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439 Jira Road, Muang District, Buriram Province 31000, Thailand
Tel: +6644-611-221 ext. 4001
Fax: +6644-612-858
Website: <http://icon-elt-2022.bru.ac.th/2022/03/11/icon-elt-2022/>

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University
439 Jira Road, Muang District, Buriram Province 31000, Thailand
Tel: +6644-611-221 ext. 4001
Fax: +6644-612-858
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Methods in Collecting Data on Pragmatic Competence: A Critical Review

Jansuda Boontree¹ / Nawamin Prachanant² / Saowarot Ruangpaisan³

¹PhD Student, English Language Teaching, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand, E-mail: jansuda.bt@bru.ac.th

²Major Advisor, Assistant Professor Dr., Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand, E-mail: nawamin.pc@bru.ac.th

³Co-advisor, Dr., Faculty of Education, Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand, E-mail: saowarot.rp@bru.ac.th

Abstract

This study aimed to overview the commonly used methods for data collection in researching pragmatic competence. The data were collected by reviewing 78 domestic and international academic documents and research articles in pragmatics published from 2000 to 2021. The data were categorized into critical issues according to methods for collecting pragmatic competence data. The findings ranged from Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), role plays, naturalistic interaction, verbal reports, and conversation tasks. The study is helpful for those interested in developing the tools for measuring learners' pragmatic competence and collecting pragmatic competence data.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Pragmatic Competence, Methods in Collecting Data

Introduction

The nature of human communication is that the speakers often intend to convey more than the words they utter. At the same time, the hearers go beyond what speakers have uttered to retrieve the intended interpretation of the utterances (Taghizadeh, 2017). Therefore, the study of speaker meaning and how the language is used in communication is called pragmatic. Pragmatic concerns the meaning communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. Yule (1996) adds that only pragmatics allows humans into the analysis among the three linguistic components as syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The advantage of studying language via pragmatics is that learners can talk about people's intended meanings, assumptions, purposes, and actions they perform when they speak. Crystal (1985) defines pragmatics as the study of language from users' point of view, especially of their choices, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects of their use of language. On the importance of studying pragmatics, Leech (1983) claims that humans can begin to understand the nature of language only if they understand the language used in communication. The ability of someone as the hearer to understand the message implied by the speaker is called pragmatic skill or pragmatic competence.

1.1 Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence is one component of communicative competence. According to Savignon's (1991) explanation, it claims that the communicative competence needed for participation includes grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. As the ability to convey and interpret the contextual meaning, pragmatic competence plays a significant role in communicative ability. Canale and Swain

(1980) comprise pragmatic competence as a critical component of their model of communicative competence. Likewise, Chomsky (1980) acknowledges the intention of language use and proposed the concept of pragmatic competence as the ability to understand how language relates to the context in which it is used. According to Cruz (2018), pragmatic competence is significant so that hearer comprehends what speakers say contextually. Understanding the intention of what people say is one aspect that makes the communication run as it is supposed to be. However, the inability to understand the message implied in communication is called pragmatic failure. The term “pragmatic failure” is chosen instead of “pragmatic error,” unlike grammatical errors, which can be judged according to prescriptive rules. Pragmatic competence entails probable rather than definite rules. Therefore, it is impossible to say that the pragmatic force of an utterance is wrong, but rather it failed to achieve the speaker’s purpose. Lu (2019) mentions that pragmatic inappropriateness is a pragmatic failure in line with the idea proposed by Thomas (1983). Thomas (1983) indicates that pragmatic failure is the inability to understand what is meant by what a human is saying. As a result, failure may cause misunderstandings and sometimes communication breakdowns. So, one of the essential skills associated with pragmatic competence is recognizing the appropriateness of an utterance within a given context and choosing one possible form over another based on that understanding (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

