

DISCOURSE IN L2 LEARNING

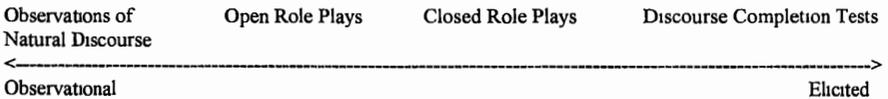
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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, increasing attention has been paid to developing and assessing the second language (L2) learners' pragmatic abilities in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Studies investigating the L2 learners' interlanguage pragmatics have employed a variety of research methods, such as role plays, observational methods, and Discourse Completion Tests. The purpose of this paper is to take a critical look at these research methods used in studying interlanguage pragmatics. Interlanguage pragmatics is defined here narrowly as the L2 learners' production of speech acts and the acquisition of L2 speech act knowledge. This paper also aims to present a pilot study which investigated the Korean learners' interlanguage pragmatics by employing one of the research methods discussed in the present paper.

Research methods employed in the study of interlanguage pragmatics can be characterized in terms of constraints these methods impose on the data from the least constrained to the most constrained ones. Figure 1 presents different research methods arranged along a continuum with these two dimensions (Kasper and Dahl 1991: 217 for a similar display).

Figure 1 Observational-Elicited Continuum of Research Methods in Interlanguage Pragmatics



The data elicitation techniques from the right-hand to the middle side of the continuum consist of highly controlled methods such as Discourse Completion Tests and closed role plays, and less constrained open role plays. The far left-hand side indicates observations of naturally occurring data, in which no deliberate constraints are placed on the informants.

Discourse Completion Tests were first developed by Levenston and Blum (1978) to investigate lexical simplification, and then they were adapted to study speech act realization by Blum-Kulka (1982) (cited in Kasper and Dahl 1991). In the Discourse Completion Tests, informants are provided with a written questionnaire listing a number of brief situational descriptions, and the informants are asked to write down a response that they think they would say in the given context. The second next most constrained method is a closed role play. In closed role plays, several situations are described in a written form, and subjects are asked to perform orally the speech act behavior, in response to the initial verbal cue issued by the interlocutor. The interlocutor's verbal cue is intended to set the tone for the situation (e.g. an angry taxi driver, a whining child, etc.), and there are no on-going interactions involved between participants. In an open role play task, a description of the situation is given to subjects either in a written or spoken manner. Then subjects are asked to say what the person they are role-playing would say in a given situation through interaction with the interlocutor. An observational technique, the least constrained research method, is to collect samples of spontaneous speech in natural contexts.

The most authentic data collection method is to observe natural discourse. It reflects what speakers say in a real context rather than what they think they would say. The communicative event also has real-world consequences, being a source of rich pragmatic structures (Cohen 1996). However, difficulties

with this method have been noted by several researchers Cohen (1996), for example, pointed out that (a) The data may not yield enough or any target speech act performance, (b) It is very time-consuming to collect and analyze naturally occurring data, (c) It is very difficult to control contextual variables such as gender, age, first language background, and (d) The use of recording equipment may be intrusive. Similarly, Beebe and Takahashi (1989: 120) suggest that 'Natural data give us lots of examples that are not at all comparable in terms of speakers, hearers, and social situations, unless one or two situations are selected, and this poses other limitations'. Moreover, Kasper and Dahl (1991) have noted that cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparable data are difficult to collect via naturally occurring data. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's (1990) study of graduate advising sessions is one of the few speech act studies that used observational methods. Thirty-two advising sessions were audio-taped in full length, in which three faculty members and their twenty-five graduate student advisees (eighteen nonnatives and seven natives) participated. Comparability between natives' and nonnatives' use of speech act strategies was insured since both groups interacted with the same native interlocutors in the same status relationship (i.e. advisee vs. advisor). However, the case of an advising session has limitations for cross-cultural comparability, as Kasper and Dahl (1991: 231) indicated:

Since graduate advising sessions, where adviser and advisee negotiate the student's coursework for the new semester, are institution-bound and, hence, culture-specific speech events that have no (direct) equivalent in other cultural contexts. For instance, our Japanese informants report that at Japanese universities, advising takes place informally among the students, with older students advising younger students. Moreover, even in our native cultures (Germany and Denmark), which have more affinity to American context, advising sessions of the kind reported do not exist.

