

Defining and measuring “ Pragmatic Competence ” in a foreign language teaching context

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| その他（別言語等）のタイトル | 外国語教育における「語用論力」の定義と測り方について |
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Defining and measuring “Pragmatic Competence” in a foreign language teaching context

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“Competence” is a word commonly present in diverse study fields. Stemming from the Latin root *competere* (meaning to fall together; to come together; to be convenient or fitting), it commonly means “The ability to do something successfully or efficiently”. In the field of linguistic studies, this term was initially made relevant by linguist Noam Chomsky, and was used by structural linguists in opposition to the term *performance*. In this oppositional context, the former would refer to the speakers’ (or listeners’) subconscious knowledge of the set of grammatical rules of a given language, while the latter pointed to the less than ideal manifestation of competence in communicative situations, under the effect of individual limitations of each participant of the interaction.

Throughout the years following the popularization of the term by language structuralists and with the growing interest in studying language use, linguists saw the need, however, to redefine “competence”, in order to encompass other aspects of linguistic knowledge involved communication, not only the ability to compose grammatically correct sentences. One of these posterior definitions is that of pragmatic competence, commonly defined as the ability to a) communicate a message, with all of its intended nuances and meaning, effectively in a given socio-cultural context; and b) to correctly interpret another speaker’s message as originally intended by them. As simple as this definition seems, when it comes to measuring a speaker’s ability, especially in the case of learners of a foreign language, there may be divergences about how the criteria established by the definition of “competence” should be applied in evaluation. In other words, there seems to be no common standard when it comes to measuring a speaker’s pragmatic competence. As such, the aim of this article is, through the review of literature from the last three decades on the topic of pragmatic and communicative competence, to propose a minimum set of common standards that could be applied in such situations, allowing for a certain degree of commonality when it comes to further studies in the fields of pragmatics and foreign language teaching.

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Examination of Previous Studies

Pragmatic Knowledge and Pragmatic Competence

Initially, in order to enable us to discuss the definition of Pragmatic Competence, it is necessary to establish a basic theoretical framework of the field. For this reason, we have chosen to adopt the definition of Pragmatics as presented by Yule (1996), in which he defines it as “the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms”. This definition is furthered by presenting the four main areas that pragmatics is concerned with, them being “The study of speaker meaning” (p. 3), or the study of how meaning transmission and interpretation; “The study of contextual meaning” (p. 3), or the study of context-based meaning attribution by speakers and the role of context in meaning making; “The study of how more gets communicated than is said” (p. 3), or the study of the role of the listener’s inference in order to correctly interpret the message as intended by the speaker; and “The study of expression of relative distance” (p. 3), or the study of the influence of distance in the amount of information that is necessarily uttered in a given conversational context. The reason for this choice is owed to the relative simplicity and widespread character of Yule’s definitions, while still offering enough background knowledge to enable further analysis of the topic of this paper, notably when offering alternatives to the definition of Pragmatic Competence.

While covering communicative competence, Trosborg (1995) refers to research done by Canale–Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), defining it as “a modular or compartmentalized view of competence, rather than a single global factor” (Trosborg, 1995. p. 9). The author divides this concept, in a linguistic level, in four interrelated areas of competence: *linguistic competence*, *sociolinguistic competence*, *discourse competence* and *strategic competence*. The first of these areas, *linguistic competence*, refers to that same definition proposed by Chomsky and other structuralist linguists, that being the speaker’s mastery over the rules of a given language. *Sociolinguistic competence*, in turn, concerns itself with “the sociocultural rules of use, i.e. the system of rules which determines the appropriateness of a given utterance in a given social context.” (Trosborg, 1995 p. 11) This competence, in turn, is divided into two aspects by the author, denominated *sociopragmatic competence*, or appropriateness of meaning, and *pragmalinguistic competence*, or appropriateness of form. *Discourse competence*, the third area presented by Trosborg, refers to the relation of appropriateness between the utterances produced by a speaker and the context in which they are uttered. When it comes to the scope of this

article, sociolinguistic competence and its subdivisions, as well as discourse competence, can be considered the most relevant topics proposed by Trosborg, and will also be examined from the point of view of other linguists. Finally, *strategic competence* is presented as "a compensatory element which enables a speaker to make up for gaps in his knowledge system or lack of fluency by means of *communication strategies*." (Trosborg, 1995 p. 11) The author argues that these strategies, beside compensating for eventual "breakdowns" in communication, they also serve to increase the speaker's effectiveness when in a communication context, and are employed by native and non-native speakers alike, albeit in different situations.

