The Naturalized Role-play: An innovative methodology in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research[1]

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ABSTRACT

Research methodologies provoke much debate in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research. They have different advantages and disadvantages, though the goal of many methodologies remains the controlled elicitation of data that is comparable to real-life production. In this paper an innovative methodology of data collection is proposed—the Naturalized Role-play (hereafter NRP). This methodology is capable of realizing the desirable but virtually impossible aim of eliciting spontaneous data in controlled settings. The paper also presents two empirical studies which validate the effectiveness of this methodology in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Compliment response data collected by means of the NRP is compared with data from other major methods, which include questionnaires, closed role-plays, open role-plays and natural data recording. NRP data is also compared with real-life data from field recordings in different languages. Results show that NRP data resembles real-life data. Moreover, the NRP yields more natural and accurate pragmatic data than existing methods of data elicitation. It is also more practical and efficient than natural data recording in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research.

Introduction

Research methodologies have been a hotly debated issue in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research (For an explanation of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, see Tran, 2003c, 2004b). Pragmatics researchers are always faced with the methodological challenge, which has been sustained by the pros and cons of each major method of data collection (Tran, 2002b, 2004b). As Kasper (2000) remarked, "research into adequate data gathering methodology remains a lasting concern in pragmatics research" (p. 340). Such a concern motivated me to create the NRP.

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The methodological issue in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics

Before presenting the NRP and the empirical research testifying to its positive effects, it is necessary to present an overview and evaluation of major existing methodologies in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research because this methodological issue in the literature necessitates the design of the NRP. (For more methodological reviews, see Golato, 2003; Kasper, 2000; Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Tran, 2004b, 2004d, 2006; Trosborg, 1995).

Questionnaires

The questionnaires can be in the form of a discourse completion task (DCT) or a multiple choice questionnaire. In a DCT, a number of situations are described in writing with spaces for research participants to fill in what they would say in such situations.

The questionnaire has been the most widely-used method of data collection in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research because it is capable of collecting a large corpus of data in a short time. It also incurs low costs. Moreover, questionnaire data yields stereotyped appropriate responses (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) or stereotyped expressions of politeness in various speech communities. Questionnaires also include the generalization of semantic formulae of communicative act data and shape the structures of communicative acts under investigation as they exist in the native speakers' (NSs) mind (Cohen, 1996). Most importantly, social variables (e.g., age, gender, status or power of interlocutors, social distance, imposition of the situation, etc.) can be controlled in the design of a questionnaire. Variable controls in questionnaires shed light on the possible influence of social and psychological factors on communicative act performance (Beebe & Cummings, 1996). The control of social variables also makes it possible to compare data cross-culturally or cross-linguistically.

The most cited disadvantage of questionnaires is the fact that questionnaire data cannot be automatically equated with actual production data (Tran, 2004b). The questionnaire taps only what participants think they should say (Boxer, 1996), not what they actually say in reality. Questionnaires also attract criticism because written responses do not show discourse information such as prosodic features of speech, the number of turns taken by interlocutors towards communicative act production, conversation sequence organization, repetition, elaboration, etc.; nor do they display nonverbal features in interaction (Cohen, 1996). Among different types of DCTs, Yuan (2001) found that "the oral DCT technique is a better method than the written DCT" but compared to natural data collected through field notes and oral interviews, "the oral DCT suffers similar drawbacks as do the written DCT in that it cannot elicit elaborated negotiations and indirect compliment exchanges seen in everyday conversations" (p. 289).

When Golato (2003) compared German compliment response (CR) data collected through a DCT with those recorded in naturally occurring talk, she found some fundamental differences. For example, no DCT respondent ignored a compliment whereas participants in actual conversation did. Moreover, appreciation tokens (e.g., "thank you") occurred in DCT data but not in naturally

occurring data. In addition, the "response pursuit marker" "ne? (right?)" (p. 102) is always included in a German CR when the compliment recipient agrees with the compliment but it "occurred only once in the DCT data" (p. 109). Because of the differences between data from two methods, Golato stated that "compared with data collection instruments routinely used in conversation analytic (CA) studies, DCTs are inappropriate for studying actual language use" (p. 91).

Role-plays

Role-plays can be defined as simulations of social interactions in which participants assume and enact described roles within specified situations. There are closed and open role-plays. The closed role-play usually consists of one turn by the role-play conductor and another one by the informant in which data in focus appear. In the open role-play, participants take turns speaking leading to the production of data in focus.

The most salient advantage of role-plays is that they provide spoken data that approaches real-life performance in at least two ways. First, role-play data allows the researchers to examine not only the content of the utterance but also its discourse features such as laughter, reluctant pauses, intonation, tone, stress, turns, moves in an utterance, sequence organization, overlapping, repetition, etc. Moreover, as found by Margalef-Boada (1993), role-plays allow more negotiation, repetition and avoidance strategies than written questionnaires. Second, role-plays yield longer and more elaborated communicative act data than questionnaires (See Rintell and Mitchell, 1989). Role-plays also share with questionnaires other advantages. Not only can they be replicated, but they also allow control of social variables.

However, role-plays have some disadvantages. Like authentic data, open role-play data requires transcribing, which is time-consuming (Kasper and Dahl, 1991). The situations in role-plays, like those in questionnaires, could sometimes be unrealistic to participants (Cohen and Olsthain, 1993). Role-play data has also been criticized for being not natural enough. These disadvantages, however, are remediable.

Natural data collection

The source of natural data is usually real life. Existing means of gathering natural data include compiling field notes of real-life data and tape-recording them.

Field notes of natural data

In this ethnographic method, researchers observe real-life interactions and take notes of natural data on the communicative acts in focus.

Tape-recording natural data

Alternatively, researchers can audiotape or videotape social interactions as

often done in CA studies in order to capture data on the communicative acts in focus.

