

Pragmatics and English Language Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics generally involves how the meaning and use of language can vary depending on the context and situation of communication. Even though pragmatic knowledge is an important factor that affects communication in various social settings, it is usually considered one of the most difficult aspects to acquire, particularly for second language learners. Having pragmatic competence requires an ability to understand implied meanings, and thus, knowledge of cultural background and language skills are necessary to produce appropriate language within different cultural contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the process by which English language learners acquire pragmatic competence. Section one begins with a background into the general meaning of pragmatics. Section two discusses several factors that influence the acquisition of pragmatic competence, including learner fluency levels, sociocultural influences, and other learner variables. Section three considers specific teaching strategies for improving learner pragmatic competence including an increased use of digital technology, increased social interaction, and active classroom participation.

1. General Background

This section provides an overall background on pragmatics including how pragmatics is defined, how pragmatic competence is developed, and some approaches that are used to describe the development of pragmatic competence for second language

learning.

1.1 Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a section of linguistics that involves how language is used in social contexts and how people produce and comprehend meanings through language (Nordquist, 2019). For second language (L2) learners to process and produce socially and culturally contextualized language, they need to acquire pragmatic competence. The definition of pragmatic competence is the ability to use language appropriately and effectively according to context-oriented situations (Taguchi, 2009). This pragmatic competence is difficult for English language learners (ELLs) to acquire because in addition to cognitive processes, pragmatic competence requires an understanding of cultural backgrounds to act appropriately in various social contexts, language proficiency to convey that understanding, and the ability to use both to achieve a particular communicative objective (Taguchi & Youn, 2022).

Specifically, researchers have noted that pragmatic competence requires the competence in two types of knowledge: *pragmalinguistic* knowledge and *sociopragmatic* knowledge. Pragmalinguistic knowledge is the knowledge required to use linguistic elements appropriately in situations, whereas sociopragmatic knowledge is the knowledge of social contexts that govern appropriate language use. In other words, sociopragmatic knowledge is required to adjust speech acts in compliance with social and contextual factors (Zavialova, 2023). This type of pragmatic competence goes far beyond the lexical or linguistic knowledge

needed to understand the literal meaning of words (Harlow, 1990).

Chang (2011) examined the relationship between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence to observe which one precedes the other. She concluded that both types of competence are interdependent as opposed to independent. Consequently, several inferences can be drawn about pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and the roles they play in pragmatic competence: (1) both are important elements, (2) they interact in dynamic ways, and (3) ultimately the proper mapping of both types of knowledge is essential for pragmatic competence.

1.2 Development of Pragmatics

Many researchers have debated the developmental sequence and speed of pragmatic development in ELLs because their pragmatic sequence and speed depend on various factors, such as the context of learning and various other individual differences among learners. Nonetheless, the development of pragmatics in L2 learners has been consolidated in a general pattern by the synthesis of several research studies, and this pattern has both similarities and differences with the developmental sequence of pragmatics among first language (L1) learners (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Kasper and Rose's (2002) research focuses on results that illustrate the developmental sequence of pragmatic competence in specific areas. For example, research on the pragmatic function of requests has been compiled based on data collected by several

researchers. In general, the following five stages have been identified:

1. **pre-basic**, whereby the learners begin to form their requests using a few words that usually lack functional words;
2. **formulaic**, which includes the use of formulaic expressions commonly used in everyday situations;
3. **unpacking**, through which the learners begin to analyze the formulaic expressions and begin producing their own forms of requests;
4. **pragmatic expansion**, in which the learners learn and add new forms to their repertoire and begin expanding their knowledge; and
5. **fine-tuning**, a stage where the learners have mastered the pragmatic function of request and will be able to adjust their speech acts according to social contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002:140).

Several research results suggest that some pragmatic features develop faster than others in ELLs. For example, Taguchi's (2008) study showed that indirect opinion comprehension developed later than indirect refusal for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because of its complexity. In another study, Taguchi (2011) noted that it was easier and faster for her participants to produce and acquire knowledge in low-imposition than in high-imposition situations. In other words, high-imposition speech acts were late

emerging in the EFL learners in her study.

Although studies on the developmental sequence of pragmatics have progressed, many researchers have pointed out that more longitudinal research is still needed in this area because the question of whether learners go through similar stages of development is open to debate as many factors, especially individual learner factors play a role into the development of pragmatics, and the sequence can vary depending on the pragmatic features examined (Zavialova, 2023).

1.3 Approaches to Pragmatics

There are both cognitive and sociocultural approaches used to describe the development of pragmatic competence by ELLs. One hypothesis related to the cognitive approach is the **interaction hypothesis** which emphasizes the role of social interaction in L2 acquisition. Michael Long noted that interaction is necessary to make language input comprehensible. In interaction, learners interact with interlocutors and work together to reach mutual understanding by negotiation for meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Related to Long's negotiation for meaning, Merrill Swain has introduced a **comprehensible output hypothesis** that claims that opportunities for output encourage development as L2 learners attempt to produce language that is accurate and contextually appropriate, and in doing so, they realize their own L2 limits and find alternative ways to express meaning. Through such output, learners notice a gap in their knowledge, that is, how

their speech acts and understanding might differ compared to that of native speakers (NSs) (Gass & Mackey, 2020).

