

AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW B2-C2 LEVEL ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) LEARNERS DISPLAY THEIR PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN SPEAKING

EDIT WILLCOX-FICZERE

Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom

Abstract. The importance of testing second language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence is becoming evident following increasing research (e.g. Ross and Kasper, 2013). Current pragmatic tests mainly use the Speech Act Theory as a theoretical framework and discourse completion tasks (DCTs) as test instruments. However, these have been criticized lately for overlooking the importance of the *discursive* side of pragmatics. The main objective of this research was to contribute towards the assessment of B2-C2 level EFL learners' pragmatic competence by experimenting with task formats that allow the examination of extended oral discourse. The empirical study examined how two speaking task formats allowed test takers to display their pragmatic competence. It also aimed to identify some criterial features defining the level of EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Six university students took part in this mixed-method study, which included four monologic and two dialogic tasks, followed by a semi-structured interview. Performance of the tasks was video recorded, transcribed and analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively using a Conversation Analytic framework. It was concluded that both task formats allow learners to display their pragmatic competence in terms of the sequential organization of speech and selection/use of pragmalinguistic devices. Results also showed that with increasing proficiency the number and range of pragmalinguistic devices seemed to increase and the sequential organization of speech tended to become somewhat more natural.

Key words: EFL, pragmatic competence, assessment, task formats, oral discourse

INTRODUCTION

As the number of overseas students and employees in English-speaking countries has increased exponentially over the last decades, the importance of pragmatic competence for L2 speakers to be successful in social integration has been highlighted, and the need for assessing it has become more pressing (e.g. Ross and Kasper, 2013). The aim of the present study is to contribute towards such assessment by examining CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) B2-C2 level EFL learners' pragmatic competence in speaking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1 DEFINING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

One of the early models that include the notion of pragmatics is Canale's (1983), who identifies 'sociolinguistic competence' as the combination of 'appropriateness of *form*' and 'appropriateness of *meaning*'. Leech (1983), somewhat similarly, distinguishes between *pragmalinguistic* knowledge (i.e. awareness of linguistic choices available) and *sociopragmatic* knowledge (i.e. awareness of contextual factors influencing the use of such choices in communication), but calls it pragmatic competence. Bachman (1990), building on this earlier research, developed a model for communicative language ability, within which he includes pragmatic competence as a branch of language competence. He, in line with Leech (1983), also distinguishes between speakers' ability to consider *contextual factors* when attempting to produce socially appropriate utterances in communication (i.e. sociolinguistic competence) and speakers' knowledge of *language functions* (i.e. functional knowledge). Research, thus, seems to indicate that pragmatic competence combines *social awareness* and *linguistic ability*, which allows speakers to produce socially and linguistically appropriate utterances in a given context in order to conduct social interaction successfully.

Social interaction, however, also includes the hearer. Speakers are unable to achieve their communicative goals without considering their relationship to the hearer, and without evaluating the hearer's utterances before formulating their own response. It would thus indicate, as Faerch and Kasper (1983) argue, that speakers, as well as possessing linguistic and social knowledge, also need to be able to formulate their communicative goals, plan their speech accordingly and constantly *monitor their own performance on-line* in communication. Communication generally includes extended discourse during which participants take several turns, thereby gradually sequencing speech to achieve their communicative goal. It is, therefore, argued here that on-line processing skill, alongside contextual and language knowledge, is also essential when defining pragmatic competence.

Consequently, the following definition of pragmatic competence was adopted for assessing EFL learners' competence in the present study:

- ability to organise speech *sequentially* in extended discourse;
- ability to use *pragmatic functions* (i.e. requests and apology) appropriately;
- ability to select/use *linguistic devices* in English to achieve communicative goal;
- ability to respond to *interlocutor* appropriately taking contextual factors (e.g. power) into consideration.

2 ANALYZING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

2.1 ORGANIZING SPEECH SEQUENTIALLY AND USING PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS APPROPRIATELY

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a sociologically-based approach which, according to Levinson (1983: 286), focuses on ‘how coherence and sequential organisation in discourse are produced and understood’. In other words, CA analyses how speakers structure their speech in order to achieve their communicative goals in social interaction, whilst also evaluating the hearer’s responses and forming their own response accordingly. Gonzalez-Lloret (2010) argues that CA could be used effectively to analyze speech acts (SA) in interaction since it investigates action as and when action *emerges* during the talk without predetermining the speaker’s intentions. CA, thus, would not only allow the analysis of the *sequential* development of SAs but also of the speaker’s *online processing* skills.