Role plays are the second closest to authentic language use, following observational methods. The advantages of role plays over the observational technique are that they are replicable and that they easily allow for the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic study. In addition, the situations are set up for a particular speech act to take place, making possible the close analysis of long interaction sequences of comparable data (Cohen 1995). However, role plays are also not without problems. One of the biggest weaknesses of role play as a data collection method lies in its validity, it is not certain to what extent the informants' responses are representative of what they would actually say in real life. Role plays sometimes force unnatural behaviors from the subjects. If subjects are not good actors, the results could be problematic in that it is difficult to tell the subjects' linguistic proficiency from their 'situational adeptness' (Cohen and Olshtain 1994: 152). In addition, there might be a 'response set' (i.e. tendency to have the response to one situation influenced by the response to another, in particular, in situations where subjects are limited to a series of the same type of speech act) (Cohen and Olshtain 1981: 129). Furthermore, the subjects are not given the choice to opt out of the speech act. In the real world, people sometimes opt not to apologize, request, or complain.

A Discourse Completion Test allows us to collect a large amount of data over a short period of time. However, along with the role plays, one of the biggest problems with the Discourse Completion Tests is the extent to which the data collected in this way truly reflects real language use. This view is shared by Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989), who have suggested that decontextualized written responses in the Discourse Completion Tests may not be comparable to what takes place in the actual interactions. Studies (Bodman and Eisentein 1988, Rintell and Mitchell 1989) have shown that in comparison with oral role plays, subjects tend to provide far shorter responses in Discourse Completion Tests, where no real negotiations take place. In addition, due to the nature of written mode, informants have more time to plan and weigh their answers carefully and even to make corrections, a situation which is far from speech act realizations in a real context (Beebe and Cummings 1995).

Beebe and Cummings (1985: 14 cited in Kasper and Dahl 1991: 242-243) also pointed out that Discourse Completion Test responses do not adequately represent (a) the actual wording used in real

interaction, (b) the range of formulas and strategies used (some, like avoidance, tend to be left out), (c) the length of response or the number of turns it takes to fulfill the function, (d) the depth of emotion that in turn qualitatively affects the tone, content, and form of linguistic performance, (e) the number of repetitions and elaborations that occur, or (f) the actual rate of occurrence of a speech act—e.g. whether or not someone would naturally refuse to produce it at all in a given situation

2. The Pilot Study

The pilot study presented in this paper aims to investigate the interlanguage pragmatics of advanced Korean learners of ESL by using open role plays. More specifically, it aims to investigate how the apology speech act performances of advanced Korean learners of English compare to those of native English speakers in terms of five apology strategies. Among a variety of speech acts, apologies are the second most widely studied speech acts after requests, from both the cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics perspectives. According to Fraser (1981: 260), apologies are defined as ‘the offender’s [apologizer’s] expressions of regret for the undesirable effect of the act upon the offended party [apologee]’. Apologies are called for when social norms have been violated or when an expectation of the offended party has not been met (Fraser 1981). An apology speech act intends to restore harmony between apologizer and apologizee, it is regarded as a remedial work, which aims to change what might be looked upon as an offensive act into an acceptable one (Goffman 1971). Once the offense has been recognized by both parties, the offender must let the offended person know that he or she is sorry for the infraction. Therefore, the act is ‘highly-hearer-supportive and often self-demeaning’ (Edmondson and House 1981: 45).

Apology Strategies In this study, the following five apology strategies were considered. These strategies were based on the description of the apology speech-act set provided by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Trosborg (1987).