In her study, Trosborg (1995) also presents a distinction, drawn by Canale (1983), between communicative competence and actual communication, arguing that communication would be the concretization of competence, which in turn is submitted to "*performance constraints* such as memory and perceptual constraints, fatigue, nervousness, distractions and interfering background noises". (Trosborg, 1995. p. 12)

In addition to Canale & Swain's model, Kasper & Ross (2013) present more recent frameworks used to typify pragmatic, or communicative, competence. They argue that Dell Hymes' theory of competence "has shaped their fundamental outlook more than any other work." (Kasper & Ross, 2013 p. 5) According to them, this theory is centered around knowledge of appropriateness of an utterance when inserted in a given context, and this dimension of appropriateness is treated as part of the dominion of pragmatics. This framework, however, still maintains, according to the authors, the competence-performance dichotomy reminiscent of Chomsky.

Later, Taguchi (2012) suggests a similar operationalization of pragmatic knowledge and processing, with the former being concerned with the accuracy of pragmatic comprehension and the level of appropriateness in an individual's pragmatic production, while the latter, encompasses speaker fluency in the same components (comprehension and production). According to Kasper and Ross (2013. p. 6), Taguchi's model "offers a theoretical basis for assessing the processing dimension in pragmatic comprehension and production that lends the assessment of pragmatics a stronger psycholinguistic foundation."

Labben (2016), in turn, enumerates several abilities that are required of an individual in order to produce a speech act (Labben, 2016), which involve a speaker's ability to "grasp the contextual factors likely to affect the response" (p. 73), information such as the interlocutor's age, gender, social distance and cultural background, background, among

others, as well as the type of speech act and level politeness the situation requires; the ability to “understand the cultural inferences involved in the situation” (p. 73) in order to “issue a sociopragmatic evaluation of the situation taking into account features of the context.” These processes are the ones that will enable speakers to perform the choice of which speech act to perform and the “appropriate sociopragmatic strategies” (p. 73) that the same speech act presents for its realization. Finally, speakers are also thought by the author to be required to “map the strategies into the target language by choosing the appropriate pragmalinguistic form to realize the speech act” (p. 73), before finally proceeding to the enunciation and completion of the speech act in the appropriate form.

In his original article, Labben compared the abilities required of an individual, when producing a given speech act, in both oral communication situations and when during the realization of a Discourse Completion Test, arguing that the latter “seems to be more demanding, cognitively speaking, than producing speech acts in real-life contexts” (Labben, 2016 p. 73), stating, however, that this issue requires further research based on psycholinguistic methods, and that this would be outside the scope of his study. Cognitive demand notwithstanding, Labben manages to propose a well-rounded set of conditions that can be considered as requisites for the successful performing of a speech act, which in turn can be useful when trying to typify pragmatic competence and generate a set of specific parameters that can be used to measure it objectively.

Labben’s proposed parameters relate to the subconscious processes involved in elaborating an enunciation, and a failure in any of these processes can undeniably lead to pragmatic failure by the speaker, a situation even more likely to happen in the case of second or foreign language speakers. The sociopragmatic evaluation mentioned on the third item is dependent on the result of the previous two acts of context apprehension, and the result of that same evaluation is fundamental for the posterior tasks, up to the moment of the enunciation. We can conclude then that this sociopragmatic evaluation, as mentioned before in Trosborg’s research, is an important component of Pragmatic competence, and Labben’s analysis gives us more information on how speaker process this evaluation when speaking.

Another recent study by Cohen (2018) also touches on the subject of pragmatic competence, or “pragmatic ability”, defining it as “the ability to deal with meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader) and to interpret people’s intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (···) that they are performing when they speak or write”, based upon the

concepts offered by Yule (1996). In the subject of foreign language teaching/learning, Cohen posits the existence of benefits for learners stemming from the awareness of the appropriateness of their utterances in a given context, “namely what can be said, to whom, where, when and how.” (Cohen, 2018 p. 5) Further in his piece, Cohen also briefly critiques the denomination coined by Leech (1983), presented also by Trosborg (1995) in her article, consisting of the terms *sociopragmatics* and *pragmalinguistics*. Despite their popularity in the field of linguistics even today, for the author, this terminology can be considered vague when trying to determine if a given event consists of a failure in one of these two ideas, or even a combination of both.

