

## **The Design and Analysis of Pragmatic Competence-based Assessments for Improving Linguistics Skills of EFL Learners**

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**Abstract:** *Following a thorough survey of the available literature and concentrating on the wax and wane of testing pragmatic competence so far, the present study firstly is an attempt to develop a comprehensive test of inter-language pragmatics mainly focusing on academic situations in the Iranian context. Secondly, the study aims to investigate the criteria required for the selection of speech acts of academic situations. Reliability, expert judgment validity, internal validity, and content validity of the test will be obtained through analyzing the data gathered through administering the test to native and non-native participants. Various methods of calculating reliability and validity of an MCDT employed in the present study could also pave the way for further research in the domain of assessing inter-language pragmatics and developing more valid and reliable tests. The present study findings could contribute to the fields of second language testing and assessment in general and testing inter-language pragmatics in particular.*

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics competence, assessing, linguistic ability.*

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### **Introduction**

As one of the most significant aspects lying in the second language teaching and learning process is to develop learners' ability to communicate appropriately in a given target language and culture, language testing services then have focused on the tests which could measure the communicative ability or better say, pragmatic competence of the learners. Therefore, teaching, learning, and testing practices which exclusively focus on the features of the target-language linguistic system cannot suffice the multivariate aspects of communication. In this regard Swain (2005, p. 471) asserts that "language learners also need to learn the social and pragmatic conventions of the target-language" Otherwise, inappropriate use of language can lead to pragmatic failure and those speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the very least, or more seriously, rude or uncultured (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

Tests of inter-language pragmatics are used to measure the non-native speakers' developmental knowledge of language pragmatics and appropriate use of second language. In case inter-language pragmatics is ignored, effective communication cannot be achieved, and that is why pragmatics and pragmatic testing come into the picture. In line with pragmatic testing research, developing an academic test of pragmatics, which mainly focuses on the academic situations, is a new research topic. The present study firstly is an attempt to develop a test of inter-language pragmatics which mainly focuses on testing pragmatic competence of the second/foreign language learners in the academic situation in the Iranian context, and secondly to investigate criteria for the recognition of academic speech acts in the English language.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Though a lot of tests of inter-language pragmatics have been developed and used in the academic centers both in Iran and in the international arena, rarely have these tests moved beyond measuring more than two or three speech acts at the same time. That is why developing a comprehensive test of

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inter-language pragmatics seems a necessity. The second problem which has attracted the attention of the present researcher is the lack of a comprehensive test of pragmatic competence to check the real ability of the English learners in the real academic situations (Taguchi, 2015). The tests of inter-language pragmatics developed so far have mostly focused on non-academic situations and the lack of a comprehensive academic test of this type is highly felt. The third problem pertains to the Iranian EFL learners' challenge in developing pragmatic knowledge in the English language at the academic level; something which plays a significant role in the academic negotiations and classroom discussions, though academic pragmatic knowledge in English is not limited to the classroom context and it covers areas such as social life of campus and getting engaged in interpersonal relations as well (Farashaiyan & Amirkhiz).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The present study basically is an attempt to develop a test of language proficiency which mainly focuses on testing inter-language pragmatic competence of the second / foreign language learners at the academic situation in the Iranian context. Also, the study aims to investigate the criterion required for the selection of specific speech acts in the academic context in terms of their efficiency at the academic situations in Iran. As the main purpose of the study is developing a comprehensive test of interleague pragmatics, reliability, internal validity, expert-judgment validity, content validity, and construct validity of this test are of paramount importance and that is why the present study has paid special attention to such issues. The criteria developed for the selection of specific speech acts and their related situations in the academic context are also in line with increasing content and construct validities. Jianda (2010) implies that validity of a test of inter-language pragmatics is bound to the correct recognition of the construct under investigation, the content focused on, and the functions and situations selected.

### **Research Questions**

Considering the problem stated and the purpose of the study the following research questions are developed:

1. What are the specific criteria for the selection of speech acts of academic situations for the development of pragmatic tests? Which speech acts are more academically oriented?
2. Do the components of the MDCT developed at the academic level contribute to the reliability of the test?
3. Does the MDCT developed remain reliable concerning the performance of native and non-native speakers?
4. Does the MDCT developed have expert judgment validity based on content-related evidence?

### **Research Hypotheses**

The first research question is descriptive in nature and will be discussed through covering the related literature and running the Meta-analysis, therefore, the first question remained as follows:

What are the specific criteria for the selection of speech acts of academic situations for the development of pragmatic tests? Which speech acts are more academically oriented?

Based on the other research questions cited above the following null hypotheses are formulated:

- **1:** Components of the MDCT developed at the academic level do not contribute to the reliability of the test.
- **2:** The MDCT developed does not remain reliable concerning the performance of native and non-native speakers.
- **3:** The MDCT developed does not have expert judgment validity based on content-related evidence.