The most prominent advantage of recording spontaneous speech is that data collected is natural and contains discourse features. The natural data collecting method, however, is also subject to criticism. Although compiling field notes of real-life data and tape-recording them are different means of collecting natural data with different disadvantages, they share the following major disadvantages. First, there is little control of social variables concerning the interlocutors. According to Beebe and Cummings (1996), "many studies of natural speech have not given us scientifically collected samples that represent the speech of any identifiable group of speakers. They do not give us situational control" (p. 81). Data is thus often unsystematic (Beebe, 1992, cited in Beebe and Cummings, 1996). As a result, studies based on natural data have limited replicability and comparability across languages and cultures.

Moreover, when being used in pragmatics research, the method of recording real-life interactions involves the risk of not getting sufficient data on the communicative acts in focus after a long period of time recording authentic interactions. (See further discussion later in this paper. For my use of the term "communicative acts", see Tran, 2003c, 2004c).

The methodological issue was accented by Golato's research (2003) when she, without empirically examining data collected through other methods (e.g. role-plays, recall protocols, etc.), claimed that "DCTs and other methods of data collection" (p. 91) could only "measure phenomena other than (or additional to) actual language use" (p. 92). If true, this would be a significant concern to pragmatics researchers because one of the major aims of pragmatics research is to examine actual language use and the most commonly used methods of data collection so far have been questionnaires and role-plays.

Moreover, when reviewing previous studies of compliments and compliment responses, Golato (2003) argued that:

> "many such studies of compliments and compliment responses do not—in fact, cannot—describe actual language use, simply because their analyses are not based upon data that illustrate actual language use with sufficient granularity. In other words, due to an inappropriate choice of data collection procedure, the claims of many published articles on compliment and compliment responses may need to be attenuated" (p. 91).

Golato's article called into question the validity of the majority of pragmatics studies which were based on data elicited in controlled settings. It follows from Golato's argument that tape-recording real-life interactions as often carried out in CA studies is an appropriate means of data collection in pragmatics research because it can provide natural data on language use whereas other methods in which data is not collected in natural settings fail to yield authentic production data. However, tape-recording real-life data is not without its problems as presented above. Moreover, it is time to question whether only data collected in real life is spontaneous.

The unresolved methodological issue can be ascribed to the fact that pragmatics researchers often had to choose between collecting data in controlled

settings in order to gain control of social variables and collecting a limited amount of spontaneous data without control of social variables. Both spontaneous data and control of social variables are desirable in pragmatics research but researchers have only been able to achieve one at the expense of the other (Tran, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004d, 2006). Therefore, the NRP is suggested as a way to gain both.

The effectiveness of the NRP is validated through the comparison of NRP data and data from other methods. As can be seen from the above overview of methodologies in pragmatics research, DCTs and the method of tape-recording real-life interactions, which Golato (2003) chose to compare, were in effect two extremes. Golato did not compare data collected through other methods between these two extremes. In this research project (See also Tran, 2004d, 2006), NRP data is compared with data gathered through four other means of data collection which are questionnaires, closed and open role-plays as well as real-life data collection.

Moreover, both Golato's (2003) research and the studies presented herein are based on data on the communicative act of responding to compliments. However, while Golato's (2003) research was based on only German CR data, this project was grounded on English, Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English interlanguage pragmatic CR data. (For a review of previous studies about CRs, see Chen, 1993; Farghal and Al-Khatib, 2001; Golato, 2002, 2003; Herbert, 1986, 1989, 1990; 1991; Herbert et al., 1989; Holmes, 1986; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Saito and Beecken, 1997; Tran, 2002a; Yuan, 1996).

The NRP

The NRP (Tran 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004d, 2006) is the result of an attempt to combine the advantages of major methods discussed above and to remedy their disadvantages. Questionnaire data allows the control of social variables but their equivalence to natural data is questionable (Boxer, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Golato, 2003). Role-plays, which allow the control of social variables and are spoken, have been criticized for producing data that is not natural enough. Truly natural data, however, does not offer much control of social variables, replicability and comparability across languages and cultures. Therefore, it would be highly desirable to collect data that is as natural as possible in controlled settings. The NRP was designed to realize that aim. The term "naturalized" was used to indicate a degree to which data approaches natural data.

In this approach, spontaneous data is defined as data provided by informants who, at the time of uttering the data in focus, are unaware that such data is the focus of research and are thus not conscious of being studied in these instances. Although no distinction has been made between "spontaneous data" and "natural data" thus far, there is indeed a fine difference between them. While natural data normally comes from real life, spontaneous data does not necessarily do. The definition of spontaneous data herein agrees with the established view that data is spontaneous when participants are not aware of being observed or studied (Beebe and Cummings, 1996; Houck and Gass, 1996; Manes and Wolfson, 1981).

However, it does not necessarily mean that in order for data to be spontaneous, participants have to be unaware of being observed or studied in the whole process of interaction in which data in focus emerges. Participants may be aware of being observed or studied but not in the moments when they produce the data in focus.

At the core of the NRP is the idea of eliciting spontaneous data in controlled settings. In the NRP, informants are not aware of the research focus during their role-play performance. They are conscious of being observed and studied in the whole procedure but not in the moments when they provide spontaneous data on a communicative act in focus. In order to realize this notion, the researcher/ role-play conductor directs the informant's attention to a number of tasks that they perform during the role-play. These tasks are unrelated to the communicative act in focus and their function is to distract the informant's attention from the research focus. As interaction proceeds and when the informant is absorbed in the given tasks, the role-play conductor will lead the conversation to the point when the informant produces the communicative act in focus spontaneously without being aware that the data they produce in these instances is the focus of research.

The NRP is like an open role-play but it differs from the open role-play in that it consists of only distracting tasks for informants to perform, none of which leads to the production of data in focus. Data in focus, however, comes up spontaneously in the course of the conversation and out of no prescribed task for informants. The NRP can thus elicit more natural data and overcome the main drawback of the existing open role-plays.

