
Assessing L2 Pragmatics through Writing: Challenges and Affordances

Ibtissem Knouzi*¹ and Khaled Barkaoui*¹

¹York University – Canada

Résumé

Although pragmatic knowledge is a key component of most models of second language (L2) ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980; Connor & Mbay, 2002), L2 writing performance is rarely examined in terms of L2 learners' pragmatic choices. Examining L2 pragmatic knowledge *in/through* writing poses two challenges: (a) how to design tasks that elicit the specific aspects of pragmatic knowledge of interest (e.g., speech acts, politeness strategies) and (b) how to evaluate test-takers' pragmatic knowledge based on learners' performance on such tasks. This study examines both challenges in relation to a specific writing task that requires L2 learners to perform two face-threatening speech acts, complaining and making a suggestion, in emails addressed to different audiences. Performing both speech acts successfully requires a high level of pragmatic competence and the use of politeness strategies to "counteract the potential face damage of the face threatening act" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). Additionally, the politeness strategies that the writer uses need to be adapted according to the social distance and the relative difference in power between the interlocutors (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Martinez-Flor, 2005). In this study, each of 16 test-takers at two levels of English language proficiency (low and high) wrote four emails to audiences that differ in terms of their familiarity and power status relative to the writer (friend vs. manager) complaining about a given problem and suggesting ways to resolve it. Each writing session was video recorded. Each participant then watched a video recording of their writing session and provided stimulated recalls about what they were thinking while writing each email. In total 64 emails were collected (16 test-takers x 2 tasks x 2 versions). Using taxonomies developed by Martinez-Flor (2005) and Li (2010), each of the 64 emails was analysed in terms of the frequency, directness, and type of complaints and suggestions made as well as the politeness strategies and redressive forms used. Devices used to mitigate the imposition of the suggestions (e.g., hedges) as well as examples of impoliteness (e.g., threats) were also identified. Furthermore, the stimulated recalls were analyzed in terms of participants' explanations of their pragmatic choices during the test. The results were then compared across audiences and test-taker proficiency levels. Key findings and pedagogical implications will be presented. Recommendations related to the assessment of L2 pragmatics *in* and *through* writing as a viable but challenging method will be discussed in this presentation.

*Intervenant