

SPEECH ACTS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXAMINATION (*)

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ABSTRACT.

This study investigates speech acts and the pragmatic situations and measures in the English test of the foreign language examination, which is a part of the university placement test in Turkey. The study shows that pragmatic test items emerged as early as 1978, with the use of discourse completion test (DCT) items and dialogue completion test (DIA) items. These items included 20 types of speech acts, which occurred more in DCTs than in DIAs although the number of DIAs is more than DCTs. The DCT situations have developed over the years resulting in more information in DCT prompts. Items including pragmatic situations and speech acts peaked in the 1990's to account for 16% of the test, which later decreased to 10% in 2003. Although the effort of including pragmatic situations in this test could be considered worthwhile in terms of employing pragmatics in educational testing, certain factors such as poor distractors prevent most of these items from being pragmatic items.

Key Words: Foreign Language Examination, Pragmatic Measures, Speech Acts.

ÖZET.

Bu çalışmada Türkiye'deki üniversite giriş sınavının bir parçası olan yabancı dil sınavının (YDS) İngilizce testindeki söz edimler ve edimsel durum ve ölçütler araştırılmaktadır. Araştırma sonucunda edimsel soruların söylem tamamlama testi ve diyalog tamamlama testi şeklinde 1978'de ortaya çıktığı gözlenmiştir. Bu soru türleri 20 değişik söz edimi içermektedir. Bu söz edimler her ne kadar YDS'de şimdiye dek toplamda diyalog tamamlama sorularının sayısı söylem tamamlama sorularından çok olsa da söylem tamamlama testlerinde daha çok görülmüştür. 1978-2007 yılları arasında uygulanan YDS soruları dikkate alındığında, söylem tamamlama sorularında verilen durumlardaki bilgi miktarında artış gözlenmiştir. Edimsel soruların oranı 90'lı yıllarda gözle görülür bir şekilde

* Foreign language examination is a supplement to the university placement test administered nationwide in Turkey by the Student Selection and Placement Center (SSPC) for students who chose to study foreign language teaching, linguistics, literature, translation and the like.

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artmış ancak bu oran 2003 yılında tekrar düşmüştür. Edimbilimi eğitim alanındaki testlere uygulamaya çalışması açısından bakıldığında, edimsel durumları teste ekleme çabası önemli gibi düşünülse de, çeldiricilerin zayıflığı gibi belli faktörler bu soruları edimsel yetiyi hedef alan sorular olmaktan alıkoymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Yabancı Dil Sınavı, Edimsel Ölçütler, Söz Edimler.*

1. Introduction

Pragmatics could be defined as the study of language in its context of use (Cutting, 2002: 3; McNamara and Roever, 2006: 54). The field first emerged in the work of Morris (1971) and has developed mainly with the works of Austin (1962), Searie (1969; 1979), and Grice (1975). Some areas in pragmatics have gained more attention after the 1980s. One of those areas is cross-cultural pragmatics, which aims to compare performance of second language learners to that of native speakers. Initial studies in this area emerged in the early 1980s (See, for example, Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). These early studies investigated how speakers of different languages performed certain speech acts. They were able to compare pragmatic patterns of same speech acts in different languages as well as how native speakers and nonnative speakers performed them. Meanwhile, more started to be said on the communicative aspect of language proficiency, a trend initiated by the work of Hymes' (1979: 19) after his definition of communicative competence, which includes both knowledge and use. Following his work, several models or definitions of communicative competence came out (Canale and Swain, 1980; Ochs and Schiefflin, 1983; Davies, 1989; Bachman; 1990 to name a few). Among these models, Bachman's has a strong component of pragmatics, which drew attention to pragmatic competence. Such developments in the field gave way to the efforts of testing pragmatics. However, starting from then up to now, the development of communicative language testing and testing pragmatic competence is not complete (McNamara and Roever, 2006: 44). The studies that aim to test pragmatic competence usually investigated speech acts (Cohen, 2004: 302). It is understandable considering the fact that most tests of language proficiency test a limited number of language components and derive conclusions from them (McNamara and Roever, 2006: 65-70).

Speech act tests started as tests aimed to compare performances of nonnative speakers to those of native speakers, as there is a difference between how native speakers and nonnative speakers perform pragmatic actions (Cohen, 2005: 284).

According to Cohen (2005: 303), it was Fraser's study in 1980 that employed the earliest form of discourse completion tasks. However, according to Rose and Ono (1995: 192), discourse completion tasks were first introduced by Levenston in 1975.