The process of the NRP is illustrated in Appendix A. In this example, as the focus was on CRs, the role-play informants' attention was not drawn to CRs. It was important that they should not be aware of the research focus because if they had been conscious of it, they might have responded in the way they thought they should do rather than the way they would naturally do. Therefore, informants' attention was directed to a number of distracting tasks for them to perform such as giving directions for the other interlocutor to get to a bookshop, telling him/ her the hours of the bookshop, offering him/her a ride, double-checking where to park the car/motorcycle and expressing concern about the other interlocutor's health. When the informant was the least alert to the research focus and when it was most natural, the role-play conductor complimented the informant on his/ her (writing) skill, possession (i.e. car), appearance and clothing. The compliments were simply made to appear as a natural part of the conversation to move it forward.

While conductors play an important role in the NRP, the applicability of the method does not rely on their intuition as to how to lead the conversation to the point when informants produce data in focus spontaneously. NRP conductors are trained to gear the conversation to that point in the same way with different informants. For example, in the NRP to collect CRs (Appendix A), conductors were instructed as to when, where and how to place a compliment in the conversation. Specifically, in the first situation on campus, after some greetings, they complimented the informant, who was expecting to be asked about directions to a bookshop, on his/her published article. Then they asked for directions to get

to the bookshop and for the hours of the bookshop. When the informant offered to give them a ride and they got into the car, it gave them a chance to compliment on the car naturally. In the second situation, as the conductor (who was the host/hostess) greeted the informant (who was the guest) at the door, the conductor included a compliment on the informant's appearance. After the informant double-checked where to park the car, the conductor offered to put the informant's coat in the hall. It was then that the conductor complimented on the informant's clothes, which could be the coat, dress, shirt or tie. The informant then asked whether the conductor felt better because the former had been told that the latter was not feeling very well. Although the structure of the role-play was designed and presented to the conductors this way, they were informed that they did not have to strictly follow these steps in the conversation. However, conductors should keep in mind that these tasks were designed to give them the opportunities to place compliments naturally in the conversation. So another function of distracting tasks in the NRP is to provide conductors with the chances to tune the conversation to the points when informants produce data in focus spontaneously.

NRP situations should be carefully designed with attention to detail in order to be identified with real-life situations. The following considerations in role-play construction explain why the situations in the NRP in Appendix A were designed as they were.

First, NRP situations were designed in a way that best reflected the social reality that the role-play informants found themselves in. As informants in this research project were all university students, the setting was on campus of a university. The other interlocutor was their classmate (if they were undergraduates) or their colleague who shared the same office with them (if they were postgraduates). This means the situations were designed to work under both circumstances. Unlike normal role-plays in which informants usually have to take on roles different from their own, informants in the NRP can be themselves. They do not have to assume other social roles or positions that are not their own. Data is thus more natural (Trosborg, 1995). Moreover, the situation was designed to apply in both Australia and Vietnam. An example of the flexibility of the situation was the detail that the role-play informant drove a car (in Australia) or a motorcycle (in Vietnam).

Second, the social distance between interlocutors was described as between new colleagues because of the following reason. As Wolfson (1988) gathered research outcomes concerning non-native speakers' (NNSs') compliments, invitations, partings, refusals and disapprovals, she found that the frequency of the communicative act in focus, length of utterances and level of directness were the highest between status equals who were friends, co-workers and acquaintances; and were the lowest between intimates and between total strangers. She proposed the Bulge theory characterizing this pattern of interaction at three levels of social distances, (i.e. between intimates, between status equals, and between strangers). Therefore, when it came to making a choice among these three levels of social distance in order to limit data for specification in the present studies, the most interesting level selected was between status equals, for example,

new colleagues. It is because their relationships are the most open to redefinition and there exists among them the potential for lessening of social distance (Wolfson, 1988). The level of social distance between new colleagues also increased the authenticity of the situation because it matched with the social distance between role-play conductors and role-play informants.

Third, the NRP situations in Appendix A were designed to elicit responses to compliments on skill (i.e. writing an article which was published in a popular journal), possession (i.e. new car), appearance and clothing. These four objects of compliments were focused on because they made up over "97 percent" of naturally occurring compliments (Holmes, 1986, p. 496).

Fourth, details such as the informant's competence, new car and appearance were mentioned in order to make compliments as congruent with the informant's self-evaluation as possible. It was necessary to take into consideration the congruence of compliments and the compliment receiver's self-evaluation because it might influence the result. According to the cognitive consistency or balance theory (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Knapp et al., 1984; Saito and Beecken, 1997), people are more likely to accept what matches with their own evaluation of themselves and deny what does not. As a result, "compliments are accepted if they fit our own self-evaluation" (Knapp et al., 1984, p. 23) and vice versa.

The effectiveness of the NRP was examined in the following two empirical studies. The first one verifies the effectiveness of the NRP in cross-cultural pragmatics while the second one validates the NRP in interlanguage pragmatics.

Study 1: The NRP in cross-cultural pragmatics

In the first study, the NRP was applied in cross-cultural pragmatics. NRP CR data and real-life CR data were compared in English and in Vietnamese. Data was analyzed to examine whether the NRP worked in cross-cultural pragmatics research.

Research questions and objectives

In the first study, the following research questions were examined:
1) Can the NRP elicit data in focus without informants' awareness in cross-cultural pragmatics?
2) Does NRP data resemble natural data?

The first research question was answered through the observation and analysis of how the NRP proceeded in practice and the informants' comments on the process. Data collected through the NRP and natural data in real life were compared to answer the second research question.

Method

Participants

Forty informants participated in the NRP in the first study. Twenty of them were Australian English NSs in Australia and twenty others were Vietnamese NSs in Vietnam. In each group of NSs, the number of males and females was ten.

They role-played with conductors of the same gender who were trained to conduct role-plays naturally as outlined in the instructions and consistently with different informants. Australian English speaking conductors role-played with Australian English speaking informants, and Vietnamese speaking conductors with Vietnamese informants.