Interactional Competence

When dealing with the idea of interaction, Kasper & Ross (2013) also posit the concept of interactional competence, based on the idea that “there cannot be a theory of interactional competence without a theory of interaction.” (Kasper & Ross, 2013 p. 9) Considering that interaction is a fundamental element in communication, the authors point, interestingly, that many pragmatic competence models underestimate its importance. They argue, however, based in Bachman & Palmer’s (2010) “reciprocal language use” models that language users connect via an “input-output component” that suggests communication is established from the moment the hearer’s and the speaker’s cognitive systems are shaped via a common language through interaction. This interactional competence framework suggests speakers obey a normative set of structures when engaged in verbal interaction, and that the knowledge of this norm (in other words, competence), which encompasses factors such as the cooperative principle and turn-taking, among others, is what makes it possible for speakers, for example, to self-select for consecutive turns in order to cover a silence in conversation, as in this example presented in their article (Kasper & Ross, 2013):

IR: Um (.) have you done any traveling at all?

(.5)

IR: Have you taken any trips to other countries?” (p. 9)

In the same topic, Compernelle (2013) also argues that interactional competence relies onto contextually situated pragmatic abilities, and that it does not deny the existence of individual pragmatic knowledge. For the author, “we use our socially constructed understandings of specific social-interactive activity types to recognize and negotiate the trajectory of the unfolding talk and to interpret the actions of others and to project the future ones as well. (Compernelle, 2013 p. 327) When examining the influence

of individual competence in assessment of L2 pragmatics, Compernelle states that a “competent participation” in such tests is intrinsically tied to an individual’s knowledge of what may be considered “acceptable, appropriate and/or recognizable contributions” to that given context or situation. (Compernelle, 2013 p. 328) This would constitute, in other words, knowledge of the same responsibilities of both participants of a verbal interaction that were enumerated earlier by Kasper & Ross, as well as the different roles of each participant in that interaction.

Intercultural Competence

Lastly, one more concept that can be of interest when studying pragmatic competence in a foreign language context is that of intercultural competence. In a 2010 article, Spencer-Oatey mentions that this competence is referred to by a series of different terms, “including *intercultural competence*, *transcultural competence*, *intercultural effectiveness* and *intercultural communication competence*.” The author defines it as “an umbrella label that refers to all aspects of competence needed to interact effectively and accurately with people from other cultural groups, and to handle the psychological demands that may be associated with this.” (Spencer-Oatey, 2010 p. 190) In her study, the author presents different frameworks of intercultural competence, and the one presented by Byram (1997) stands out for positing a distinction between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence, the former being one of the four components of the latter. Some of the components presented by Byram in his model, conceptualized in the diagram below, are similar to the ones presented by Trosborg (1995) in her own four competences framework of pragmatic competence:

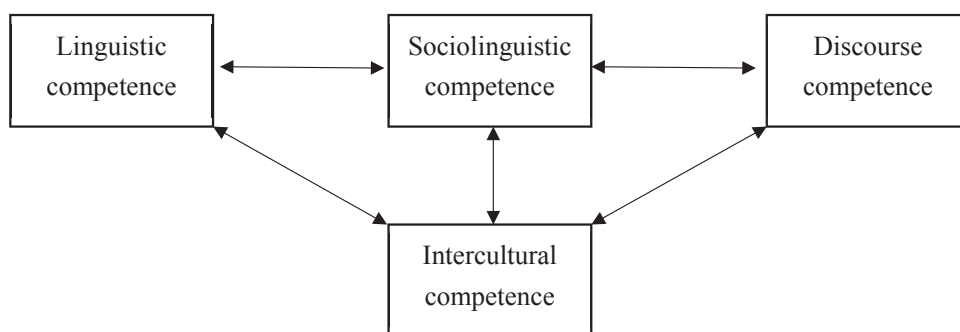


Figure 1 - Byram's conceptualization of Intercultural communicative competence (adapted from Spencer-Oatey, 2010 p. 196)

