

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUE IN PRAGMATIC RESEARCH: IS DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST A RELIABLE DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT?

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ABSTRACT

In pragmatic research One of the data collection instrument which reliability is being questioned about its reliability is the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). This issue appears due to several weaknesses of DCT. Firstly, the authenticity of the situations is limited. Then, the hypothetical nature of the situations in DCT simplifies the complexity of interactions in real conversation. Moreover, what people claim they would say in the hypothetical situation is not necessarily what they actually say in real situations. In addition, DCT is not able to bring out the extended negotiation which commonly occurs in authentic discourse due to the absence of interactions between interlocutors.

Despite its disadvantages, DCT allows researchers to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short time. Furthermore, DCT creates model responses which are likely to occur in spontaneous speech. DCT also provides stereotypical responses for a socially appropriate response. DCT is also an appropriate instrument for interlanguage pragmatic research because it can be applied directly to participants coming from different cultural backgrounds.

In dealing with the drawbacks of DCT, further research is needed to evaluate the reliability and validity of DCT. Strengthening the design of DCT may allow this instrument to collect data more carefully and reliably in order to improve the quality of the study. Applying multi instruments of data collection in a study will also enhance the quality of the data as well as the study.

Key words: DCT, pragmatic, speech act, reliability

1. Introduction

How to collect appropriate data is a crucial issue in pragmatic research because the data collection instrument will determine whether the data gathered are reliable and fairly accurate to represent the authentic performance of

linguistic action. One of the data collection instruments in pragmatic research being questioned about its reliability is the Discourse Completion Test (henceforth DCT).

According to Kasper and Dahl (1991), DCT along with role play serves as one of the major data collection instruments in pragmatic research. They define DCT as a written questionnaire

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containing short descriptions of a particular situation intended to reveal the pattern of a speech act being studied.

There are five types of DCT. Firstly is the classic format. In the classic DCT, the prompt is ended by a rejoinder and/or initiated by interlocutors' utterance.

Example 1:

Walter and Leslie live in the same neighborhood, but they only know each other by sight. One day, they both attend a meeting held on the other side of town. Walter does not have a car but he knows Leslie has come in her car.

Walter : _____
Leslie : *I'm sorry but I'm not going home right away.*

(Blum Kulka , House, and Kasper 1989)

The second type is dialogue construction, which may be commenced by an interlocutor initiation. However, the rejoinder is not present.

Example 2:

Your advisor suggests that you take a course during summer. You prefer not to take classes during the summer.

Advisor : *What about taking a course in the summer?*
You : _____

(Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1993)

The next type is open item-verbal response only. In this format,

participants are free to respond without any limitation from an interlocutor initiation and rejoinder. However, they are required to provide verbal response.

Example 3:

You have invited a very famous pedagogue at an institutional dinner. You feel extremely hungry, but this engineer starts speaking and nobody has started eating yet, because they are waiting for the guest to start. You want to start having dinner. What would you say?

Safont-Jordà 2003)

The fourth type is open item free response construction. In this type, participants are free to give verbal response or non-verbal response and even allowed not to respond at all.

Example 4:

You are the president of the local chapter of a national hiking club. Every month the club goes on a hiking trip and you are responsible for organizing it. You are on this month's trip and have borrowed another member's hiking book. You are hiking by the river and stop to look at the book. The book slips from your hand, falls in the river and washes away. You hike on to the rest stop where you meet up with the owner of the book.

You: _____

(Hudson, Detmer, and Brown 1995)

The last type of DCT is the new version of DCT developed by Billmyer

and Varghese (2000). This “new” type is actually a modification of open item-verbal response. The difference is that in the new version, situational background is provided in details as seen in the following example.

Example 5:

Old version

A student in the library is making too much noise and disturbing other students. The librarian decides to ask the student to quiet down. What will the librarian say?