As the present research investigates EFL speakers’ performance at three different proficiency levels, *developmental issues in the sequential organization of speech* will also need to be considered. Al-Gahtani and Roever’s (2012) research, using CA to analyze speech production in interaction, indicates that pragmatic competence manifests itself in the way learners organize their speech *sequentially* by employing more *elaboration* at higher levels. Their findings indicate that higher proficiency level learners tend to use more supportive moves (e.g. pre-/post-expansion) and control the conversation by not relying only on the interlocutor to initiate. This might perhaps result from their increased linguistic ability, which in turn leads to increased *cognitive capacity* to display this knowledge in real-life discourse. Al-Gahtani and Roever’s (2012) research led Hassall (2013) to re-examine some previous research results (Trosborg, 1995) and found that using CA for analyzing the same data would support their findings. This might indicate that there is, indeed, development in EFL learners’ sequential organization of speech, and that a CA framework would best allow the examination of such development.

2.2 SELECTING AND USING LINGUISTIC DEVICES TO ACHIEVE COMMUNICATIVE GOALS

As highlighted in 1.1 the sequential organization of discourse is only one aspect of EFL learners’ pragmatic competence and the analysis of *pragmalinguistic resources* used in their speech is also required to make inferences about their pragmatic competence. An extensive coding scheme has been developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) in order to identify linguistic devices used in requests and apologies. Using this scheme requests can be analyzed according to the degree of directness and the type of modification used. Although this scheme is not complete or finite, since language changes might alter existing linguistic devices, it contains a range of *lexical/phrasal modifiers* (e.g. intensifiers) that can aid the analysis of EFL learners’ pragmatic competence in oral discourse.

It is argued here that as well as lexical/phrasal modifiers, *conversational routines* (CR) can also be considered pragmalinguistic devices since in EFL classrooms they are learned and utilized as chunks of language used in particular social situations (e.g. Would you mind X?). Although no agreed definition for CRs exists amongst linguists, the name is still used interchangeably with formulaic expressions, conventional expressions, and formulas, their importance when analyzing pragmatic competence cannot be ignored. Using CRs gives EFL speech a more proficient feel and also indicates pragmatic knowledge and awareness. For the purposes of the present research the following definition of CRs (Myles et al., 1998: 325) has been adopted:

- used repeatedly and always in the same form;
- situationally dependent;
- community-wide in use.

Regarding the *developmental* sequence of pragmalinguistic resources, there is no general consensus amongst academics. However, it is believed that some development occurs with increasing proficiency. Barron (2003) argues that grammatical competence frees up cognitive capacity at higher levels, which enables learners to attend to pragmalinguistic features in communication. Dittmar and Trosborg (1991, in Barron, 2003), for example, found that *downtoners* (e.g. Could I perhaps...?) were acquired later and appeared only in higher proficiency learners' performance. Moreover, Barron (2003) found that there was a development in the quantity and complexity of lexical/phrasal *downgraders* (i.e. linguistic devices which are used to soften the force of requests) in more proficient learners' requests, while Bardovi-Harlig (2009) noticed that higher proficiency learners used more intensification. Thus, it seems that there is some improvement in the use of pragmalinguistic devices in EFL learners' speech.

3 ASSESSING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Current pragmatic tests are mainly based on the *framework* adopted by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and use discourse completion tasks (DCTs) as *test instruments*. Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1992, 1995), for example, designed a test for L1 Japanese learners of English using the aforementioned framework and methodology. Their test instrument mainly focused on politeness and directness levels in three different speech acts (SA) (i.e. request, apology and refusal), and consisted of five task types (discourse completion tasks, role plays and a self-assessment). Liu (2006) also used the same framework when designing a test, consisting of multiple-choice DCTs (MDCT) and self-assessment, for Chinese learners of English. Speech acts, however, are not the only pragmatic features that have been tested. Roever's (2005, 2006) test instrument (i.e. MDCTs), for example, included items that elicited knowledge of implicature and routine formulae. His study also differed from the previously described tests in that he targeted different

L1 speakers (i.e. European, Asian). The SA theory, as an underlying framework, and DCTs, as task formats, thus, seem to be commonly used when assessing pragmatic competence.

