

## PROFILING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to explore the components that foreign language learners need to acquire in order to develop their pragmatic competence. This paper presents a description of phase one of an ongoing research project at Goce Delcev University-Stip, Republic of Macedonia, on developing pragmatic competence of foreign language learners. We first define pragmatic competence; then we discuss data collection instruments and procedures; and we conclude with an outlook on further research.*

**Keywords:** *Discourse Completion Test, explicit instruction, pragmatic competence, role play, speech acts*

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of foreign language learning is communication, and pragmatic competence is narrowly tied to it. Gumpres (in Stalker 1989:184) defines communicative competence as “the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers have to create and sustain conversational cooperation, and thus involves both grammar and contextualization”. Similarly, Canale and Swain point out that the term ‘communicative competence’ refers to “the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use” Canale and Swain (1980:6). In connection with this, Stalker sees pragmatics as “a system of rules which enables us to successfully fulfil the functions we choose to accomplish by matching linguistic structures (at all levels from speech genre to phonology) with the environment in which we are operating” Stalker (1984:184). Accordingly, people “accommodate linguistic features both consciously and unconsciously in order to adjust the social distance between the producer and the receiver” (Stalker, 1989:182).

In the process of communicating in the foreign/second language, learners need to be able to successfully navigate through a language and culture that are new to them. Developing pragmatic competence is particularly difficult when the language is learned in an environment in which it is not a means of daily communication, as the learners do not get enough input that will allow them to become aware of the pragmatic principles used in the respective society. Hence, language instruction is of immense importance for them.

This has been realized by many authors who have argued in favour of developing models for second/foreign language teaching based on the communicative approach, which would integrate linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Johnson 1978; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Van Ek 1976; Widdowson 1987). As a result different forms of language teaching syllabi developed focusing on the communication functions: requesting, apologising, inviting, describing, asking for and giving information, etc. Other forms focused on situational dialogues, conversational gambits, etc. The point of reference for all language programmes today is the Common European Framework of Reference Levels (Council of Europe, 2001) which is based on the assumption that communicative language competence include linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.

Despite the great activity in this field, there is a lack of valid data on communicative competences of Macedonian learners of English. In language teaching there is a lack of syllabi focusing on teaching communicative competences and there is a widespread need of tracing effective methods for reinforcing communication skills. The aim of this project is to fill in this gap.

Motivated by this, the authors of this paper started the project *The role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as foreign languages* carried out at Goce Delcev University-Stip, Republic of Macedonia. In particular, the project will focus on the following:

- realization of the speech acts of requesting, apologising and complaining in the interlanguage of English and German language learners;
- comparison of the speech act realization in the target language and in learners' interlanguage;
- definition of the reasons that bring about pragmatic failure by foreign language learners;
- the role of explicit instruction in the development of the pragmatic competence of foreign language learners.

In this paper we first define pragmatic competence and discuss what learners need to know to become pragmatically competent. Then we discuss the instruments for measuring learners' pragmatic competence. Finally, we point out to the next stage of our research.

## 2. Defining learner's pragmatic competence

We would like to start this part with Crystal's broad definition that pragmatics is "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 2008:379).

This definition puts the social context of discourse (e.g. power and politeness, use of metaphor and irony, and so on) in the foreground. It also focuses on the user and the intended meaning. In defining pragmatic competence we find Leech's distinction between sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge particularly useful.

Sociopragmatic knowledge refers to the "specific 'local' conditions on language use [...] for it is clear that the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle operate variably in different cultures or language communities, in different social situations, among different social classes, etc." (Leech 1983:10). In particular, this means knowledge of the context, recognition and production of illocutionary meaning, distribution of politeness strategies, the speaker-hearer relationship, formality of the situation, social values and cultural beliefs, etc.

Pragmalinguistic knowledge, as described by Leech (1983:11), refers to the particular linguistic resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions. This means knowledge of socially appropriate language use with respect to the sociopragmatic variables.

The learner's pragmatic competence according to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993:3) is seen as "a non-native speaker's use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language". It includes learners' pragmatic and discourse knowledge. Because sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules are not obvious, it often happens in communication that learners do not understand or misunderstand what native speakers say. It is even more difficult for learners to produce the appropriate expressions in a given context to meet the expectations of native speakers. Not abiding by the target language and cultural norms results in pragmatic failure of foreign language learners.