1.2 Pragmatic Assessment

Pragmatic assessment is involved in developing pragmatic competence. Assessment of pragmatic skills is vital to identify learners who need additional intervention in social communication. The pragmatic assessment identifies and measures single cognitive processes underlying a range of communication behaviors. They differ in two dimensions; the extent to which they are based on the underlying theory and the components of pragmatic competence they tap (Sobhani, 2014). The speech act theory, which focuses on the communicative functions of utterances and attempts to explain the use of language to accomplish intended actions, is commonly employed in pragmatic assessment. For instance, the synthesis study of Boontree et al. (2022) revealed that the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology were found to assess learners’ pragmatic competence because they are the daily communication principle, and the ecological niche speech acts are situated easily (Mitchell, 2007; Green, 2007). As a result, the speech acts are primarily concerned with collecting and assessing the learners’ pragmatic competence. Nevertheless, a difficulty in research pragmatics is the method or instrument used to elicit and gather data (Hinkel, 1997). Therefore, how to collect appropriate data is a crucial issue in pragmatic research because the data collection instrument and the methodological issues will determine whether the data gathered are reliable or not. Additionally, the methods equate with specific design elements and strategies of inquiry, such as how to recruit participants, the type of data collection, and methodology are more closely linked to philosophical issues within the research process (Giacobbi, Poczwardowski, & Hager, 2005).

1.3 Critical Review

Boaheng (2020) defines a critical review as an overall critique of a text with its use of evidence and can contribute to historical understanding. A critical review provides a reasonable evaluation of a secondary historical source so that those who

have not read the source can understand its key contributions to studying a historical topic or period. Furthermore, it is a form of literary criticism in the texts analyzed based on their contents, styles, and distinction. There are 3 purposes of critical review. First, a critical review ensures that researchers/learners acquire the skills of engaging in intellectual discussion on what they read. Second, the critical review involves analytical skills that push reviewers to read and think about a text more profoundly, moving beyond a “book report.” Third, it allows others to keep track of the latest research without necessarily reading the entire document.

Research Objective

The research objective was to overview the commonly used methods for data collection in pragmatic competence.

Research Methodology

This study reviewed 78 domestic and international research articles online based on pragmatics competence published from 2000 to 2021. First, those articles were searched with keywords: pragmatic competence, pragmatic development, pragmatic language testing, and data collection methods. The data were then categorized into critical issues according to methods of collecting pragmatic competence data.

Research Results

This study reviews the commonly used methods for data collection in pragmatic competence. Generally, the data gathered in the pragmatics research methods can be divided into natural discourse data or observational data collection and elicited data collection (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007). The data collection in pragmatics draws on various methods. The methods mentioned are discourse completion tests (DCTs), multiple-choice questionnaires (MCQs), role plays, role play self-assessment, self-assessment, rating scales, verbal reports or think-aloud protocol, corpus linguistics, diary, interview, naturalistic data or naturally occurring data, i.e., field observations, audio and video recordings of real-life conversations, and technology-based data collection as mentioned by many scholars (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1992, 1995; Kasper, 1999; Demeter, 2007; Golato, 2013; Taguchi, 2018; Nguyen, 2019).

According to the data analysis, the methods for collecting pragmatic competence data found in the study are presented in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1 Methods in Collecting Pragmatic Competence Data

Data collection methods	Frequency	Percentage
Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)	55	56.71
Role plays	24	24.75
Naturalistic interaction	9	9.27
Verbal reports	6	6.18
Conversation tasks	3	3.09
Total	97	100

As shown in Table 1, it could be explained that 5 data collection methods were employed in this study. The result also informs that the highest data collection method was DCTs ($f=55$, 56.71%), followed by role plays ($f=24$, 24.75%), naturalistic interaction ($f=9$, 9.27%), verbal reports ($f=6$, 6.18%), and conversation tasks ($f=3$, 3.09%), respectively.

Each data collection method can be shown in detail at the following points.

a) Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)

DCTs are the most widely used type of data collection method. DCTs can be separated into Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT), Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT), and Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT). There were 55 research articles that employed DCTs in this study: 30 Written Discourse Completion Tasks, 17 Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task, and 8 Oral Discourse Completion Task. In the DCTs method, the test-takers require to read a description of a situation or listen to the recorded description situation. The test-takers then write, choose, or record what they would think to come next in the situation, respectively. Some of the critical studies on DCTs were done by many scholars, e.g., Brown 2001, Golato (2003), Rose (2009), Chang (2011), Nemati, Rezaee, and Mahdi (2014), Liu & Xie (2014), Li & Bin (2014), Tabatabaei & Farnia (2015). Nemati, Rezaee, and Mahdi (2014) assessed the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners through MDCT. The finding suggested that MDCT can be reliably used in EFL contexts as a valid measure of pragmatic competence. Also, Rose (2009) applied ODCTs in her study since the participants might be understood the tasks and scenarios beforehand. Then the participants were instructed to say (in English) what they thought the role in the scenarios would say. Furthermore, real-time oral responses provide insights into how learners can apply specific, pragmatic knowledge. However, Chang (2011) used WDCT in his study in order to reveal participants' actual language ability. The participants in his research were young learners whose L2 proficiency was low. The oral tasks would elicit their great anxiety, which led to the production of brief and irregular utterances. DCTs afford administrative advantages and do not require time-consuming transcriptions (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000), and remain the most widely used type of instrument. However, it is also criticized for its inadequateness to represent the actual pragmatic competence in actual performance. It gives rise to another method, role play, which emphasizes more actual interaction.