However, using *SA theory as a theoretical framework* has been criticized lately for overlooking the importance of the *discursive* side of pragmatics (Kasper, 2006; Roever, 2011). In SA theory, it is the speaker who is in focus and the listener tends to be regarded as passive, which is likely to prevent researchers from noticing the effect listeners' responses have on speakers' verbal behaviour. Walters (2007) attempted to rectify this issue when utilizing a CA framework in his research. His listening comprehension tasks consisted of role-play and DCTs, and measured ESL learners' understanding of a previous turn and their ability to respond to it. Roever's (2011) criticism of the way he used the CA framework is valid since he only analyzed isolated utterances instead of examining the sequential organisation in extended discourse

As well as the SA framework, *DCTs as test instruments* have also been criticized for not allowing examination of the *discursive* side of pragmatics. Kasper (2006) claims that they can be unreliable and do not allow the examination of the sequential organization of speech, while Kane (2006) points out that they can only elicit a part of the target domain. Their inability to elicit online processing which, as pointed out earlier, is a crucial skill in social interaction, also makes their use questionable. As more effective alternatives, role-plays and/or monologic tasks have been suggested (e.g. Kasper and Rose, 2002; Roever, 2011). These would better allow for examining L2 test takers' pragmatic competence in organising discourse and would also provide an insight into test takers' online processing skills.

It would, thus, appear that the use of DCTs as task types and SA theory as a theoretical framework might be questionable when assessing EFL learners' pragmatic competence. They only allow for the analysis of isolated utterances and not for the analysis of extended social interaction; yet this is exactly how pragmatic knowledge manifests itself in practice. For the above mentioned reasons the present research used monologic and dialogic tasks as task instruments and CA as theoretical framework.

Overall, it has been argued that pragmatic competence consists of *social knowledge* and *linguistic knowledge*, manifested in the way speakers *organize their speech* in communication and in the way they *select/use linguistic resources* taking *contextual factors* into consideration. This competence is essential in social interaction and, as such, should be included when assessing EFL learners' communicative competence. It has also been stated previously that in order to assess this competence the analysis of both, *sequential organization of discourse* and *pragmalinguistic resources* used in speech, are required. The use of *monologic/dialogic task types* as research instruments and a *conversation analytic framework* for analysis has also been advocated.

Therefore, the research questions of this paper are:

- What features of pragmatic competence, *in terms of sequential organisation and pragmalinguistic devices*, are elicited by monologic and dialogic tasks?
- In what ways are these pragmatic features utilised differently by B2-C2 level learners?

METHODOLOGY

1 PARTICIPANTS

Data was collected from 6 international university students all having a different L1. All participants were studying at a UK university at the time of the study. Their proficiency levels ranged from B2 to C2 (two students at each level), and the levels were based on their IELTS and TOEFL scores using the Cambridge English conversion table to correlate IELTS to CEFR and the TOEFL conversion table to correlate TOEFL to CEFR.

The average age was 25.5 with only one participant being slightly older (34). The gender division was equal (3 males and 3 females), however, there was no equality of genders at the different levels, with 2 female participants at B2 and two male participants at C1 levels. This gender difference at the two levels clearly presented a limitation in the study and has also possibly affected the results. Therefore, the equality of genders at each level will need to be rectified in a future study.

All L1s were different, however, at B2 level both participants were from Asian and both C2 level participants were from European countries. This could have also had an effect on the results and will need to be rectified in a future study.

2 DATA COLLECTION

The instrument in this study consisted of:

- a speaking task: 4 monologic and 2 dialogic tasks;
- a semi-structured interview.

After an initial explanation of the task requirements participants performed the monologic task alone, with a few seconds preparation time given, and the dialogic task with the researcher. This was followed by a semi-structured interview with each participant. Monologic tasks were audio recorded and the dialogic tasks and interviews were audio and video recorded.

2.1 THE SPEAKING TASKS

The research instrument consisted of four monologic tasks (leaving a message on an answerphone) and two dialogic tasks (having a conversation with the interlocutor in an assumed role). All the tasks were based on students'

suggestions regarding commonly encountered situations in academic life and elicited two types of speech act, request and apology. The tasks were put together to reflect real situations, the most common power constellations (i.e. hearer has more power: professor-student; both interactants have the same level of power: flatmates, classmates) and degree of imposition in the participants' university life.

