

Title of Project:

Re-Envisioning Assessment of Inter-language Pragmatics (ILP)
through Computer Mediated Communicative Tasks

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

Thanks to increasing awareness about communicative competence, there is a shift of focus in second language (L2) instruction from linguistic competence and grammatical accuracy to achievement of functional purposes in by producing and comprehending language in a socially and interactionally appropriate manner. Notions of pragmatic competence and ILP have attracted much attention within the realm of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in general, and Second Language Pragmatics assessment in particular. In the study of pragmatics, language assessment and SLA, three important issues at stake are: (1) developmental aspects of communicative competence, (2) the possibility of teaching pragmatics, and (3) different methods of assessing non-native speakers' pragmatic competence. Studies related to the last topic mostly focus on questions of whether or not pragmatic features are assessable, whether or not the assessment tool is effective in evaluating natural language use, and whether or not there are different outcomes for different assessment methods (Liu, 2007; Roever, 2011; Trosberg, 1995; Yamashita, 2008; Youn, 2015). Most of the studies undertaken in the past have used traditional fixed discourse completion tests (DCTs) based on pre-determined interactional outcomes, which are often criticized for not capturing real-life, extended communication (Youn, 2015). Golato (2003) has questioned the validity of DCTs. Although DCTs offer practicality, practicality is often achieved at the expense of authenticity by posing a threat to the validity of ILP assessment. Furthermore, when closed role-play tasks based on pre-determined interactional outcomes were used, they do not reflect authentic pragmatic performance. These gaps can influence the validity of ILP assessment and require a systematic approach to develop more authentic test instruments.

Research Questions

The present study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of key stakeholders about pragmatics needs of ESL writing courses?
2. How effectively can pragmatic knowledge be assessed by using communicative email exchanges, predicted to produce extended, responsive discourse?

3. What is the inter-rater reliability for pragmatic constructs operationalized in the four communicative role-play tasks?
4. How do pragmatic features of emails (linguistic politeness strategies) differ between learners of different proficiency?

Research Methodology

The research was based on a mixed-methods study design. The methodology of research was appropriate for meeting the purposes of the current study, which revolved around the perceptions of faculty members, ESL instructors, administrators, and students and the assessment of pragmatic knowledge of non-native students through their email role-play communication. The researcher adopted the methodology in the present study as it may lead to detailed information needed to perform better analyses for assessing the pragmatic needs of graduate students in ESL writing courses at a large Midwestern university in the United States. This methodology helped the researcher to draw on all possibilities as perceptions of different stake-holders were collected through interviews and an online survey. With the help of follow-up interview questions, all missing details, such as demographic information, years of residence in a target language community, and confusions about incomplete responses were classified. The data were collected through an online survey for faculty members and graduate students and a semi-structured questionnaire for ESL instructors, ESL administrators, International Student, and Scholar Services (ISSS) officers. Finally, assessment data were collected through interactive email communication involving fifty-two non-native English-speaking graduate students. Interactive tasks were designed by following Davidson and Lynch (2002) test specification approach to elicit extended communication between test takers. In order to achieve several email exchanges there was high reactivity (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) in themes for all four tasks. All tasks were designed to reflect authentic real-life academic situations. Statistical analyses were performed on perception data that were collected from test takers. All email data ratings from the trained raters were entered in an Excel spreadsheet, and SAS 9.3 was used to analyze the data for a central tendency and dispersion through mean, median, and standard deviation of ratings assigned to different questions. Means of all four tasks and separate components of pragmatic knowledge were also calculated to assess the difficulty level of different tasks for test takers.

Atlas-ti, a qualitative data analyses package was used to find common patterns in respondents' qualitative explanations for different follow up questions. Atlas-ti helped to organize qualitative information in terms of words, phrases and expressions in open-ended responses to follow up questions. Qualitative analysis helped to describe and explain stake holders' perceptions of email requests they rated during the data collection phase.

Summary of Findings

This study's findings contribute to the ongoing discussion of inclusion of multi-turn extended written interactions in L2 pragmatics assessment (Roever, 2011; Roever, Fraser, & Elder, 2014). The email role-play test can be used to assess degree of appropriateness of pragmatic features of email interactions in low-stakes pedagogical, diagnostic, and placement test use contexts. Learners can also use it for self-assessment to improve their socio-pragmatic competence for writing effective emails. However, any high-stakes use should be warranted by a specific validation process. This research suggests interactive email pragmatics activities should be structured and scaffolded in ways that maximize an awareness of the form-function-meaning relationships, a practice that is in line with past research on best practices for L2 pragmatic instruction and assessment (Taguchi & Sykes, 2013; Timpe et al., 2015). Multi-turn email tasks as used in the current study could be used as one component to teach NNSs to use English email conventions. Positive pedagogical outcomes could perhaps best be accomplished through free-

standing computerized modules, which instructors could ask students work on outside of classroom settings. In the classroom assessment context, interactive email tasks have the potential for increasing the difficulty level of the interactive communicative tasks while still maintaining the necessary component of practicality. Regardless of the methods adopted, systematic curricular inclusion of email pragmatics in ESL courses appears to be necessary and would assist ESL learners in developing their email pragmatic competence in academic settings.

The email tasks in the current study can be validated by employing Kane's (2006) approach to validity arguments. The current study can try to obtain backing for pragmatic performance in four email tasks by scoring isolated concrete features illustrating pragmatic competence in actual use. Another approach would be to administer the test to native speakers of English and compare the performance of native and non-native speakers illustrating what is an actual target-like pragmatic performance in interactive email tasks used in the present study. These steps can offer some backing for the evaluation inference in the validity argument. This argument-based validity approach is suggested by several experts (Chappelle, 2012; Kane, 2006, 2012; Youn, 2013, 2015). This approach can work well with email tasks as detailed instructions were shared with role play partners for obtaining written data to observe and score by using a scoring rubric. Tasks were designed by following test specification approach, which helped in improving assessment task design, developing clear rating criteria, and enhancing rater performance. This specification driven validation approach can help to obtain suitable backing for the evaluation inference. Furthermore, this approach can easily enlist the network of inferences that should be made to justify the use of the test following Toulmin's (2003) argument structure in an effect-driven approach to validation (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). This approach is increasingly emphasized in the recent publications related to the language test validation process (Chappelle, 2012; Kane, 2012). The proposed validation can be comprised of three phases of test specification: (1) generalization, (2) interpretations, and (3) pedagogical interventions. The email tasks can only be used for low stakes diagnostic or placement decisions. All these parts should work like a chain, as suggested by Saville (2012). In order to enhance the quality of test as a whole, the quality of key processes should be enhanced first. To achieve that goal, developing the test specifications anchored to the testing mandates is an indispensable step (Davidson & Lynch, 2002).

Implications

My dissertation project was centered on ILP issues as potential reasons for email communication-related misunderstandings among international students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This research is of interest to many fields, including linguistics, anthropology, communication, and Cross-Cultural Competence (3C). The results of this study will help language testers assess critical skills of ILP; this assessment may address different issues of education or may help individuals to act as informed members of the academic discourse community in a Midwestern U.S. university. The findings of this study may also provide a basis for future cross-cultural training, and the researcher expects that these findings may be applicable to different organizational and educational contexts.

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