Pragmatic Language Testing and Its Application in Testing Oral Proficiency

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Abstract. With the rapid development of pragmatics, many pragmatic theories have been applied to language testing. This paper presents a general introduction of some important pragmatic concepts and discuss the development of pragmatic language testing. Types of pragmatic oral test items and practical ways of evaluation are explored.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, foreign languages testing in China is still a newly established field. Throughout the language testing history, the development of applied linguistics is closely related to the reform of language test. When structuralism was challenged by sociolinguistics, language test was transformed from psychometric-structuralist testing to the psychological-sociolinguistic testing. With the rapid development of pragmatics, many theories of pragmatics have been applied to language testing.

Basic concepts in Pragmatics

According to David Crystal, “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 effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication”[1]. In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Communicative action includes not only speech acts such as requesting, greeting, and so on but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and sustaining interaction in complex speech events. Leech proposed to divide pragmatics into pragma linguistics and sociopragmatics [2]. Prama linguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings. Sociopragmatics indicates the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action.

In 1979, Oller put forward his theory of “the unitary competence hypothesis”. John Oller advocated the pragmatically oriented approach as opposed to the discrete point oriented language testing approaches [3]. Later, Oller gave up this opinion himself. It has commonly accepted that language is multi-componential.

In 1990, Bachman proposed his famous model of communicative language ability and included pragmatic competence in the model. The model consists of three parts: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysical mechanism[4]. Bachman’s model of communicative competence is one of the most widely adopted models in language testing. It serves as a theoretical guideline for design communicative language tests.

The Development of Pragmatic Language Testing

In the 1960s, language testing began to be dominated by psychometric-structuralism approach. Carrol in 1961 strictly distinguished discrete point testing from integrative testing [5]. Integrative testing attempts to assess a learner’s capacity to use many bits all at the same time.

Language testing has gone to a new, active period since 1980. Some of the original ideas, new methods have been introduced in language testing studies. With the development of pragmatics, more and more scholars and linguists realize the importance of language naturalness.
The Communicative-Pragmatic stage of language testing has come since 1990. Being an organic combination of testing and pragmatics, communicative and pragmatic testing has been a brand new field in language testing. Communicative language testing not only takes the language knowledge into account, but also attaches much emphasis to people’s ability of using language in situational context in appropriate manner, whose purpose is to test the test-takers’ ability of communicating easily and effectively in social life. Johnson, K & Johnson, H hold that communicative language testing was to test the communicative proficiency and to use communicative events as test items. Therefore, items often bear direct relations on language use; tasks in the tests are as authentic as possible; besides, knowledge of structure and meaning, knowledge of language function as well as appropriateness of expression to social situations are included in tests; the examinees may have the choice to decide what to talk about or what level of proficiency to be tested in certain tests; texts tend to be up-to-date and representative of the test-takers’ intended use of the language [6].

Representative types of Pragmatic Oral English Test

Role play, interview, discussion and many of their varieties are considered as representative types of pragmatic oral test.

**Role Play:** Role play is language use in a simulated real life situation. Role play can focus on a variety of different functions. This is especially useful for the assessment of specific work-related oral performance. It is a very good indicator of real life performance, although it tends to favor the extroverted candidates with some acting skills.

**Interview:** Interview tasks are a direct test of language use; they measure oral skills by having the test takers actually speak. Oral interviews are testing situations in which the tester and test takers carry on a conversation.

**Discussion:** Discussion between the test takers can be a valuable source of information. Usually two or four test takers are put together in pairs or groups and are given one topic, argument to have a discussion and give their own opinions.

**Retelling:** After hearing a short story or conversation, the candidate has to retell what she/he has just heard. Testers will assess the candidate according to the criterion of size, accuracy, and fluency.

**Spontaneous Speech:** Candidates are required to give a speech on a topic and almost have no time for preparation. The topics are closely related to the candidates’ daily life. Such as: My University Life, A Good Book I Have Read, Smoking is Harmful, and so forth.

**Oral Cloze:** Cloze tests can also be administered orally on an individual basis. One of the main differences between written and oral cloze test is that in the written test, the candidate has the text in front of him and he can consult the text as often as he wishes.

The Evaluation of Pragmatic Oral Test

Cohen advocated a new way to evaluate pragmatic competence and oral proficiency on the bases of the three evaluation methods put forward by Savigon, Jokobovits, Gordon and Levenston respectively [7]. Cohen’s evaluation includes two aspects: form and content. Form is consisted of three sub-items:

- Naturalness of discourse: Is the speaker’s speech intelligible?
- Style of expression: Is the style of expression authentic or idiomatic?
- Clarity of expression: Can the speech be understood by native speakers?

Content is also consisted of three items: Suitability: Is the language used appropriate to the society or function? Accuracy of information: Can the testee accurately narrate an event and describe an object and strive to logic? Amount of information related: Is the amount of information appropriate to function?

