 2013).

The primary reason why written DCTs continue to be popular, however, is that they allow systematic control of situational and social factors, they are easy to administer, and can be used to collect large amounts of data in a relatively short amount of time. Recent research has also offered innovations to the original format of the DCT, such as that provided in Cohen and Olshtain (1981). Oral DCTs (also termed closed role plays) ask participants to speak their turn rather than write it, which makes the task a direct measure of spoken language rather than indirect in the case of written DCTs that intend to project oral responses. Some authors have developed technology-enhanced DCTs that provide images, audio, video, and/or animation (e.g., Halenko 2013; Winke and Teng 2010), which may make the task more appealing and authentic for test-takers (e.g., Culpeper, Mackey, and Taguchi 2018; Rockey, Tiegs, and Fernández 2020). Another innovation in the DCT format are collaborative DCTs in which two participants construct a dialogue together (Taguchi and Kim 2016). In any type of DCT, the responses collected must be scored by trained raters using well-developed and clear rating criteria in order for the data to have a reasonable level of reliability (i.e., consistency in scoring) (e.g., Youn and Bogorevich 2019).

Role plays (also called open role plays) involve a simulated verbal interaction between two or more people. Although the participants' roles and the setting are controlled by the researcher, the interactional outcomes of the role play are not predetermined (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2018). The data that result can be analyzed for interactional features and co-construction of meaning over multiple turns. While role plays have been employed for decades in L2 pragmatics (e.g., Rintell 1979), only more recently have interactional resources – rather than speech acts – been the focus in assessing L2 speakers' performance in role plays. Because role play performances are more complex than DCT responses, developing clear and valid rating criteria for interactional data is crucial – for example, by using CA to analyze interactional features as a first step in developing data-driven rating criteria (e.g., Youn, 2015). A further consideration when assessing interaction within a theoretical framework such as interactional competence (e.g., Young 2011, 2019), is how or whether to give an individual a rating when theoretically speaking, interactional competence is co-constructed and not only related to the skills of one individual. Young (2019) argues that examining the participation framework and how individuals establish intersubjectivity within that framework is key.

Although role plays have the advantage of eliciting interactional data in a controlled context (i.e., setting and roles are crafted by the researcher to target particular contextual variables), they have the disadvantage of being less practical than DCTs to administer and analyze. Further, role plays tend to reflect naturalistic interaction better than DCTs, but still constitute dialogue between people who are acting and using their imaginations to construct the scenario, who typically do not have real-life relationships, and whose behavior will not have any real social consequences.[1] A further challenge in developing role play scenarios and rating criteria is ensuring that the task and the assessment of the performance reflect the characteristics of the real-life setting being represented (e.g., Taguchi and Roever 2017). Some innovative techniques have attempted to improve on some of the limitations of role plays. For instance, Vilar-Beltran and Melchor-Couto (2013) asked participants to complete role plays as avatars in the virtual world Second Life, which provided a richer visual context through graphic images and animation, reducing the need for participants to rely on their imaginations. Another strategy is to include a speech act not described in the role play scenario, so that participants are unaware and do not expect that speech act and, therefore, may respond to it more naturalistically. An example is Cheng (2011), who included compliments in role plays in which participants were expecting other speech acts.

While role plays and DCTs are the most common methods to assess pragmatic production, multiple-choice questions (MCQs) is a method that has been employed to examine receptive skills in pragmatics. Researchers have assessed comprehension and recognition of various pragmatic features such as conversational implicatures, routine formulas, and speech acts (e.g., Hudson et al. 1995; Taguchi 2009; Timpe-Laughlin and Choi 2017). Although MCQs have high practicality due to ease of administration and scoring, they sometimes suffer from low reliability, if distractor options are not clearly incorrect for all test-takers or

1 In naturally-occurring interactions, there are also instances in which participants do not have relationships beyond a brief transaction, for example, service encounters between strangers.

partial credit is not given. Taguchi and Roever (2017) point out that one challenge in creating MCQs, as well as other assessment methods in L2 pragmatics, is making items difficult enough for higher proficiency learners to avoid ceiling effects. Steps to address this challenge highlighted by these authors include creating more difficult test items, recruiting test-takers with a range of proficiency levels (previous research is dominated by intermediate and advanced L2 speakers), and identifying the degree of difficulty of various pragmatic features.