Instruments

Data was collected through the NRP (Appendix A) and through the observation and note-taking of CRs in real life. The description of the NRP situations and the cards given to Vietnamese informants were translated into Vietnamese. Each informant participating in the NRP produced four CRs to compliments on skill, possession, appearance and clothing. The total number of CRs collected was eighty CRs in English and eighty CRs in Vietnamese. Observation and field notes of CRs in real life in Australia and in Vietnam provided fifty-one natural CRs in English and forty-nine CRs in Vietnamese.

Despite disadvantages of field notes (See Golato 2003), CR data in real life was observed and taken note of instead of being tape-recorded because of the following reasons. First, it appears methodologically sound to collect a broad range of natural data which is not limited to data from only "friends and family" (Golato, 2003, p. 98) as in Golato's (2002, 2003) studies. While friends and family members are more likely to give the researcher permission to audiotape/videotape their social interactions than people selected randomly, their data is biased towards people that the researcher knows. From a researcher's perspective, it would be interesting to study data which is obtained by audiotaping/videotaping people selected at random without their knowledge because such data is really natural, but it raises an ethical issue to audiotape/videotape people without their consent.

Second, in collecting real-life CRs, observing and taking notes of naturally occurring CRs is more practical than tape-recording them because in the latter case, the researcher has to examine a large amount of recorded talk in order to identify a small number of CRs which may not be present at all. Tape-recording real-life interactions to capture data in focus is also more cumbersome than observing social interactions to take field notes of them. Moreover, CRs are usually short so they can be recorded in field notes with some degree of accuracy.

Analysis

This section explains how data in the two studies reported herein was transcribed and categorized. While some discourse features such as tone, pauses, overlaps, etc. might be missing in a broad transcription, data was transcribed broadly without CA transcriptional details because these studies were not CA ones. The NRP was audiotaped. The non-verbal behavior of the informants participating in the NRP as well as those providing real-life data was observed but no instance in which their non-verbal behavior contradicted their spoken CRs or could influence the classification of the CRs was recorded.

CR data in these two studies was categorized in terms of strategy use within the following framework of categories based on data collected. Examples (in

italics) are among the data in these studies. The underlined words in each example represent the CR strategy that the example illustrates. It is noted that there are CRs which contain more than one strategy. In the examples, A represents the compliment giver and B is the compliment recipient.

- Appreciation Token:
  A: *What a lovely dress!*
  B: *Oh.* <u>*Thank you. Thank you*</u>.

- Agreement:
  A: *Hey you're looking really well today.*
  B: <u>*Yeah*</u> *I'm happy to say that* <u>*that's correct*</u>. *Heh heh heh.*

- Disagreement:
  A: *You're looking radiant.*
  B: *Oh.* <u>*No, I don't think so.*</u>

- Compliment Upgrade:
  A: *Nice car!*
  B: *Thanks.* <u>*Brand new*</u>.

- Compliment Downgrade:
  A: *It's a really nice car.*
  B: *Oh no.* <u>*It looks like that but actually it has a lot of problems*</u>.

- Opting out:
  Opting out with laughter:
  A: *Oh, that's nice. How lovely! It's my favourite colour. I wanna buy a blue car one day.*
  B: <u>*Heh heh*</u>.

  Opting out with filler(s):
  A: *I was just reading your paper, that paper you submitted to the journal the other day. It was really good.*
  B: <u>*Uhm*</u>.

  Opting out without anything/No acknowledgement:
  A: *I read your article the other day, too. It was really good.*
  B:

  Opting out with topic change:
  A: *I like your lovely dress.*
  B: <u>*I heard that you (were) not well last time. So do you feel well now?*</u>

Findings and discussion

The NRP fulfilled its aim of eliciting data in focus without informants' awareness at the success rate of 100%. As the debriefing sessions following the NRP revealed, none of the informants in the NRP was aware of their CRs being the research focus. According to their speculations, the focus was on their interaction or on their use of language. More specifically, they guessed what was being observed was how they gave directions, offered somebody a lift, etc. These

were exactly the tasks which were intentionally included in the NRP to distract informants' attention from the research focus. So these tasks fulfilled their purpose and the NRP fulfilled its aim. A positive answer can be offered to the first research question in the first study.

Concerning the second research question, CR data collected through the NRP and natural data in English and in Vietnamese were compared to see whether NRP data resembled natural data both in English and in Vietnamese. Table 1 presents the frequency of use of each strategy in NRP data and natural data in English and in Vietnamese. For each strategy, both the raw data and the percentages of data out of the total number (n) of CRs in each group were reported.

Table 1 shows the close resemblance between English data collected through the NRP and those through real-life observation and note taking. While there might be fine-grained differences in terms of manner of production that the broad transcription did not capture, salient similarities lie in the frequency rankings of various CR strategies. Among English NRP data, Appreciation Token (61.25%) was used the most often and next was Agreement (28.75%) and then Compliment Upgrade (11.25%). Compliment Downgrade and Disagreement were rare among the English data. English natural data yielded the same results. The most commonly used strategy in English natural data was Appreciation Token (66.67%) and the next commonly used ones were Agreement (31.37%) and Compliment Upgrade (9.8%). Compliment Downgrade was also rare and no Disagreement was found in English natural data. No instance of use of Opting out was found in either English NRP data or English natural data.

Table 1 also indicates that Vietnamese NRP data closely resembles Vietnamese natural data. Both in Vietnamese NRP data and in Vietnamese natural data, Compliment Downgrade (36.25% in NRP data and 40.82% in natural data)

Table 1

Comparison of the frequency of use of each strategy in the CR data collected through the NRP and real-life CR data in English and in Vietnamese

Strategies	English NRP data	English natural data	Vietnamese NRP data	Vietnamese natural data
	n=80	n=51	n=80	n=49
Appreciation Token	49 61.25%	34 66.67%	4 5%	1 2.04%
Agreement	23 28.75%	16 31.37%	0 0%	0 0%
Disagreement	1 1.25%	0 0%	27 33.75%	17 34.69%
Compliment Upgrade	9 11.25%	5 9.80%	0 0%	0 0%
Compliment Downgrade	3 3.75%	3 5.88%	29 36.25%	20 40.82%
Opting Out	0 0%	0 0%	18 22.50%	9 18.37%

and Disagreement (33.75% in NRP data and 34.69% in natural data) were the most frequently used strategies. Compliment Upgrade and Agreement were not found in either Vietnamese NRP or Vietnamese natural data. Opting out, however, occurred in both the Vietnamese NRP (22.5%) and the Vietnamese natural data (18.37%). Following are some examples showing the similarities between NRP data and natural data in English and in Vietnamese.

