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The assessment process as real-life performance: Rethinking assessment of pragmatic instruction in the Japanese EFL classroom

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Studies on the effectiveness of pragmatic teaching involve students answering multiple choice questions based on scenarios presented, finishing discourse completion tests (DCTs) that describe a situation and require students to write possible responses (Kim, 2007), or demonstrating ability through role-plays in a classroom environment. Although the assessment strategies used by Takimoto (2009b) and others (e.g. Ishihara, 2011) to document the impact of pragmatics instruction in the Japanese classroom are efficient, they lack the capacity to both measure the application and the transferability as demonstrated in real-life settings. The study reported here addressed these gaps by creating and testing an applied performance test whereby Japanese English learners cooperated in the negotiation and structure of verbal encounters in the target language. The assessment process involved creating a situation where greetings were necessary to avoid an impolite or socially uncomfortable experience and using a rubric for assessing how students managed the speech act exchange. The results demonstrate that the test enabled the Japanese students to demonstrate their competence in using American English greetings, especially an introductory greeting in a lifelike setting. Feedback from participants also suggests that the test provided a meaningful learning experience and an increase in metacognitive awareness.

Keywords: pragmatics; speech acts; greetings; assessment; EFL; Japan

Introduction

Pragmatic instruction is important for any speech act (e.g., greetings, requests, apologies, or compliments) where students gain awareness of the function of the speech act and learn how to make appropriate choices to successfully participate in it (Zeff, 2016). When students first learn to use a language function in the classroom, teachers need effective ways to assess their ability. Typical methods for determining the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction as a teaching strategy are computer-based discrete point tests, discourse completion tests (DCTs), and role-play where students are asked to prepare answers for a given situation using specific expressions and phrases Teachers well acquainted with the use of prosody, politeness, and appropriateness in a given speech act can observe student using them in lifelike ways in the classroom. When students apologize for tardiness, request more time to complete a task, or simply greet in the hallway, teachers are able to assess their abilities.

Instruction in the production of language functions is crucial for EFL students to develop pragmatic speech acts that can be used fruitfully outside the classroom. Recent trends in language instruction in Japan have been to use communicative language teaching (CLT) to enhance the classroom experience albeit with mixed results and few

concrete improvements (Humphries, Burns, & Tanaka, 2015). Takimoto (2009b) focused on using comprehensible input in the form of explicit pragmatic instruction to learn bi-clausal expressions such as politeness markers in request forms. To assess the impact of the explicit pragmatic instruction, he used pre-, post-, and follow-up tests. The test tools to measure input were an acceptability judgment test (AJT) and a listening test (LT). To measure output, he used DCTs and role-play (RP) tests. His study suggested that pragmatic instruction had positive effects on the development of pragmatic awareness regarding requests. However, recognizing that testing situations are not the real world and that there are differing roles of sociolinguistic variables in real-life (Kim, 2007), some researchers have sought to improve DCTs by making them more realistic in relation to the speech act. The study reported here created and tested an applied performance testing situation that approximated a real-life encounter; it required students to speak appropriately within the context of genuine communication, thus enabling them to demonstrate their pragmatics proficiency.

This assessment process was developed by examining greetings, which are naturally occurring, contextually connected communications that are radically different in Japanese and American English. In Japan, greeting practices are complex primarily because there are culturally required honorifics connected to appropriate means of address, and Japanese greetings are fundamentally grounded and determined by a hierarchical system of status (Burdelski, 2013; Okamoto, 1997). In American English, no such rules exist surrounding greetings, making the greeting speech act somewhat tricky for Japanese users of English. The primary rule is that an initiated greeting requires a response. The complexity of its socio-pragmatic function and yet commonplace nature in everyday communication made the greetings speech act ideal for developing and testing a real-life setting assessment process.