In addition, Byram’s model further subcategorizes intercultural competence in five components: knowledge (*savoirs*), attitudes (*savoir être*), two sets of skills (*savoir faire* and *savoir comprendre*) and education (*savoir s’engager*). Each of these five components

relates to different abilities required of a speaker: possessing knowledge of social groups, and their practices and processes; having an open attitude towards other cultures and a willingness to let go of one’s own beliefs; possessing the skill to interpret events and practices from another culture and relate it to one’s own; having the skill to obtain knowledge from an experience of coming in contact with a different culture, as well as using this newly obtained knowledge in interaction, and; possessing the necessary cultural and educational background to perform a critical evaluation of both one’s own and other’s cultures and countries.

Although criticizing the lack of discourse samples in his framework, Spencer-Oatey states that Byram’s theorizing had “major impact on intercultural thinking in Europe.” (Spencer-Oatey, 2010 p. 198) Indeed, the inclusion of a culture related competence in the context of communication was a significant step in studying intercultural communication and pragmatics, especially under the light of the increase in both human and information mobility that happened at the end of the 20th Century and beginning of the 21st. Globalization, the popularization of the internet and the development of more efficient means of communication meant that speakers of all languages suddenly had to adapt to a paradigm that, up to that point, was restricted to a smaller part of the population, the need of taking a different set of culture and values in consideration when communicating in a language different than their mother tongue. And this paradigm shift meant that communication studies had to readapt and include this new variant in their analysis, when trying to understand the processes at work in an interactional context. Byram’s typifying of the abilities that constitute intercultural competence, bringing to light the necessity of speakers both understanding their own culture and being able to interpret and accept the other’s culture, represents this move towards reinterpreting communication studies and is still relevant when trying to understand what constitutes pragmatic competence.

Spencer-Oatey also presents a multidisciplinary framework for intercultural competence, designed by herself together with Stadler in 2009 as a part of the Global People Project. This framework, once more comprised of four competences (knowledge, communication, relationships and personal qualities/dispositions), is said to be innovative due to including communication competences “that are omitted elsewhere, such as Communication Management.” (Spencer-Oatey, 2010 p. 200) In her conclusion, Spencer-Oatey argues that the models analyzed in her article all identify the importance of “knowledge” as a study subject, and that communication is dependent on shared knowledge. She also posits that communication, another competence considered to be of

great importance by her, needs to be dealt with in more detail and to incorporate a discourse-based approach in its study, concluding that the area has much to offer in pragmatic research.

Proposal

Drawing from the theoretical framework reviewed in the previous section, as well as the definition presented by Yule (1996), we would like to propose, as a tool to evaluate and measure the pragmatic competence of FL learners in a language teaching context, defining pragmatic competence as “the bare minimum level of mastery of each of the four main areas of pragmatics studies, as defined by Yule, that is necessary to establish mutual understanding between the participants of a given linguistic interaction, according to their role in the moment of the utterance and taking into consideration any possible performance constraints at the moment of the enunciation.” This would entail that both speaker and listener roles would have to, in order to be considered pragmatically competent, be able to fulfill a given set of essential conditions, listed as follows:

Table 1 - Conditions for Pragmatic Competence

| For the speaker | For the listener |
|---|---|
| Knowing how to transmit their intended meaning in a message, or to produce the adequate speech act for a given situation; | Being able to correctly interpret the intended meaning of a message; |
| Being able to conform to the level of formality, politeness or directness a given situation requires; | Being able to identify the assumptions and/or goals, as well as what kind of action is being performed during an utterance; |
| Possessing knowledge of the appropriateness of their utterances when inserted into a communication context. | Being able to correctly infer information that was not explicitly uttered, given an appropriate context. |

The conditions we have reunited here as the minimum standard to evaluate pragmatic competence relate both to Yule’s definition of the field of pragmatics, by requiring the participants of an interaction to possess knowledge on the pragmatic processes involved in the transmission of a message, as well as to theories such as Trosborg’s and Labben’s, given that most of these conditions rely on the speaker’s (and listener’s) ability to properly execute sociopragmatic (by examining the situation and adequately planning the content of their enunciation) and pragmalinguistic (by once more examining the situation and adequately planning the form of the enunciation) evaluations of the interactional context they are inserted into.