The DCT test measure gives the test-takers a socio-cultural context in which they need to perform an appropriate pragmatic action because a person should be equipped both with the knowledge and control of linguistic and social aspects of language to be considered competent in pragmatics (McNamara and Roever, 2006: 54-55). This test measure has been widely adapted since then and different forms of it appeared. Below are two early examples.

- (1) You call from work to find out how things are at home and your kid reminds you that you forgot to take him shopping, as you had promised. And this is the second time that this has happened. Your kid says over the phone, "Oh, you forgot again and you promised!"
You:(Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; in Cohen, 2004, 304)

- (2) *At a students' apartment*

Larry, John's roommate, had a party the night before and left the kitchen in a mess.

John : Larry, Ellen and Tom are coming for dinner tonight and I'll have to start cooking soon; _____

Larry : OK, I'll have a go at it right away.

(Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984: 198)

More has been said about such elicitation tasks since the early 1980s and more versions appeared in later years (i.e. open role-play, face-to-face interview, multiple-choice DCTs, DCTs with or without rejoinders). Hudson, Detmer and Brown (1995) evaluated several versions in a comprehensive study at the University of Hawaii. Each test had both advantages and disadvantages, and also some versions were more appropriate for a given speech act than others (p. 6). Apart from their study, many other scholars critiqued or evaluated such measures and had a variety of views or research results, some of which contradict one another. Some looked at different aspects of elicitation tasks such as adding more information to the situation prompt (Varghese and Billmyer, 1996), adding a video prompt (Zuskin, 1993), adding rejoinders or multiple rejoinders (Cohen and Shively, 2002; Johnston et. al. 1998; Rose, 1992). Other researchers investigated whether these tests yield different results when administered in non-English speaking societies (Rose, 1994; Rose and Ono, 1995; Hinkel, 1997), and some others compared oral and written tests

(Sasaki, 1998; Yuan, 2003), and elicited data and natural data (Golato, 2003). What all these studies reveal is that there is not a single and set DCT type, thus, a researcher or a test developer should consider a number of variables and options listed above before constructing and administering such tests.

2. The Study

This study analyzes question types that seem to be aimed at eliciting speech acts in the foreign language examination taken for university placement in Turkey. For this purpose, the researcher first investigates the question types in the foreign language examination. Overall, three types of questions seem to aim at testing pragmatic competence. The first type is pragmalinguistic item. There were six occurrences of this type between 1977 and 1986, so they are excluded from the analysis because of their limited occurrence. The other two types have occurred more than a hundred times each, and thus, they are defined as the question types to be analyzed. A total of 262 items are analyzed. The first analysis is regarding how these 262 items have developed over the years. The second analysis, on the other hand, examines whether these 262 items target any speech acts. Based on this analysis, speech act categories are identified and their occurrences counted. Another analysis is done to see the amount of these question types and whether there is a pattern in the inclusion of such questions in the foreign language examination. Finally, length of the prompts in DCTs is analyzed. The purpose of this analysis is to see if there has been a pattern in the development of DCTs in line with the progress of literature.

3. Findings

The most common practice of using elicitation tasks for testing pragmatic competence is in research studies. There is not a common agreement on whether such elicitation tasks could be used as tests in education. Hudson et. al. (1995), for example, concludes their famous study on prototypic measures of cross-cultural pragmatics with a cautious statement. They say, “the instruments should be used for research purposes only, and no examinee level decision should be made. Further validation studies are needed before we can be sure with any certainty what the results of the tests mean” (p. 68). However, items resembling pragmatics measures emerged as early as 1977 in the university placement test in Turkey, a nationwide high-stakes test. The English test was first given in 1974, which had sections on grammar, word order, translations, and reading, all of which were composed of multiple-choice questions. The first question types that seem to aim at testing pragmalinguistic or illocutionary knowledge emerged in 1977. An example from that test is below:

- (3) "İsteksizlik" ifade eden cümle aşağıdakilerden hangisidir?
(Which one of the following sentences expresses "reluctance"?)
- A) I hope I will be forgiven for not coming.
 - B) I am looking forward to going there.
 - C) I am sorry that I was not able to go.
 - D) I cannot come though I very much want to.
 - E) I am not really interested in going there.
- (Son Hazırlık Yayınları, 2001)

In the following year, two types of discourse completion test items appeared. Below are those discourse completion test (DCT) item and dialogue completion test (DIA) item:

- (4) Mehmet's friend Ali is a director in a government office. Mehmet wants to see him; he goes to Ali's secretary and asks her:
Yukarıda verilen durumda Mehmet aşağıdakilerden hangisini sormuş olabilir?
Which one of the following questions may Mehmet ask in the given situation?
- A) The director is not here, is he?
 - B) Did you see me yesterday?
 - C) Where have you been Ali?
 - D) Should I see the director?
 - E) May I see the director?
- (5) Tom: Did you spend much this afternoon?
Robert: Oh! Yes, I bought lots of things. _____
Tom: Thank you, but I already have one. Give it to George.
Yukarıdaki karşılıklı konuşmada boş bırakılan yerde aşağıdakilerden hangisi söylenmiş olabilir?
(Which of the following is the most appropriate for the omitted part of the dialogue above?)
- A) I bought a shirt for George
 - B) Here is a camera for you, Tom
 - C) I bought nothing for you
 - D) There is a letter for you on the table
 - E) I sold your bag
- (Son Hazırlık Yayınları, 2001)

Over the years, these questions have changed a bit. The DCT items included more information in the situation given. In addition, some situations seem to be constructed based on sociopragmatic variables such as power, distance and imposition and also on politeness principle. Hudson et. al. (1995)

and Brown and Levinson (1987) assert that three factors affect performance of speech acts more than any other factors: relative power of the speaker to the addressee (P), distance between speaker and hearer (D) and the degree of imposition (R). Brown and Levinson (1987) also explain that performing pragmatic actions are performing face-threatening acts (FTAs). According to them people perform FTAs based on the politeness principle. The DCT item from the 2005 test, given below, reveals P, D, and R. It also aims to get the examinee to identify the FTA that should be performed. In this case, s/he should perform the FTA on record with redressive action (for a detailed discussion, see Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, the options given are not clearly target language phrases, or rather phrases that native speakers are unlikely to produce.

- (6) *Verilen durumda söylenmiş olabilecek sözü bulunuz.*
 (Find the expression that could be said in the given situation.)
 In a shop, you've found a pair of jeans you really like. But they cost more than you can afford. You decide to try your luck and ask the shopkeeper quite plainly to bring the price down. So, you say:
 A) They're nice, and actually they are not really too expensive.
 B) Can't you sell them to me for less?
 C) I'll take them but they are certainly not worth the price you're asking.
 D) There can't be many people prepared to pay so much!
 E) Do you always charge so much?
 (ÖSYM Arşivi)

As this study investigates the speech acts that are included in the DCT and DIA items, each item in these categories is investigated to find out what speech acts they include. In DIA items, speech acts that are not in the choices but part of the conversation are also included, as they have an impact on the omitted slot, and thus the responses. Overall, 189 occurrences are identified. These speech acts are distributed across 20 different types from request as the most common to accepting invitation, writing a get-well card and compliment response as the least common. Table I below shows the distribution of speech acts in the foreign language examination.

Table 1: Speech acts in Foreign Language Examination between 1974 and 2007

Speech Acts	Total	DCT	DIA
Request	37	27	10
Suggestion	29	16	13
Advice	28	15	13
Offer	26	12	14
Apology	10	9	1
Refusal	10	3	7
Comfort statement	8	7	1
Complaint	6	2	4
Opposition	5	3	2
Command	5	4	1
Invitation	5	4	1
Compliment	4	2	2
Congratulation	4	3	1
Request response	3	3	0
Encouragement	2	2	0
Asking for advice	2	2	0
Thanking	2	1	1
Compliment response	1	0	1
Get-well card	1	1	0
Accepting invitation	1	1	0
Total	189	117	72
		%62	%38

If this table is compared with the total number of the DCT and DIA items in the foreign language examination, it could be noticed that DCT items include more speech acts than DIA items. The number of DCT items that have been included in the test until 2007 is 126 whereas there have been 136 DIA items in the tests. Although the number of DIA items is more than DCT items, the number of speech acts in DCT items is more than DIA items. Only 38% of the speech acts came from those items. It is basically because some DIA items are only testing conversational routines.

