

Assessing L2 Pragmatics: Issues and Considerations

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INTRODUCTION

Once considered separate and discrete knowledge components, current theoretical and methodological perspectives now view second language (L2) proficiency as a dynamic, cognitive process comprised of several interacting knowledge components and abilities. Theoretical definitions tend to attribute L2 proficiency to two main components. First, the general consensus among L2 assessment researchers is that L2 users leverage their knowledge of the formal and organizational structures of language (i.e., syntax, lexis, and phonology) to comprehend and formulate cohesive discourse. However, pragmatic knowledge, which is responsible for shaping the manner in which these formal structures are comprehended and produced in relation to the context in which they occur, has been more difficult to define and operationalize. This discussion will examine evolving research in the assessment of L2 pragmatic knowledge and indicate gaps between contemporary theoretical definitions, operationalization, and measurement methods.

BACKGROUND

What is L2 Pragmatics?

Most substantive theoretical discussions of L2 pragmatics provide a broad definition of this highly complex, elusive concept. However, much like pragmatics itself, a universally agreed-upon definition is ephemeral and difficult to pin down. Broadly, Bardovi-Harlig (2013, p. 68) summarizes pragmatics as the knowledge of “how-to-say-what-to-whom-when.” This simple definition captures the essence of pragmatics: There are nearly limitless linguistic routes one can take to achieve a communicative goal depending on the numerous variables of the social context in which the communicative act occurs.

A slightly more detailed definition comes from Crystal (1997, p. 301), who defines pragmatics as studying “language from the point of view of the users, especially the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their language has on other participants in the act of communication.” This definition suggests that communication events are not only shaped by the social context in which they occur, but also that the language choices made in these contexts carry some type of force or effect on the interlocutors. Taken further, this definition also suggests that as a communicative event unfolds, the effects carried by these linguistic choices permeate throughout the ensuing communicative event. That is, the unfolding of the communicative event itself determines the shape of the discourse that follows.

From this, it is apparent that even the most reductive treatments of pragmatics give rise to numerous interpretations of this concept, inducing a “combinatorial explosion” of potential lines of meaning. Moreover, when researchers attempt to precisely delineate the attributes underlying pragmatic knowledge and operationalize these components into measurable attributes, these lines of meaning tend to become increasingly entangled and complex. The following sections will examine both how these components have been theoretically defined and operationalized in the assessment of L2 pragmatics, and present research attempting to break from traditional views of these definitions.

THEORETICAL DEFINITIONS IN THE ASSESSMENT OF L2 PRAGMATICS

Speech Act Theory and Politeness

Early views of L2 proficiency in L2 assessment research varied in their acknowledgement of the role of L2 pragmatics in shaping utterances and discourse (Canale & Swain, 1980; Carroll, 1961, 1968; Lado, 1961; Oller, 1979). Communicative language ability (CLA) is perhaps the most prominent contemporary model of L2 proficiency that provides a comprehensive definition of pragmatic knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010). This model attributes effective utilization of L2 pragmatics to both the knowledge of the instrumental and manipulative functions of language, and the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions that mediate language use in communicative contexts. Theoretical definitions of these functions have been heavily influenced by speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which suggests language is used to perform certain functions (e.g., apologies, complaints, requests, refusals). These functions can then be performed utilizing varying degrees of direct or indirect language, sometimes referred to as politeness. The degree of directness can vary according to certain conditions of the social context, such as the imposition of the communicative goal on the interlocutor, the social distance shared between the interlocutors, and the power differential between the interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

This theoretical conceptualization of L2 pragmatics has dominated perspectives of operationalizing L2 pragmatics assessments for several decades (Brown, 2016). In their test of cross-cultural pragmatics, Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1995) developed a widely cited EFL test of language functions (e.g., apologies, requests, refusals), which varied these functional aspects of language according to differing degrees of politeness in their test of cross-cultural pragmatics. Similarly, Yamashita (1996) developed an assessment of L2 pragmatics in a Japanese L2 context, which also targeted the same language functions along the same degrees of politeness seen in the previous study. Not only did these studies investigate similar theoretical components of L2 pragmatics, but they also examined the comprehension of L2 pragmatics using similar methods of elicitation.

