A Study of the Problems of Discourse Completion Tests*

Kyung Suk Kim
(Kyonggi University)


There are a lot of studies which investigated language learners’ speech behavior with the data collection method of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). It has been one of the most favored methods in the studies of Korean EFL learners’ speech performance with regard to speech acts. But those DCTs used for Korean EFL learners, particularly written DCTs, have many problems which downgrade the value of their results. The most critical problem is the feasibility of the speech situations. That is, many of the speech situations which are taken from the DCTs designed mainly for native speakers or ESL learners are not likely to happen in the real world of the Korean EFL learners. In addition to this, the limited number of speech situations for the DCTs and the very small number of sociolinguistic variables embedded in the speech situations are also crucial factors undermining the validity of the results of the studies. Along with these problems having to do with the speech situations, other problems concerning the direction for completing the discourse and the proficiency of the respondents are also dealt with. Finally, suggestions to make the DCTs a more valid means of data collection for speech behavior are provided.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although it is a rather common practice that teaching and learning second language pragmatics are based on the instinct of educators and/or researchers, many researchers have pointed out that the most authentic and reliable data in the field of pragmatics is naturally occurring speech gathered by ethnographic observation (e.g., Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Rose, 1998; Rose & Ono, 1995). However, difficulties in collecting data with this method are well-documented (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) and have led

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to the wide use of alternative methods such as interviews, role-plays, think-aloud protocols, diaries, and others. An elicitation procedure called the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) has been much favored in the studies of language use by ESL and EFL learners.

Most studies which collected data using DCTs in Korean EFL settings have adopted and/or adapted those administered to ESL learners and/or native speakers and have not questioned whether they are cross-culturally valid means of data collection. Along with the cross-cultural validity issue, many DCTs have some serious problems in their design, for example, with regard to the number of variables embedded in the speech situations, the relationship between the respondents’ proficiency and the formats of the DCT, the wording of the directions to the DCTs, and the number of speech situations in a DCT. The problems make it hard for the DCTs to elicit the use of target speech acts. This in turn poses a significant threat to the validity of the results. This paper investigates the broad range of problems of the DCTs used in the studies of language use by Korean EFL learners (e.g., Bok-Myung Chang, 2003; Jong-Im Han, 1999a, 1999b; Euen Hyuk Jung & Sang-hwa Hur, 2005; In-Gyo Jung & Byung-Kwon Jung, 2001; Insoo Ko, 1998; Young-in Moon, 1998, 2006; Young-in Moon & Hye-jung Ahn, 2005; Eun Kyung Park, 2005; Jeong-Suk Park, 2001; Mee Jung Park, 2002; Jaesuk Suh, 2006). In addition, some suggestions to make the DCTs more valid means of data collection are to be made.

II. THE DCT

A discourse completion test was first used by Levenston and Blum (1978) in an attempt to study how specific words are acquired and used by adult learners, and how such usage differs from that of native speakers. Learners were asked to fill in the blanks with one word in short texts, or “discourses.” The discourses were designed to restrict as far as possible the number of acceptable alternatives; in the ideal discourse there would be only one word which a native speaker would be likely to supply. Here is an example:

They expelled him from the university because he ______________ in all the exams. (p. 10) failed / succeeded

Since then, DCTs have been widely used in studying interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartsol, 1992; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka, 1991; Young-in Moon & Hye-jung Ahn, 2005; Sasaki, 1998; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Yuan, 2001).
1. Formats of DCTs

There are five kinds of DCTs and they differ in the degree of control on the responses the informants provide. The following three formats do not control the responses with regard to their content but can put some control on the length of the response: open-ended, oral, and cartoon DCTs. Open-ended DCTs which vary in the length of required response include a scenario that describes a speech situation with information about the setting and relationship between the interlocutors. The informants are requested to write down whatever they would say in a given situation as follows:

It is cold outside. You are on the bus. The passenger sitting next to you keeps the window open. You feel extremely cold and other people also seem irritated by the situation. You turn to the person and say ...

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______________________________
______________________________

(Young-in Moon, 2006, p. 212)

Similar to open-ended DCTs, oral DCTs provide the respondents with a description of a speech situation and require them to show a speech act performance. But instead of reading a written form, the respondents listen to a description of a speech situation or watch a scene and say what they would say in that situation into a tape recorder. Cartoon DCTs were recently developed and they are becoming popular. They use single or multiple frames. Yeo Bom Yoon and Kellogg (2002) employed a 3-frame cartoon, in each of which a different kind of speech act behavior was required: Korean translation of a two-turn dialogue for the first frame, completing the header of a scene with no words provided for the second frame, and free composition of a scene for the third frame. On the other hand, Young-in Moon and Hye-jung Ahn (2005, p. 296) used a five-frame DCT which elicited a speech act in the last frame as shown below.
There are two kinds of controlled format DCTs. In a dialogue completion type of DCT, a scenario and an incomplete dialogue which may include a missing turn are provided. And the informants are asked to fill out the incomplete part by writing in an expected speech act. A multiple-choice format DCT provides the respondents with multiple responses and asks them to choose the best possible answer. The following two examples are first a dialogue completion and second a multiple-choice format.