The greetings speech act in Japan

Takimoto's (2009b) study of the "requesting" speech act was not the first to document the positive effect of pragmatic instruction in the Japanese classroom. By examining EFL students' ability to give and respond to compliments after explicit pragmatic instruction, Ishihara (2011) showed that "instruction probably facilitated learner's improvement not only in terms of performance but also awareness of giving and responding to compliments" (p. 75). Even though pragmatic language instruction plays a minor role in Japan (Ishihara, 2010; Kakiuchi, 2005), the call for its use and its demonstrated impact are well established (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Lyster, 1994; Matsumura, 2003).

Greetings are an important and necessary pragmatic speech act for Japanese EFL students. American English greetings especially challenge Japanese students. When two English-speaking people from the United States connect, a greeting should normatively occur unless some context exists that would prevent this from happening, such as a noise distraction (Goffman, 1971). However, greetings in Japan are different because social context is highly visible in Japanese greetings (Matsumoto, 1988) When an exchange is necessary, the person of lower status must wait until the person of higher status acknowledges the relationship. This acknowledgement might be a slight nod of the head serving as a micro-greeting, thus successfully meeting the conditions for greetings. Whereas in the West a nod is an upward motion of the head, in Japanese it is a downward motion signifying a bow. Because of the complicated nature of the bow in Japanese culture (De Mente, 1990), language students' understanding of the Western use of this micro-greeting can be problematic. Indeed, it was confusing even for former

US President Obama during his 2009 meeting with the Emperor of Japan, leading to a situation termed Bow-Gate by the press. Regardless of the formality of the context, it is culturally important for language students to perform speech acts in a way that is polite and appropriate.

An online survey of 75 native English-speaking EFL teachers throughout Japan (unpublished) showed they perceived a problem with the English greeting practices of native Japanese speakers' across a range of social contexts. When asked about how their students returned greetings in English, 32% (n=36) of respondents reported receiving contextually unexpected return greetings and 14% found the greetings to be non-proficient or unnatural. Respondents' comments indicated the greeting speech act was mostly conducted without complex routines. They specifically mentioned the case of addressing a professor without a title (i.e., "Smith" instead of "Professor" or "Mr. Smith"), receiving a response of "Good morning" regardless of the time of day, and experiencing confused or shyly proffered greetings particularly in less common contexts or in response to nonstandard greetings. By far the biggest indicator of problematic greeting practices occurred when respondents were approached by people unknown to them; fewer than 10% (n=36) of responses were termed unproblematic while close to 40% (n=36) were considered inappropriate. Such problems indicate a need for real-life greetings instruction.

Ebsworth, Bodman, and Carpenter (1996) identified eight varieties of greetings commonly used in American English. Three types of greeting cause Japanese students particular difficulty, not because of a lack of knowledge concerning appropriate vocabulary or phrases, but because of the situational element of the exchanges and a general lack of pragmatic instruction in them. The researchers named these greetings the *introductory greeting,* the *chat,* and *greeting on the run*. In American English, the introductory greeting often engages eye contact, followed by a temporal greeting expression such as "Good afternoon" and concludes with an expression like "Nice to meet you". The chat in American English typically occurs when people with some relationship have a brief conversation, but it can also occur between strangers. The greeting on the run (also called a passing greeting by Goffman, 1971) occurs when participants do not stop to talk beyond an initial acknowledgement (Ebsworth et al., 1996), for example, a simple nod of the head.

These greeting types present difficulties for Japanese EFL students because they fall outside the typical Japanese social context and have different sociolinguistic elements from those found in Japanese greetings. They are particularly challenging for Japanese students because of a lack of pragmatic instruction in the textbooks generally used in Japanese schools (Kakiuchi, 2005). Additionally, they are challenging to learn and perform appropriately without the contextual awareness that comes from pragmatic instruction. Such greetings are especially useful for measuring pragmatic ability.