A final assessment method that has been employed occasionally in classroom-based assessment is collecting samples of L2 use in real-life settings beyond the classroom. Morris (2017), for instance, assessed the learning of L2 speech acts in oral communication by asking her students to audio-record themselves using the L2 out in the community to complete tasks such as ordering food in restaurants and asking people on the street for directions. In another case, Alcón-Soler (2015) assessed the use of requests in writing by collecting and analyzing authentic emails that students had written to their professors. A considerable benefit of this method is that we can assess what L2 speakers actually do with language in a real-life encounter with potential material and social consequences, but drawbacks include lack of practicality in many situations (e.g., difficulty getting ethics board approval or consent from community members, few opportunities for L2 interactions outside the FL classroom) and the challenge of comparability, since in real life, the researcher cannot always control social and contextual variables. Finally, when assessing productive skills in the classroom context, Ishihara (2019) and Ishihara and Cohen (2010) have advocated for innovative assessment techniques to respect L2 speakers' agency and identity. For instance, teachers can measure performance not in comparison to L2 native speakers – whom L2 speakers may not wish to emulate – but rather, L2 speakers can be assessed in relation to how successful they were in a given task in achieving their own communicative goals in the L2.

In sum, this section has provided an overview of historical trends in L2 pragmatics assessment, has touched upon current debates in the field, and has reviewed common assessment methods. We conclude in the following section by offering some future directions.

3 Conclusion and future directions

This chapter has traced developments in assessing L2 pragmatics over the past four decades, from the early 1980s when Andrew Cohen and his colleagues began implementing DCTs to assess speech acts to more recent interest in discursive pragmatics and pragmatic abilities beyond speech acts. Looking toward the future, the remainder of this section highlights some areas for research going forward.

The potential for digital technologies to enhance assessment is a key consideration. In pragmatics, it is imperative to contextualize interaction physically, discursively, and socially, yet as we discussed earlier, providing this real-life context for assessment tasks can be challenging in terms of practicality. Creating pragmatics assessments that are administered within digital spaces such as virtual environments, in which individuals role play via avatars or test-takers interact with a bot (i.e., an artificial intelligent agent), are potential ways to not sacrifice practicality while improving contextualization and standardization of assessment tasks (see Chapter 10, this volume). More research on the creation and implementation of assessment tasks in digital spaces is needed.

Another direction for future research is to expand on what has previously been assessed in order to measure dimensions of pragmatic competence that have heretofore received little attention, such as humor (see Chapter 8, this volume), strategic competence (see Chapter 9, this volume), and gesture and prosody. While assessing areas such as humor and gesture may create challenges for scoring and inter-rater reliability, broadening our focus to encompass such areas has the potential to provide a fuller picture of L2 learners' pragmatic abilities. Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume provide examples of how to approach assessing the underexplored areas of humor and strategic competence.

Various authors (e.g., Cohen 2019; Taguchi and Roever 2017; Youn and Bogorevich 2019) have pointed out the need for empirical research that establishes the features and range of pragmatic norms expected in different domains (e.g., retail service encounter, advising session) and in different target languages. For instance, in the case of retail service encounters in Spanish, previous research has documented the expected social actions and their sequential organization, norms for requesting, and a range of ways that speakers express politeness in this domain in various Spanish-speaking communities (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2015). Such information is crucial for assessment because, in order to determine the degree of appropriateness of pragmatic performance in a particular domain, we need to have an empirically-based understanding of how competent speakers behave in that domain in the real world.

Finally, we have seen efforts in recent years to make pragmatics-focused instructional materials easily accessible to FL teachers – Andrew Cohen, for instance, was involved in developing websites for learning Japanese (http://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/japanese/introtospeechacts/index.htm) and Spanish (http://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home.html) pragmatics and a wiki for sharing pragmatics materials (http://wlpragmatics.pbworks.com). As we continue this push for pragmatics instruction in the FL classroom, we need a greater focus on the design and implementation of classroom-based assessments in order to support teachers as they incorporate pragmatics instruction into their curricula (e.g., Ishihara and Cohen 2010).

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