Cohen (2012) applied the interaction hypothesis to pragmatics and stated that for ELLs to fully grasp the pragmatic messages from language input, they need an understanding that goes beyond knowing the mere definitions of words. They need to comprehend how those words are used and their underlying meanings in various contexts. Other messages include body language and the use of silence in conversations. There are several individual learner factors such as learning styles that affect whether learners will experience pragmatic failures.

In terms of output, five factors have been identified that hinder comprehensible pragmatic output. These include an inappropriate transfer from L1 to L2, the ways in which L2 learners overgeneralize certain pragmatic behaviors, inability due to insufficient grammatical comprehension, the poor quality of instruction and materials exposed to L2 learners, and a low degree of acceptance to the L2 norms (Cohen, 2012).

Another major hypothesis related to the cognitive approach is the **noticing hypothesis** introduced by Richard Schmidt. The initial noticing hypothesis stated that it is essential for learners to notice the input for acquisition to occur. Following an amendment by Schmidt, the weaker version of the hypothesis stated that noticing helps acquisition but is not a prerequisite of acquisition. Furthermore, it also noted that noticing does not always lead to acquisition (Li, 2019).

Applying the initial noticing hypothesis to pragmatics implies that for normal pragmatic acquisition to occur, noticing input of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features needs to take place by ELLs. The weaker version would denote that attention to certain pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features can help facilitate learning. The noticing hypothesis differentiated between noticing and understanding in pragmatics where noticing referred to the attention devoted to the pragmalinguistic forms while the latter signified the ability to make connections between the noticed pragmalinguistic forms and their associated sociopragmatic contexts (Li, 2019). Consequently, better understanding leads to more learning than mere noticing (Li, 2019).

In addition to the above-mentioned hypothesis, one theory that has often been applied to the development of pragmatics is the Sociocultural Theory. This theory recognizes various social, cultural, and other external factors found in the learning environment. One construct in the theory is mediation. This refers to the process in which learners construe social relationships and cultural artifacts to manage and transform their L1 and L2 learning, their relationships, and the objective world in which they live. Three types of mediation include mediation by outside objects (**object-regulation**), mediation facilitated by other people, such as through corrective feedback (**other-regulation**), and mediation where external influences have been internalized and used to complete a task (**self-regulation**). Different learners adopt these different types of mediation for their own learning (Lantolf et al., 2020).

The Sociocultural Theory can be applied to the development of pragmatic knowledge in that culture and social interactions are important for language learning (Lantolf et al., 2020). Language is the highest form of cultural artifact, and therefore, an understanding of the cultural practices, values, and norms of a target language helps facilitate language learning. It is important for L2 learners to actively improve their sociocultural understanding of the target language to improve their communicative performance and pragmatic knowledge.

2. Factors that Influence Pragmatics

This section examines several factors that play a role in the development of pragmatic competence of ELLs, particularly those in Japan. These factors include differences in the level of learner fluency, sociocultural factors, and individual learner variables.

2.1 Level of Learner Fluency

There are several similarities in the acquisition process of pragmatics between L1 and L2 speakers. The development of pragmatic competence for L1 and L2 learners is a slow process and takes many years to improve. Moreover, both L1 and L2 learners tend to pick up basic pragmatic knowledge implicitly. Research has shown that L1 learners are engaging in interactions with interlocutors even before they start to produce words themselves (Taguchi, 2011). In the case of L2 learners, they tend to pick up speech acts in low-imposition situations faster than in high-low imposition situations because their teachers frequently

use low-imposition speech acts in the classroom, and these phrases become internalized and recycled. The role of practice in different contexts and with different people is essential for both learners (Airenti, 2017).

A significant difference between L1 and L2 learners is that L1 learners have not acquired metalinguistic awareness (i.e., they are not able to separate language from the object that language represents) before beginning to develop pragmatics (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Therefore, the first step in the development process for L1 learners is for them to become aware of the representation of their own speech acts. On the other hand, L2 learners may understand the representations of speech acts in social contexts that they have acquired in their own L1 and must map out phrases in the appropriate social situations in their L2 (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

In terms of pragmatics, L2 learners make mistakes not necessarily because of their lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge but because they make incorrect choices when they do not have enough command over certain situations to produce appropriate language (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Consequently, L2 learners' pragmatic ability will grow once they grasp the representations and proper command of such language skills. As noted by Kasper and Rose (2002), learners first begin using unanalyzed formulaic phrases and keep adding to their interlanguage pragmatic repertoire over time. However, there are certain cases where the learners' L1 influences their L2, even for high-proficiency learners. Many factors influence the degree to which L2 learners transfer knowledge from their L1

to L2, including the proficiency of the L2 learners and other sociocultural influences.