Expression of Apology Use of an expression which contains a relevant performative verb
e.g. ‘I’m sorry’, ‘I apologize’, ‘Excuse me’, ‘Please, forgive me’, ‘Pardon me’

Explanation An explanation or an account of situations which caused the apologizer to commit the offense

Acknowledgment of Responsibility A recognition by the apologizer of his or her fault in causing the offense
e.g. ‘It completely slipped my mind’, ‘I didn’t mean to’, ‘It was my fault’

Offer of Repair An offer made by an apologizer to provide payment for some kind of damage caused by his or her infraction, which can be specific and non-specific

Non-specific offer of repair

e.g. ‘I’ll see what I can do’

Specific offer of repair

e.g. ‘I will do extra work over the weekend’

Promise of Non-recurrence A commitment made by an apologizer not to have the offense happen again

e.g. ‘It won’t happen again’

Subjects The subjects who volunteered for this study were ten native speakers of English and ten native speakers of Korean in their mid 20’s to mid 30’s. There were five females and five males in each of the groups. They were all studying at the graduate level at an American university at the time of the study.

All the Korean speakers had their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores of 600 or above, a minimum of one and a half years' stay in the United States (one and a half to three years), and a minimum of eleven years of English study in Korea (eleven to twelve years)

Instrument Open role plays were used to elicit the data. The role-playing situation (i.e. apology to a sibling for forgetting to take her to the shopping mall) was relatively an 'authentic' hypothetical situation to the subjects since this situation might have already happened to them, or the subjects might run into such a situation later in their graduate life. The full text of the situation and instructions appear in the Appendix.

Procedures Subjects in both native and nonnative English speaker groups individually engaged in oral role plays in English with a native English interlocutor in a lab. After one week, the nonnative speakers were asked to perform the same role-playing situation in Korean with a native Korean interlocutor. In all cases, prior to engaging in the role play, subjects were first asked to silently read, along with the interlocutor, the situation provided on the card at the beginning of the session. The apology situation was written in English and Korean in the English and Korean role plays, respectively. Subjects were then asked to role play with the interlocutor in response to the verbal cue issued by her. All responses were audio-taped and transcribed.

Data Analysis. The data were analyzed with respect to the five apology strategies discussed previously. The frequency with which each of the 20 subjects used any of the five apology strategies was calculated.

Findings. The results of subjects' use of apology strategies appear in Table 1.

Table 1 Percentage of Subjects' Use of Apology Strategies.

Situation	Apology Strategies	Native English Apologies (n=10)	Nonnative English Apologies (n=10)	Native Korean Apologies (n=10)
Forgetting to take one's sibling to the shopping mall	APOL	60	100	100
	EXPL	90	90	90
	RESP	90	40	80
	REPR	100	100	100
	NONR	0	0	10

Note. APOL: Apology of Expression, EXPL: Explanation, RESP: Acknowledgment of Responsibility, REPR: Offer of Repair, NONR: Promise of Non-recurrence.

Expression of Apology. The advanced nonnative speakers (NNSs) and the native speakers (NSs) used the expression of apology strategy differently. Similar to their L1 production (100%), the NNSs were more likely to use expressions of apology than their counterparts (NSs 60% vs. NNSs 100%). Differences were also found between these two groups in terms of their use of linguistic forms for expressing apologies. The NSs tended to use expressions such as 'I am so sorry, darling', 'I'm really sorry', and 'I'm so sorry, sweetie', while the NNSs used expressions such as 'Can you forgive me?' and 'Please, forgive me, please'. This extra intensity on the part of the nonnatives was not necessary, considering the lower status of the person receiving the apology. The NNSs seemed not to be able to use expressions appropriate to the L2 interactional context. This point is illustrated in example (1). Another variation of nonnative speakers from native speakers' usage of apology expressions was the adverb 'first' before saying 'I'm sorry', as in example (2).

(1) NNS-NS interaction

I Oh, you forgot again you promised!

S Yeah, you know, you know me, you know, oh I'm terribly busy right now Maybe you can know that if you grow up **Can you forgive me?** I know you're a pretty nice and sweet girl **Please forgive me, please.**

(2) NNS-NS interaction

I Oh, you forgot again you promised!