The above discussion raises the question of what abilities learners have to acquire to become pragmatically competent. Most of the studies that we have consulted have focused on speech acts (Röver 2005; Liu 2004; Beebe et al. 1990; Blum-Kulka 1982; Kasper 1989; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Trosborg 1995; etc.). Other studies have investigated routines, implicature, the ability to perform politeness functions, the ability to perform discourse functions, and the ability to use cultural knowledge.

Most studies of speech acts have focused on a particular speech act, its realization and variations in strategies used by the participants. Among those studies, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) was the pioneering one and very influential as a large international project.

### **3. Assessing speech acts in second language pragmatics**

The early efforts for assessing speech acts appeared in the 1980s when there were efforts to obtain more empirical information about key speech acts such as apologizing, requesting, complimenting, and complaining (Fraser *et al.* 1980, in Cohen 2004). Data were collected through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and the goal of the studies was to establish cross-language and language-specific norms of speech act behavior in order to better understand the development of second language learners' pragmatic competence. The initial efforts were made by Cohen and Olshtain (1981), Blum-Kulka (1982), Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), etc. The instruments included prompts for closed, guided, or open-ended responses, and the prompts were aimed at speech act comprehension or production.

More recent efforts at assessing speech act ability have resulted in composing batteries of instruments for studying speech acts. The most notable work was conducted at the University of Hawai'i (Hudson et al. 1992, 1995) which resulted in devising six measures: written discourse completion task, multiple-choice discourse completion test, oral discourse completion task, discourse role-play task, discourse self-assessment task, and role-play self-assessment. The tasks were varied with respect to the power of the speaker, the social distance between the speaker and the listener, and the degree of imposition caused by the speech act.

We would also like to point to Roever's work (2005, 2006), who tested three aspects of English as a second language learners' pragmalinguistic competence: recognition of situational routine formulas, comprehension of implicature, and knowledge of speech act strategies. As McNamara and Roever note "Roever tried to strike a balance between practicality and broad content coverage to avoid construct underrepresentation: His test could be delivered through a

standard Web browser, took about one hour, and both the routines and implicature sections were self-scoring” McNamara and Roever (2006: 60).

#### 4. Methodology and procedures

In our research on investigating the pragmatic competence of Macedonian language learners of English, we focus on three speech acts: requests, apologies and complaints. We are currently in the process of collecting data for assessing learners’ pragmatic competence and in this paper we will focus on the instruments that we applied for this purpose. Learners’ speech acts were elicited with the following questions in mind:

1. Are the students aware of the sociopragmatic variables and do they vary their responses according to their interlocutor?

2. Do they use the same strategies and formulaic expressions as native speakers? We will use the term formulaic expressions to encompass expressions which have more or less fixed form such as greetings, exclamations, swear words, collocations, sentence frames, automatic responses, etc. They are “stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation and analysis by the language grammar” (Wray 2000:465).

3. Are the students aware of the cultural differences between the two languages?

4. Do they produce the appropriate amount of speech?

The participants of the project were 139 students of English in their second and third year of study, age between 19 and 24. The whole process was completed in three stages:

1. All students were first asked to fill in an information sheet and sign a consent form. The information sheet included information about their age, gender, year of study, mother tongue, other languages spoken, and length of stay in an English-speaking country (if any). The consent form informed them that data from the test would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only, that their results would have no effect on their grades, and that their name will not appear publicly. Upon completion of the information, the students were asked to sit the Quick Placement Test designed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and their level of proficiency in English was determined. The students had 45 minutes to complete the test.

2. In the second stage the students were asked to complete a DCT consisting of 18 tasks, six tasks for each of the speech acts.

3. In the third stage the students were asked to do the role plays immediately followed by a retrospective interview. The DCT, role plays and retrospective interview are described in more detail in the next section.

The results of the Quick Placement Test were as follows: C2 - 9, C1 - 36, B2 - 52, B1 - 35, and A2 - 7. For the purpose of this study we will continue working with the levels B2 and C1. This will enable us to form a good, cohesive group of students who have good knowledge of the grammatical structures and have enough vocabulary to be able to express their views, mood and emotions. Not having to struggle to express themselves, they will be able to focus on the pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of communication.

All the students who completed the DCT also did the role plays. Table 1 summarises the number of DCT responses and role plays for each of the levels. Following the role plays, we obtained 37 retrospective interviews from the students.