(Billmyer and Varghese 2000)

Example 6:

New version

It is the end of the working day on Friday. You are the librarian and have been working in the University Reserve Room for two years. You like your job and usually the Reserve Room is quiet. Today, a student is making noise and disturbing other students. You decide to ask the student to quiet down. The student is a male student who you have often seen work on his own in the past two months, but today he is explaining something to another student in a very loud voice. A lot of students are in the library and they are studying for their midterm exams. You notice that some of the other students are looking in his direction in an annoyed manner. What would you say?

(Billmyer and Varghese 2000)

DCT was first used by Blum-Kulka (1982) to study speech acts. Since

then, DCT has been significantly employed as a method of data collection in speech acts study (Beebe and Cummings 1996). Despite its popularity as a means of data collection, several studies have discovered that DCT has some drawbacks which influence its reliability in gathering appropriate data. Therefore, this paper aims at highlighting the controversy around the use of DCT. The second aim is to critically evaluate that debate.

2. Controversy around the Use of DCT

2.1. Strengths of DCT

Manes and Wolfson (1980), Kasper and Dahl (1991), and Cohen (1996) suggest that the most reliable data collection instrument which will lead to the proximity of actual linguistic performance is authentic discourse. Unlike DCT which produces “artificial” linguistic action, data from spontaneous speeches are considered to be natural. It means that they represent authentic linguistic actions.

The strong argument presented above, however, is argued by Beebe and Cummings (1996). If the naturalness of DCT becomes the main concern, the data collected by DCT and authentic discourse will significantly differ. Yet, Beebe and Cummings’ investigation which compared the use of DCT and natural speech data collection in relation to the amount of talk and semantic formulas used by participants in refusal speech act shows that DCT in many respects accurately reflects the content expressed in natural data. Thus, both

data collection instruments will provide fairly similar results. The significant difference is only found in the length of talk and the range of formula such as avoidance strategies.

Beebe and Cummings (1996) claim that the primary reason why natural data and DCT are different is the psychological element. They note that "DCT is a written hypothetical situation so that DCT does not bring out psychosocial dynamics of an interaction between members of a group" (p. 77). In other words, there are no real consequences for both speaker and hearer on DCT since the real interaction is absence.

Beebe and Cummings claim that the absence of feeling and interaction, insufficient social and situational information such as detailed background of the event and comprehensive information on the role relationship between the speaker and the hearer lead DCT to some drawbacks. The first is actual wording in real interaction. The second is the range of formulas and strategies used such as avoidance. The third is the depth of emotion which affects the tone, content, and form of linguistic performance, and the last is the actual occurrence of speech act such as whether or not in a real situation a person produce a particular speech act (e.g. in a situation where one faces a situation which requires her/him to refuse something, s/he may opt not to refuse at all because the status of the interlocutor is higher than her/him).

Although Beebe and Cummings admit the weaknesses of DCT, they strongly support the use of DCT in pragmatic research. The naturalness is

only one of many criteria for good data. It is true that absence of naturalness leads to lack of psycho-social dimension of DCT. However, it cannot be ignored that DCT provides several important strengths. DCT allows researchers to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short time. Furthermore, they state that DCT creates model responses which are likely to occur in spontaneous speeches. DCT also provides stereotypical responses for a socially appropriate response.

According to Beebe and Cummings (1996), on one hand much attention has been paid to examine the weaknesses of DCT; on the other hand, the weaknesses of natural data are hardly discussed. Natural data clearly represent spontaneous speech; nevertheless, natural data collection is not systematic. The social characteristics of the participants such as age, ethnic group, and socioeconomic status are often unknown, and the time consuming nature of data collection are known to be the main weaknesses of natural data. The infrequent use of the speech act being studied is also another disadvantage of natural data. In Beebe and Cummings' study, some participants being observed through telephone conversation did not produce at all the refusal act although the researchers had already used every strategy to make participants utter the refusal act. The same problem is found in Béal's study (1990). In this study, participants produced only a few request acts throughout the observation period.

Another disadvantage of natural data is the inconsistency in applying ethnographic data collection methods (Beebe and Cummings 1996).