A: (________) having a rest?
B: That sounds good! (Bok-Myung Chang, 2003, p. 36)

Next week there is a test in a class that is difficult for you. Your friend seems to understand the class better than you. You and your friend are having lunch together. What would you say or do?
a. Could you help me study for this test?
b. I would do my best without my friend’s help.
c. I’m having a real hard time studying for the next test.
d. Help me study for the test. (Rose, 1994, p. 14)
2. Advantages and disadvantages of the DCTs

The advantages of DCTs are well summarized in Beebe and Cummings (1985). DCTs are believed to be highly effective means of:

a. gathering a large amount of data quickly;
b. creating an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategies that will occur in natural speech;
c. studying the stereotypical, perceived requirements for socially appropriate (though not always polite) response;
d. gaining insights into social and psychological factors that are likely to affect speech and performance;
e. ascertaining the canonical shape of refusals, apologies, partings, etc., in the minds of the speakers of that language. (p. 13)

The disadvantages of DCTs have been manifested in many studies. Beebe and Cummings (1985) found differences between written and oral role-plays. Among many differences, it was revealed that “written role-plays bias the response towards less negotiation, less hedging, less repetition, less elaboration, less variety, and ultimately less talk” (p. 3). As Hinkel (1997) points out, this finding indicates that it shouldn’t be assumed that DCTs may yield comparable data regardless of the mode (written or oral) and the format (open, multiple-choice, or dialogue-completion). In a comparative study of refusals in spontaneous speech and written DCTs, Beebe and Cummings (1996) showed that the DCTs did not elicit natural speech with respect to actual wording, range of formulas and strategies, length of responses (four times as many words and sentences over the phone) or number of turns necessary to fulfill a function. Nor did they adequately represent the depth of emotion and general psycho-social dynamics of naturally occurring speech. This is because respondents were addressing an anonymous fictional character and had no motivation to establish or preserve a relationship.

III. PROBLEMS OF THE DCTS USED IN KOREAN EFL SETTINGS

1. The Feasibility of Speech Situations

The biggest problem of the many items of the DCTs used in Korean EFL settings, particularly the written ones, is the feasibility of the speech situations. Some studies
employed speech situations which were likely to happen in the respondents’ real world (e.g., Euen Hyuk Jung & Sang-hwa Hur, 2005; Young-in Moon, 2006; Eun Kyung Park, 2005). Euen Hyuk Jung and Sang-hwa Hur (2005) examined the request speech act performances of Korean EFL learners and those of native speakers, using a DCT with 12 speech situations. The participants were university students in their twenties, which was taken into account when designing the 12 speech situations, all of which concerned college life (e.g., “asking a classmate that you do not personally know to share his materials with you in class,” “asking a professor that you do not personally know to let you audit his class”). In investigating apology speech act behavior, Eun Kyung Park (2005) collected data from subjects, who were married and older than 40 years, using five speech situations. All of them were likely to happen in their family and workplace as in the following example:

You are a teacher in a school. One day you get in the class ten minutes late. What do you do to your students? (p. 48)

But unlike these two studies, many studies (e.g., In-Gyo Jung & Byung-Kwon Jung, 2001; Insoo Ko, 1998; Mee Jung Park, 2002) included DCTs whose speech situations have no or little connection with the respondents’ circle of life. This is due to the fact that the studies adopted the DCTs used for native speakers or ESL learners, with no or a little adaptation to make them fit Korean EFL settings. Thus, they may not have elicited the intended speech acts or may have brought out a very limited range of responses or even the strategy of avoiding responses. The following example is taken from Mee Jung Park’s (2002) study of Korean EFL learners’ advice-giving behavior.

You are in the office of a professor. You know the professor has been working hard. The professor looks really tired and ill, and clearly does not feel well. What would you say or why would you say nothing in the situation, if the professor was?

an old distinguished professor whom you have never had contact with in person

I wouldn’t say anything, because ____________________________________________________________ (p. 77)

This situation is slightly adapted from the original one used in Hinkel (1997) in that the original library setting is changed to an office. But this situation has practically no
feasibility. How could a student who had no previous contact in person with the professor stay in his office long enough to notice that he had been working hard and he was somewhat ill? If it happened in the library as in the original situation, it might make sense. In other words, the adaptation to make it appropriate for Korean learners turned out to be worse.