b) Role Plays

Role plays are one of the most common methods used in pragmatic competence studies. The role-play method encourages the test-takers to read a description of a situation and then play a particular role with another person. So, role plays help gather data about the types of discourse that are difficult to access in real-life situations because of the sensitivity of the data (Archer et al., 2012). There are two types of role plays: closed and open. A closed role play requires participants to act out a scenario alone without an interlocutor and produce one-turn responses. In contrast, open role play allows participants to take as many turns as they need to complete the required task (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). Several researchers have advocated the use of role play method. Ghavamnia et al. (2018) used closed role plays innovatively to elicit naturally sounding suggestions from L2 English learners. Hassall (2003) examined how Australian learners of Indonesian perform requests in everyday situations compared to Indonesian native speakers. Battaler (2013) compared role plays and natural data for asking for a drink at a cafeteria in Peninsular.

Besides, Ghavamnia, Eslami-Rasekha, and Vahid-Dastjerdia (2018) employed role play to examine the effects of input enhanced instruction on Iranian EFL learners' production of appropriate and accurate suggestions. Role plays were conducted among adults because they were better at processing and performing linguistic actions without causing too much anxiety. In addition, role play can become evident the natural use of pragmatic competence. The researchers have recognized that the data may not be equivalent to genuine conversations, and it was not always possible to distinguish in analyses whether participants were oriented to the role play or the make-believe situation in the role play (Taguchi, 2015).

c) Naturalistic interaction

Naturalistic or naturally occurring data are usually collected via audio/video recording in a real-world setting with or without the researcher's presence. Field observations and technology-based data collection can add to this kind of method. Participants are usually aware of being recorded while engaging in real-life tasks. The researchers applied discourse analysis or conversation analysis techniques to transcribe and analyze a conversation to reveal how certain linguistic forms occur over conversational sequences and serve as resources for participants as they jointly construct a pragmatic act (Taguchi, 2015). The naturally occurring speech represents the most valid measure of actual language use (Tran, 2004). However, it does not allow the researcher to exercise control over social and contextual variables. This lack of control makes it difficult to systematically replicate the same scenario and compare speech samples from different individuals or groups (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Tran, 2004). Some researchers employed naturalistic interaction in their study; for example, Shively (2011) applied field observations to investigate pragmatic development in Spanish service encounters studied abroad. Taguchi, Li, and Liu (2013) comprehended the conversational implicature in L2 Chinese via field notes. Also, Shively (2015) employed audio and video recording to collect the data for developing interactional competence during study abroad. Cunningham (2017) used technology-based data collection in the second language survey pragmatic appropriateness in telecollaboration.

d) Verbal report

A verbal report is also known as a verbal or think-aloud protocol. It is the thoughtful way that converts the thinking process of the subjects when they complete tasks into speech, whose purpose is to explore the reasoning process when learners are producing written or oral language. It is the direct access to the cognitive problem-solving steps a learner performs in working memory when dealing with the task (Sun, 2021). The verbal report used second language pragmatics to investigate students' L2 pragmatic competence. In the case of interactive data collection, verbal reports can only be retroactive and thus reflects the participants' hypothesis about their performance rather than their cognitive processes. Li and Ren (2018) explored the dynamic and multi-facet relationship between learners' L2 pragmatic performance. They found that the subjects can refer to their pragmatic output and recall why they chose the corresponding pragmatic strategy in the specific situation in a verbal report. Timpe (2012) also utilized a verbal report methodology to access respondents' cognitive processes while working on the tasks.