Ethnographic approaches require researchers to gather data in a speech community. However, the tendency to observe family, friends, and colleagues around researchers triggers a question about the definition of speech community. Those people around the researchers cannot always be defined as speech community, as mentioned by Beebe and Cummings (1996) that “in a large urban center, population tends to be very mobile-geographically and socially and the circle of friends and colleagues of the researcher will not necessarily share a speech variety” (p. 68). Furthermore, the use of recording devices such as video or tape recorder may make participants uncomfortable since they feel that they are being spied (Wiersma 1986). If note taking is preferred than the recording devices, its administration which merely relies on researchers’ memory causes accuracy problems.

Nelson, Carson, Al Batal, and El Bakary (2002) state that DCT is an appropriate instrument for interlanguage pragmatic research. DCT can be applied directly to participants coming from different cultural background whilst natural data cannot provide such facility since in natural data collection, participants’ variables such as status and ethnic background are difficult to control.

Based on their cross-cultural study between American and Egyptian, Nelson et al. (2002) indicate that by using DCT they can use the same situation for both Egyptian and American respondents. In natural data, it is impossible to replicate situations. Moreover, they could directly compare the strategies used by both groups in the

same situation in order to determine similarities and differences in features of speech act being studied. In brief, although Nelson et al. are fully aware of the limitation of DCT which is simplification of complex interaction, they claim that DCT still represents norms of appropriateness.

Kwon (2004) notes that DCT is a controlled elicitation data method so that DCT allows participants to vary their response because the situations are developed with status embedded in the situations. Thus, it will help the participants to distinguish which strategy is used when they encounter a situation where another interlocutor has lower, equal, or higher status.

Another advantage of DCT is that respondents will provide the prototype response occurring in one’s actual speech. Therefore, DCT is more likely to trigger participants’ mental prototype whereas natural data are more likely to bring on unpredictable and uncommon items in a speech such as repetition of certain words and back channel (Kwon 2004). Furthermore, DCT helps researchers comprehend the construction of a speech act in an authentic communication due to DCT’s nature as a prototype of actual speech acts.

Kwon (2004) indicates that DCT is an effective data collection instrument when the objective of the investigation is “to inform the speakers’ pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented, and about their sociopragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategies and linguistic choices are

appropriate” (p. 342). Based on these arguments, Kwon believes that DCT is the most appropriate instrument in his study since the purpose of his study is to reveal participants’ use of refusal strategies under given situation rather than to investigate pragmatic aspects that are dynamic of a conversation such as turn-taking or sequencing a speech.

Houck and Gass (1999) corroborate Kwon’s statement. They find that when the focus of study is on data production, data elicitation measures such as DCT is the most appropriate means because natural data cannot produce adequate data due to the infrequent emergence of the speech act being studied. However, when the study emphasizes on conversational interaction and the sequencing of the communication, an interactive procedure such as spontaneous natural speech or role play should be employed (Kasper 2000).

2.2. Weaknesses of DCT

Kasper and Dahl (1991) put DCT at the lower level of data collection method due to its weaknesses compared to other data collection method. They state that DCT is the major data collection method in interlanguage research but at the same time is also a much criticized elicitation format. Furthermore, they view that DCT, on one hand triggers productive responses; on the other hand, DCT is limited in the authenticity of the situations.

Despite having important strength promoted by DCT’s supporters, DCT carries weaknesses which, according to some studies, affect the

appropriateness of the data gathered. Brown and Levinson (1987) indicate that the hypothetical nature of situations in DCT simplify the complexity of interaction in real conversations. Moreover, they point out that what people claim they would say in the hypothetical situation is not necessarily what they actually say in the real situation.

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) discover that DCT elicits narrower range of semantic formulas and fewer strategies than the natural data. In addition, DCT is not able to bring out the extended negotiation which commonly occurs in authentic discourses due to the absence of interaction between interlocutors.

