

L2 Pragmatic Assessment: A Literature Review of Techniques and Challenges

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Abstract: With the increasing recognition of pragmatics as a crucial component of language competence, assessing L2 learners' pragmatic abilities has become an essential area of study in second language acquisition. This literature review examines empirical studies on L2 pragmatic assessment, emphasizing its significance in language learning and teaching. Pragmatics plays a crucial role in communication by conveying both locutionary and illocutionary meaning, enabling effective discourse completion. This review explores three key aspects of L2 pragmatic assessment: the necessity of assessing pragmatic competence, the techniques employed for evaluation, and the challenges encountered in assessment design and implementation. The discussion highlights various assessment tools, including discourse completion tests (DCTs), role-plays, and checklists, alongside their advantages and limitations. Additionally, concerns related to validity, reliability, and practicality in pragmatic assessment are addressed. The review underscores the need for continued research and methodological refinement to enhance the accuracy and applicability of pragmatic assessment in second language acquisition.

Keywords: L2 pragmatics; Assessment; Assessment Techniques

1. Introduction

It has been decades involving pragmatics to L2 language learning. Like other linguistic elements, pragmatics plays a crucial role in communication, as it enables interlocutors to interpret and convey both explicit and implicit meanings effectively. Without it, learners may struggle to understand and respond appropriately to their interlocutors even though they have completely acquired the linguistic elements of vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, it is essential to teach and assess pragmatics for fostering the comprehensive linguistic development of L2 speakers.

Similar to other linguistic elements, L2 pragmatic knowledge and competence are able to be elicited and evaluated. A review of existing research on pragmatic assessment reveals a broad scope of inquiry and detects two primary strands of research that emerge within this domain. One is regarding the pragmatic competence and performance of L2 learners, such studies would include the trait of L2 speakers with a particular cultural background in their speech act production or strategy using [1,2]. The rest investigates quite a lot regarding the assessment itself, including the assessment framework and the assessment techniques [3,4].

In order to summarize the landscape of L2 pragmatic assessment, this review synthesizes key studies in the field. It begins by defining pragmatics and outlining the necessity of assessing L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge and performance. The second part examines various assessment techniques, highlighting their applications, strengths, and limitations. Finally, the review discusses critical challenges in pragmatic assessment, including issues related to validity, reliability, and practicality, which educators and researchers must consider when designing and implementing assessment instruments.

2. The necessity of L2 Pragmatic Assessment

As defined, pragmatic competence "is understood to involve the ability to use the knowledge in a flexible and adaptive manner in interaction." [5] It comprises two key components: pragmalinguistic knowledge, which pertains to the linguistic resources necessary for appropriate language use in specific communicative contexts, and sociopragmatic knowledge, which involves an understanding of the social norms and contextual factors that govern language use [6]. Currently, the L2 learners of English already outnumber native English speakers. Many

of these L2 speakers and learners share a divergent culture with that of English-speaking countries, including the USA and the UK. This cultural diversity often presents challenges in interaction, as differences in sociopragmatic expectations can lead to misunderstandings. Acquiring the competence of pragmatics enables the learners to master the knowledge of “how-to-say-what-to-whom-when” [7]. Given the crucial role of pragmatic competence in effective communication, it is essential to assess learners’ abilities systematically.

As mentioned by Gesuato and Castello [7], there are three possible rationales for assessing: raising awareness (informing), affecting behavior (determining future courses of action), and allocating resources (assigning rewards). Pragmatic assessment serves a critical role in all three areas. First, it raises learners’ awareness of pragmatic norms, fostering greater attentiveness to sociocultural and linguistic appropriateness in communication. Second, assessment results inform educators about learners’ proficiency levels, allowing them to tailor instructional strategies accordingly. Finally, pragmatic assessment enables the effective allocation of teaching resources by helping educators refine their approaches to specific speech acts, adjust instructional time, or implement alternative teaching methods to ensure sufficient pragmatic instruction. Given its significance, it is essential to examine the various techniques used to assess L2 pragmatic competence and evaluate their effectiveness in different educational and research contexts.