- English NRP data:
  A: *You're looking good this evening.*
  B: *Oh, thanks.*
- cf. English natural data:
  A: *You look great.*
  B: *Thank you.*
- Vietnamese NRP data (with the English translation):
  A: *Chac chac. Cai ao cua ban thiet la het say.* [Wow. Your dress is really fancy.]
  B: *Dau co. Coi vay chu minh hang dom lam. Gia cung re re ha.* [It's not. It looks like that but the material is very bad. The price is also very cheap.]
- cf. Vietnamese natural data:
  A: *Cai ao bo mac dep thiet do!* [What a beautiful dress you're wearing!]
  B: *Dep gi ma dep. Do cu lam roi.* [It's not beautiful. It's very old.]

So in English and in Vietnamese, CR data collected through the NRP resembles natural CR data recorded in field notes in terms of frequency of strategy use. A positive answer can be offered to the second research question in this study. As CR NRP data is remarkably similar to CR real-life data in different languages (e.g. English and Vietnamese), the NRP proves to be an efficient tool of data collection in cross-cultural pragmatics research.

Study 2: The NRP in interlanguage pragmatics

In the second study, the NRP was applied in interlanguage pragmatics. Vietnamese-English interlanguage pragmatic data on CRs was collected through the NRP as well as through other major methods such as the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play, natural data observation and recording. Data was analyzed to see whether the NRP worked in interlanguage pragmatics research.

Research questions and objectives

The second study aims to investigate the following research questions:
1) Can the NRP elicit data in focus without informants' awareness in interlanguage pragmatics?
2) Does NRP data resemble natural data better than data collected by means of other major methods such as questionnaires, closed and open role-plays?
Concerning the first research question, participants in the NRP were interviewed retrospectively to find out whether they knew what the focus of the research was and whether their CRs were spontaneous. In order to examine the second research question, data collected through the NRP, questionnaires, closed and open role-plays was compared to real-life data.

Method

Participants

    In the second study, data was gathered from seventy-four Vietnamese speakers of English as a second language (L2) in Australia. They were university students, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-one years. Their length of stay in Australia averaged one and a half years. Their level of English proficiency was advanced (i.e. they had scored at least 577 for TOEFL or 6.5 for IELTS). In the closed and open role-plays as well as the NRP, Vietnamese speakers of English role-played with Australian English role-play conductors of the same gender.

Instruments

    The five instruments of data collection used were the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play, NRP, real-life data observation and note-taking. The questionnaire was a DCT and was carried out with twenty participants (ten men and ten women). Eighteen students (nine men and nine women) participated in the closed role-play and sixteen students (eight men and eight women) in the open role-play. The NRP (Appendix A) was conducted with twenty informants (ten men and ten women). The corpus of real-life data was assembled by compiling field notes on naturally occurring CRs in English by Vietnamese speakers of English in their interaction with Australian English NSs in Australia. Forty-two natural CRs were recorded.

    The questionnaire, closed role-play and open role-play were designed to elicit CRs to the same compliments on skill, possession, appearance and clothing as in the NRP in Appendix A. The details which were given in order to make compliments congruent with the informants' self-evaluation in the NRP were retained in the questionnaires, closed and open role-plays.

    The questionnaire and the closed role-play (See Appendix B) were the same but were implemented differently. The questionnaire was sent to respondents to collect their written responses. In the closed role-play, participants were given a card with all the situations and the printed open dialogues. The role-play conductors said their lines and the informants gave their oral responses.

    It should be noted that the instructions and situations in the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play and NRP were described in Vietnamese to Vietnamese speakers of English. In most studies in this field, NNSs read or listen to the description of questionnaire or role-play situations in the target language. The situations written in the L2 provide vocabulary "clues for how to respond" and informants may pick them up (Cohen, 1996, p. 29). Informants are likely to use certain words just because they appear in the description of situations in the L2. That may affect their data and consequently the results of analysis. Therefore, the description of situations was translated into Vietnamese for Vietnamese informants in order to avoid this contaminating effect.

    In the open role-play (See Appendix C), the role-play conductor was given a card with the description of situations and the role-play informant another card with the reverse description of the same situations. They were asked to have a conversation. The conversation was not limited to any topic. Just as in the NRP, the focus on CRs was not made explicit to informants in the open role-play.

However, the difference between an open role-play and the NRP is that the latter, as opposed to the former, includes distracting tasks and more information than merely what is necessary for the participants to produce the data in focus. The inclusion of such extra tasks for the purpose of distracting informants' attention from the research focus is characteristic of the NRP, but not of the open role-play. Therefore, distracting tasks were not included in the open role-play in this study.

Findings and discussion

The NRP was found to work well in practice with the interlanguage group. Retrospective interviews with participants in the NRP indicated that none of them was aware of the research focus during their performance. The NRP could thus elicit spontaneous interlanguage pragmatics data in focus without informants' awareness.

CR data collected by means of the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play, NRP, real life observation and recording was categorized in terms of strategy use based on the framework presented in the first study. Table 2 shows the comparison of corpora of data collected through these different methods.

As shown in Table 2, NRP data resembles real-life data better than questionnaire, closed role-play and open role-play data. NRP data shows a striking similarity to natural data whereas questionnaire, closed and open role-play data distinctly differs from natural data in terms of frequency of use of most CR strategies.