### **Pragmatics**

As a subdivision of linguistics, pragmatics differentiates between two meanings in each utterance: sentence meaning and the speaker meaning (Leech, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In order to

understand and then generate a communicative act, a type of pragmatic proficiency or competence is required (Kasper, 1997). Mey (1993) believes that overcoming utterance ambiguity is a part of pragmatic competence since meaning is connected to time, place and the manner in which that utterance takes place. Different concepts have been developed and studies in pragmatics among which the most significant are:

- Deixis: the speakers' intention by a particular statement in a specific context
- Presupposition: the logical meaning of an utterance
- Performative: the performance of a specific action by saying an utterance.
- Implicature: the implicit meaning of an utterance not found in its ordinary use.
- Hudson, et al. (1995) argues that certain rules are obeyed to sustain the flow of a conversation; indeed, pragmatics is interested in such principles. A number of these include:
- The Cooperative Principle: the participants contribute to help the flow of the intended speech event (Grice, 1975).
- The Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983): interlocutors respect each other's face and try to behave politely (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

According to Levinson (1983), the modern usage of the term pragmatics is attributable to the philosopher Charles Morris (1938). He was concerned to outline the general shape of a science of signs, or semiotics (or semiotic as Morris preferred). Morris (1938) differentiated between three distinct branches of inquiry within semiotics: syntactics (or syntax), referring to the study of “the formal relation between linguistic forms”, semantics, being the study of “the relation of signs to the entities in the world to which they are applicable” (their designata), and pragmatics, concerned with the study of the semiotic relationship between signs (syntax) and interpreters (sign users). Levinson (1983) indicated that for the same two following reasons interest in pragmatics appeared. The first would be as a reaction to Chomsky who uses language as an abstract construct and the second as a necessity to bridge the gap between accounts of linguistic communication and prenominal linguistic theories of language. Leech (1983) introduced a new paradigm by contributing to the progress of a shift of direction towards performance and away from competence. The focus of attention in this fresh paradigm, that is to say pragmatics, was meaning in use rather than, as Chomsky pointed out, meaning in abstract. Based on Alcaraz (1990), the chief characteristics of pragmatics are referring to: (1) using language as a means of communication; (2) focusing on functions rather than on forms; (3) studying the processes that take place in communication; (4) using language authentically and in an appropriate context (5) interdisciplinary nature of pragmatics; and (6) applying linguistic theories based on the concept of communicative competence.

Two very important characteristics can be observed from the definitions provided above. These characteristics distinguish pragmatics from all other linguistic disciplines. The first and the most important is that peculiar attention is devoted to users of language. Also great emphasis is given to the context of users' interaction. Since meaning is regarded as a dynamic aspect not a static one that is negotiated in the process of communication, Verschueren (1999) believes pragmatics to be the study of meaning in context. One of the most detailed definitions of pragmatics was stated by David Crystal (1985): The study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication (Crystal, 1985, p.240). This definition characterized pragmatics by the following distinguishing features that clearly show all the aspects involved in pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002):

- Meaning is created in interaction with speakers and hearers.
- Context includes both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects.
- Choices made by the users of language are an important concern.
- Constraints in using language in social action (who can say what to whom) are significant.
- The effects of choices on co-participants are analyzed.

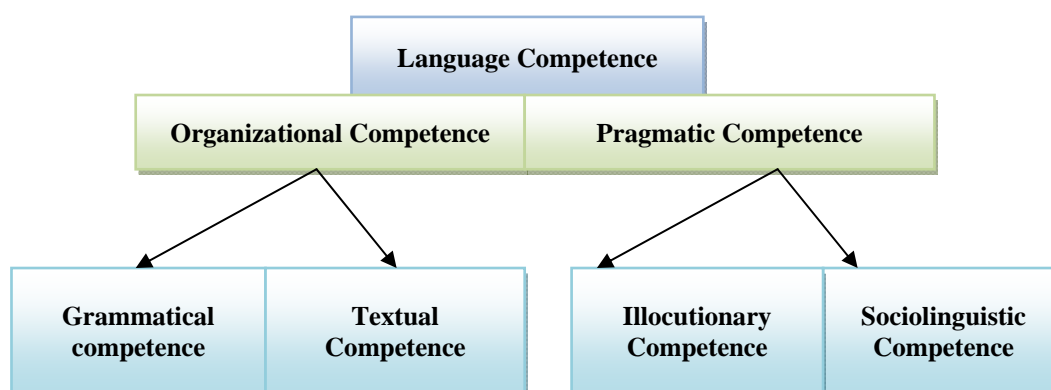
In this sense, Thomas (1995) defines pragmatics as meaning in interaction, since the process of communication pays attention on the effects of speakers' intentions on the hearers.