3. Current Trends in Pragmatic Assessment Research

Given the growing emphasis on assessing L2 pragmatic competence, researchers have explored different methodologies to evaluate learners’ proficiency effectively. The first type of research targeting pragmatic proficiency assessment examines how different assessment techniques function with learners from specific linguistic and cultural backgrounds and identifies the pragmatic traits they exhibit. According to Taguchi [5], this approach often involves contrastive analysis, comparing the linguistic strategies of L2 learners with those of native speakers. For instance, Altasan compared the pragmalinguistic competence of Arabic-speaking EFL learners with native English speakers, analyzing how they formulated requests in different social contexts [1]. The study found that L2 learners often employed more direct request forms due to the influence of their L1 politeness norms, whereas native speakers preferred more indirect and mitigated strategies to maintain politeness. However, some studies focus on a single learner group, exploring the development and variability of their pragmatic competence without direct comparison to native speakers. Ren [8] investigated Chinese EFL learners’ pragmatic awareness and found that their apology strategies varied significantly based on language proficiency and exposure to native speaker input, highlighting the gradual nature of pragmatic competence development in L2 acquisition.

The second strand of research in pragmatic assessment focuses on the techniques themselves, examining their characteristics, effectiveness, and limitations. When selecting assessment techniques, several key factors must be considered to ensure their suitability for both research and instructional purposes. One fundamental consideration is practicability, which refers to the logistical and administrative feasibility of designing, administering, and scoring an assessment [9]. Ideally, assessment techniques should be easy to implement, efficient in scoring, and cost-effective. Beyond practicability, assessments must also demonstrate reliability, validity, and authenticity. Reliability pertains to the consistency of assessment results across multiple administrations, ensuring that the same tool yields stable and reproducible outcomes. Validity, described as “the most complex criterion of an effective test” [9], concerns the extent to which an assessment accurately measures learners’ pragmatic proficiency. Authenticity is another crucial factor, as language assessments should ideally reflect real-world communicative interactions to support learners’ pragmatic development. For example, Cohen [10] identified limitations in the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) format, arguing that it constrains test-takers’ ability to engage in extended interactions, thus reducing the authenticity of the assessment. Additionally, DCTs may limit turn-taking opportunities, potentially affecting learners’ performance and the natural flow of discourse. To address such concerns, Youn [11] investigated the validity of open role-plays in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context, providing strong evidence that role-play assessments effectively capture pragmatic competence and offer sufficient validity for evaluating interactive pragmatic skills.

4. The Assessment Techniques

Building on the importance of L2 pragmatic competence, it is crucial to explore the various techniques used to assess it. A range of assessment methods has been developed to evaluate learners' pragmatic knowledge and performance, with numerous studies investigating their effectiveness across different contexts. These techniques can generally be examined from two perspectives: their role in measuring learners' proficiency and their methodological characteristics.

DCT is the most widely used data collection technique used in the pragmatic assessment [3] because of the compatibility of various scenarios and applied languages. To elicit the test takers' certain speech act, DCT usually gives a related scenario and asks the test-takers to fill in a blank given in the discourse based on their understanding. What they need to do is to analyze the scenario and find out the proper language to compete with it. The former part examines the sociopragmatic knowledge and the latter one evaluates the pragmalinguistic knowledge of the test-taker. Golato used the DCT as one way to elicit German compliment responses. The study found that using DCT as the tool can get some divergent data compared to the naturalistic data method. The DCT elicited more "freut mich" (please me/ make me happy) than the other method. And one of the benefits of DCT was that it can provide quick data to the researchers. Considering the different formats of DCT, empirical study has proved that the oral DCT works better than the written DCT for eliciting more performance and getting more detailed data [13].

The pragmatic checklist is another tool that is used for the pragmatic assessment; it can be seen commonly in pragmatic diagnosing. Researchers and clinicians compile a list containing multiple items that need to be assessed, and each item would be evaluated by rubrics that vary based on the different checklists. Usually, it asks the parents to complete the lists within a certain time, and then the researchers would score and interpret the results based on the sheet parents provided, which is basically a self-monitoring and self-assessing tool. Volden and Philips examined a newly released checklist for children with ASD (autism spectrum disorders) named The Children's Communication Checklist—2 (CCC-2). The study found that compared to the previous TOPL checklist, the current one works better in identifying the impairment.

Both DCTs and pragmatic checklists offer distinct advantages in assessing pragmatic competence. While DCTs allow researchers to elicit speech act production systematically, checklists provide valuable observational data on pragmatic behaviors in real-world settings. Each method presents unique strengths and limitations, necessitating careful selection based on the specific objectives of pragmatic assessment.