Rintell and Mitchell (1989) investigate output from role-play and DCT. They found that in oral-mode (role-play), participants exhibit longer responses than output from written response (DCT). It means that DCT cannot elicit comprehensive features in a speech act.

Based on studies which question the appropriateness of DCT, Kasper (2000) posits a categorization of focus and format in data collection. The following model is cited from Kasper (2000). Since the major instruments of data collection in interlanguage pragmatic are DCT, role-play, and natural data, only those three instruments are included in the model.

	Focus				Procedures	
	interaction	comprehension	production	metapragmatic	online/offline	interaction with researcher
Authentic discourse	+	+	+	-	on	-/+
Role-play	+	+	+	-	on	-
DCT	-	-	+	-	off	-

The ‘Focus’ column informs us about different aspect of language in use (i.e. interaction, comprehension, and production) or about the participant’s metapragmatic knowledge. In the ‘Procedure’ column, on/off represents whether data are collected while participants are engaged in an activity involving language use (‘online’) or whether the participants are required to recall or create pragmatic information from memory. ‘Interaction with researcher’ indicates whether or not researcher-participant interaction is an inherent part of the procedure, such as in role-play where sometimes researchers directly take part in the role-play.

Kasper’s categorization shows that authentic discourse possesses the most complete features whereas the least features are owned by DCT. In other words, Kasper suggests that the best data collection method is natural data. However, admitting weaknesses of natural data, Kasper finds that the most appropriate elicited data method which can substitute authentic discourse is role-play. From her categorization, it can be seen that both authentic discourse and role-play share the same features.

Kasper views that role-play produces all aspects of conversations. Role-play allows the emergence of spontaneity through the interactive

nature of role-play and is also able to capture the negotiation feature between hearer and speaker. The only different characteristic between authentic discourse and role-play is that authentic discourse is caused and developed by participants whereas in role-play research’s goal becomes the main cause of elicited conversation occurrence.

Kasper (2000) states that DCT cannot provide data associated with the dynamics of a conversation such as turn-taking and sequencing of action. DCT is also incapable in producing pragmatic cues such as hesitation, and all paralinguistic and non-verbal features.

As mentioned by Beebe and Cummings (1996), the main disadvantage of DCT is that there is insufficient social and situational interactions such as background to the event, information on the role relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and details related to the context and setting. Billmyer and Varghese (2000) point out that these insufficient backgrounds bring disadvantage to participants of a pragmatic research. They must create their own context to the DCT situations. Thus, they are required to be creative in responding the DCT situations while in natural conversation speakers have full access to contextual details.

Considering the advantages and the disadvantages of the DT, it is important to take into consideration the design of DCT so that the quality of the data can be improved. Billmyer and Varghese (2000) suggest the idea of redesigning DCT. They believe that by redesigning DCT, its adequacy to approximate authentic discourse can be enhanced. In dealing with this issue, they carried out a validation study of DCT by enriching the contextual detail of DCT prompts in request act. They find that enhancement does not affect the strategy and the amount of syntactical and lexical devices. However, a result indicates that enhancing DCT prompts produced significantly longer and more elaborated requests.

3. Evaluation

DCT may become the subject of criticism due to its hypothetical nature. However, undermining DCT is not the best way to solve the problem. Promoting DCT without considering other methods will also produce data which do not represent the real situation. One must note that every data collection instrument has its advantages and disadvantages.

It is believed that the use of more than one technique will equip researchers with significant triangulation. Triangulation allows researchers to assess the sufficiency of the data (Wiersma 1986). When the data are inadequate, they will not be consistent with the tentative hypothesis. Furthermore, he points out that triangulation will also enhance the

internal validity of the study. When a conclusion of a study cannot be drawn in confidence, there is insufficiency in research procedures. It means that the study lacks of internal validity.

Researchers must also consider the purpose of their study so that the instrument which will be used in the study fits the study's purposes. Strengths and weaknesses of DCT indicate that DCT (along with other data elicitation method such as role-play) is an appropriate data collection method when the purpose of the study is the data production.