Real-life assessment

An effective real-life assessment has two main requirements. First, it requires an experience as close to real life as possible, in which greetings are genuinely necessary to avoid an impolite or socially uncomfortable experience. The value of using a "real-life performance" is that it creates a "situation in which proficiency is normally demonstrated" (Clark, 1975, p. 26). Second, it requires a method for measuring how the students manage the speech act. The challenge for designing assessments of authentic speech acts is the difficulty of observing students in a naturally occurring setting. The assessment process must:

1. prompt students to use a specific speech act in an original and responsive manner in a way which allows them to demonstrate both ability and intention (Searle, 1969).
2. reliably enable a relevant speech act to occur so that assessment can take place (see Bella, 2014, pp. for problems encountered with assessing authentic apologies, compliments, and requests; Ishihara, 2010; Takimoto, 2009a).
3. provide students with situations where the speech act would normally occur and prompt the choice to play an appropriate role in the exchange.
4. take place within the freestyle nature of conversation. Since choice is essential in polite and appropriate language use, the occasion for making choices needs to be intrinsically part of the test.

The study reported in this paper responded to the research question:

> Can an observable, yet naturally occurring, scenario be devised to demonstrate students' use of pragmatic knowledge?

Methods

The study, conducted in 2013, used a custom-designed real-life assessment process in a university setting in Japan the context and the process are described in more detail below.

Participants and setting

The participants consisted of 36 students of mixed gender from three first-year speaking courses in the Humanities Department of a private university in Hokkaido, Japan. Students had completed an average of six years of English study and had achieved TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores of 480-520, indicating a pre-intermediate level. They had all had limited experience of communicating with native speakers of English.

Assessment process

The framework used to design the assessment process took Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) positive correlation hypothesis as its starting point, "predicting that second language proficiency is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer" (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 157). In developing this process, examples from recognized patterns of natural occurrences of the greeting speech act (Kakiuchi, 2005) and casual conversation (Ventola, 1979) were used. To this end, the choices made indicate appropriateness of the patterns used when participating in the speech act. Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, and Ross (1996) noted that awareness of relative social status, appropriateness, and politeness style can be observed in the performance of linguistic actions. The goal, therefore, was an applied performance test placing students in an actual or simulated setting where they would naturally engage in the task being assessed (Jones, 1985). The protocols were intended to prompt one or more of the three target structures of *introductory greeting, chat greeting,* and *greeting on the run*. This greetings interaction was accomplished by placing strangers in a room where the first natural interaction would be a greeting.

The testing scenario

A controlled observation of a greeting situation was created in which students were paired. To ensure a focus on greetings between people who did not know each other, non-acquainted students were paired. Since greetings occur in the first moments of an interaction, the engagement was short.

Two students were asked to enter a classroom with a short delay between them. A 13-year old female native speaker of American English was already seated in the classroom. This girl had recently arrived in Japan and was unaccustomed to Japanese styles of greeting, which allowed her to respond and interact as a typical US teenager. Although the girl was younger than the Japanese participants, her height and style of dress made her look like a peer to those Japanese university students. Participants were informed they would be recorded, but the recording device was hidden from view (following the style of Labov, 1966).

Unlike other studies (Ishihara, 2010; Takimoto, 2009b), the students received no preparation about either the context or the focus of the meeting. As is customary in American social practice, it was anticipated that when two people who did not know each other met, some greeting would occur, and that when the third person joined them, another greeting would follow. The American girl also received minimal instruction regarding language or method. She was asked to greet first only if no greeting was initiated by a participant after a delay of approximately five seconds.

It was hypothesized that when the first student entered the room and encountered a foreign girl who made eye contact, the pair would begin interacting with an introductory greeting or chat greeting (e.g., "How are you?" or "How's it going?"). Likewise, an introductory greeting could be followed naturally by a chat pattern (e.g., "Where are you from?"). When the second student entered the room, it was possible that a greeting on the run with a fellow student would occur, leading to the need to focus attention on the unique element of a foreign girl in the room. This attention might follow the chat pattern if the second student entered the conversation. However, given the natural setting, the second student also might have chosen to exchange an introductory greeting with the girl.