**Table 1 Number of DCT responses and role plays: B2 and C1 levels**

	Apologies	Requests	Complaints	Total
<b>B2</b>				
DCT responses (49 students)	277	275	265	817
Role plays (49 students)	31	41	45	117
<b>C1</b>				
DCT responses (31 students)	185	185	186	556
Role plays (31 students)	21	27	21	69

## 5. Research instruments for speech acts

In this section of our paper we discuss the instruments that we used for assessing the pragmatic competence of language learners. We will refer to 1) the design of the testing instruments; 2) context parameters, i.e. the setting in which the speech acts take place; and 3) the importance of retrospection.

### 1) The instruments

The instruments were designed largely by drawing on assessment and research instruments already in use (Bachman 1990; Boxer and Cohen 2004; Gass and Mackey 2011; Hudson, Brown, and Detmer 1995; Liu 2004; Röver 2005; etc.). We were led by Röver's statement that "they have to be practical and their scores should allow defensible inferences about a learner's pragmatic knowledge" (Röver 2005: 39). Three types of instruments were adopted: DCT, open role play, and introspective interview.

### Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

DCTs are the most criticised, but the most frequently used type of instrument for measuring pragmatic competence. DCTs are attractive because they "elicit something akin to real-world speech act performance and because they are still somewhat practical despite the need for rating - at least they can be administered to large numbers of test takers at the same time" (McNamara 2006: 65). Although there are many claims that DCTs do not replicate reality, and people do not use DCT responses in the same way that they use language in real-life communication, there are certain aspects that can be assessed with this instrument. McNamara points out that "although DCTs measure knowledge and do not allow direct predictions of real-world performance, they can be thought of as measuring potential for performance, as knowledge is arguably a necessary precondition for performance" McNamara (2006:67).

The DCT that we used for assessing our language learners' pragmatic competence consists of three parts referring to the three distinct speech acts: requests, apologies and complaints. In constructing the section on requests, we referred to the studies of Blum-Kulka, and Olshtain (1984), Economidou-Kogetsidis and Woodfield (2012), and Olshtain and Cohen, (1990); for apologies we referred to Blum-Kulka, and Olshtain, (1984), Ogiermann (2009), and Trosborg (1995); while for complaints we referred to Trosborg (1995). All situations involve some kind of conflict or social

difficulty (medium or high offence/or medium or high threat for the speaker (S) or the hearer (H)) and would require elaborate facework to achieve the desired goals.

Each situation described in the DCT represents differing degrees of power, social distance and degree of imposition. Each task is followed by a blank space within which the subject writes his/her response, as in the example below:

You borrow a book from the library and while reading it you make some comments which you forget to erase. The librarian notices the comments and complains about them. In response you say:

The DCT was piloted with 15 students. The main purpose of this phase was to show if the students will find the situations acceptable, suitable and similar to real-life situations; if they will find the instructions sufficient to be able to decide how to formulate their speech acts; and if the instructions will trigger the required speech act.

Based on students' feedback, the items were revised before being used among larger population. The students' remarks showed that some of the situations needed further explanations about the relationship between the speaker and the hearer in terms of length of friendship, closeness, frequency of contact, etc. For example, in the Ride home situation, it wasn't clear whether the people have communicated previously and how close their relationship was. There were two situations that many of the students did not understand and had to be rephrased (Term paper, Down payment). There were also a few problems with vocabulary so explanations of the problematic items were included (dent in the fender, down payment, baggage reclaim, luggage rack).

#### Open role play

The open role play tasks involve 9 role plays, three for each of the speech acts investigated. Students were divided in pairs of the same level of proficiency. Each student received the description of the situation and of his/her role.

In comparison with the DCT tasks, role plays are more similar to real-life speech situations. They allow for involvement of both interlocutors and as in real conversation "there is a distributed responsibility among interlocutors for the creation of sequential coherence, identities, meaning, and events" (McNamara and Roever 2006:46). The context in which they are built up is wider: the situation is described in more detail, there are two interlocutors and their roles are described more precisely. Conversation unfolds naturally as in real-life communication. Also there is a moment of surprise. Additionally, although a lot of the talk is predicted, the hearer cannot be sure what strategies, formulaic expressions and other linguistic means the speaker will use; the hearer may be surprised by the attitude projected by the speaker and may need to adapt and modify his/her own response in compliance with it; there is language planning, asking for clarification, conversation management, etc. All these characteristics make the conversation more like conversation in real life. Still, it cannot establish context as in real world. There is nothing at stake, the face of the speaker and the hearer are not really threatened, speakers may be bolder and risk more than in real life.