The task requirements for the two task types were designed to be as comparable as possible, apart from the interactive aspect of the dialogic task, and the order of task prompts were counter-balanced to avoid potential order effect. Task instructions were recorded on cards as well as orally explained by the interlocutor. The interlocutor did not use scripts in the dialogic tasks but adapted to the participants as needed, while following some principles and guidelines to offer flexible, but standardized interlocutor input.

2.2 THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

All test-takers were asked to take part in a retrospective verbal interview immediately after they finished the tasks in order to explore participants' perception of task situations.

The outline for the interview used a Likert-scale and consisted of:

- demographic information;
- pragmatic information (power, imposition);
- task content (familiarity, difficulty);
- cultural notes (comments on L1 and L2 cultural, linguistic similarities/differences).

3 DATA ANALYSIS

The research investigated the following pragmatic features of speech: appropriacy, elaboration (pre- and post-expansion), linguistic devices (intensifiers, hedges, downtoners, understaters and conversational routines) employed to carry out speech acts. Conversational routines were identified as a type of linguistic device since they are often learned as chunks in and outside EFL classrooms.

All recordings were transcribed following CA conventions (Heritage, 1984). Data was analyzed first qualitatively using CA to examine pragmatic speech events as a whole and then quantitatively, to identify linguistic devices to perform them. The following presents the different stages of the data analysis.

Firstly, in terms of appropriacy the sequence openings/greetings and closings were examined in particular. Secondly, Schegloff's (2007) categories of pre- and post-expansion for CA were used to analyze the sequential organization of speech. This was followed by the quantitative analysis of linguistic devices using the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and House and Kasper's (1981) coding categories, namely intensifiers, hedges, understaters and downtoners.

For the purposes of this research only those categories that corresponded to the linguistic devices employed by the majority of the participants were selected. Finally, the semi-structured interview data was analyzed in order to gain an insight into the participants' speech productions. It was also used to triangulate the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis. Likert-scales (1–5) were used to elicit how they evaluated power, social distance, imposition in the task situations and to understand how difficult/familiar these situations were to them. Subsequently notes were taken of the comments participants made and coded regarding whether task situations, task types or cultural issues were referred to.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It should be noted that due to the limited number of participants (N=6) the results described below are only suggestive.

1 MONOLOGIC TASKS

1.1 APPROPRIACY

Participants generally displayed appropriacy at all levels. It was interesting to note, however, that C2 participants tended to adjust addressing the hearer slightly more in line with the power constellation (e.g. equal power constellation: 'Hey Jane... Thanks'; unequal power constellation: 'Good evening Professor Wilson ... Thank you.') whilst also using a more elaborate closing formula (e.g. 'I'm very sorry for the inconvenience.'). This might result from the formality of the relationship with their professors but could also indicate more familiarity with the conventions and/or more cognitive capacity to attend to such detail.

1.2 ELABORATION

Participants at all three levels used elaboration to a lesser or greater degree in both power constellation tasks (S<H, S=H). It is worth noting that B2 participants tended to use more repetition (Excerpt 1: lines 3–5), perhaps to buy time to formulate their thoughts or search for language options.

Excerpt 1: Late essay submission, B2, S<H

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. opening: | Good afternoon professor Willson. This is (first name). |
| 2. apology: | I'm calling you to (0.3) e::rm to apologize↑ |
| 3. → problem statement: | that I haven't submitted the the (0.3) report (0.3) on <u>Monday</u> (0.3) |
| 4. → account: | because I'm (0.3) quite (.) I'm quite <u>busy</u> to do <u>other</u> presentations and↑ we have a lot of <u>work</u> ↑ (.) I have a lot of <u>work</u> to finish (.) |

5. → problem statement: a:nd I forgot to (0.2) to submit the report.
6. REQUEST E::rm I just called you to (0.3) to () Is it possible if I submit (0.3) today?
7. closing: Thank you.

1.3 LINGUISTIC DEVICES

Overall, all participants used some linguistic devices to a greater or lesser degree. However, the number and range of these devices tended to increase with proficiency with C2 learners employing the most and widest range. Trosborg (1995) also found that with increased language control more modification (e.g. intensifiers, hedges) was used in L2 learners' speech.

