

# Developing a Sociocultural Assessment of the Requesting Speech Act

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a work-in-progress study of a dynamic assessment of pragmatics. Specifically, the study aims to develop a methodology that will allow a thorough classroom assessment of learners' pragmatic competence in regards to the requesting speech act, while simultaneously promoting its development.

Discussion of the study will be in two parts. The first section will examine the rationale for employing a dynamic assessment methodology in the language classroom, and for focusing on the pragmatic aspect of communicative competence. In the latter half of the paper, an overview of the stages undergone in developing the assessment will be provided.

## A Rationale for a Dynamic Assessment of Pragmatic Competence

Grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978), and sociocultural theory, dynamic assessment (henceforth referred to as DA) is a form of testing that emphasizes interaction between the examiner ("the mediator" in DA terms) and the learner. In a dynamic assessment therefore, the mediator and learner will carry out a collaborative task, working jointly towards its completion. This is in contrast to more traditional forms of testing, in which the learner's performance is assessed in isolation from others, with no assistance given.

This emphasis on the importance of interaction is based on Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that all learning is essentially social in nature, with the "novice" learning a skill at first by collaborating with another more skilled interlocutor (the "expert"). Gradually, the skill in question becomes internalized by the novice, until they can perform the ability independently. As this internalization process unfolds, the learner will typically require less assistance, and furthermore, less explicit assistance. Proponents of DA therefore put forward that, by looking at the amount and types of assistance required by the learner, insights can be gained as to their level of development.

Other than the central importance of interaction, DA differs from standard testing in a number of other ways. It is typically "development-oriented" (Poehner, 2008), in the sense that its primary objective- developing the ability or skill being assessed- is deemed more important than more traditional assessment goals of efficiency or reliability. Further, while standard types of testing treat learning and assessment as two separate activities, DA considers them to be inseparable and simultaneous in nature (Poehner, 2005; 2008).

The goals then of DA can be seen to be two-fold. The assessment should place the development of the learner as the primary goal, above other considerations, such as reliability or efficiency. The second aim is to gain insights into the developmental level of the learner, and their future potential in regard to the assessed ability.

## Mediation

The interactive nature of DA necessarily means that the mediation taking place between the examiner/mediator and the learner is of central importance. A key

characteristic of a dynamic assessment is that such mediation must be both systematic and principled, grounded in sociocultural theory. To this end, the concept of the Zone of Proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) is used to guide the mediator throughout the DA collaborative task. The ZPD, defined for the purposes of this study as the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they are able to do with assistance, is a fundamental sociocultural concept. For sociocultural theorists, effective mediation- that which leads to development- must fall within this space. Should it lie outside of the ZPD, whether due to being too helpful, or not helpful enough, the assistance will not be optimally effective (Poehner, 2008). A mediator in a DA session therefore aims to provide mediation guided by the learner's ZPD.

In successfully locating this zone of proximal development, the work of Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) is instructive. Aljaafreh and Lantolf, in analyzing the collaborative work of a tutor and learner in a series of written language tasks, found that effective assistance should be both *graded* and *contingent*. Mediation therefore, should be as implicit as possible, while still being sufficient for the task to continue, and only given when necessary. Providing overly explicit help, or help when it is not required, will not be effective in promoting development, and may in fact hinder it. By providing assistance that is both graded and contingent upon need, the dynamic assessor therefore, can provide developmentally sensitive mediation to the learner.

### Pragmatics

The focus of this study is a dynamic assessment of a particular aspect of English language pragmatics- the speech act of requesting. This focus was chosen for a

number of reasons. In the field of second language testing, the pragmatic element of communicative competence has received attention only relatively recently. The first large-scale study of pragmatics assessment was carried out by Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1992; 1995). While other researchers have followed with pragmatics assessments since then (Roever, 2005; Liu, 2007), it is still an underdeveloped area. Further, there have been few applications of DA to second language learning in general, and pragmatic competence specifically.

Further, pragmatic competence is a key aspect of communicative competence, and the cost of pragmatic “failure” can be high, with infelicitous pragmatic behaviour potentially leading to stigmatization and stereotyping of non-native speakers (LoCastro, 2012). Failing to adhere to L2 pragmatic norms in situations such as job interviews may also mean failing to advance in L2 societies (LoCastro, 2012).

For these reasons, it is put forward that this study can make a contribution to the twin goals of raising learner awareness of L2 pragmatic norms, and also developing an effective assessment of this area of L2 competence.

### **Development of the Dynamic Assessment**

In order to develop an effective assessment that is able to both locate the target area of competence and evaluate it successfully, a number of steps were carried out.

#### Identifying the object

The area of second language pragmatics is a large and varied one, which encompasses not only a variety of speech acts such as inviting and apologizing, but also other elements of communicative competence such as implicatures. In order

to develop an effective, manageable assessment therefore, it was necessary to focus on a specific aspect of pragmatic competence. To this end, the speech act of requesting was chosen for two particular reasons. Importantly, there is a large body of research that has been carried out on the topic of the requesting speech act, describing it in detail (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Most pertinently for this study, requesting has been the focus of various conversation analysis-based studies (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Liddicoat, 2011). Further, requesting is a frequent speech act, regularly carried out by people in their daily lives. This makes the speech relevant to the needs of second language learners, who stand to benefit from a raised awareness of L2 pragmatic norms.