The studies above all utilized some form of a discourse completion task (DCT; e.g., written, oral, multiple-choice). DCTs are a method of elicitation that presents test-takers with a sample of discourse situated within a context. After test-takers are oriented to the social and communicative context, they are then required to either complete the final turn of discourse context or complete a penultimate turn followed by a rejoinder. These types of tasks, however, tend to be problematic and are often criticized for their lack of providing adequate and authentic

context, which is an essential consideration for any assessment, much less assessments of pragmatic knowledge that require test-takers to draw upon rich social and communicative contexts to comprehend and produce pragmatic meanings. The lack of authenticity has been primarily attributed to the impracticality of providing sufficient social and communicative context within an assessment, which ultimately leads to the underrepresentation of the entire L2 pragmatics construct (Grabowski, 2016).

Conventional and Non-Conventional Implicature

Another strand of L2 pragmatics assessment takes a slightly different approach to operationalizing L2 pragmatics. Roever (2005) also investigated comprehension of requests, refusals, and apologies with varying degree of politeness; however, this assessment differed from previous studies. In addition to operationalizing L2 pragmatics in terms of speech acts, it also investigated the comprehension of formulaic implicature (e.g., *Would you mind if...*) and idiosyncratic implicature (e.g., *The pope Q...*). These notions of implicature build upon Grice's (1975) notion of conversational maxims, according to which utterances can imply meanings, beyond the literal and intended message, only inferred in relation to the context in which they occur (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). The results of this study found that formulaic implicature was decidedly easier to comprehend across levels of L2 proficiency, yet all proficiency levels had difficulty comprehending idiosyncratic implicature.

Taguchi (2005, 2007, 2008, 2012) also contributed to this strand of L2 pragmatics assessment research across a variety of foreign language contexts (e.g., English, Japanese, Chinese) and by leveraging newer web-based methods (e.g., a multiple-choice listening comprehension DCT). These studies examined conventional implied meanings and non-conventional implied meanings, similar to what Roever (2005) referred to as formulaic implicature and idiosyncratic implicature, respectively. In addition to utilizing computer-based assessment methods, which at the time was relatively innovative, this research also advanced operational definitions of L2 pragmatics by directly linking it to an underlying model of cognition and inference. These operational definitions were highly influenced by Bialystok's (1990, 1993) models of L2 language and pragmatic processing and proficiency. The results of these studies indicated that the comprehension of L2 pragmatics shared a positive relationship with cognitive processing abilities. Similar to Roever (2005), these studies also found that, while generally test-takers across varying levels of proficiency were able to comprehend formulaic, conventional implicature, test-takers had significant difficulty with idiosyncratic, conventional implicature. Despite breaking ground in conceptualizing L2 pragmatics in terms of cognitive processing, these assessments also fell victim to the methodological criticisms found in the assessments of formulaic speech acts previously mentioned: Comprehension of utterances that go beyond the literal, intended meanings requires the integration of the full social and communicative context in which they occur. However, as noted in the previous section, providing sufficient context within an assessment is often difficult and impractical.

A Cognitive View of Pragmatic Meaning

This cognitive perspective—that the comprehension and production of L2 pragmatics largely relies upon a complex of cognitive processes and abilities to integrate features of the social and communicative context into communication—has recently gained increasing attention in L2 assessment research. Purpura (2014, 2017) suggests that underlying all communication—including the comprehension and production of L2 pragmatic knowledge and meaning—is a cognitive model of information processing. In other words, a language user will decode the literal and inferential features of a perceived message in relation to the social and communicative context and integrate this message into what they already know about the context in their long-term memory or their background knowledge. As this message is integrated into the long-term memory storage, and the mental model of the context is strengthened, the language user begins formulating a response into which they encode both the features of the incoming message and the context to convey an appropriate response. In this conceptualization, cognitive processes enable language users to imply and infer layers of meaning in relation to their knowledge of context and the pragmatic meanings associated with that social and communicative context.

One researcher has attempted to tap into the layers of pragmatic meaning. Grabowski (2009, 2013) investigated test-takers' ability to produce pragmatic meaning in a series of role-play tasks. This study operationalized L2 pragmatics according to Purpura's (2004) theoretical model of L2 grammatical ability, which makes a distinction between several layers of pragmatic meaning that can be encoded into utterances. Grabowski assessed test-takers for both their ability to produce grammatically accurate and meaningful utterances and to encode appropriate sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and psychological meanings into those utterances. The results of these studies indicated that across three levels of proficiency (i.e., intermediate, advanced, expert), expert level test-takers showed the most separation from the other levels according to their ability to produce pragmatically appropriate communication. Additionally, these results provided several key innovations to L2 pragmatics assessment. First, while previous studies operationalized and measured L2 pragmatics in terms of the ability to comprehend direct or indirect formulaic structures (e.g., request, apology, refusal), Grabowski examined the ways in which language users convey considerably more complex ideas, such as multiple layers of implied meaning. Second, noting limitations associated with the practicality of providing authentic social and communicative contexts within traditional DCT assessments of L2 pragmatics, Grabowski utilized role-play tasks, which provided a richer and more authentic social and communicative context for test-takers to produce pragmatic meanings.