The types of intensifiers did not differ very much across levels, the most frequent ones were: *so/really/very*. C2 level participants used a slightly wider range including 'extremely', 'terribly' and they also used them in a variety of ways (e.g. *extremely/terribly sorry*), whereas B2 level participants had a narrower range of usage. This is consistent with Bardovi-Harlig's (2009) findings; however, it should be noted that C2 learners in this study tended to use not only more but also a somewhat wider range of intensifiers (type/token ratio B2: 0.3; type/token ratio C2: 0.35). Interestingly, C1 level participants did not use any intensifiers, which could be due to personal or cultural reasons.

There was very little hedging observable but the use of hedges seemed to increase slightly with proficiency. The only type of hedge commonly used was 'just'; one other type (i.e. 'perhaps') was employed only once by a C2 learner. However, the amount of data gathered here is insufficient to generalize.

Conversational routines differed in terms of grammatical complexity. C2 level participants tended to use grammatically more complex forms in terms of tense and modality (e.g. 'I was wondering if ...'). C1 level participants also used some slightly more complex forms (e.g. 'I would like to know if I ...'), whereas B2 participants used somewhat simpler ones (e.g. 'Is it possible...?'). This is in line with Barron's (2003) and Bardovi-Harlig's (2009) findings, namely that grammatical complexity in pragmalinguistic features increases with proficiency. However, it should also be noted that, as Roever (2012) argues, learners' length of stay in the target language community also plays a part in producing routine formulas with more accuracy.

2 DIALOGIC TASKS

2.1 APPROPRIACY

Appropriacy was generally displayed in both tasks at all levels. However, similarly to the monologic tasks with unequal power constellation, C2 participants tended to be consistently more formal in Task 5 than B2 and C1 participants. The following is an example of language use produced for Task 5.

2.2 TASK 5 – S<H (student – professor)

2.2.1 Elaboration

There were three discernible parts to all the conversations produced for this task, namely: the actual request part followed by a phase of clarifying the problem and the final phase of trying to find a solution. C1 participants produced the shortest conversation, which could be due to the fact that culturally they would not elaborate so much in the given power constellation (S<H), as one of them indicated in the semi-structured interview. In terms of speech produced (Figure 1), B2 level participants spoke more and produced slightly longer turns, whereas, C1 and C2 level participants spoke less, thus letting the interlocutor respond more. This is probably expected in this type of power constellation (S<H) that the hearer produces more speech. However, it should also be taken into consideration that both B2 participants were female, whereas three out of the four C1/C2 participants were male; gender or personality difference might have also affected the amount of speech produced. The vital phase pragmatically was the request phase and it was mainly here that pragmalinguistic devices became more apparent and played a greater role. It is this phase that is discussed in more detail below.

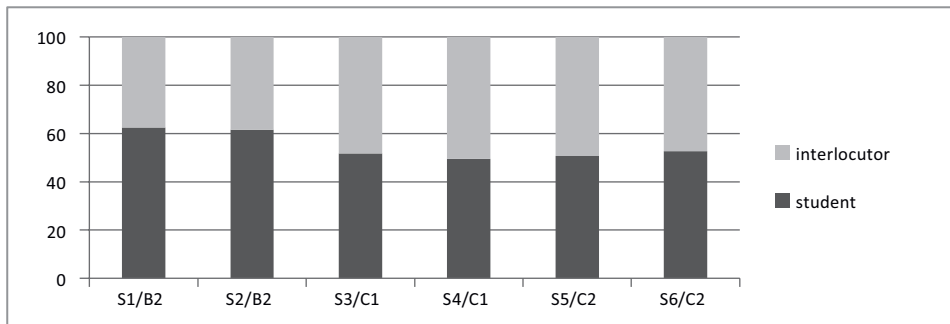


Figure 1 Speech division (%) in Task 5 (S<H)

B2

Participants included pre-expansion, request and post-expansion in the request phase of their conversation. One Japanese participant produced a longer request phase including an initial request. This might have been due to cultural issues since this type of speech act with this power constellation may well be considered a potential 'face-threat' in Japanese culture. Despite this difference, the way both participants structured the request phase of their speech was generally similar. It is also worth noting that repetition (similarly to monologic tasks) was apparent in their speech.