Each of the six items has five ratings or bands. The scorer will assess the ratings according to the test taker’s performance. And the total amount of scores in each ratings will be the tester’s integrative oral ability. The scores can also be transformed into hundred marks. Using the following formula:

\[ S = 100 \times \frac{C_t}{(C \times 5)} \]
Ct stands for the integrative oral rating of the test takers. C stands for the numbers of items used in the evaluation.

**Sample of Evaluation**

Two students’ performance in a role play test are assessed according to the evaluation method for oral test created by Cohen. Before the oral test, the students A and B heard the following instructions respectively. They made the following dialogue without discussion:

A: Excuse me.
B: Can I help you?
A: Er, I, I, I have lost, a, a wallet.
B: Oh, here are two, I’ve got two wallets. Someone sent them here this morning.
A: Er. It consists some credit, er cards. And, er, and a . . .
B: Excuse me, can you tell me what’s the color of the wallet?
A: I cannot remember it very, er, perfectly. Mm, maybe it’s green.
B: Maybe?
A: I’m not sure! Er, there’s an very important thing. It contains a, a, a plane ticket, to London. It’s very important. Ah, it is, er I will take the plane this evening.
B: Oh, I know. But you see since you say wallet is very important, so maybe, er, I should be responsible for it. Er, and you cannot be very sure, it’s very hard for me to give it to you. Ah, can you tell me what’s the material of the wallet?
A: Mm, maybe it, it is made of leather.
B: Made of leather? And maybe green, maybe leather?
A: Maybe . . .
B: So many maybe’s. Oh, I’m so sorry that I cannot give it to you.
A: I’m not careful for, er, for my, er wallet. I’m very busy every day and I’m not care about its character. Er, it’s very important that it’s, it’s eight. I want to leave at once. Can you, er, give me, the wallet back?
B: Mm, I think you’d better wait for, er some minutes. Maybe someone else. . .
A: I have no time to wait. You, you just choose . . . You said you have two wallets. You can give me one, then I choose one.
B: The two wallets are so similar.
A: I have no time to talk, er, with you. Then, ask your manager to here, I want to . . .
B: Our manager? I am manager (laughing) Then, I think can you give me your ID card?
A: ID card? It is in the wallet! Yeah! You can see the ID card there.
B: ID card, yeah? It’s here.

**The evaluation from“form” aspect**

1. Naturalness of discourse: A’s task is to get the wallet back though she could not describe it precisely. In the dialogue, she emphasized the importance of the wallet, and used appropriate words. we gave her band five. B’s task is to refuse to return the wallet if A fails to describe it accurately. B asked A several times about the color and other characters of the wallet, and insisted A to give a detailed and definite description. Considering these, B should also be given the highest band five for this item.

2. Style of expression: A made quite a number of linguistic errors or mistakes in the dialogue. For example: It consists some credit, er, cards. (The correct sentence should be : “It consists of some credit cards”); I cannot remember it very, er, perfectly. (I cannot remember it very well.)So A can only get band three in this item. The errors or mistakes and unidiomatic expressions are fewer in B’s speech.

3. Clarity of Expression: A’s speech is not as logically clear as student B, The meaning of some sentences and expression is not clear. So A can only get band four; while B can get five for this item.
The evaluation from the perspective of “content”

4. Suitability: This item is difficult to assess, as both did a good job in the role play. A was in the customer’s position. The tone she used was direct and it was also reasonable for her to ask to see the manager when she could not get her wallet back. Student B acted the office worker. Her tone was polite, but at the same time she stuck to principles. So both of them can get band five for this item.

5. Accuracy of information: As in the role play, the students were not required to describe certain objects or narrate an event. So we do not take this item into evaluation.

6. Amount of information: Student A used “er” for ten times to show her eagerness to get the wallet. In 9), she twice mentioned “very important”, in 15) the reason she used to explain why she could not remember the wallet very well is far-fetched. We score her band four for this item. The reason student B used to explain why she refused to give it back sounds reasonable and convincing. (refer to 10, 14). She said “The two wallets are so similar” to hint that she could not give it to A so casually. So we give her band five.

Table 1. The Evaluation of the Two Students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Band</th>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Naturalness of discourse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Style of expression</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Clarity of expression</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suitability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Accuracy of information</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Amount of information</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sum of the bands for the six items is the integrative oral scores of the test taker. Student A is 21. Student B is 24. As in the role play, only five items are evaluated, so the hundred mark of the students will be:

\[ S_A = 100 \times \frac{21}{25} = 84 \quad S_B = 100 \times \frac{24}{25} = 96 \]  

(2)

Summary

Teaching and testing linguistic forms of language without paying attention to how these forms are actually used was not sufficient. Social appropriateness of an utterance, who is talking to whom, when, and under what circumstances, is just as important as linguistic accuracy. Pragmatic language test is a new direction in testing learners’ language ability, especially for oral testing. The types of pragmatic oral tests listed in this paper are only a small part of pragmatic oral tests. Other types of pragmatic oral tests and more efficient ways to evaluate still needs further consideration and research.

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