### **Pragmatic Competence**

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), there are two area of pragmatic knowledge: one is functional and the other is sociolinguistic: Functional knowledge or what Bachman (1990, p. 89) calls "illocutionary competences" helps us "interpret relationships between utterances or sentences and texts and the intention of language users" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 46). It is obvious that in order to interpret a given utterance properly the language users' prior knowledge of the language setting which includes the characteristics of the participants is needed. According to Alderson (2004), functional knowledge includes four categories of language functions such as ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative knowledge. Pragmatic ability in a second or foreign language is part of a nonnative speakers (NNS) communicative competence and therefore has to be located in a model of communicative ability. In this regard, the role of pragmatic competence and assessing this underlying trait will be investigated in the following sections. According to Cohen (2009), pragmatic competence helps us to build or interpret discourse by relating utterances or sentences and texts to their meanings. However, Elder and Harding (2011) define this competence in terms of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.

Pragmatics tests mostly have focused on one or the other aspects of pragmatic competence and can be classified as oriented more toward the socio-pragmatic end (testing appropriateness in the context of social relationships) or the pragmatic linguistic end (testing linguistic forms necessary to achieve communicative ends) (Bardovi-Harling, 1999). Within this scope, speech acts have attracted the researchers a lot and "there has been some assessment of implicates, routines, and judgment of appropriateness" (McNamara & Roever, 2006, p.57). The term of communicative competence has had an important influence in the field of SLA, since communicative competence has been the basis for the teaching approach known as communicative language teaching (Bardovi-Harlig & Shin, 2014). It is for this reason that different scholars have attempted to define the specific components that make up the construct of communicative competence. Among the different constituents, the pragmatic component is essential in the context of EFL, since it is very important to teach sentences not only in grammatical terms, but also in the appropriate situation or context where the utterance is taking place (Farhady, 2005). The model of communicative competence was first put forward by Canale and Swain (1980) and further developed by Canale (1983). They believe communicative competence is composed of four competencies:

Grammatical: concerned with mastery of the language code (knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, semantics, phonology, syntax and sentence-grammar). Canale (1983) established a big change in this original model. That model deals with the separation of discourse from sociolinguistic competence. While discourse competence concerns mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to attain a unified spoken or written text, the latter would only include the socio-cultural rules of use (Canale, 1983). So through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning, the unity of a text is achieved. Critics analyzing the models proposed so far point to the fact that there was no mention of the importance of the pragmatic component. Schachter (1990) asks whether pragmatic competence exists in Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) frameworks at all, since it was not sufficiently differentiated from the sociolinguistic one. Canale (1983) argues that he considered pragmatics as an area within sociolinguistic competence, like Savignon (1983, 1997), but it was implicit. As a result of this chief criticism Bachman (1990) was the first one, dividing language knowledge into organizational and pragmatic competence explicitly, as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure (1): Language Competence*

Bachman (1990) believes that pragmatic competence can be classified in two main types of communicative use of language: the relationships between signs and referents, the language users and the context of communication. He also believes that pragmatic competence includes two kinds of knowledge:

- Sociolinguistic knowledge
- Functional knowledge or illocutionary competence

Functional knowledge, on the other hand, is concerned with the intention of the language user behind the sentences he has used. As an example: "Do you have the time?" can be considered as a literal question with a yes/no answer; however, the intention of the speaker is most probably asking for directions.

### **Is Pragmatic Competence Teachable?**

Can pragmatic competence be taught? This question has inspired a number of research projects exploring the role of instruction in learners' pragmatic development. Kasper (1997) argues that while competence cannot be taught, students should be provided with opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence: Competence is a type of knowledge that learners possess, develop, acquire, use, or lose. "The challenge for foreign or second language teaching is whether we can arrange learning opportunities in such a way that they benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2" (Kasper, 1997, p. 1). According to Akutsu (2006), pragmatic skills are supposed to be teachable to some extent as reflected in inter-language pragmatics. Another line of investigation suggests that this type of knowledge is effectively acquired when it is taught explicitly. In addition, progress in language skills is not a sign indicating pragmatic skills improvement. Therefore, 'it is necessary for a language learner to have opportunities to be exposed to enough pragmatic strategies and situations and that in appropriate manners to acquire the competence' (Akutsu, 2006, p. 135).