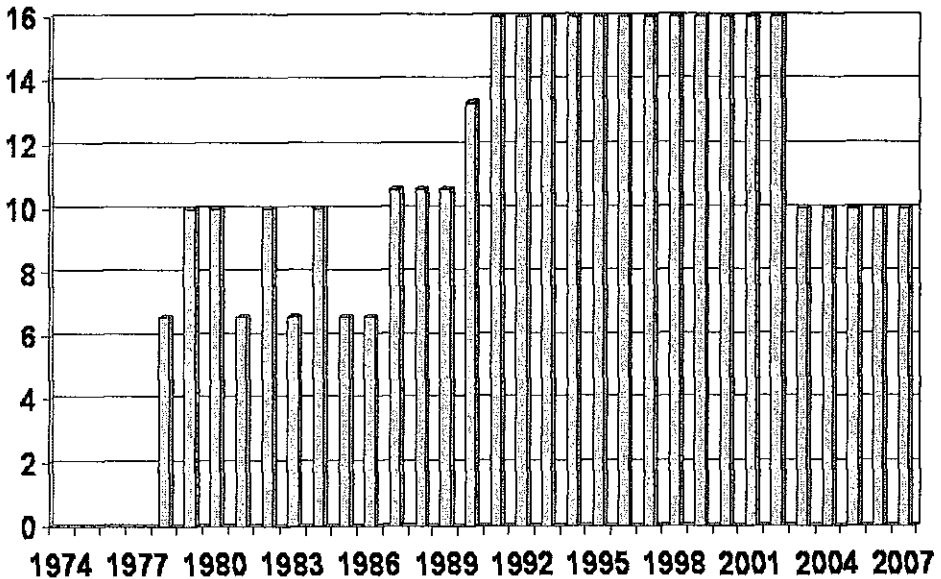
Table 2: Percentages of DCT and DIA items and the speech acts in these items.

Percentages		
	Items	Speech Acts
DCT	48%	62%
DIA	52%	38%

Another finding is that some speech acts appeared more in one question type than in the other. For example, DCT items produced requests, apologies, comfort statements, commands, invitations more frequently than DIA items, whereas offers, refusals and complaints appeared more in DIA items. This could mean that one question type would be more appropriate for some speech acts, as Hudson et. al.(1995: 6) also mention. For example, a refusal could be given in a DIA item better, as a request or offer of the interlocutor could be given as part of the dialogue. Apologies, on the other hand, are less appropriate for turn-taking although the hearer could indicate whether s/he accepts an apology or not. Also, apologies are usually performed as a complete set of apology strategies. Therefore, some question types may be more appropriate for certain speech acts.

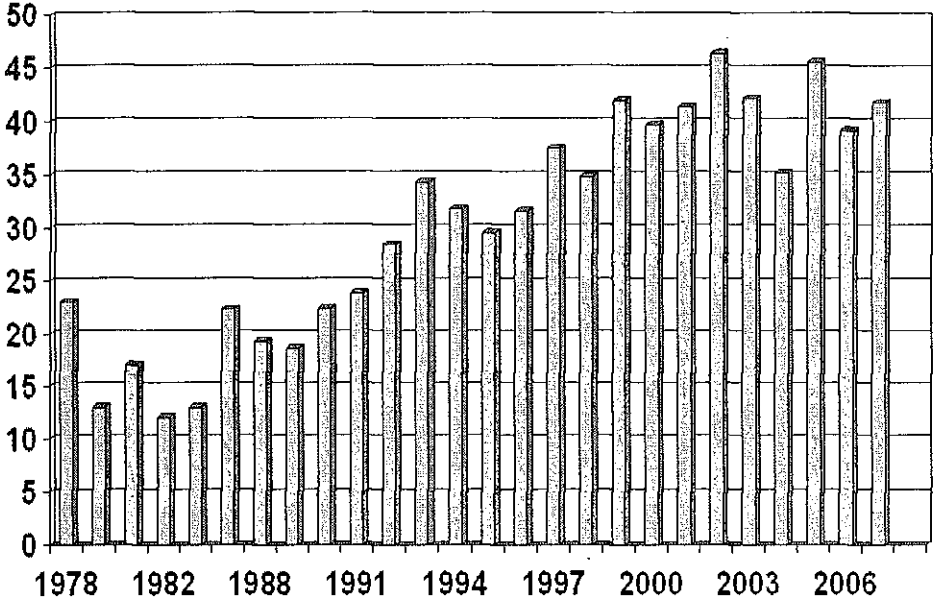
When the progress of foreign language examination is considered, the percentage of DCT and DIA items throughout the history of foreign language examination would be an interesting issue. The chart below shows the percentage of DCT and DIA items between 1974 and 2007. There was no such question type until 1978. Between 1978 and 1986, there were 30 items in the test and the number of DCT and DIA varied between 2 and 3. Starting from 1987 the number of questions increased to 75 and the number of DCT and DIA increased to 8 accounting for 10.6 % of the questions. The number of DCT and DIA increased to 10 in 1990 and 12 in 1991, accounting for 13.3% and 16 % respectively. In 1999, the number of questions increased to 100 and the number of DCT and DIA items increased to 16, still accounting for 16% of the items. Starting from 2003 to date, the number of DCT and DIA items has been 10, thus accounting for 10% of the items. The center's decision to decrease the number of items including some pragmatic aspects may be considered as a back step because there has been increasing efforts to develop tests of pragmatics and including such items in language testing (Roever, 2006; McNamara and Roever, 2006). However, the foreign language examination is necessary for college admission. Therefore, it makes sense that its focus is more on reading, because students who enter programs that offer classes in English need to succeed in academic studies and an EFL environment. Reading skills are more important than pragmatic competence in such situations.