Beyond DCTs and checklists, role-play and naturalistic assessments are also widely used to evaluate pragmatic competence. Role-play assessments involve learners engaging in simulated communicative situations, allowing researchers and instructors to observe their pragmatic performance in real-time [11]. Unlike DCTs, role-plays offer a dynamic and interactive setting, enabling test-takers to engage in extended dialogues and demonstrate their ability to adapt their language use based on contextual factors [11]. Naturalistic assessment, on the other hand, involves analyzing learners' spontaneous language use in authentic communicative environments, such as classroom discussions or real-life interactions [12]. While these approaches provide higher ecological validity compared to DCTs and checklists, they also pose practical challenges, such as the difficulty of controlling variables and ensuring consistency in evaluation. Nevertheless, role-play and naturalistic assessments are valuable tools for capturing the fluid and adaptive nature of pragmatic competence in L2 learners.

5. Issues in Pragmatics Assessment

A review of existing research indicates that significant efforts have been made by scholars and educators to develop effective methods for eliciting and evaluating L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge and performance. Researchers work hard on the techniques and assessment tools, trying to find out the most efficient and practical method for pragmatic assessment. Innovations can also be seen in the research as proof of their endeavors. However, there are still quite a few issues that lead to more discussions when reviewing and summarizing the work that has been done.

Synthesized from the previous research, three significant issues were detected in recent assessment research. The first one is the selection of assessment tools. Covered in the review, DCT (in oral or written form), role plays and natural interactions [2] all have a high frequency when assessing pragmatics. As analyzed, these tools all

have their advantages and shortcomings. Researchers and test holders have to consider to what extent the tools selected in the assessment fit the assessing needs, no matter in research study or real-life teaching. Though it is challenging to design a flawless assessment using proper tools to elicit the pragmatic performance representing their whole pragmatic proficiency, innovations are still requested in the field by researchers and test holders so they can use it in assessment in the most effective way to evaluate learners and test-takers' pragmatic proficiency.

Another critical Altasanissue in pragmatic assessment is determining the range of pragmatic features to be evaluated and ensuring the validity of assessment outcomes. Pragmatics encompasses various communicative functions, such as requests, compliments, apologies, refusals, and implicatures, making it challenging to include all aspects within a single assessment. The review found that through collected research, most of these studies [1] only selected one or a few pragmatic traits and embedded them into the assessment to evaluate the performance of language learners. In addition, when discussing the validity of the assessment, the review considers whether the elicited pragmatic performance can be used to represent learners or test takers' pragmatic proficiency instead of the validity of the assessment itself. As a result, researchers and educators must critically decide which aspects of pragmatics to assess and how to design tasks that accurately reflect learners' ability to use pragmatic knowledge in diverse communicative settings.

The third issue is regarding the teaching stakeholders. Though pragmatics has been a significant element in second language learning for decades and gets attention from many teaching stakeholders worldwide, it is still in an underestimated position in L2 class compared to the common linguistic element such as syntax and lexicon, no need to say the situation of assessing pragmatics. A key contributing factor is the lack of instructor training and awareness regarding pragmatic instruction and assessment. Some teachers may lack formal training in teaching pragmatics or may not fully understand its role in language development, leading to inconsistent or inadequate instructional approaches. Furthermore, deficiencies in assessment knowledge among educators can result in skewed or inaccurate evaluations, as some instructors may rely on ineffective assessment designs or subjective criteria when evaluating learners' pragmatic competence. Addressing these challenges requires greater emphasis on teacher training programs that integrate pragmatic instruction and assessment strategies, ensuring that educators are equipped to effectively assess and support learners' pragmatic development.

6. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the studies related to pragmatic assessment have grown incredibly from the perspective of amount and depth. The present review went through multiple critical issues discussed in the related research. The findings underscore the importance of systematic assessment in both instructional and research contexts to ensure that learners develop the ability to navigate real-world communication effectively. The review also analyzed assessment studies based on their research objectives: one strand primarily investigates assessment outcomes, evaluating learners' pragmatic proficiency and performance, while the other focuses on assessment methodologies, examining the effectiveness, reliability, and validity of various assessment techniques.

Among studies centered on assessment tools, the review identified a range of measurement techniques for pragmatic evaluation, each with distinct advantages and limitations. However, no single tool is entirely comprehensive, balancing practicality, validity, reliability, and authenticity. Given this challenge, it remains essential to refine assessment methods, enhance their accuracy, and ensure proper training for examiners to maintain consistency and fairness in evaluation. Future research should further explore how pragmatic assessment can be effectively integrated into language learning, ultimately contributing to the development of L2 learners' communicative competence.

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