



Title of Project:

Effects of Pragmatic Task Features, English Proficiency,
and Learning Setting on Chinese ESL/EFL Learners'
Spoken Performance of Requests

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Project Summary:

In the second language (L2) assessment literature, the psycholinguistic dimensions of task characteristics (e.g., familiar/unfamiliar information) and performance conditions (e.g., length of pre-task planning time) have been found to predict, if anything, only small amounts of test score variance (Brown, Hudson, & Norris, 1999; Iwashita, McNamara, & Elder, 2001; Elder, Iwashita, & McNamara, 2002). In spite of these largely failed attempts to apply Skehan's (1992; 1998) psycholinguistic model of task difficulty to language testing situations, task effects in L2 performance assessments have remained an important and intriguing line of investigation, especially due to considerations of test fairness and consequences.

In contrast to the psycholinguistic approach, pragmatic perspectives have gained some success in the research on task effects on L2 performance in assessment contexts (e.g., Fulcher & Márquez Reiter, 2003; Taguchi, 2007). However, there have been very few studies following this thread. This dissertation research was designed to fill the gap by examining the relationship between pragmatic task features and ESL/EFL speaking performance of one type of speech act: requests. Two different but potentially commensurable areas of research were drawn upon: a task-based approach to language assessment and the Speech Act Theory formulated by Austin (1962). Pragmatic task features were manipulated to help detect the impact of pragmatic conditions on task performance and test score variability. Three independent variables were examined in the quantitative study: pragmatic task features (i.e., PDR, which is the additive effects of Power, Distance, and Rank of imposition), English proficiency, and learning setting (ESL or EFL); the three dependent variables were temporal and pragmatic measures of task performance, namely, response latency (a.k.a. pre-task planning time), speech rate, and pragmatic ratings.

Research questions:

- 1) To what extent can each of the independent variables (IVs) account for the variance in measures of speech formulation and production in speech act performances (i.e., response latency, speech rate, and pragmatic ratings)? Is there any interaction among the IVs?



- 2) Are there any differences in the linguistic expressions that Chinese ESL/EFL learners and L1 American English speakers use to make requests, in terms of typology, frequency distribution, and level of directness involved in the expressions? Will there be any change within each group in the use of the various request strategies when the pragmatic task type changes from PDR-low to PDR-high?
- 3) How do participants' perceptions of task difficulty correlate with the response latency, speech rate, and appropriateness ratings of their speech act production?

Twenty participants were recruited from each of these groups: Chinese ESL high proficiency learners, Chinese ESL low proficiency learners, Chinese EFL high proficiency learners, Chinese EFL low proficiency learners, and L1 American English speakers. Participants' spoken responses to four request elicitation tasks (two exemplars each of PDR-low and PDR-high tasks; see Table 1 below) were collected via a computer-mediated semi-direct oral Discourse Completion Test. A mixed-methods design was employed for data analysis. Quantitative analyses consisted of three repeated-measures factorial ANOVAs with response latency, speech rate, and the composite average rating of pragmatic appropriateness as the dependent variables. Qualitative analyses involved a discourse analysis of Chinese ESL and EFL participants' spoken request production in comparison to the requests produced by L1 English speakers with respect to the types and frequency of request sub-strategies as well as the lexical/phrasal and syntactic downgraders employed.

Primary findings of this dissertation are that a) compared to PDR-low situations, PDR-high tasks were associated with longer response latency, slower speech rate, and request performances receiving lower ratings of pragmatic appropriateness from L1 English expert judges; b) high proficiency Chinese ESL and EFL learners' spoken request production had a faster speech rate and received higher ratings of pragmatic appropriateness than the requests produced by low proficiency learners in the same learning setting; c) Chinese ESL participants tended to receive higher ratings of pragmatic appropriateness than EFL learners; and d) the ESL learning setting seemed to have most greatly benefited low proficiency learners.

These main effects of pragmatic task features, English proficiency, and learning setting were qualitatively confirmed by the discourse analysis on the request sub-strategies and internal modification devices that participants employed. Learners with high proficiency or in the ESL learning setting were found to approximate L1 English speakers better than low proficiency learners or learners in the EFL learning setting. In addition, learner production differed from L1 English requests in the frequency of certain sub-strategy types and lexical and syntactic downgraders, e.g., the past tense marker “-ed” and the subjectivizer (e.g., *I was wondering*).

In response to Question 3, Spearman rank correlation analyses suggest that for either PDR-low or PDR-high situations, low ratings of difficulty (meaning that a situational task was rated as “very easy” or “easy”) were associated with L2 production characteristic of faster speech rate and higher appropriateness ratings. However, response latency in PDR-high tasks did not have a significant correlation with participants' ratings of task difficulty. Apparently, there was more variation of individual choice and strategy in response latency, especially in PDR-high situations.



This empirical research into task effect from an experimental pragmatic perspective is an important contribution of this dissertation to the L2 Assessment literature. Theoretical and practical implications of the study include the following:

- a) Pragmatic features can be manipulated to design speaking tasks with varying levels of cognitive demand on second or foreign language learners;
- b) Compared to an EFL learning setting, an ESL setting is more conducive to pragmatic acquisition and development. Low proficiency learners in an ESL learning setting can benefit greatly from the exposure to authentic language input including pragmalinguistic expressions that L1 English speakers use to make polite speech acts.
- c) Explicit pragmatic instruction might be necessary and effective to help raise learners' awareness to the differences between themselves and L1 English speakers in the choice of request sub-strategies, lexical and syntactic downgraders. For instance, it can be discussed in the pragmatics lessons that L1 English speakers frequently use subjectivizers (e.g., "I was *wondering*") and downtoners (e.g., "I was wondering if I could *possibly* take the exam a day later"), especially in PDR-high situations, to make their request sound more polite.

PDR level	Brief description of situation
PDR-low	Ask to borrow a pen from a friend
PDR-high	Call a company's manager asking to schedule a job interview outside of the manager's usual time slots for interviews
PDR-low	Ask your younger brother to pass you the TV remote control
PDR-high	Call your professor asking to take an upcoming exam one day late while being aware the professor would need to write a new exam just for you

Table 1: Exemplars of PDR situations



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