Data collected through different methods did not vary in terms of the use of Compliment Upgrade and Agreement. Table 2 indicated that in all corpora of data collected by means of different methods, there was no Compliment Upgrade

Table 2
Comparison of the frequency of use of each strategy in the CR data collected through the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play, NRP and real-life data by Vietnamese speakers of English

Strategies	Questionnaire data	Closed role-play data	Open role-play data	NRP data	Natural data
	n=80	n=72	n=64	n=80	n=42
Appreciation Token	67 83.75%	57 79.17%	31 48.44%	19 23.75%	9 21.43%
Agreement	0 0%	2 2.78%	1 1.56%	3 3.75%	1 2.38%
Disagreement	10 12.5%	8 11.11%	12 18.75%	25 31.25%	14 33.33%
Compliment Upgrade	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Compliment Downgrade	12 15%	13 18.06%	14 21.88%	27 33.75%	15 35.71%
Opting Out	0 0%	0 0%	5 7.81%	13 16.25%	6 14.29%

and no Agreement (in questionnaire data) or only a few Agreements (in data collected through other methods). The fact that Vietnamese speakers of English did not use Compliment Upgrade and seldom used Agreement could be attributed to pragmatic and discourse transfer because the Vietnamese NSs did not use these two strategies either (cf Table 1). (For my use of the term "pragmatic and discourse transfer", see Tran, 2003d, 2004c, 2004d, 2006).

Apart from the above two CR strategies, Table 2 features a strong resemblance between NRP data and natural data as well as remarkable differences between questionnaire, closed and open role-play data and natural data in regard to all other strategies (i.e. Opting out, Disagreement, Compliment Downgrade and Appreciation Token).

Opting out was not used at all by participants in both the DCT (as also found by Golato, 2003; cf Ross, 1994) and the closed role-play. A plausible explanation is that the design of the questionnaire and closed role-play discourages the use of this strategy. In the questionnaire, a line was given in each situation for participants to fill in what they thought they would say. So they would find it inappropriate not to say anything. In the closed role-play, participants had to say something in response to a turn spoken by the role-play conductor. Consequently, participants were bound to say something. In reality, however, they might choose not to say anything. The frequency of use of Opting out in the NRP (16.25%) was close to that in real-life data (14.29%). Although the use of this strategy was found in open role-play data (7.81%), the number of times it occurred in open role-play data was only half the number of times it did in NRP data or in natural data. Therefore, with reference to the use of Opting out, NRP data closely resembled natural data. Open role-play data differed from natural data. Questionnaire and closed role-play data was in stark contrast to natural data.

Moreover, the frequency of use of Disagreement and Compliment Downgrade in questionnaire, closed and open role-play data was obviously different from that in natural data whereas these strategies were used at almost the same frequency in the NRP as in real life. The number of times Disagreement and Compliment Downgrade occurred in questionnaire and closed role-play data was approximately half the number of times they occurred in natural data. In contrast, the frequency of use of Disagreement (31.25%) and Compliment Downgrade (33.75%) in NRP data strongly resembled the frequency of use of Disagreement (33.33%) and Compliment Downgrade (35.71%) in natural data. Therefore, regarding Disagreement and Compliment Downgrade, NRP data resembled natural data the most. Questionnaire and closed role-play data was the least similar to natural data. Open role-play data was in between.

The use of Appreciation Tokens characterizes the most interesting difference between questionnaire, closed and open role-play data and real-life data as well as the most significant similarity between NRP data and natural data. Table 2 revealed that the number of Appreciation Tokens in natural data (21.43%) was about one fourth of that in questionnaire data (83.75%), was nearly one third of that in closed role-play data (79.17%), was approximately half of that in open role-play data (48.44%) and was almost equal to that in NRP data (23.75%).

The finding that the number of Appreciation Tokens in DCT data was considerably higher than that in natural data was in agreement with Golato's (2003) finding. Accordingly, as regards the use of Appreciation Tokens, NRP data was almost the same as natural data. Open role-play data resembled natural data much less. Questionnaire and closed role-play data was in sharp contrast to both natural and NRP data.

The following are some examples showing how different questionnaire, closed and open role-play data are from NRP and natural data. The examples also show how similar NRP data is to real-life data. All of them were collected from Vietnamese speakers of English.

- Questionnaire data:
  A: What a nice car you've got!
  B: Thank you.
- Closed role-play data:
  A: What a nice car you've got!
  B: Thanks.
- Open role-play data:
  A: It's a nice car. I really like it.
  B: Uhm thanks.
- NRP data:
  A: It's a really nice car.
  B: Oh no. It looks like that but actually it has a lot of problems.
- Natural data:
  A: Cool car! Looks really good.
  B: Not at all. It caused me a lot of trouble.

The NRP is a valid methodology in interlanguage pragmatics because it can help gather accurate data on pragmatic and discourse transfer whereas other methods of data elicitation cannot. The validity of the NRP is further demonstrated in the contrast between data collected through the questionnaire, closed role-play, open role-play and natural data as well as the similarity between NRP data and real-life data in terms of pragmatic and discourse transfer of such CR strategies as Disagreement, Compliment Downgrade and Appreciation Token.

The analysis of the use of Appreciation Tokens by Vietnamese speakers of English resulted in the findings that compared to other methods of data elicitation, the NRP yielded the most accurate data on pragmatic and discourse transfer. The amount of transfer found in NRP data was almost the same as that in real-life data. Open role-play data did not exhibit accurate pragmatic and discourse transfer data. Questionnaire and closed-play data even failed to display pragmatic and discourse transfer in the communicative act of responding to compliments.

A plausible reason can be offered to explain why NRP data and natural data can provide more accurate information on pragmatic and discourse transfer than other methods of data collection. It is because in the NRP and in real life, informants are not aware of what the researcher is focusing on in their speech. Therefore, the data in focus that they provide is more natural and reflects pragmatic

and discourse transfer more accurately. Pragmatic and discourse transfer was not uncovered in questionnaire and closed role-play data because of the following reason. The Vietnamese speakers of English might have learnt that the appropriate and common reply to a compliment in English is "Thank you". In the questionnaire and closed role-play, they would not have any difficulty in figuring out that the research focus was on their CRs. Therefore, they just applied what they learnt by simply saying "Thank you". Such brief replies are considered not interactive because communication would stop there and they "create distance rather than solidarity between native and nonnative speakers" (Wolfson, 1989, p. 229). In the questionnaire and closed role-play, however, there is no opportunity for further communication.