The problem of feasibility of a speech situation can also be noted in the items of the DCT in In-Gyo Jung and Byung-Kwon Jung (2001). The data were collected from 30 Korean English teachers and 30 English native speakers with teaching experience in Korea. The researchers adopted the DCT from Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) study and modified the multiple choice format into an open-ended one.

Name of hearer: Richard A. McCance. He is the principal of your school.
You want to borrow his cellular phone.
You: Excuse me. I’ve got to give a call to my brother in Seoul right now.

In the situation above, it may be possible to make a request speech act in an American school setting, but there is a slight possibility that Korean school teachers would dare to ask to borrow a cellular phone from their principal. This means that the speech situation may not elicit comparable data from the two groups of respondents. Here is another example of the non-feasibility of a speech situation taken from Insoo Ko (1998):

You ask your familiar neighbor (in his 50s) to give you a ride to the airport so that you can catch an earlier flight. (p. 406)

He administered a DCT of five speech situations including the above one to Korean learners of English as a foreign/second language and also to the speakers of English as a native language. He selected five speech situations out of eight, which were used in Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper’s (1989) study of request speech behavior. He didn’t make any modification to the speech situation to suit the learners. In our society, even if the two interlocutors are acquainted, it is extremely rare to ask a ride for such a long distance. Thus, Korean young learners of EFL must have found it difficult to project themselves into the speech situation such as the one above.

2. The Number of Variables Embedded in the Speech Situations

Another major problem with the speech situations is that few researchers have taken into consideration the multiplicity of variables affecting the realization of speech acts. Some of
the most conspicuous variables in speech behavior are solidarity (which can be subdivided into length of acquaintance and interaction frequency), power, degree of imposition/privacy (hearer’s perception), gender, age, setting (time, place, and circumstances), and formality of situation. However, most of the studies of speech act behavior using the written DCTs tested the effects of only two variables, solidarity and power (e.g., Jong-Im Han, 1999a, 1999b; Insoo Ko, 1998; Young-in Moon, 1998, 2006; Young-in Moon & Hye-jung Ahn, 2005; Jaesuk Suh, 2006). Furthermore, Euen Hyuk Jung and Sang-hwa Hur (2005) included only one variable; they examined how social distance affected the request speech act performance. In addition, Jeong-Suk Park (2001) investigated the effect of status relationship, which was the sole variable in her study of the speech act of correction. In her two studies, Young-in Moon (1998, 2006) tried to investigate the effects of two variables, status and solidarity. But in her later study, she used the same speech situations as the ones employed in her former study with a slight adaptation to suit the young respondents. However, the adaptation resulted in the exclusion of the variable of solidarity in some situations as follows:

It is midnight. The person living next door, who you are acquainted with, is having a loud party. This is a frequent occurrence. It is a working night for you and you have to get up early in the morning. You knock on the door and say …

It is midnight. The person living next door is having a very loud party. He does this all the time. It is a Monday night and you have to get up early in the morning. You can’t stand this anymore. You knock on the door and say …

(Young-in Moon, 2006, p. 201)

3. The relationship between the respondents' proficiency and the formats of the DCT

Although the written DCT formats such as the dialogue-completion DCT and the multiple-choice DCT have inherent problems of delimiting the respondents in providing their own creative responses, they have been used in pragmatics studies, particularly for low proficiency learners, because they are not usually capable of providing creative responses. In other words, the two types of DCTs are not appropriate for the respondents who are able to answer in their own words. The two examples below are from Bok-Myung Chang’s (2003) list of dialogue-completion DCTs. She devised the examples based on middle school textbooks and she administered them to both middle school students and university students.
Mrs. White: Hello?
Minho: Hello. (a) I speak to Linda, please?
Mrs. White: (b), she’s out right now. Who’s calling?
Minho: This is her friend, Minho. (p. 34)

A: (c) having a rest?
B: That sounds good! (p. 36)

In the two examples, the possible responses for each blank are too controlled with regard to their length and wording. In the cases of blanks (a) and (c), only a few expressions with the length of one to two words can be supplied. For example, a single word such as ‘may,’ ‘can,’ or ‘could’ would suffice for the blank (a). Particularly, the university students are deprived of their capacity to provide their own responses. For example, they might want to add a sentence before they say ‘how about’ in blank (c). After all, the tasks cannot achieve their aim of examining how much the informants know in carrying out a certain speech act just by looking at the pre-controlled responses.