The studies concerned with the teachability of pragmatic features of language have suggested that those learners who were instructed outperformed the control group that received no instruction (Billmyer, 1990; Bouton, 1988; Morrow, 1996; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Wildner-Bassett, 1994). In a meta-analysis of thirteen empirical ILP studies carried out by Jeon and Kaya (2006), they reported the ILP instruction seems to be an effective way of presenting the pragmatic aspects of language. This is in line with what Norris and Ortega's (2000) suggested regarding their grammatical instruction. A number of studies have explored how English language textbooks present speech acts (see Bardovi-Harlig, et al. (1991) on closings; Boxer and Pickering (1995) on compliments; and Edwards and Csizér (2001) on openings and closings). These studies are essential since they consider English as a Foreign Language (EFL); in EFL instruction natural input is much scarcer than it is in English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Therefore, the role of textbooks in raising students' pragmatic awareness is more important. However, all the above-mentioned articles concluded that textbooks

usually fail to provide the necessary and appropriate input in speech acts, and the material they do present often differs from real life speech.

### **Testing Second Language Pragmatics**

According to McNamara and Roever (2006) the assessment of pragmatic language skills is necessarily a difficult and complex challenge. Because of the nature of pragmatics, it is almost impossible to construct a standardized test that accurately captures the essence of social communication. Past attempts at doing so have resulted in tasks that actually assess underlying linguistic or cognitive skills rather than true social communicative functioning. Assessment of L2 pragmatics tests language use in social settings, but unlike oral proficiency tests, it does not necessarily focus on conversation or extracting speech samples. Because of its highly contextualized nature, assessment of pragmatics leads to significant tension between the construction of authentic assessment tasks and practicality: Social context must be established and learner responses are often productive, so simulations of real world situations and scoring by human raters would be ideal, but they are also very costly. It is indicative of these difficulties that only few tests are available in this area (McNamara & Roever, 2006).

Considering pragmatics as the study of language use in a social context one can argue that language users' pragmatic competence is their "ability to act and interact by means of language" (Kasper & Roever, 2004 in McNamara & Roever, 2006, p.54). In order to assess the pragmatic knowledge of language, the test developers first should know what they want to test and try to give a thorough definition which includes different dimensions of this aspect of language. According to McNamara and Roever (2006) testing one's pragmatic knowledge is a tough job. Assessment of L2 pragmatics tests language use in social settings, but unlike oral proficiency tests, it does not necessarily focus on conversation or extracting speech samples. Because of its highly contextualized nature, assessment of pragmatics leads to significant tension between the construction of authentic assessment tasks and practicality: Social context must be established and learner responses are often productive, so simulations of real world situations and scoring by human raters would be ideal, but they are also very costly. It is indicative of these difficulties that only few tests are available in this area. Pragmatics tests mostly have focused on one or the other aspects of pragmatic competence and can be classified as oriented more toward the socio-pragmatic end (testing appropriateness in the context of social relationships) or the pragmatic linguistic end (testing linguistic forms necessary to achieve communicative ends) (Bardovi-Harling, 1999). Within this scope, speech acts have attracted the researchers a lot and "there has been some assessment of implicatures, routines, and judgment of appropriateness" McNamara & Roever, 2006, p.57).

### **Tests of Inter-language Pragmatics**

In spite of the significance of pragmatics, testing its knowledge in second language has recently received the due attention it deserves (e.g. Bachman, 2000; Hudson et al., 1995; Roever, 2001). Leech (1983) states that pragmatic knowledge in L1 or L2 includes two types of knowledge: pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic. Clark (1979) contends that pragma-linguistic part includes conventions of means (i.e., strategies for realizing communicative intentions) and convention of forms (i.e., the linguistic tokens necessary to implement these strategies in communication). According to Fraser et al. (1981), the socio-pragmatic component is concerned with knowledge of social norms such as mutual rights, obligations, power differential, social distance and etc. In order to communicate effectively regarding the pragmatic aspect of communication, learners must be able to draw on these two types of knowledge simultaneously. According to Hudson et al. (1995), the framework employed in the project run had not included formats that were a totally "cued" semi-direct format, such as a multiple-choice language laboratory DCT, because this format did not appear to be a meaningful or productive test type. Likewise, the framework did not include a completely free response self-assessment format. Such a format would not provide interpretable data. Consequently, the formats would be viewed as being on a scale of more to less free/cued responses. Considering the fact that pragmatics is understood as language use in social settings, tests would necessarily have to construct such social settings. It is not just contextual variables that would have to be established: Speech acts are carried out over various turns and their exact shape takes into account interlocutor reactions. In addition, the

utilization of these features in the academic setting is also of paramount importance. Thus, there must be ways to develop tests of academic pragmatic proficiency which can determine to what levels students have been able to achieve the pragmatic norms required in those settings. From another perspective, the studies focusing on academic pragmatic settings have considered a very limited number of speech acts. The present research is aimed at bridging the gap in the literature and device a test of pragmatic competence to include a variety of speech acts in a single measure.

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