Excerpt 2

1. S1: Professor (first name). Do you have a few minutes?
2. I: Yes?
3. S1: Because I want to ask you about my score↑ we have done (.) last week?
4. I: Mmm.
5. S1:→ Because I thought I did (0.3) quite well↑ and I quite sure that my answer (0.3)
6. → it's correct (.) it's good, but however my score is quite low↑
7. I: Mmm.
8. S1: **>Could you please< explain↑ or give me feedback about the question?**
9. → Because I want to improve (.) if my idea (.) my answer about the question is not
10. → correct (.) yes (.) I want to correct it. It's good for me to improve and for the next
11. (.) exam↑

In Excerpt 2, the participant opens with a greeting and then produces a 'preliminaries to preliminaries' or pre-pre (Schegloff, 2007) in line 1 to preface the request and after this is acknowledged continues with pre-expansion to project the upcoming request in line 3 and to state the problem and explain the reason for the request in lines 5–6. It is here, as well as in lines 9–10, where repetition is noticeable. Once the actual request is produced in line 7 there is post-expansion to provide another reason for the request perhaps to minimize face-threat and imply that it is not a complaint.

C1

Neither C1 participants employed any post expansion and produced only pre-expansion and the actual request. However, cultural or personality traits might have influenced their speech production.

Excerpt 3

1. S4: Hi (first name). >I'd like to talk to you< about (.) like my dissertation?
2. I: Ye::s?
3. S4: In English literature? Like (.) I got a really low mark? And I (0.2) >kind of thought<
4. I was doing really well (.) so:: (.) I'm kind of (.) surprised. **>Can we talk about it<**
5. **please?**

In Excerpt 3, the participant produces a greeting in line 1 followed by an initial request and after the go-ahead response produces a problem statement in line 3 and provides a reason for the request that follows. The sequence leading up to the request is brief compared to the B2 sample in Excerpt 2 but it does contain the basic information necessary before the verbalization of the request.

C2

Both participants used pre-expansion followed by the actual request and finished with post-expansion. This post-expansion provided specific facts (line 10) to make the argument more valid; this was absent at the other two levels.

Excerpt 4

1. S5: Professor (surname)↑
2. I: Yes, how can I help you?
3. S5: The last assignment↑ (.) I was looking at it (.) and e::rm (0.3). Thank you very
4. much for giving me the feedback (.) a::nd erm (0.3) >**I was just wondering**< (.) **if**
5. **I could learn a little bit more about why (0.3) >you know< (0.2) the grading**
6. **was (0.3) so low?**
7. I: M::
8. S5: I was little surprised I must (.) I must [say↑
9. I: M:::]
10. S5: I thought that I::: hit on the on the important areas of the assignment so:::↑ >**it**
11. **would be great< if you could explain (.) perhaps why the grade was (0.3) as**
12. **[low=**
13. I: yeah]
14. S5: =as it was?

In Excerpt 4 the participant opens the conversation with a greeting and after the go-ahead response uses pre-expansion to preface the request in line 3. Interestingly, at this point there is a longish pause, possibly to determine how to best express his intention. This is followed by another pre-expansion (thanking) in lines 3–4, before the actual request is made with the problem embedded in the language. Post-expansion includes an expression of surprise and specific/factual support (lines 8, 10–11) for why the request was made. This phase of

building up to the actual request seems very natural in terms of both sequential organization and pauses, which allow the interlocutor to signal comprehension.

2.2.2 Linguistic devices

All students used a variety of *intensifiers*, *hedges* and *conversational routines*. In addition, the appearance of *understaters* and *downtoners* in the speech of C2 participants is also worth noting.

Similarly to the monologic tasks, *the types of intensifiers* did not differ very much across levels the most frequent ones being *really* and *very*. Interestingly, intensifiers did appear in C1 learners' speech, and as mentioned earlier their absence was noticeable in the monologic tasks they produced. C2 participants used the largest variety but the least number of intensifiers (type/token ratio: 0.75). This might have resulted from the fact that when taking the power constellation (S<H) and high imposition into consideration C2 participants decided against their extensive use. They also stated in the semi-structured interview later on that they 'had to be careful not to sound pushy'.

Hedges were used almost to the same small extent at all levels. The most commonly employed was still *just*; however, *kind of* also appeared in participants' speech with similar frequency. The main difference in the use of *just* was grammatical accuracy across the levels. B2 participants tended to struggle with its accurate use (e.g. 'Just I visit you in tutor time?'), whereas C1 and C2 participants seemed to use them with relative ease and accuracy (e.g. C2 participant: 'I was just wondering if I could...').