With regard to the design of a multiple-choice DCT, a special care should be taken so that the respondents are allowed to choose from various options offered by the pragmatic system of English without being coerced into making particular choices. In the following example, the respondents are requested to choose one or multiple answers. And with the exception of the choice (a), just the information about what the respondents are intended to do in the situation is described with no actual utterance provided.

You borrowed a bike from your friend. While you were riding it, the chain of the bike broke. What do you say to your friend?
(a) I say sincerely, “I’m sorry.”
(b) I explain the reason.
(c) I make reparation.
(d) I don’t think an apology is necessary. (Eun Kyung Park, 2005, pp. 48-49)

Although the respondents are allowed to choose multiple answers, it is hard to know what they would say in their own words with regard to the choices (b), (c), and (d). It may be possible for them to feel obliged to choose among the choices with no freedom to give their own answers. Research has indicated that not all English language learners wish to behave pragmatically just like native speakers of the target language (Washburn, 2001). That is, language learners may want to actively create both a new interlanguage and an accompanying identity in the learning process. Thus, learners should be provided with options in the multiple-choice DCT which can support their desire for observing native
speaker pragmatic norms or flouting native speaker pragmatic conventions without being impolite or bringing about misunderstanding.

When researchers decide how much space is needed for the respondents to write in open-ended DCTs, the respondents’ level of proficiency should be taken into consideration. In open-ended DCTs, some studies (e.g., In-Gyo Jung & Byung-Kwon Jung 2001; Mee Jung Park, 2002) provide a single line to be filled out or others (e.g., Young-in Moon, 2006; Young-in Moon & Hye-jung Ahn, 2005; Jeong-Suk Park, 2001; Jaesuk Suh, 2006) provide much space (e.g., five lines or a paragraph-long open space). Either case has a potential problem with regard to the respondents’ level of proficiency. If there is only a single line, the respondents tend to assume that a short response is required. This is a great help to low proficiency respondents because they don’t have to write elaborate responses, but at the same time it can’t elicit any further comment from advanced respondents even if they do have more to write. When there is much space to be filled out, it can be appropriate for advanced respondents to write in as much as they can. But for low proficiency respondents, the amount of space gives a burden to them so that they sometimes write in unnecessary responses or they may take the strategy of avoidance. This may be misinterpreted by the researchers such that they think the respondents don’t have enough capability to provide fully relevant responses to the situation. Therefore, the proper amount of space suiting the level of the respondents’ proficiency should be well gauged in advance in designing the DCTs. But many DCT studies with Korean EFL learners didn’t pay serious attention to this factor in designing their DCTs.

In a written DCT given to young low level learners, mainly elementary school students and some middle school students, Young-in Moon and Hye-jung Ahn (2005) provided five lines to be filled in as follows:

You borrowed a book from your friend. It was Harry Potter. You liked the book. You read it in your room. The book was very interesting. But you spilled orange juice on the book. It became dirty. Now, you give the book to your friend. What would you say to your friend?

______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

(p. 295)

It is obvious that the five lines are too much for the young low level learners to fill in. The researchers admit that an elicitation method other than the DCT needs to be developed.
for low level learners because many of them were not willing to write down a response. They may have been affected by the unintended requirement of the DCT; that is, they might have felt a lot of pressure in filling in the space. In her study on requests and complaints, Young-in Moon (2006) followed the same format. The following is one of the items of the DCT in her study whose participants were first and second year students of a high school and freshmen and seniors of a university.

Your grandfather just died and you cannot go to school tomorrow because of his funeral. However, you do not wish that you would be simply recorded as “absent” in a roll book. You go to your teacher and say …

_____________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________

(p. 212)

Unlike the two studies above, Mee Jung Park (2002) provided a short single line to be filled in by Korean graduate students who were selected on the basis of their relatively high scores on standardized tests. The mean TOEFL score of the respondents was 612.6. They must have possessed the capability of writing beyond the space provided as in the following example:

You are in a bus heading to the university. People are entering the bus, but there are not so many people on the bus so far. A person is getting on the bus, and you notice that the person’s pants are not zipped. The person walks towards your seat and is sitting next to you. What would you say, or why would you say nothing in the situation, if the person sitting next to you was …?

An old distinguished professor whom you have never had contact with in person

_____________________________________________________________

I wouldn’t say anything, because _____________________.