Of course there are some drawbacks as well. Role plays are more difficult to organise and manage. It is difficult to keep track of a large number of students and to organise them in pairs of the same level of proficiency. They are time consuming and it is difficult to transcribe the conversations. Generally, students find them interesting and fun to do. However, for some students they may be stressful.

The tasks involved in the role plays included Professor's book (apology to a person in position of authority), Baggage reclaim (apology to a stranger), and Appointment (apology to a friend) for apologies; Project work (request to a person in position of authority), Ride home (request to a stranger), and Notes (request to a friend) for requests; and Wrong mark (complaint to a person in position of authority), Noisy party (complaint to a stranger), and Owing money (complaint to a friend) for complaints. The number of role plays obtained at B2 and C1 level is given in Table 1.

## 2) context parameters

The DCT tasks varied with respect to power, social distance and degree of imposition (Hudson, Brown, and Detmer 1995).

Relative power (P) is the degree to which the speaker can impose his or her will on the hearer due to a higher rank within an organization, professional status, or the hearer's need to have a particular duty or job performed. Social distance (D) is the degree of familiarity and solidarity the interlocutors share. Absolute ranking of imposition (R) refers to the imposition on the hearer to perform the act or the severity of offence. Table 2 shows distribution of the variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition across the DCT tasks.

**Table 2 Power, social distance and degree of imposition across the DCT and role play tasks.**

Situation	Contextual setting	Power	Social distance	Degree of imposition/ offence
<b>Apologies</b>				
1.	Library book	+	+	medium
2.	Professor's book	+	+	high
3.	Baggage reclaim	-	+	medium
4.	Shopping bag	-	+	medium/high/low
5.	Appointment	-	-	high/low/medium
6.	Term paper	-	-	high
<b>Requests</b>				
1.	Project	+	+	medium
2.	Invitation to give a speech	+	+	high
3.	Ride home	-	+	medium
4.	Lighter	-	+	medium
5.	Notes	-	-	medium
6.	Down payment	-	-	high
<b>Complaints</b>				
1.	Wrong mark	+	-	high
2.	Wrong medicine	+	+	high
3.	Noisy party	-	+	medium
4.	Cut in line	-	+	medium
5.	Late pick-up	-	-	medium
6.	Dent	-	-	high

Some of these variables were difficult to determine because we do not have the full context, and, for the role plays, we do not know how the other person would respond. It was especially difficult to decide about the imposition. For example, some people may consider the Appointment situation high offence; others could consider it low offence. The imposition depends on other factors as well: the hearer's plans, momentary mood and circumstances, etc.

The perception of the imposition may also be culturally constrained. What is considered high offence in one culture may be considered low offence in another. The perception of the imposition or offence is also dependent on the personality of the interlocutors. Some speakers may view the Shopping bag scenario high offence because of the damage caused; for others it may be low offence because they will not consider it their fault.

In analysing the interlocutors' responses, we also need to take into consideration the face threat for the speaker and the hearer, which is not always obvious. The Ride situation, for example, may be considered a low threat for the couple if they were going home. However, if they had planned on not going home, the request may be viewed by them as high threat. The latter case may also be a high threat for the speaker, because he may be seen as intruder and his request may be rejected.



Due to these factors, some scenarios may not trigger the required speech act. Such was the case of the Shopping bag, when some students explained that they wouldn't say anything, just take the bag and put it in their lap because after all it wasn't their fault.

### 3) Retrospective interview

In support of the retrospective interview, Cohen (2004: 320) suggests that "there may also be some value in using verbal report as a complement to the other forms of data – as a means of triangulation". It allows for discussion afterwards as to "what the respondents actually perceived about each situation (e.g. what they perceived about the relative role status of the interlocutors) and how their perceptions influenced their responses, what they wanted to say vs. what they actually said, how they planned out their responses, and what they thought of the social event of going through the tasks altogether" (Cohen 2004:321). The information collected from the respondents provides valuable support for the analysis. The retrospective interviews were conducted immediately after the role plays with the following aims in mind:

- to check how the actual environment influences students' language performance (classroom, not natural environment; the fact of being recorded);
- to check students' awareness of social factors underlying communication, i.e. if the students are aware of the norms of interaction in a given context considering the power, social distance and degree of imposition/severity of offence; and
- to check students' awareness of the cultural constraints in interaction, i.e. if the students are aware of the characteristics of the English and Macedonian culture (positive politeness/negative politeness; directness/ indirectness).