In addition, when working in a foreign language teaching context, we have to consider one more set of conditions that can be thought of as essential when evaluating the pragmatic competence of speakers and listeners of a foreign language. Borrowing from the components proposed by Byram (1997), these conditions would be: (a) Possessing an open-minded approach towards other cultures and being willing to let go of preconceived notions and beliefs about them, and; (b) Being able to evaluate critically not only other cultures, but also one's own, based on one's own educational and cultural background, in order to acquire new knowledge of culture and sociocultural practices.

This second set of conditions directly relates to intercultural competence, requiring from the interactants, when in an intercultural communication context, to possess the willingness to dispose of preconceived cultural notions and stereotypes and be willing to interpret and accept different cultures, a process that, when absent, would likely make it impossible for communication and mutual understanding to occur without generating friction between the participants of that interaction (and consequently, escaping our definition of pragmatic competence).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many different factors to be taken into account when trying to give a definition of pragmatic competence. By reviewing literature on this matter, it is possible to verify that many of the different definitions presents throughout the last three decades of studies in the field of pragmatics possess common points between them. Although different linguists may consider topics such as interaction or knowledge as having more or less importance, we believe that none of them can be completely left out when trying to update the definition of competence. Rather, together with an approach that takes into account the interactive character of communication, they can provide us with a more complete set of conditions that can be used to both define and measure pragmatic competence, which can be summarized as such: Pragmatic competence is the bare minimum level of mastery of each of the four main areas of pragmatics studies, as defined by Yule, that is necessary to establish mutual understanding between the participants of a given linguistic interaction, according to their role in the moment of the utterance and taking into consideration any possible performance constraints at the moment of the enunciation.

It is also worth mentioning that, when this evaluation is applied to foreign language teaching context, one more set of conditions comes into the playfield of analysis: that of

intercultural competence, the knowledge and skills required of an individual to operate satisfactorily in a multicultural communication scenario. We believe, from the frameworks presented by linguists as Byram and Spencer-Oatey & Stadler, that one important component that can help define a speaker as “competent” is based on the existence of both sociocultural knowledge and an open-minded attitude from the speaker, which therefore should be taken into account for both interactants.

With the definition of competence and the conditions presented in this article, we hope to provide other researchers on the field of intercultural pragmatics with an alternate set of tools to be utilized when doing research on foreign language teaching, as well as contributing with the production of knowledge in this rich study field.

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外国語教育における「語用論力」の定義と測り方について

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要旨

「能力」というのはいくつかの文脈や研究分野に出てくる言葉である。ラテン語の語根「competere」（意味：合わせる、便利、相応しい）に由来を持ち、「compete」、【競争する】という動詞と同じ語源を持つ。一般的に、その言葉の意味は「上手く、又は効果的に何かをする能力」だ。しかし、言語核の研究分野の中で、言語学者Noam Chomskyの研究から当該になり、構造言語学者に「performance」という言葉に対して使われていた。この対立的な場面では、前者は話し手もしくは聞き手の無意識的な言語規則の知能付し、後者は能力の理想に満たない、コミュニケーションの場の役者の個人的な制約から生まれる現実的な発現に付した。

長年にわたって構造言語学者が「能力」という専門用語を普及した結果となった言語学の研究にあたる興味がその普及の数年後大きくなり、他の言語学者が「能力」を再定義して、規則に沿う文を作るだけでなく、コミュニケーションの数ある一面における言語学的な知能を含ませる必要に気づいた。その再定義の一つは言語学能力という概念で、A) 社会的や文化的な文脈の中であるメッセージをニュアンスや意味が完全に伝わるように効果的に伝える能力、とB) 話し手が意味したメッセージを正しく解する能力である。この定義は簡単だと思われるものの、話し手の能力を測るとき、徳に外国語学習者の場合、その能力の定義が打ち立てるクライテリアはどのように使われるかの分岐が生じるかもしれない。つまり、話し手の語用論能力を測るための常軌はなさそうだ。そのため、この論文の目的はいくつかの先行研究を検討し、語用論力を測るに際して使える最低限となる常軌を提案し、これからの語用論や外国語教育の研究分野にある通有の段階を与えることである。