The scenario had several discrete actions that led to the potential for unplanned, natural greetings. The participants were gathered in a computer room where they were seated with headphones and a listening/speaking task, minimizing contact among them. The American girl was seated in a room across the hallway looking at an iPad. One participant was called to enter the room alone, while the facilitators made special efforts not to interact with that student. The accepted Japanese custom in this situation suggests the participant could either choose to greet the seated girl or to stand and wait for something to happen. The girl was instructed to make eye contact with the entering participant but not to initiate the greeting unless there was silence for about five seconds in which circumstance her most common opening greeting was "Hello". After 30 seconds, they were joined by a second participant. It was hypothesized that at this point some greetings would occur. For example, a greeting might occur between the two Japanese students if no contact had been made with the American girl, or the second Japanese student might join the conversation already underway by greeting both parties. The entire scenario lasted a maximum of three minutes, after which the American girl ended the conversation and the participants returned to the computer room.

Triangulation

This applied performance test was part of a larger study using additional research instruments which included, among others, a questionnaire asking participants about their experiences with greetings. Data from that survey provide some insights into the findings reported here and will be reported briefly.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded greetings were assessed using a rubric which recorded observations about the role and influence of context in individual greetings performances (Figure 1). The rubric was calibrated with colleagues who served as raters and revised to account for their experiences using it. It tracked the greeting strategy used as well as four criteria for evaluation: greeting timing in terms of delay in response or initiation; appropriateness of language and phrasing; active participation; and the rater's overall impression. The criteria for the rubric were adapted from research in communicative language competence testing (Paltridge, 1992; Pillar, 2012; Swain, 1985), and were used as prompts for the raters to assess numerically and by quality. Raters themselves were calibrated through a series of rubric norming sessions.

Oral Performance					
	Descriptor (points)	Descriptor (points)	Descriptor (points)	Descriptor (points)	Descriptor (points)
Greeting Timing (Delay in response or initiation)	Silence (1)	Long delay (2)	Moderate delay (3)	Minimal delay (4)	No delay (5)
Language and Phrasing (appropriateness)	Inappropriate (1)	Deficient (2)	Adequate (3)	Good (4)	Very good (5)
Active Participation	Inadequate (1)	Deficient (2)	Adequate (3)	Good (4)	Very good (5)
Overall Impression	Poor (2)	Deficient (4)	Adequate (6)	Good (8)	Very good (10)

Total Score ___/25

Strategy used

	Initiation	Participation
Introductory greeting	☐	☐
Chat greeting	☐	☐
Greeting on the run	☐	☐

Figure 1: Rubric for measuring greetings in an applied performance test

Analyzing data in interlanguage pragmatic studies has been the subject of much discussion and debate. Often, coding is based on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). For this study, segmentation with the identification of head acts for the three greeting patterns made it possible to modify the requirements. Greeting head acts, the minimum unit of recognition as a greeting (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), are comprised of a temporal context that represents either a time-free or time-bound interjection (Jibreen, 2010). Table 1 presents the head act strategies identified in the speech act of the three greetings described in this study. Coding following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), involved contextualizing the speech act, manipulating the external and internal contextual features, and adapting the cultural transposition for American English. Modified transcription methods in conversation analysis were used (Schegloff, 2007).

Table 1. Greeting head acts

Greeting Strategy	Time Bound	Time Free
Introductory greeting	Good afternoon Good morning Good evening	My name is… I am… Nice to meet you.
Chat greeting	Good afternoon Good morning Good evening	How's it going? How are you? What's up?
Greeting on the run	Good afternoon Good morning Good evening	Hey Hello

Results

Only 4 of the 36 participants (12%) initiated a greeting whereas the remaining 32 participants (88%) participated in but did not initiate any greetings. The choice of whether to initiate was created by the interaction scenario, but students were expected to participate in some way. Fulfilling this expectation demonstrated their awareness of the context, which enabled them to demonstrate communicative competence.