DISCUSSION

This review has indicated several issues that have been identified in the research. One significant issue is related to the mismatch between theoretical and operational definitions of L2 pragmatics and the measurement methods utilized for eliciting the full theoretical construct of L2 pragmatic knowledge from test-takers. Traditional assessments of L2 pragmatics tend to investigate whether test-takers can comprehend or produce different types of language functions according to variations in politeness constraints and typically rely on utilizing various formats of DCT to investigate this knowledge or ability. This operationalization and measurement method seems to be prevalent in an effort to maximize the practicality of assessments measuring L2

pragmatics. In other words, a measurement design, which can easily define a given language function within a single category and vary these functions according to high or low levels of politeness, is fairly practical to design, analyze, and interpret. On the other hand, operationalizing the construct of L2 pragmatics according to the comprehension and production of pragmatic knowledge and meaning is much less straightforward and requires considerably more resources to design, analyze, and interpret.

A second apparent complication relates to whether the operational definitions of L2 pragmatics should include both formulaic, conventional language structures and idiosyncratic, non-conventional language structures. This consideration again relates to the issue of practicality. While assessments of the formulaic structures of language may be easier to design, analyze and interpret, these assessments do not fully represent the construct of L2 pragmatics. However, including non-conventional language structures in assessments of L2 pragmatics requires considerably more effort to design. In order to assess the comprehension or production of these structures, test-takers would need adequate social and communicative context through which they could make interpretations about the meanings of these structures in relation to the communicative context in which they occur. Including this depth and richness of context not only impacts the demand on resources but also requires test-takers to utilize significantly more cognitive processing effort, which previous studies have directly linked to the processing of idiosyncratic, non-conventional language structures.

The previous two points reveal a third overarching and much larger issue. While contemporary research generally accepts the notion that L2 proficiency and L2 pragmatics can be attributed to a complex of underlying cognitive abilities and processes, the theoretical and operational definitions guiding contemporary assessment designs of L2 pragmatics rarely provide direct reference to any underlying cognitive theory with only several exceptions previously mentioned in this review (Grabowski, 2009, 2013; Taguchi, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012). This oversight indicates that current assessments of L2 pragmatics may not be capturing the true nature of L2 pragmatics processing as it is currently conceptualized. As a result, assessment designers are not developing assessments, tasks, and items that tap into test-takers' cognitive ability to integrate rich social and communicative contexts into their comprehension and production of L2 pragmatic meaning. This inadequacy among current assessments of L2 pragmatics can in part be attributed to the cautious adoption of emerging theories in L2 assessment research, but it may also be attributed to the lack of innovations in assessment technologies and methods that can support the underlying cognitive processing theories involved in the comprehension and production L2 pragmatic meaning. The gap between current L2 pragmatics assessment methods and the contemporary theoretical models is evident. Developing new methods of assessing L2 pragmatics is essential if we are to keep pace with the evolving theoretical research.

CONCLUSION

This short literature review sought to examine the ways L2 assessment researchers have recently defined, operationalized, and measured L2 pragmatics. Through this review, it has been shown that finding an exact definition for such an elusive concept as L2 pragmatics requires much further investigation. Currently, it seems theoretical and operational definitions are caught between two worlds: (1) those rooted in the traditional perspectives that view L2 pragmatics as

consisting of functional devices utilized according to variations in social and communicative contexts and (2) those that essentially view L2 pragmatics as a cognitive process of integrating social and communicative context into the comprehension and production of meaning. Traditional assessments of L2 pragmatics have generally neglected the latter evolving notion in their measurement methods, in large part due to the practicality concerns associated with designing, analyzing, and interpreting less concrete operational definitions, such as the comprehension and production of implied pragmatic meaning. An exploration of new methods that go beyond the traditional formats is necessary if assessments are ever to represent the full construct of L2 pragmatics.

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