In the open role-play, pragmatic and discourse transfer was found but the transfer data was not sufficient or accurate because the open role-play does not include extra tasks to distract informants' attention from the research focus. Even when the research focus is not stated in the open role-play, the design of the open role-play still allows informants to figure out what the researcher is looking at.

In the NRP, informants, whose attention is distracted from the research focus through extra tasks, are not aware of what the researcher focuses on, thus producing more natural production data and more accurate data on pragmatic and discourse transfer. So the NRP not only yields data which resembles real-life data better than other major methods of data elicitation (i.e. questionnaires, closed and open role-plays) but also provides more accurate data on pragmatic and discourse transfer than other methods. Positive answers can be offered to both of the research questions in this study. The NRP can be considered an effective instrument of data collection in interlanguage pragmatics.

Conclusion and applications of the NRP

In this article I have proposed the NRP and presented two studies to verify its effectiveness. The NRP makes possible collection of spontaneous data in controlled settings. As demonstrated, the NRP can elicit pragmatic data in focus without informants' awareness. Its data resembles real-life data much better than data collected by means of other major methods such as questionnaires, closed and open role-plays. It also contributes to the validity of methodology in interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition research because it can uncover pragmatic and discourse transfer, which may remain undiscovered in other methods of data elicitation (e.g. questionnaires, closed role-plays) or not fully discovered in other methodological approaches (e.g. open role-plays). It is acknowledged that the NRP is subject to a number of limitations. First, it may be easier to use the NRP to collect data on responding acts (e.g. replying to compliments, invitations, offers, suggestions, apologies, thanks, etc.) than to gather data on initiating acts (e.g. requesting, apologizing, complaining, etc.). However, it is not impossible to apply the NRP to initiating acts. The point is how to design NRP situations that allow elicitation of such data without informants' awareness. That requires creative thinking on the part of researchers.

The following is a suggestion. To collect data on how a request to borrow a pen is made, for example, the researcher may ask the informant to have a conversation with them about a certain topic. At the beginning of the conversation, the researcher, who is holding a red pen on purpose, may give the informant a form to fill out his/her name and some background information. On top of the form is a line asking the informant to write in red. Informants usually do not carry a red pen with them so they would ask the researcher if they could use the researcher's red pen. Therefore, the conversation functions as a distracting task so that informants, when making a request to borrow the pen from the researcher, are not aware that their requests are the focus of the study.

Second, although attempts have been made to make the NRP as natural as possible, it is still not real-life. Given the controlled settings, the procedure itself is not spontaneous. However, what is claimed spontaneous is the data in focus (e.g. responses to compliments), not the procedure of data collection or the whole data from it. The idea of collecting spontaneous data in an unnatural context may sound astounding but it is what the NRP is about and it has been shown to work.

In addition to the demonstrated positive effects of the NRP, it is more practical and efficient than existing means of spontaneous data collection including real-life data tape-recording in pragmatics research. Although the method of tape-recording real-life interactions as often carried out in CA studies has recently been advocated in pragmatics research (Golato, 2002, 2003), the use of this method should be adopted with caution in the field of pragmatics because the nature and purposes of CA research are not the same as those of pragmatics. In CA research, the focus is on the organization of conversations, turn taking, turn construction, etc. Conversation analysts audio-tape and/or video-tape natural talk in interaction without the intention of gathering data on specific communicative acts (e.g. complimenting, requesting, apologizing, complaining, etc.). Pragmatics, however, focuses on how language is used and how communicative acts are realized. As Kasper (1992) remarked, "patterns of speech act realization are a central pragmatic concern" (p. 206). Pragmatics researchers often collect data on a certain communicative act in focus. Tape-recording authentic interactions is associated with the risk of not getting enough data in focus within a certain period of time, passive role of the researcher, little control of social variables (Cohen, 1996), non-replicability, non-comparability across studies, languages and cultures, etc. The NRP, however, can yield data that is equivalent to natural data and can remedy the problem of lack of practicality associated with field observation and real-life data tape-recording in pragmatics research.

The NRP can be used in combination with other methods, for example, real-life data collection. As Beebe and Cummings (1996) recommended, researchers should "gather data through multiple approaches since each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses" (p. 81). In the method of multiple approaches, the NRP can be the main tool of data collection providing the major corpus of data for a study while the other methods (e.g. real-life data collection) provide supplementary data.

Further research can be conducted to examine the application of the NRP in studies about other communicative acts, in other languages, with speakers of other native and target languages, with L2 learners at different levels of proficiency, etc. The validity of the NRP can certainly be testified again through repeated comparisons of data from this methodology and from existing methods of data collection especially the method of tape-recording real-life data. Moreover, data can be transcribed at a microanalytic level as in CA studies to take into consideration more discourse features.

In conclusion, with this article I wish to share with the large readership my answer to the long-standing methodological problem in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research. The NRP is more effective than existing methodologies because it can combine advantages of major methods without their drawbacks and realize the desirable aim of eliciting spontaneous data in controlled settings. Given that the hitherto unfulfilled goal of methodologies in pragmatics research is the controlled elicitation of data that is comparable to real-life production, the NRP is a step in the right direction.