DCT is still better than other major elicited data instruments because its efficacy in administration makes it a valuable and necessary instrument in interlanguage pragmatic research. Conversely, the administration of role-play is more complicated. Researchers need to audio or video tape and transcribe the conversation. The taping itself may be considered intrusive for participants even if the taping is fairly not disturbing. Cohen (1996) claims that "it may still make some respondents uncomfortable, at least for the first few minutes" (p. 25). Furthermore, transcribing the conversation is time-consuming procedure.

Since DCT allows researchers to collect a large amount of data in relatively short time, DCT is suitable for quantitative research. Quantitative research is usually employed in cross-linguistic study when the goal of study is to compare the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic of two different speech communities. Therefore, DCT lets researchers directly compare a large amount of data and draw generalization based on the comparison.

As mentioned by Kwon (2004), DCT triggers the prototype response occurring in one's actual speech due to its hypothetical nature. Thus, DCT reveals what participants would do not what they actually do in a given situation. By considering Chomsky's theory about competence and performance, it can be viewed that DCT measures participants' competence but it does not evaluate their performance. In other words, DCT shows which strategic and linguistic choices will fit pragmatic norms regardless of whether participants use the same strategies and linguistic forms in natural speech (Kasper 2000).

In language learning setting, DCT may be used to assess learners' sociopragmatic competence. Whether or not learners know the appropriate way to do, a particular speech act may be confirmed through DCT.

Obviously, DCT has its own drawbacks. Due to its limitation in capturing the paralinguistic features and the elaboration of the talk, DCT is not reliable and valid to be employed in a research involving dynamic conversation such as in a study which investigates mitigation and negotiation in a particular speech act.

In order to improve the quality of the data, various studies have been conducted to investigate outputs by modifying the DCT prompts. Rose (1992) finds that inclusion and exclusion of hearer's response (rejoinders) in the DCT do not have significant effects on the data elicited. In addition to that, Johnston, Kasper, and Ross (1998) discover that the type of rejoinder has an effect on the choice of strategies in a variety of speech acts. In contrast, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993)

revealed that non-native speakers' responses are similar to those of native speakers where rejoinders are available. Billmyer and Varghese (2000) investigate the effect of enriching the situation in DCT prompts towards the output. The result shows that enhancing DCT prompts produces significantly longer and more elaborated request.

The studies mentioned above indicate that further research is needed to evaluate the reliability and validity of DCT. Strengthening the design of DCT may allow this instrument to collect data more carefully and reliably in order to improve the quality of the study.

Applying multi instrument of data collection in a study will also enhance the quality of the data as well as the study. Using the strength of each instrument to cover limitation of each instrument is suggested by Cohen (1996) and Billmyer and Varghese (2000).

4. Conclusion

Current language learning trend gives attention to communicative language instruction which includes pragmatic competence. Yet, there is evidence that language learners may lack mastery of speech act and that this problem may lead to communicative breakdown (Wolfson 1989).

In dealing with the of lack mastery of speech act, researchers must determine learners' ability in performing speech acts through various measures such as authentic discourse, role-play and DCT.

Therefore, the call for research in issue of data collection method is essential since such a research will

provide evidence in relation with the validity and reliability of the instrument of data collection. When the validity and reliability of the instrument are convincing, the instrument will appropriately measure learners' pragmatic competence.

Indeed, DCT is still critically needed in pragmatic research. Up to now, there are no other data collection instruments that have as many administrative advantages as DCT so that research in pragmatic testing and teaching will still rely on it. By considering the element of validity and reliability, further research in DCT is needed. The investigation of the DCT's design will bring about a reassessment of instrument design which will lead to the improvement to the usefulness of DCT.

To sum up, the debate on DCT will still continue until new effective and efficient instrument of data collection is invented. Nevertheless, the debate has positive impacts to the development of new design of DCT. Moreover, the debate also makes researchers aware of the advantage of a multi instrument approach in data collection which definitely will enhance the quality of the data and the internal validity of the study.

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