Conversational routines were used extensively at all levels with C2 participants using the most and widest variety (type/token ratio: 0.9). Grammatical complexity in these routines also seemed to increase with proficiency. For example, one of the B2 participants chose this generally simple interrogative form to verbalize their request 'Could you please explain...?' whilst a C2 participant opted for a much more elaborate conditional clause 'It would be great if you could explain **perhaps**...'

As mentioned previously, *understaters* and *downtoners* appeared in C2 participants' speech. Both participants seemed to use these pragmalinguistic devices consciously and confidently, which might perhaps suggest that this task format (i.e. involving an interlocutor in an unequal power constellation) prompts more proficient learners to attend more to the interlocutor's 'face'.

2.3 TASK 6 (S=H)

2.3.1 Elaboration

There were again three discernible parts in all the conversations produced for this task: the actual request followed by a phase of disagreement and finally a phase of finding a solution. The conversations were generally similar in length

and the number of turns produced in task 5. However, there was a difference in C1 participants' production, namely that they produced a lot more short turns compared to task 5. Speech division (Figure 2) was also very similar to task 5 with B2 participants speaking the most and C1/C2 participants allowing the interlocutor to contribute slightly more. The amount of speech produced by participants was on average 10 per cent more than in task 5, probably due to the power constellation difference, which participants identified to be $S > / = H$. This may perhaps explain why they felt more in control of the conversation. Another interesting observation was that all the participants used implicature in the request phase and generally used a lot more short turns to get to the actual request, the reason probably being that, as one participant stated, their flatmate had to be told that 'they are dirty', which might be considered rather 'face' threatening.

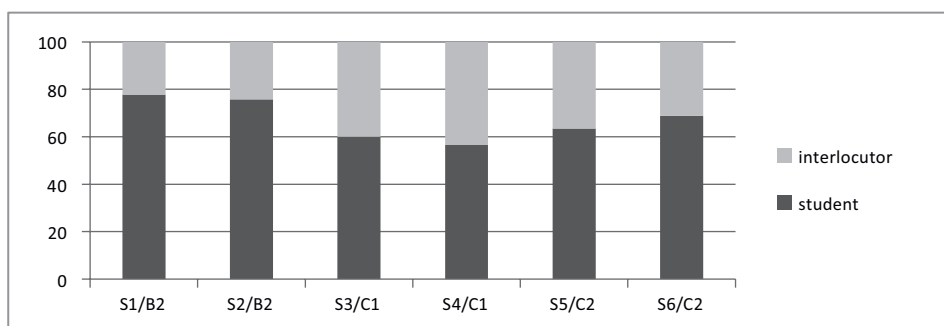


Figure 2: **Speech division (%) in Task 6 (S=H)**

2.3.2 Linguistic devices

Similar linguistic devices were used as in Task 5. *Conversation routines* were employed extensively at all levels although there was a gradual increase in number and type as the proficiency level increased (type token ratio B2: 0.76, C1: 0.91, C2: 0.97). The number of *intensifiers* used was somewhat lower compared to Task 5. Interestingly C2 participants employed the most, as opposed to Task 5 where they used the least, which may be the result of considering the power constellation ($S = H$) and the imposition (high). *Hedges* again were used to a similarly small extent at all levels. It was also observed that in this task C1 participants used more understaters and downtoners than their C2 counterparts. The reason for this was that their evaluation of the imposition was fairly high, as indicated in the subsequent semi-structured interview.

3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Overall, the interviews contributed to interpreting some of the data, in that they helped to gain an insight into some cultural issues behind language use. They also

provided an opportunity for feedback on the task specifications. For instance, participants commented that in the two monologic tasks with S<H power constellation one was easier because there was ‘an excuse’ given for the request. They also indicated that in a S=H power constellation knowing how close a friend they are talking to makes a difference or that more prompts would make them ‘argue more’. When comparing the two types of tasks generally they were of the opinion that monologic tasks allowed them to think more about language use. This is surprising since the quantitative analysis of their speech production has indicated otherwise.

CONCLUSIONS AND DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS A FURTHER STUDY

Generally, this study has given evidence that both task formats allow test takers to display their pragmatic competence in terms of sequential organization of speech and pragmalinguistic devices. The mixed method approach has also proven to provide ample data for the analysis of pragmatic competence. However, it is acknowledged here that in order to gain a deeper understanding of speakers’ pragmatic competence, the quantitative analysis of pragmalinguistic devices should also be complemented by the qualitative analysis of the context within which they are used.