e) Conversation tasks

Conversation tasks have been used to collect semi-naturalistic conversation data. Conversation tasks are defined by Kasper (2008) as a task in which participants

discuss a topic to reach a particular goal that determines by the researcher. This method includes recordings of spontaneous conversations when participants engage in activities by the researcher, but the speakers are not aware of being observed or of the research focus. For example, Al-Gahtani and Roever (2014) employed conversation tasks to investigate L2 requests in Arabic. The students had a conflict in scheduling, which they needed to resolve by requesting a schedule change from their school administrators. Also, Nguyen (2017) used conversation tasks and retrospective methodology to investigate L2 pragmatics development of EFL criticisms and responses to criticisms. However, data obtained by conversation tasks are close to those of naturalistic conversations. Although they are spontaneous and can be consequential (Bardovi-Harlig, 2010), conversation tasks are motivated by the researcher's goals and thus are not truly authentic, unlike naturally occurring discourse which comes from real-life interaction.

Discussion

Pragmatic competence is one of the language aspects that causes many challenges for L2 learners. L2 learners need to develop their pragmatic competence to be able to use the language appropriately. This section discusses the research results on methods in collecting pragmatic competence data, which is in line with previous studies such as discourse completion tests (DCTs), role plays, verbal reports, naturalistic data, and conversation tasks. Kasper and Dahl (1991) introduced that the instruments such as discourse completion, closed role play, open role play, and observation of authentic discourse are placed as production methods. In addition, the rating scale, multiple-choice, interview tasks, discourse completion, closed role play, and open role play are recognized as the elicited methods in data collection. Demeter (2007) stated that methodology and instruments used in gathering pragmatic knowledge of individuals are crucial, influencing the outcome of the study. He compared two sets of results obtained through role play and a discourse completion test. He understood that "although DCTs are more appropriate for studying the main types of strategies in speech act production, role-plays seem a better choice when the interaction between the speaker and hearer is also important for the study." Kusevska and Ivanovska (2017) also indicated that DCTs and role plays are the most common means for data collection in interlanguage pragmatics. The advantages of these instruments are that different variables can be controlled and that a considerable amount of data can be easily collected. The study by Sun (2021) discovered that the Metapragmatic judgment item, discourse completion task, role play, and verbal reports were the most widely used instruments in L2 pragmatic competence of Chinese tertiary-level students. As the results indicated, the primary method of collecting pragmatic competence data employed in this study was the Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). DCTs are attractive because they elicit real-world speech act performance (McNamara, & Roever, 2006). The WDCT demands the learners to read a situation description and write what they would say next to produce a particular language considering the usual contextual constraints (Hudson et al., 1995; Oller, 1979), and the MDCT can be administered to large numbers of learners simultaneously. The advantages of DCT can also support high reliability in this type of test (Brown, 2001). However, compared to role plays, role plays are more like real-life speech situations than DCTs (McNamara, & Roever, 2006). Role plays have an

advantage in that they closely represent oral production; for instance, they contain turn-taking features, hesitations, silences, and negotiation of meaning (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). However, they are still driven by the researcher's interests and do not always allow for the same free topic or action development as Kasper (2000) mentioned. Nevertheless, only limited efforts have been made to evaluate the validity of this method. Rintell and Mitchell (1989) compared DCTs with role plays and found out that the collected data from the two methods are very similar. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) reached native and non-native English rejections using two different DCTs: open and dialogue-type questionnaires. They found out that the variation of DCT type affects non-native speakers' responses more than the native speakers' answers. Also, Hinkel (1997) made a similar comparison between DCTs and multiple-choice questionnaires. It can be argued that no method is inherently better than another and that methodological choice essentially depends on research goals.

Recommendations

This article tried to overview various methods for collecting pragmatic competence data. There are many issues that researchers and teachers will need to consider in pragmatics competence. It could be claimed that no method is essentially better than another, and those methodological choices effectively depend on research goals. It is hoped that the results of this study will be used as guidelines for collecting and developing the tools for measuring learners' pragmatic competence as well as helpful in future research in the field of collecting pragmatic competence data and pragmatic competence development. As was discussed, each method has its own advantages. In this sense, it could be suggested that future research should adopt more different methods to examine pragmatic competence and compare the results. Although this trend is time-consuming and impractical, it can provide researchers with reassuring data. Also, the operation of various methods will indeed reduce the validity problems. Moreover, in raising students' pragmatic competence, the examination of other aspects of communicative competence such as grammatical competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence should be concerned.

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