

Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Competence

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Naoko Taguchi

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Preface

Second language acquisition researchers often ask: How do people develop competence in a second language (L2)? What internal and external factors affect the development? What variations are observed in the process and outcome of the development? This book addresses such questions as they are found in the domain of interlanguage pragmatics. It presents a longitudinal study of pragmatic development among Japanese learners of English in Japan. The study was guided by two questions: (1) What pattern and rate of development can we observe across different pragmatic functions and attributes? and (2) What types of learning resources and experiences are available in the context and how do they shape developmental trajectories of individuals?

Participants were 48 Japanese students studying English in a bilingual university in Japan. They completed two pragmatic measures: a pragmatic listening test assessing their ability to comprehend conversational implicatures and a pragmatic speaking test assessing their ability to produce speech acts. These measures were given three times over one academic year in order to capture changes in their pragmatic competence. In addition to the quantitative data, this study used qualitative analyses by sampling a subset of the participants for case studies. Eight participants were interviewed for the nature of their social contacts, domains of contacts and activity types to examine the relationship between pragmatic gains and types of sociocultural experiences. Interview data were supplemented with class observations, journal entries and field notes. Through the process of synthesizing the extensive body of triangulated data, an interesting portrayal emerged about the opportunities for pragmatic practice, learners' stance in accessing the opportunities and context-specific factors that promoted or constrained the access.

Throughout this project, I have been fortunate to have the assistance and support of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank students and teachers at Akita International University who participated in this study with serious commitment. Thanks also go to faculty and staff members in the institution for their tremendous support throughout the study. I would particularly like to thank Al Lehner and Kirby Record for giving me permission to conduct this study and arranging my research stay,

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Naoko Taguchi
Pittsburgh, PA
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1 Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Development: An Introduction

Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), analogous to interlanguage grammar or interlanguage lexicon, is a branch of study in second language acquisition (SLA) that focuses on second language learners' knowledge, use and development in performance of sociocultural functions in context. The original definition of ILP can be traced back to Kasper and Dahl, who stated that '*interlanguage pragmatics* will be defined in a narrow sense, referring to non-native speakers' (NNSs') comprehension and production of speech acts, and how their L2-related speech act knowledge is acquired' (Kasper & Dahl, 1991: 216).

Two decades after this definition debuted in the field, we have accumulated a large, diverse body of international literature that has collectively expanded the scope of ILP research beyond 'comprehension and production of speech acts' and beyond an examination of pragmatic 'knowledge'. 'Ability to perform language functions' and 'knowledge of socially appropriate language use' are now defining characteristics of pragmatic competence in the theoretical models of communicative competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). These features have been operationalized in a variety of ways as measurable constructs, and specific tasks and analytical methods have since been identified to elicit and examine these constructs. Target pragmatic features investigated to date are wide ranging, including: speech acts, conversational implicature, formal vs. informal speech styles, honorifics and politeness terms, terms of address, rituals of small talk and other discourse genres, routines and formulaic expressions and conversation management devices (e.g. reactive tokens, discourse markers and turn-taking). Learners' knowledge of

these pragmatic features as well as their processing efficiency in using this knowledge in real time have been examined through a variety of methods, ranging from ethnographic studies that involve observation of naturalistic interaction to descriptive–experimental studies that use construct-eliciting instruments.

Numerous ILP studies introduced over the last few decades – whether descriptive, quasi-experimental, qualitative or quantitative – have centered on developmental issues of pragmatic competence. Such studies have addressed a range of questions about pragmatic development among individuals who have learned an additional language through various venues, such as formal schooling, sojourns or in naturalistic settings. These studies have posed many questions: Do learners register meaningful gains in pragmatic competence, outside of grammatical, lexical and phonological competence? Do they demonstrate an even pace in development across pragmatic functions, or do some functions develop more quickly than others? Does pragmatic competence develop naturally with ‘time’, or does its development require instructional intervention, feedback and modeling? Do L1–L2 similarities and differences in forms, conventions and cultural norms lead to positive or negative L1 transfer, consequently affecting the rate and patterns of development? Is pragmatic growth constrained by learners’ grammatical knowledge and general proficiency? Does exposure to target language input and learners’ amount of contact with native speakers facilitate pragmatic development, or do formal classroom settings afford ample sociocultural opportunities that lead to increased pragmatic abilities?