#### Defining the object

In order to accurately assess a target skill or ability, it is necessary to precisely define and describe it. Rather than rely on the intuition of the researcher, the study drew upon a large body of conversation analysis research in order to describe the speech act of requesting. This coincides with a recent movement in pragmatics towards viewing speech acts not as isolated adjacency pairs, described without reference to context, but as acts that unfold over multiple turns in an interaction (Kasper, 2004; 2006). The use of authentic data in conversation analytic studies avoids the need to rely on native speaker intuition in creating examples of speech acts. It also allows for detailed descriptions of how typical requesting interactions tend to proceed. Conversation analysis therefore allows us to view requesting interactions as being organized in typical ways, with interactants co-constructing various stages of a conversation. Some of these stages, such as a conversation opening or closing, are common to interactions in general, while other stages, such

as *pre-requesting*, are specific to the requesting speech act. By using the findings of conversation analysis studies then, a basic model of a typical request-based conversation can be developed, shown in *Figure 1* below. It is important to note that within these stages can be various sub-stages and variations. The *pre-request* stage for example may include a “*pre-pre*” in which the requestor projects an upcoming request to the listener (Schegloff, 1980). The request stage may also be expanded upon by an insertion sequence between the request and the answer, in which the listener asks for more information before agreeing or declining the request.

*Figure 1- the basic stages of a request-type interaction*

1. opening
2. pre-request
3. request
4. post-request
5. pre-closing
6. closing

A further element to be taken into account is the role of social context in requesting. Factors such as social status, the relationship between interlocutors, and the degree of imposition imposed upon the listener by the requestor can all influence the language choices made in an interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Roever, 2011). Investigating learner awareness of these factors therefore is an important part of the dynamic assessment.

## Task Type

In carrying out the dynamic assessment, the type of collaborative language task to be used is of considerable importance. Inevitably, there must be a trade-off between authenticity and the need to be able to control the variables related to the social context of requesting situations. While “real life” interactions would therefore provide the most authentic data, the ability to control these variables would be restricted. On the other hand, use of task types such as multiple choice questions would be equally problematic, as they bear little relation to authentic requesting scenarios.

Strategic Interactions (SIs), developed by Di Pietro (1987), offer a suitable compromise between these two extremes. SIs are a form of role-play which are typically more dynamic and unpredictable than more traditional role-play types, as the participants do not know the information on the other person’s role card. The two participants in the SI can also have differing or competing goals, which can often lead to the need for negotiation to take place. The participants also play as themselves, rather than as a “waiter” or a “customer” for example. This helps to produce interactions that, while they are controlled in terms of the social context variables, are “online,” and similar to authentic situations. Figure 2 below shows an example.

*Figure 2- An example of a Strategic Interaction scenario (Di Pietro, 1987, p.50)*

Role A: You are preparing for a final exam, which will be given tomorrow. It is evening and your friend calls you to invite you over for a while. What will you do? Should you keep studying? Do you need a break? You know that this friend loves to talk and may keep you there for hours.

Role B: It is close to the end of the college semester and today is the birthday of your friend (A). You and your other friends have organised a surprise birthday party for A. You know that A may be studying for finals, but it is your job to call him or her up and extend an invitation to come over to your place, where the party will be. Of course, you cannot reveal the real purpose for your invitation.

### Designing the Tasks

Designing the SIs entailed a four-stage process. Following Liu (2007), an initial questionnaire was given to a group of participants who were of similar ages, proficiency levels and backgrounds to the study participants. The questionnaire asked the learners to think of situations in their daily lives when they either made a request, or received one. The answers were collected, and then ranked in terms of frequency, with similar situations grouped together (asking to borrow something from a sibling for example). These ranked situations were then given to another group of learners, who were asked to evaluate how likely the scenarios were to occur in their lives. Together, these two questionnaires allowed the researcher to build a collection of requesting scenarios that were relevant to the study participants' lives, and would likely occur on a frequent basis. These scenarios were then used as templates for the study's strategic interactions.

Before carrying out the dynamic assessments, the scenario templates were given to a group of native English speakers to evaluate the social context, in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Power, Social Distance, and Imposition. This information was used to help guide the mediator during the DA sessions, helping to avoid the need for relying on intuition when assessing learners' levels of



politeness and formality.

### Style of Dynamic Assessment

One final important decision in the development process was to choose an appropriate style of dynamic assessment. According to Poehner (2008), types of DA fall into two broad categories- interventionist and interactionist. Interventionist DA attempts to adhere to the more standard testing norms, which place an emphasis on reliability and efficiency. This type of DA typically relies on scripted, standardized mediation (Poehner, 2008). Interactionist DA however, is not pre-determined, with the mediator reacting to the moves of the learner by providing what he or she determines to be the most appropriate assistance for the situation. While the mediation is still systematic therefore, adhering to the principles of the ZPD and graded, contingent help, it is more flexible and arguably more developmentally sensitive than the more restricted interventionist DA types (Poehner, 2008). Poehner (2008) puts forward that this flexible approach is more in tune with the work of Vygotsky, who placed development above reliability and efficiency, and is therefore the approach chosen to be implemented in the current study.

### **Conclusion**

The objectives of this work-in-progress study are two-fold- to develop a principled assessment of pragmatics that incorporates key insights of sociocultural theorists, and to develop pragmatic awareness among learners in an effective manner. This paper aims to provide a rationale for this approach to pragmatics assessment, and an overview of the steps taken to date to meet the research goals. Ultimately, as further research is carried out in both pragmatics and pragmatics assessment in

second language acquisition, the hope is that further progress can be made in developing assessments that reflect the interactive, collaborative nature of development.

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