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Appendix A: Naturalized Role-play

Situation 1

To the role-play informants:
The following situation describes you in a certain familiar role at school or in the society. Please listen to the description of the situation and identify yourself with the character "you" in it. If you have any question, please feel free to ask.
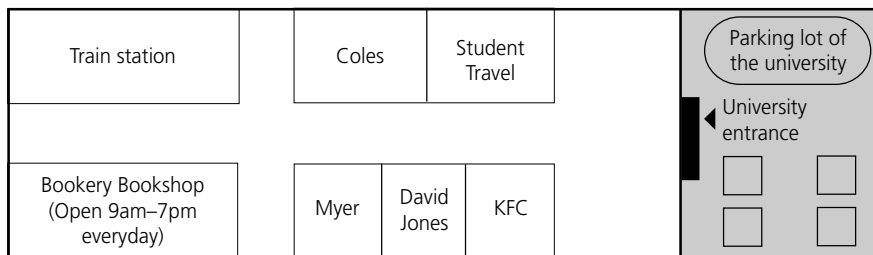
You are one of the best students in your class/office. Your articles have been published in popular journals in your field. There is a newcomer to your class/ office. You two know each other's name and have said hello to each other sometimes but have not yet had a chance to talk much.

It is now around 5pm and you are leaving school for home. You are walking in the parking lot towards your new car/motorcycle. That new classmate/colleague approaches you and says some greetings. You two talk while walking together. The social talk should include but is not limited to the following points (See the card for role-play informants below).

> In the card for the role-play informants:
> - (When being asked) Please give him/her directions to get to the "Bookery" bookshop.
> - (When being asked) Please tell him/her when the bookshop is closed today.
> - Please offer him/her a ride to get there.
>
> The directions and the hours can be found in the map below. Please make the conversation as natural as possible. Speak as you would in real life.

Train station	Coles	Student Travel		Parking lot of the university
				University entrance
Bookery Bookshop (Open 9am–7pm everyday)	Myer	David Jones	KFC	

To the role-play conductors:
It is your task to lead the conversation in a flexible and natural way. Please listen to the description of the situation and identify yourself with the character "you" in it. If you have any question, please feel free to ask.

You are a newcomer to a class/office. One of your new classmates/colleagues is a very good student with articles published in popular journals in your field. You two know each other's name and have said hello to each other sometimes but have not yet had a chance to talk much.

It is now around 5pm and you are leaving school. You want to stop by a bookshop and have heard that there is one named "Bookery" not far from school but you do not know where it is. You are passing by or taking a short cut through the parking lot and see that new classmate/colleague. You approach him/her and say some greetings. You two talk while walking together. The talk should include but is not limited to the following points (See the card for role-play conductors below).

In the card for the role-play conductors:
- Please ask for directions to get to the "Bookery" bookshop.
- Please ask him/her what time the bookshop is closed today.
- Please accept the ride there that he/she offers.
- When it is most natural during the talk, compliment him/her on:
  — his/her article published last week
  — his/her car

  Please make the conversation as natural as possible. Speak as you would in real life. It is very important that you compliment naturally and make your compliments a part of the normal social talk. Do not make it obvious that the compliments are among the tasks listed in the card for you.

Situation 2

To the role-play informants:
About a week after that situation, you were invited to a dinner party of classmates/colleagues at that new classmate/colleague's house. When he/she invited you to come over, he/she gave you a printed map showing where to park your car/motorbike. Today is the day of the party. You dressed up for the event and drove your car/motorbike there. Now you are at his/her doorstep. You two will say some greetings and talk while he/she leads you to the living room. The social talk should include but is not limited to the following points (See the card for role-play informants below).

In the card for the role-play informants:
- (At the door and after some greetings) Please check with him/her whether you have parked your car in the right place.
- (After he/she has put your coat in the hall for you) Please ask if he/she is all right/feeling better now (because you did not see him/her at the departmental seminar a few days ago and were told that he/she was not well).

  Please make the conversation as natural as possible. Speak as you would in real life.

To the role-play conductors:
About a week after that situation, you invited this new classmate/colleague to a dinner party of classmates/colleagues at your house. Today is the day of the party. Now you are greeting him/her at the door. You two will talk while you lead him/her to the living room. The social talk should include but is not limited to the following points (See the card for role-play conductors below).

In the card for the role-play conductors:
- (When being asked) Please assure him/her that he/she has parked in the right place.
- Please respond to his/her question expressing concern about your health (which is asked because he/she did not see you at the departmental seminar a few days ago and they said you were not feeling well).
- When it is most natural during the talk, compliment him/her on:
  — his/her appearance that day
  — his/her clothing (e.g. her dress or his tie)

  Please make the conversation as natural as possible. Speak as you would in real life. It is very important that you compliment naturally and make your compliments a part of the normal social talk. Do not make it obvious that the compliments are among the tasks listed in the card for you.

Appendix B: Questionnaire and closed role-play

Situation 1

You are one of the best students in your class/office. Your articles have been published in popular journals in your field. Today in the parking lot on campus you run into a newcomer to your class/office.

He/She: Hi, how's it going? I just read your article published last week. It was excellent!
You: _____

You offer to give that new classmate/colleague a ride in your new car to the bookshop where he/she would like to go to because it is on your way home.

He/She: What a nice car you've got!
You: _____

Situation 2

About a week after that situation, you were invited to a dinner party of classmates/colleagues at that new classmate/colleague's house. You dressed up for the event. You are now at his/her doorstep.

He/She: Hi! Come on in! You look great today!
You: _____

He/She offers to put your fine coat in the hall for you before leading you to the living room.

He/She: What a nice coat!
You: _____

Appendix C: Open role-play

Situation 1
To the role-play informants:
You have articles published in popular journals in your field. Today while you are walking in the parking lot towards your new car, a newcomer to your class/office approaches you. You two have a conversation.

To the role-play conductors:
You are a newcomer to a class/office. Today you happen to see a new classmate/colleague in the parking lot. Please have a natural conversation with him/her in which you will compliment him/her on his/her article published last week and his/her car.

Situation 2
To the role-play informants:
You dressed up for a party at that classmate's house. You are at his/her doorstep now. You two have a conversation.

To the role-play conductors:
You invited this new classmate/colleague to a dinner party of classmates/colleagues at your house. Now you are greeting him/her at the door. Please have a natural conversation with him/her in which you will compliment him/her on his/her appearance and clothing.