Accumulated research findings have, either individually or collectively, provided answers to these empirical questions. Particularly relevant to this monograph is a line of longitudinal studies, which, by definition, involve observation of the same participant(s) over an extended period of time. Ortega and Iberri-Shea (2005) proposed four criteria by which to evaluate longitudinal investigation: (1) the length of the study, (2) the presence of multiwave data collection, (3) a conceptual focus on capturing change by design and (4) a focus on establishing antecedent–consequent relationships by tracking a phenomenon in its naturalistic context. By 2010, about two dozen ILP studies conformed to these criteria. These studies have brought to light relevant insights into learners’ pathways in evolving pragmatic abilities, helping to establish causal relationships between change and time (see Chapter 2 for a review of these studies).

Development of pragmatic competence is best observed longitudinally for several reasons. First, pragmatic development is a long-term process because it requires abilities to manage a complex interplay of language, language users and context of interaction. This complexity is reflected in the distinction between the concept of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics refers to the linguistic resources available for performing language functions, while sociopragmatics refers to a language user’s

assessment of the context in which those linguistic resources are implemented (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic development entails acquisition of both these knowledge bases and efficient control of each of them in spontaneous communication. Learners need to have a range of linguistic resources, as well as the ability to evaluate layers of contextual information, select the most appropriate resources and use them efficiently. For instance, when a speaker wants to refuse someone's invitation, they need to know what syntactic forms and lexis to use. They also need to know whether such a refusal is acceptable in this particular situation in the target culture, and if it is acceptable, they need to know what language to use to express refusal to whom under what circumstances. This combination of linguistic ability and sociocultural sensitivity that is involved in pragmatic competence takes time to acquire.

The distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics also indicates that pragmatic competence may not develop hand in hand with grammatical ability. Instead, these two abilities may follow separate trajectories toward their full development. In fact, previous literature showed that while a threshold level of grammatical ability (or general proficiency) is needed for a learner to encode pragmatic functions, a high level of grammatical competence does not always guarantee a corresponding high level of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, 2000). Empirical evidence has shown that L2 learners sometimes fail to approximate native-like pragmalinguistic forms even at a rather advanced stage of L2 learning or after an extended period of residence in a target language community. For example, in a study conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) that examined the speech acts of suggestions and rejections performed by international graduate students at a US university, naturalistic data of advising sessions between the students and professors revealed little learners' progress in applying the target pragmalinguistic forms. The students gained in their ability to initiate suggestions about the courses they wanted to take and offer credible reasons when rejecting their advisors' suggestions about courses. However, they continued to use direct linguistic forms of rejections and did not employ any mitigating expressions. These findings support the assertion that grammatical competence is not sufficient for pragmatic performance. Even advanced learners who live in the target language context sometimes may fail to express pragmatic sentiments, due to their lack of understanding of L2 norms and linguistic conventions of social interaction.

Another complex aspect of pragmatic competence is its sociocultural nature. Sociocultural functions such as those found in academic advising sessions are not easy to perform because learners need to know the conventions of the advising session – the goal of the session and roles of the advisor and advisee, in addition to the linguistic forms associated with the session. Some pragmatic functions are universal but linguistic and nonlinguistic

means to practice those functions, as well as norms and conventions behind the practice, exhibit considerable variation across cultures. These observations are evident in an extensive body of literature in the field of contrastive pragmatics and cross-cultural communication (e.g. Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989; Boxer, 2002; Gudykunst & Kim, 2004). These studies revealed great variations across languages in their realizations of pragmatic acts, which are often intertwined with norms and values in a given culture. As linguistic behaviors and social conventions of speaking are not easily observable, learners often experience difficulty in noticing how people project appropriate levels of politeness or how they communicate meaning indirectly to avoid confrontation. Furthermore, learners may transfer their L1 sociocultural norms to L2 practice and end up with what Thomas (1983) calls ‘pragmatic failure’ or a failure to convey the intended meaning, which occurs when two languages operate under different conventions.