According to their answers, students found the situations for the role plays similar to everyday, real-life situations. However, they found them more difficult than the DCT because they were under pressure for what to say and how to say it. Sometimes they struggled with words and nervousness.

All students mentioned that while preparing, they were mainly focusing on understanding the situations and the roles of the interlocutors. They are aware of the social variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition and would vary their speech to comply with them. However their perception of the roles may be culturally constraint. The importance of personality traits in communication was also pointed out. Some people are more careful, and some opt out more often than others.

The use of the linguistic expressions, however, was not planned; it was rather spontaneous and intuitive. Also, some students mentioned that in real life they would talk differently. While doing the role plays they were still aware that the conversations were staged and they were talking to a colleague and not to the "imagined person". Consequently, the product that we receive may be different from what they would actually produce in real-life.

The students thought that in real life they would use the same content, but their talk would be different when talking to an English speaking person. They would apologize much more, would use more in-depth explanations and more formal language. When the students said that their responses would be "more polite", they meant more formal. Generally, Macedonian students perceive the English speakers as more formal and more polite. Besides, they noted that the fact that they would be talking to a stranger would make the situation more formal. They would also try to be more polite because they think that if you are not polite enough, English speaking people would think that you are aggressive and would avoid talking to you.

In Macedonian, their responses would be shorter with fewer expressions of apologizing and thanking. They wouldn't be "so polite", would be more direct and their reactions would be more emotional. Their speech would be more colloquial and they would use more forms showing solidarity and closeness with the interlocutors. Consequently, they would use different forms of address when speaking to a Macedonian than to an English speaking person. In Macedonian, they would not shy away from getting into an argument or becoming more aggressive. According to their perception, Macedonian speakers are less formal, more direct, and the distance between the speakers is smaller even if they are strangers or even if there is difference in power. Some of them pointed out that they know how to communicate with the people in Macedonian, but in English they are not sure about people's reactions and feelings and they feel insecure in their communication with the others.

## 6. Conclusion and outlook

In this paper we discussed the instruments that we used for collecting data for analysing the pragmatic competence of Macedonian learners of English: DCT, role play and introspective interview. In particular, we referred to the contextual parameters of communication of power, social distance and degree of imposition. The choice of both the DCT and role play scenarios was motivated by the different potentials of the two. In the DCT, learners are given time to study the situations, the roles of the interlocutors and what to say. Thus it sheds light on the knowledge of the language learners. Role plays are more like authentic conversation because they unfold language as in real life, revealing more clearly learners' productive skills. Learners' comments in the introspective interview will be helpful in understanding some of their language behaviour.

The DCT and role play scenarios elicited requests, apologies and complaints. These speech acts are very frequent and of great importance in everyday communication. The next stage would involve coding of these speech acts and analysis of the learners' performance. The coding scheme will be established on the basis of previous speech act research. In particular we will focus on analyzing the realization of the head acts (request, apology or complaint) and their internal modification (mitigation or aggravation) as well as their supportive moves (external modification). The obtained speech acts will also be analyzed with respect to (1) ability to use the correct speech act; (2) typicality of expressions; (3) appropriateness of amount of speech and information given; (4) level of formality; (5) directness; and (6) politeness (Hudson and Kim 1996).

Finally we would like to mention some limitations related to our data interpretation and analysis. First, all our data for this pragmatic analysis was collected through controlled elicitation procedures producing non-authentic, non-spontaneous data. These could produce responses that would be different from those produced in real life situations. Second, our access to parallel native data is limited and we will have to rely on previous studies of English speech acts. As, for Macedonian, the cross-cultural studies of English and Macedonian are restricted to several individual attempts. This will pose some difficulties in interpreting those language behaviours of the Macedonian learners differing from native speakers.

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Marija KUSEVSKA, Biljana IVANOVSKA, Nina DASKALOVSKA and Tatjana ULANSKA make up a team working on the research project "The role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as a foreign language." The aim of the project is to investigate learners' pragmatic competence and to create modules for its development.