Chart 1: Percentage of DCT and Dia Items in the Foreign Language Examination



Another interesting finding about the DCT questions in the foreign language examination is the count of words in the DCT prompt. There has been a gradual increase in the amount of information given. During the 1990s, literature about speech acts and testing pragmatics developed a lot. Many studies investigating pragmatic test measures and their validity appeared, as previously mentioned. For example, Brown and Levinson (1987), Hudson et. al. (1995), and Varghese and Billmyer (1996) discussed the factors affecting responses in such questions, and guide developers to carefully consider what kind of information should be put in the situation prompt. The development of DCTs in the foreign language examination follows the literature in this case because the average number of words, thus the information given, increased in line with the discussions of the scholars mentioned above. The chart below shows the average number of words in the DCT prompts over the years.

Chart 2: Average number of words in the DCT prompts



4. Discussions and Conclusion

The analysis above revealed that the Student Selection and Placement Center was influenced by the developments in the area of foreign language testing. This may be observed in the fact that they included questions that include pragmatic situations as the initial steps in testing pragmatic competence were being taken. However, the items that have come out of this process are not very satisfactory. It is hard to say whether the SSPC has been trying to include sections in the test to test the pragmatic competence of the examinees, but looking at the test types, it seems that they were inspired by the types of questions used in pragmatic research. The reason why they are not good examples of pragmatic items is that a multiple choice DCT item should have distractors that include pragmatic choices. The examinees should be given pragmatic choices so that s/he could access his or her pragmatic competence to decide which option is the most *appropriate* for the given situation. To illustrate, the item below is from Hudson, Detmer and Brown's study. As could be seen, all three options are request statements with different degrees of pragmatic choices. The examinee should have a certain degree of pragmatic competence to be able to find the most appropriate answer.

- (7) You are a salesperson in a gift shop. You need to get something out of a display case now. However, you are unable to get into the case because a customer is standing in the way and blocking your path.
- A: Excuse me. I need to get to the case behind you.
 - B: Excuse me. Could you clear the way? I have to get things out of the display case.
 - C: Excuse me. If it's not too much trouble, might I get into that display case?
- (Hudson et. al. 1995: 126-127)

When we look at the item below from the foreign language examination, we could easily see the difference. The situation tells us that Diana is making a suggestion. However, when we look at the choices, there is only one suggestion and all other choices are irrelevant. With only one pragmatic option, we cannot say that this item is testing pragmatic competence.

- (8) Diana is fond of watching films and knows a lot about them. Today, in the office, she is telling us about some film currently showing at our local cinema, which she reckons is well-worth seeing. She says to us:
- A) If I were you, I'd take the day off and enjoy myself.
 - B) This is a very different sort of film. I do think you should make time to see it.
 - C) It wasn't bad, I've seen much better ones.
 - D) None of you are ever enthusiastic about the films you've seen.
 - E) I agree that the quality of many of the films we have seen recently is not very high.
- (Son Hazırlık Yayınları, 2001)

The SSPC's effort of constructing pragmatic situations could have been worthwhile if they have constructed them in such a way that the examinees would have to use their pragmatic knowledge to solve them, because there are not many examples of pragmatic measures that are used for educational testing. However, with the lack of distractors, these questions only test general understanding of English. If these questions are improved as to include pragmatic distractors, then foreign language examination could be an example of an educational test that employs pragmatic questions.

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