A classic example of pragmatic failure is found in a documentary about interethnic communication called ‘Crosstalk’. This video was made in the late 1970s by a sociolinguist, John Gumperz, and some of his colleagues at the University of California-Berkeley to illustrate instances of cross-cultural miscommunication between Indians and British people in England (Gumperz *et al.*, 1979). The video shows that cross-cultural miscommunication occurs at three levels: differing cultural assumptions, differing ways of structuring talk and differing ways of speaking (e.g. how to emphasize a point or use various tones of voice). For instance, in the video, an Indian applicant failed miserably at a job interview because he was not aware of certain interview conventions in British culture. Following south Asian conventions of being less direct and less presumptuous, he did not provide straightforward answers to the interviewers’ questions and failed to initiate bringing up relevant topics. As the video demonstrates, consequences of these cross-cultural miscommunications can be serious, leading to cultural stereotyping and prejudice.

Taken together, these observations found in ILP research suggest that complete pragmatic competence is an aspect of L2 abilities that take some time to acquire. Pragmatic development involves mastery of linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge and the sociocultural norms underlying them, together with efficient control of both these knowledge types when encoding and decoding language functions in social contact. Given these complexities, pragmatic development is best described from longitudinal lenses, which, by tracking learners over time, can provide fuller insights into L2 learners’ pathways toward evolving pragmatic abilities.

Contributions of this Book

This book reports a longitudinal investigation conducted in 2008 about pragmatic development among 48 Japanese students of English in an

English-medium university in Japan. Over the course of one academic year, this research traced students' progress in two aspects of pragmatic competence: pragmatic comprehension – the ability to comprehend speakers' implied meaning, and pragmatic production – the ability to produce speech acts appropriately. This study aimed at revealing patterns of pragmatic development, and individual and contextual factors that affect this development. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What patterns and rate of pragmatic development can we observe across different pragmatic functions and attributes?; and (2) What types of learning resources and experiences are available in various contexts and how do these factors shape developmental trajectories of individual learners?

The 48 participants in this study completed two pragmatic measures: a pragmatic listening test that assessed their ability to comprehend conversational implicatures and a pragmatic speaking test that assessed their ability to produce two speech acts: 'requests' and 'opinions (disagreements)'. These measures were administered three times over one academic year to capture changes in pragmatic competence. In addition, qualitative data were collected by sampling a subset of the participants through case studies. The focal informants were interviewed with regard to the nature and domains of their social contacts in order to examine the relationship between pragmatic gains and available sociocultural experiences for various individuals. Interview data were supplemented with class observations, journal entries and field notes.

This study has several merits. First, it reveals patterns of pragmatic development that have not been examined extensively in a longitudinal design. Second, the study extends beyond the usual measures of accuracy and appropriateness of pragmatic language use, by analyzing learners' processing speed in performance of pragmatic functions. Finally, this study explains, not just describes, pragmatic development, by examining factors that may be related to this development. These three lines of investigation combine to contribute to the accumulated knowledge regarding what features define pragmatic competence and what factors influence it, as well as contributing to a more robust understanding of the theoretical models of L2 proficiency. Below I will explain distinctly the features of this study, which uniquely situate it within the literature of SLA and ILP.

Contribution to Greater Understanding of the Development of Pragmatic Competence

The last few decades have seen rapid development in studies on L2 pragmatic competence. This trend corresponds to growing recognition among researchers and teachers that proficient use of a language involves mastery of functional usage of the language within a social context. Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence has had a significant impact

in shaping this recognition and has enhanced our interest in investigating L2 communicative competence. Pragmatic competence – the ability to convey and interpret meaning appropriately in a social situation – has occupied a distinct place in the theoretical models of communicative competence and attracted much interest in modern SLA research (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972).