Table 2. Frequencies of strategies (n=36)

Greeting Type	Frequency
Introductory greeting	36
Chat greeting	20
Greeting on the run	7

All three greeting types were used, although not in equal proportions (Table 2). All 36 participants used introductory greeting patterns. This basic strategy was expected because of the attention formal introductory greetings are given in High School English: they included using both the first and last names. 34 participants (94%) used the expression "Nice to meet you," and only 2 (6%) completed the adjacent pair with "Nice to meet you, too." In lower scoring exchanges , participants typically remained silent until the native speaker initiated the conversation. Chat greetings were second most common and these have notably been part of the recent CLT curriculum in high school. Greetings on the run were lowest in frequency and are not addressed in the high school CLT curriculum. Raters observed close to three seconds of hesitation before participants opened the conversation (see, Example 1). The act of hesitation or immediacy of greeting was key to demonstrating whether the student had the ability to participate with some awareness of this introductory greeting pattern. As an element of testing, increased hesitation received a lower score.

Example 1: Introductory greeting[1]

01 S1   (3.1)/ Hello.
02 NS   He↑llo↓. (2.1)
03 NS   Hi my name is (FN).
04 S1   Ah, (0.2) [my] name is (.) (FN).(LN)=
             =>nice to meet you<
05 NS   Nice to meet you too. (3.2)

Key: NS = native speaker, S1 = the first non-native speaker to enter the room.

Because all the participants either initiate or participate in the introductory exchange, the chat greeting was not as prevalent in the data. A chat exchange can be seen in Example 2. Here, the first adjacency pair involved a repair pattern at 02 seconds in which "Hi" was replaced for "Halo." A second repair at 09 seconds occurred with an attempt to change the question formation, yet the mistake of using "what" instead of "where" occurred. Neither of these repairs affected the flow of the conversation. In addition to the basic patterns from high school, some students used alternate patterns, such as "How are you?" One key point of the assessment was the increase in adjacent pairs included in chat type greetings. Some longer pauses within the framework of the greeting may indicate direction choice at 09 seconds but did not affect the overall flow. It should also be noted that a chat greeting when used by native speakers can have a longer exchange and allows an exchange of information which can be seen here.

In terms of natural American English greetings the chat pattern (see Example 3) was the most natural as indicated by the raters. Walking into a room in which another person sits should produce a simple greeting that acknowledges the other person and some form of approach pattern as described by (Ventola, 1979). Two students introduced a pattern consisting of the phrase "What's up?" followed by the exchange of information.

Example 2: Introductory greeting followed by a chat pattern

01 NS   (1.5) Hello.
02 S1   (1.0) Halo. (( ))
        (.5) >Hi↑<
03 NS   Oh hi.
04 NS   My name is (First name)
05 S1   ahh. And my name is (First name)(Last name)
06 NS   Yeah↑, nice to meet you.
07 S1   Nice to meet you. (..) Um oh how are↑ you↓
08 NS   Good, how about you.
09 S1   I'm pretty good. (6.0) But to are you, what are you from?
10 NS   I':m from Maryland. It's in Ame:rica near Washington: DC.
11 S1   Yeah.
12 NS   Yeah, what abo:ut you↑
13 S1   Me
14 NS   Yeah.
15 S1   I am from (()).

Example 3: Chat greeting followed by an introductory pattern

01 S2   Hi.
02 NS   Hi.
03 S2   What's up? (…)
04 NS   Not much.(...) what about you?
05 S2   (hhh) fine.
06 NS   My name is (First name)., what's your name?
07 S2   My name is (First name) (Last name).
08 NS   Nice meeting you.

An interesting occurrence, as shown in Example 4, occurred regarding silence when faced with an unknown context for greetings. This example illustrates S1's greeting on the run attempt. Whereas a DCT would not be able to determine how a student might respond in that situation, this lifelike applied performance test enabled the instructor to consider why and how a response may have occurred. Both observation and later review of the rubric scorings revealed that few students were aware of the greeting on the run. The first student of the pair (S1) shown in Example 4 went so far as to introduce himself when the second student entered, but he was met with "Oh" as a response from S2 instead of an attempt to complete the second part of the adjacent pair. This failure to receive an appropriate greeting response did not affect the flow of the conversation, but it was noticed by all the raters; consequently, S2 was marked down from 4 to 3 in the overall impression section.