NNS Yeah **First, I'm sorry**, but I was so busy to finish my paper, you know I have a lot of things to do, so I'm sorry I'll take you to the mall next time, and I'll give you some more time

Explanation. Similar to their use of explanation strategy in L1 (90%), the NNSs used the explanation strategy as frequently as the NSs did (NSs 90% vs NNSs 90%). However, the NNSs tended to provide explanations, using significantly more words than the NSs in order to accomplish a similar pragmatic goal. Such a propensity is manifested in L2 alone, not in L1. The NNSs tended to elaborate the preconditions, the background, and the justifications for their infractions in a very verbose way. Such a tendency by the NNSs might be perceived by the hearer as both irrelevant and superfluous and might consequently lessen the force of the speech act. The verbosity manifested by the Korean advanced learners of English seems to be related to their lack of confidence and eagerness to ensure that their intended message has been conveyed to the hearer. As Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986: 177) have pointed out, 'Verbosity is evident especially among advanced learners who possess the linguistic knowledge to support the intention of their speech acts but still feel uncertain of the effectiveness of their communicative interaction'. L2 learners' level of proficiency affects the way in which learners attempt to approximate the target language norms (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986). Learners with lower L2 proficiency tend to avoid verbosity due to their limited linguistic knowledge, whereas learners with higher L2 proficiency gain confidence as to their linguistic knowledge, but are not confident about the effectiveness of their speech acts, and thus, tend to be more verbose than the target language speakers.

Acknowledgment of Responsibility. The NNSs and NSs used the acknowledgment of responsibility strategy differently in the role-playing situation. While NNSs frequently used this strategy in L1 (80%), the NNSs were less likely to acknowledge the responsibility (NSs 90% vs NNSs 40%). The nonnatives' difference from the native norms in this case has several possible explanations. It can be hypothesized that the NNSs may be aware of the linguistic choices for expressing acknowledgment of responsibility, but they might be uncertain about the sociolinguistic rules of speaking in the act of apologizing, thus, failing to use this particular strategy as frequently as the NSs. It can also be postulated that the NNSs had at their disposal a smaller range of L2 linguistic forms for realizing this particular function (i.e. acknowledging their responsibility) than their native-speaking counterparts.

Offer of Repair. Similar to their use of offer of repair strategy in L1 (100%), the NNSs used this strategy in much the same way as the NSs (NSs 100% vs NNSs 100%). However, the difference was noted in terms of degree of specificity in this strategy. The NNSs provided a less specific offer of repair (e.g. 'What can I do for you?'). The NSs, on the other hand, provided a more specific offer of repair (e.g. 'I'll tell you what. We go to the mall tomorrow and...', 'How about we go right now?')

Promise of Non-reoccurrence. Both the NSs and the NNSs showed a similar use of promise of non-reoccurrence strategy in the role-play situation (NSs 0% vs NNSs 0%), in which the NNSs used this strategy 10% of the time in their L1.

3 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the research methods used to investigate learners' interlanguage pragmatics, in particular, a speech act production in terms of their strengths and

weaknesses. The paper also presented a pilot study, which used open role plays as a data elicitation task in order to investigate how the advanced Korean learners of English perform the apology speech act in comparison with the native speakers of English. Clearly, there is a great need for more authentic data collection methods in assessing L2 learners' pragmatic abilities, which can best investigate the acquisition and development of learners' interlanguage pragmatics. In addition, combined methods should be used in order to gain a more complete picture of L2 learners' speech act realizations. As Kasper and Dahl (1991) have suggested, one main method can be used to collect the primary source of data, with the data collected by means of another method helping with the interpretation of the primary data. Alternatively, two or more data collection methods can have equivalent status in the study, complementing the findings on the research question at hand.

Appendix. Apology Situation

The following situation is a hypothetical situation that has already happened to you or you might run into this kind of situation later in your life. Upon reading the situation, along with the interlocutor, improvise the conversation which might follow until the agreement is reached between you and the interlocutor.

Forgetting to take one's sibling to the shopping mall

You have a younger sibling about eight years old. You promised to take her to the shopping mall and buy a toy that she has long wanted, but you completely forgot about it because you have been very busy with finishing the paper that you had to hand in the next day. Your sibling was excited and told all her friends about it. She is quite disappointed and upset now. This is the second time that this has happened. Your sibling calls later that day to complain. You pick up the phone, and she immediately recognizes your voice.

Younger sibling: Oh, you forgot again and you promised!
You:

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