TITLE

Aptis General Writing Test Task 4: An analysis of test-takers' pragmatic performance and cognitive processing

This is a summary of a report by Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh and Ardi Marwan as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see
www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

We wanted to explore how Aptis test-takers tapped into their pragmatic knowledge (that is knowledge of how-to-say-what-to-whom-when) to complete AGWT Task 4. This task required test-takers to write emails to a familiar and less familiar reader to communicate a particular intention such as making a complaint, or expressing an opinion. In order to complete this task, candidates should know how to express their communicative goals effectively using appropriate registers when writing to specific readers. We wanted to know what pragmatic strategies candidates employed to communicate their intentions. An example of pragmatic strategies is expressing dissatisfaction when making a complaint, and softening the negative effect of the utterance by means of various semantic moves or lexico-grammatical features.

We also wanted to know what thought processes candidates engaged in when completing the task, and how factors such as first language backgrounds and general language proficiency affected the way candidates used language to achieve the task goals. We hoped to shed light on factors in task performance, which could be useful for both test developers in the process of test validation and teachers in the process of preparing students for the test.

We investigated three research questions:

(i) What pragmatic strategies did candidates of different first language backgrounds employ to achieve the communicative goals of AGWT Task 4?
(ii) What was the effect of general language proficiency on candidates' use of pragmatic strategies?
(iii) What were the thought processes in which candidates of different proficiency levels engaged when completing AGWT Task 4?

HOW WE DID IT:

We analysed emails written by 96 second language learners of English from two different first language backgrounds (Indonesian and Vietnamese) and proficiency levels (CEFR B1 and B2). The AGWT Task 4 used to elicit these emails focused on two language functions, i.e. making an indirect complaint to a familiar person, and a direct complaint to an unfamiliar person. There was an equal

number of candidates (n= 24) in each of the four groups: Indonesian B1-level, Indonesian B2-level, Vietnamese B1-level, and Vietnamese B2-level.

We also randomly selected 16 candidates (4 from each group) from the above pool to conduct a verbal report task. For this verbal task, a new AGWT Task 4 prompt was used. The new AGWT Task 4 also focused on direct and indirect complaints. Candidates were audio-recorded while saying aloud what they were thinking during the completion of the new writing task.

Our analysis focused on pragmatic strategies employed by the candidates in email writing, and thought processes they underwent while planning, organizing, writing, and revising their emails. Patterns found across language backgrounds and proficiency levels were subsequently submitted to statistical analyses to identify significant differences.

WHAT WE FOUND:

Research Question 1

We found no difference in the patterns of use of strategies for expressing communicative intentions between the two first language groups. Both groups seemed to have access to the same range of strategies, suggesting the universality of the strategies and cultural neutrality of the AGWT Task 4 used in our study. Further, the pragmatic strategies employed by both groups were successfully captured by our pre-determined taxonomies developed based on previous empirical research on direct and indirect complaints. This suggests that the AGWT Task 4 used in our study successfully elicited the language functions it intended to measure, thus attesting to the task construct validity.

Our close analysis of the formality degrees of the emails produced by the two groups also demonstrated that although test-takers in both groups experienced little difficulty adopting an appropriate register for their first response, it was less of the case for the second response. Email 2, representing a higher-imposition test item, seemed more challenging for them to handle. This finding is supported by previous research which predicts a higher level of difficulty for this type of test items. That test-takers' performance fit the direction predicted by an external criterion measure appeared to attest to the test's construct validity.

Research Question 2

First, we found a significant, positive relationship between candidates' AGWT Task 4 scores and their Aptis total scores, indicating a positive effect of general language proficiency on candidates' ability to accomplish the social goals set by AGWT Task 4. In other words, it can be safe to suggest that the AGWT Task 4 used in our study had a sufficiently strong discriminating power to distinguish between lower and higher proficiency test-takers.

Our close analysis of the email data indicated that B1-level candidates were generally capable of consistently using an informal style when addressing a familiar reader (Email 1), but had difficulty choosing an appropriate register when addressing an unfamiliar reader (Email 2). In contrast, B2-level candidates demonstrated an overall ability to use appropriate registers more consistently in both responses. The two groups' performance, therefore, was in line with expectations regarding levels of pragmatic performance identified respectively for their proficiency levels.

In terms of pragmatic strategies, it was found that although the two proficiency groups did not differ in the overall patterns of use, the higher proficiency candidates made significantly greater use of grammatical features such as subjunctive mood to qualify their opinions and statements, particularly

in the higher-imposition scenario (Email 2). This showed that B2-level group's performance met higher linguistic demands, which was expected of their proficiency level.

Taken together, the better performance of the higher proficiency candidates in the AGWT Task 4 seemed to attest to the discriminating power and scoring validity of the task. Also, that lower proficiency candidates experienced more difficulties with Email 2 (representing a higher-imposition) than with Email 1 (representing a lower-imposition) while this was not the case for higher proficiency candidates seemed to suggest the stronger discriminating power for the higher-imposition pragmatic test item, hence, corroborating previous second language pragmatics assessment research.

Research Question 3

We found that generally, all the processes intended by test designers (e.g. task fulfilment in terms of appropriateness of register; selection of accurate and appropriate grammatical structures and lexis to express intended meaning; selection of accurate and appropriate coherence and cohesion markers, etc.) were evident in the data of both proficiency groups. Also, while some processes (e.g. self-corrections and revision) were attended to more often by higher proficiency test-takers, others (e.g. translation) were attended to more often by lower proficiency counterparts. Taken together, these findings seemed to attest to both of the construct validity and discriminating power of the AGWT Task 4 used in our study.

Finally, our findings also showed that regardless of the proficiency levels, test-takers tended to engage more in execution than in other equally important writing processes such as planning (orientation and planning) and revision (reviewing and evaluation). When revising their work, candidates also tended to focus less on appropriate language use than on accuracy of language usage. This suggests that test-takers may need training in how to make use of writing processes, particularly in what to attend to when reviewing and evaluating their work in order to perform the task more effectively.