Example 4: Greeting on the run

01 S2   .hhh (1.8)
02 S1   ahh (.) My name is, >(FN)<
03 S2   Oh↓ (3.6)

The data from the four raters were collated, and an average score for each student in each element of the rubric was uploaded to a forum where students could see their individual scores as well as how they compared to other students. In discussion with students, areas for improvement were offered.

Participants' comments about their experiences with greetings (collected in a post-test questionnaire) included self-deprecating remarks such as "I think don't be shy" and "I learned that if I greet someone, I should speak clearly." They also revealed deeper learning. One student indicated that pragmatic speech is more than words alone: "The most important things I have learned this year about greetings is smile. Good pronounsation *[sic]* and good talking are important, but smile makes people happy, and people can talk confortable *[sic]*. So, I think smile is very important." Perhaps most interesting were the comments that directly referred to the conversation opportunity with the native speaker. One participant showed remarkable self-understanding about his experience, suggesting that it had made an impact on him: "I never met a foreigner. I was worried my English wasn't good. I didn't talk so much." Another student clearly found the experience instructive about his need to be an active part of the interchange: "I didn't know what to say to the other student." A third participant indicated pleasure and a desire for more interaction in the conversational opportunity: "I wanted more time. It was too short." These comments suggest that the conversational arrangement among the native speaker and two participants did more than test their pragmatic competence in greetings; it also taught them something about the challenges and opportunities of genuine greetings contexts and gave them a previously unknown metacognitive awareness about greetings.

Discussion

This paper reports on a study of greetings in an applied performance testing scenario that attempted to approximate a real-life pragmatics context. The findings indicate that most of the participants possessed an ability to participate appropriately when placed in a situation that required the target function of greetings with an unknown native American-English speaker. In particular, students demonstrated proficiency in initiating exchanges using an introductory greeting but less awareness of when and/or how to use the chat and greeting on the run patterns, which were explicit parts of instruction. These findings suggest that the applied performance test offered a genuine context for eliciting student greetings, and the rubric appeared to be sufficient for numerically scoring discrete elements of the greeting.

Conclusion

In this study, the real-life applied performance test and its accompanying rubric worked well for assessing greetings because they are naturally occurring and important interactional tools for communication. It may work similarly well for informal and frequent assessment of pragmatic language acts regardless of whether they are spontaneously produced for the teacher in the classroom setting or in a more controlled but equally natural response scenario such as the one described here. When instructors

create lifelike situations deliberately and repeatedly, and when they require students to make choices frequently in real-life contexts, students' language uses can become more appropriate and effortless, possibly due to metacognitive awareness; all of these may lead to the fluency and communicative competence that teachers seek for their students.

The development of the applied performance test engaging a real-life pragmatic speech setting which is reported here represents a necessary first step toward developing additional lifelike performance measurement tools for pragmatic instruction. The logical next step is to quantify the results of the assessment by examining the words used by individual students and comparing how students performed. Such data would offer researchers valuable information about how pragmatic knowledge is gained and how its use fits the rules and conditions presented. Additionally, this work would provide researchers with useful real-life setting protocols for studying the effects of pragmatic instruction in other contexts.

The test described in this study could be applied to other classroom practices of pragmatic language acts and to studies of student language competence. Additionally, such pragmatic instruction can be further tested with other Asian students who may be challenged with similar or other discrete pragmatic speech acts.

Notes
1. The examples in this paper are coded with standard Conversation analysis symbols which are explained at:
   http://www.esourceresearch.org/eSourceBook/ConversationAnalysis/10TranscriptionSymbols/tabid/531/Default.aspx

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