Following these trends, over two dozen books on L2 pragmatics have been published since the 1990s. Some of these are research monographs that documented pragmatic performance of particular individuals and groups (Barron, 2003; Gass & Houck, 1999; Kinginger, 2008; Ohta, 2001; Schauer, 2009; Trosborg, 1995). Others are edited volumes with specific themes, including: cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989; Gass & Neu, 1996; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Spencer-Oatey, 2005), pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002), pragmatic teaching (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; LoCastro, 2003; Martínez Flor *et al.*, 2003; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Sóler & Martínez-Flór, 2008), pragmatic assessment (Hudson *et al.*, 1995; Röver, 2005; Yamashita, 1996), and pragmatics in institutional context (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). A few volumes have focused on pragmatics in L2 other than English (Kasper, 1992a, 1995; Márquez-Reiter & Placencia, 2004; Taguchi, 2009a). Among these books, those by Barron, Gass and Houck, Kinginger, Ohta and Schauer are the only research monographs available in the field, from which only Ohta, Barron, Kinginger and Schauer are longitudinal studies.

Ohta (2001) investigated the development of acknowledgement and alignment expressions by American learners of Japanese in a formal classroom setting. She documented developmental patterns of these two expressions, along with classroom experiences that influenced the development. Barron (2003), on the other hand, examined the development of German address forms over a 14-month study-abroad. Data elicited through discourse completion test (DCT) at seven-month intervals revealed only modest progress on learners' ability to distinguish between formal and informal address forms. Kinginger's (2008) study, another longitudinal study in study-abroad, examined the development of the knowledge of sociolinguistic variation (e.g. address forms, colloquial expressions) in L2 French in a semester-length residence in France. Pre- and post-test comparisons revealed a significant gain and considerable individual differences. Qualitative data revealed the qualities of learners' experiences, and the specifics of context and its impact on development.

This study aims to contribute to the rather limited body of longitudinal studies in ILP. Specifically, this research addresses pragmatic development in terms of both comprehension and production skills, which has rarely been explored in the literature. Longitudinal development of pragmatic competence has predominantly been studied in terms of production skills, such as production of speech acts (Barron, 2002; Schauer, 2009), reactive expressions

(Ohta, 2001) and production and perception of formal and informal expressions (Kinginger, 2008). Very few studies have examined pragmatic comprehension in a longitudinal design, and studies that have examined both comprehension and production together are even scarcer. As a result, research has not provided a comprehensive picture of the nature of pragmatic competence, namely what learners can do as producers and interpreters of pragmatic meaning. In addition, questions related to the development of pragmatic competence, for example, whether comprehension and production abilities are related to each other, or whether comprehension precedes production, still remain unanswered. To help fill these gaps in the literature, this study examines the development of pragmatic competence from two perspectives: comprehension and production of pragmatic intentions. The study documents L2 learners' ability to accurately comprehend speaker intention, ability to appropriately produce communicative intention and the degree to which these two abilities are related to each other in their stage of L2 development (see Chapter 3 for the descriptions of pragmatic comprehension and production measures).

Contribution to Greater Understanding of the Theoretical L2 Proficiency Model

This monograph uses an original theoretical framework that combines a psycholinguistic and pragmatic approach in analysis, with a goal to contribute to our understanding of what is involved in becoming a proficient L2 user. Traditionally, the acquisition of language knowledge (e.g. grammar and lexis) has been considered the end state of SLA. However, researchers have recently paid more attention to the processing dimension of language acquisition by examining how learners access and process linguistic information in real time. Language acquisition is now typically considered to have two complementary aspects: accurate demonstration of language knowledge and efficient processing of this knowledge. Analyses of linguistic knowledge and processing capacity are considered to offer alternative means for examining L2 use, and consequently provide complementary descriptions of L2 proficiency.

This partnership between competence and processing is apparent by the growing body of L2 research measuring fluency. Segalowitz (2007: 181) defines fluency as the 'aspects of productive and receptive language ability characterized by fluidity (smoothness) of performance'. The concept of processing differs from knowledge but subsumes knowledge. Language knowledge involves a variety of components, including: an underlying representation of linguistic systems (e.g. syntax, lexis), functional knowledge (form-meaning associations), knowledge of discourse (coherence and cohesion) and knowledge of pragmatic conventions (e.g. notion of politeness and rules of interaction). Fluency is thus a reflection of processing capacities in