In a further study, a revised version of the two task formats could be administered to a higher number of EFL learners (CEFR B2-C2 levels). The higher number of *participants* would ensure validity; however, they would need to be carefully selected. Firstly, gender/nationality groups should have equal representation at each level to avoid generalizations regarding proficiency when perhaps the language difference results from gender/cultural differences. Secondly, participants’ proficiency scores need careful monitoring in order to obtain reliable data to provide proof of proficiency specific pragmatic competence. The task instructions should also include more contextual information thus ensuring that participants make informed choices regarding language use. The findings of such study would be likely to have the potential to inform the task selection for pragmatic competence in English.

REFERENCES

- Al-Gahtani, S. and Roever, C. (2012) Proficiency and sequential organisation of L2 requests. *Applied Linguistics*, 33 (1): 42–65.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2009) Conventional expressions as a pragmalinguistic resource: Recognition and production of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 59 (4): 755–795.

- Barron, A. (2003) *Acquisition in Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. and Kasper, G. (eds.) (1989) *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Cambridge English (n.d.) Available from www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/177867-the-methodology-behind-the-cambridge-english-scale.pdf [Accessed on 5 August 2014]
- Canale, M. (1983) From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. Richards and R. Schmidt (eds.) *Language and Communication* (pp. 2–27). London: Longman.
- Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Faerch, C. and Kasper, G. (eds.) (1983) *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*. London: Longman.
- Gonzalez-Lloret, M. (2010) Culture and its effect on speech act performance. In A. Martinez-Flor and E. Uso-Juan (eds.) *Speech Act Performance: Theoretical, Empirical and Methodological Issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Hassall, T. (2013) Beyond strategy choice: A Reply to Al-Gahtani and Roever. *Applied Linguistics*, 34 (4): 501–506.
- Heritage, J. (1984) *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Polity Press.
- Hudson, T., Detmer, E. and Brown, J.D. (1992) *A Framework for Testing Cross-cultural Pragmatics* (Technical Report 2). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center.
- Kane, M. T. (2006) Validation. In R. L. Brennan (ed.) *Educational Measurement*, 4th ed. (pp. 17–64). Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Praeger.
- Kasper, G. (2006) Speech acts in interaction: Towards discursive pragmatics. In K. Bardovi-Harlig, J. C. Felix-Brasdefer and A. S. Omar (eds.) *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, Vol. 11 (pp. 281–314). University of Hawai'i at Manoa: National Foreign Language Resource Centre.
- Kasper, G., and Rose, K. R. (2002) *Pragmatic Development in a Second Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Levinson, S. (1983) *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liu, J. (2006) *Measuring Interlanguage Pragmatic Knowledge of EFL Learners*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Myles, F., Hooper, J. and Mitchell, R. (1998) Rote or rule? Exploring the role of formulaic language in classroom foreign language learning. *Language Learning*, 48: 323–363.
- Roever, C. (2005) *Testing ESL Pragmatics*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Roever, C. (2006) Validation of a web-based test of ESL pragmalinguistics. *Language Testing*, 23 (2): 229–256.
- Roever, C. (2011) Testing of second language pragmatics: Past and future. *Language Testing*, 28 (4): 463–482.
- Roever, C. (2012) What learners get for free: learning of routine formulae in ESL and EFL environments. *ELT Journal* 66 (1): 10–21.
- Ross, S. J. and Kasper G. (eds.), (2013) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2007) *Sequence Organisation in Interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- TOEFL (2010) *Linking TOEFL iBT Scores to IELTS Scores – A Research Report ETS*. Available from www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/linking_toefl_ibt_scores_to_ielts_scores.pdf [Accessed on 5 August 2014]
- Trosborg, A. (1995) *Interlanguage Pragmatics: Requests, complaints and apologies*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Walters, F. S. (2007) A conversation-analytic hermeneutic rating protocol to assess L2 oral pragmatic competence. *Language Testing*, 24 (2): 155–183.

Edit Willcox-Ficzere (Senior Lecturer and Subject Coordinator) is currently working at Oxford Brookes University. Her research interests include politeness theories, pragmatic competence and language assessment. Email: e.ficzere@brookes.ac.uk