Your close friend

_____________________________________________________________

I wouldn’t say anything, because ____________________. (pp. 76-77)

4. The Wording of the Directions to the DCTs

A problem that has to do with the wording of the directions on DCTs must also be
pointed out in the DCTs in Korean EFL settings. Care should have been taken not to bias the informants’ responses by using pragmatic metalanguage such as *request* and *compliment*, which refer to the speech acts under study. Unless the researcher deliberately uses such a term to guide the respondents for the performance of a specific speech act (Jaesuk Suh, 2006), the use of the term should be avoided. If the terms are included in the directions, the target speech acts to be elicited become self-evident. This may allow the respondents to focus more on the form than on the content of their responses. Whereas if the terms are not used, the informants may try to infer what is required of the speech situations and might perform speech acts which are not targeted. Here is an example which uses pragmatic metalanguage in the direction.

You are a professor in a history course. During class discussion, one of your students gives an account of a famous historical event with the wrong date.
What would you say to your student to *correct* the answer?

( Jeong-Suk Park, 2001, p. 50)

In this example, if the final sentence of the direction is rewritten as “What would you say to your students regarding the answer?” the answers may show a broad range of speech acts including correction, disapproval, request (asking for a repetition to confirm the date), and others.

5. The Number of Speech Situations in a DCT

The number of situations also poses a serious threat to the validity of the results from DCTs. Many of the DCT studies in Korean EFL settings try to generalize their findings based on the data from around 10 DCT situations (e.g., Jong-Im Han, 1999a, 1999b; Euen Hyuk Jung & Sang-hwa Hur, 2005; Young-in Moon, 2006; Jaesuk Suh, 2006). But some studies employed a maximum of 5 situations (e.g., Insoo Ko, 1998; Young-in Moon & Hye-jung Ahn, 2005; Eun Kyung Park, 2005). In a written DCT questionnaire designed to elicit request strategies, Young-in Moon and Hye-jung Ahn (2005) used only 4 situations called *ruined book*, *broken vase*, *buy me PS2*, and *loud noise*. Insoo Ko (1998) employed five request situations which were chosen out of eight situations developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kapser (1989). As an extreme case, in an investigation of EFL learners’ speech act of correction, Jeong-Suk Park (2001) used only two speech situations. The small number of situations leads to the question whether the number of situations is large enough to elicit the range of realizations of a speech act; that is, whether the respondents would behave in the same way in other situations as in the situations under study. Kasper and Dahl (1991) suggest that at least 20 speech situations are needed to examine the respondents’ performance in a certain speech act.
IV. CONCLUSION

The problems of the DCTs used in the studies with Korean EFL learners, particularly written DCTs, have been discussed above. They can be summarized as the following five topics:

a. the feasibility of speech situations  
b. the number of variables embedded in the speech situations  
c. the relationship between the respondents’ proficiency and the formats of the DCT  
d. the wording of the direction to the DCTs  
e. the number of speech situations in a DCT

In the previous section, each of the problems was pointed out and suggestions to have them taken care of were made. Although each of the problems has been dealt with one by one, that doesn’t mean each one exists independently from the others. For example, when the researcher designs a DCT item, he/she has to check whether a certain speech situation is feasible taking into consideration sociocultural variables, how much space or how many alternatives need to be given in open-ended or multiple choice DCTs, what kind of direction is appropriate for the item, and how many items for a DCT is appropriate for eliciting the realizations of a speech act. When this is done, there is one more step to go through to make sure whether the DCT is sophisticated enough to elicit target speech behavior. That is, it is necessary to do a pilot study. In order to determine that the speech situations are fit for their respondents, the researchers should do a small scale study with a group of people comparable to their respondents. By adding necessary modifications upon the results of the pilot study, the DCT will be ready for use.

The suggestions given along with the problems of the DCTs in Korean EFL settings will be beneficial for researchers to develop better DCTs which can fit their target respondents. But it should be kept in mind that DCTs have some fundamental drawbacks in eliciting speech behavior, which were presented in part II. This means we had better not jump to conclusions about learners’ speech behavior based upon the results from DCTs, particularly from only one format of DCTs such as open-ended, multiple-choice, or dialogue-completion. In order to get a full picture of learners’ speech behavior and to reduce problems attached to an individual method, multiple methods need to be employed (Sahragard, 2004). The use of multiple methods is not restricted just to the various combinations of two or more formats of DCTs. In order to overcome the inherent problems of DCTs in eliciting speech behavior close to naturally occurring speech, one or more formats of DCTs are desirable to be employed together with other form(s) of data collection such as interviews, role-plays, think-aloud protocols, diaries, and so forth. The more data the researcher gets from multiple sources, the more valid and reliable the results can be.
Kim, Kyung Suk

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Kyung Suk Kim
Dept. of English Language and Literature
Kyonggi University
San 94-6, Iui-dong, Youngtong-gu
Suwon 443-760, Korea
Email: kskim@kgu.ac.kr

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