Pragmatic transfer is yet another factor that influences learner fluency. Pragmatic transfer has been defined as the influence of learners' knowledge of other languages and cultures on their comprehension, production, and learning of pragmatic features of their targeted L2 (Kasper, 1992). Much research has discussed the role of pragmatic transfer on pragmatic competence. It has been noted that the transfer of pragmatic norms is one factor that plays into how learners often fail to adopt native-like pragmatic use of their target L2 and may ultimately lead to pragmatic failure (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

Takahashi and Beebe (1987) tried to answer the question of whether lower or higher-proficiency language learners tend to transfer their pragmatic knowledge from L1 to L2. The positive correlation hypothesis was introduced by the authors to illustrate the relationship between proficiency and pragmatic transfer. It states that language learners' language proficiency is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer. In other words, lower-proficiency learners will not transfer pragmatic knowledge as much as higher-proficiency learners because they have yet to possess enough ability to do so. Conversely, high-proficiency learners have enough ability and knowledge of both languages and thus, they would be more prone to pragmatic transfer (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) research on the positive correlation hypothesis involved a total of 80 students, 40 of them

were in the main group of the study, and the other 40 were in the control group. The main group included 20 Japanese learners of English residing in Japan (EFL group) who responded in English and 20 were Japanese learners of English residing in the United States (ESL group) who responded in English. The control group included 20 Japanese students living in Japan who responded in Japanese and 20 English NSs who responded in English. The Japanese students in the EFL and ESL contexts were divided into two groups based on proficiency – 10 undergraduate students were placed in the lower-proficiency group and 10 graduate students in the higher-proficiency group, respectively. All 80 students took the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which required them to fill in the blank with the most appropriate phrase in a refusal context (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987).

Takahashi and Beebe (1987) noted that both ESL and EFL learners showed pragmatic transfer, regardless of proficiency levels. The refusal patterns by Japanese learners of English in both the ESL and EFL groups resembled those in the Japanese control group more so than the English speakers. For example, in a situation that required refusing an employee's request for a raise in salary, all the Japanese groups used positive opinions or demonstrated empathy in their responses, while the Americans never used such phrases.

Second, although not supported in the EFL context, Japanese learners in the ESL setting showed that higher-proficiency learners tended to transfer their pragmatic knowledge from L1 to L2 than lower-proficiency learners. Lower-proficiency learners used more direct, simple, formulaic phrases of refusal, while

higher-proficiency learners used various phrases, adjusted the intensity of their intentions with more use of intensifiers, and had a more formal tone. Thus, the results supported the positive correlation hypothesis to an extent at least by ESL learners, suggesting that higher-proficiency learners tended to transfer their pragmatic knowledge because they had the ability to map the formal tone in the Japanese language to English (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987).

2.2 Sociocultural Influences

Several sociocultural factors have been recognized to influence pragmatic competence development. These include the learning environment, the education system in Japan, and the role of social harmony known as *wa*.

2.2.1 The Learning Environment

The environment for learning is important for the development of pragmatic competence by ELLs. Several studies suggest that learners who study ESL demonstrate a greater degree of pragmatic competence than those who study EFL based on their environment.

The environment for learning ESL has been shown to have a greater influence than learning EFL because ESL learners receive more input in their environment if they have the willingness to interact with their L2 community. While emphasizing the importance of various individual differences factors in the two environments that foster pragmatic development, Wyner

(2014) noted that it is not necessarily the more opportunities for input and output that foster the development of pragmatic competence in the ESL environment; rather, more opportunities for interaction with NSs in the environment further noticing which in turn positively affects its development. Comparatively speaking, Japanese who study EFL often have more difficulty developing pragmatic competence because they have far fewer opportunities to interact with NSs of English regularly.

Nonetheless, other studies have shown mixed results regarding the role of the environment and challenged the presumption that the ESL environment always leads to a greater development of pragmatics than in the EFL environment. Taguchi (2008) observed that students in the ESL and EFL environments might foster different features of skills needed for pragmatic competence. She conducted her study with 57 Japanese students attending a college in the United States (ESL environment) and 60 Japanese students attending a college in Japan (EFL environment). Comprehension of such implied meanings and processing speed were measured by a pretest-posttest design. Results have shown that both groups had significant gains in both accurate comprehension and speed. Specifically, students in the EFL context showed greater gains in accurate comprehension than processing speed, whereas those in the ESL context demonstrated greater gains in processing speed than accurate comprehension (Taguchi, 2008).

Research indicates that simply being in an ESL context is not always advantageous as far as pragmatic development is concerned. Rather, different skills of pragmatic competence (such

as speed and comprehension) might be nurtured because of the differences in the nature of the environment (Taguchi, 2008). Greater gains in processing speed among ESL learners can be attributed to the fact that ESL learners have more practice with processing discourses outside of the classroom, whereas EFL learners have far more limited opportunities and therefore require more time for such processing to become automated (Taguchi, 2008).

Wyner's (2014) and Taguchi's (2008) conclusions have implications for the development of pragmatic competence. ELLs cannot acquire a high level of pragmatic competence from mere written and spoken input. Instead, they must be able to notice and practice various forms of pragmatical use based on their sociocultural and situational circumstances. Simply communicating with other NSs does not directly contribute to an L2 learner's pragmatic development because noticing is an important element of understanding what factors help aid ELLs in their own pragmatic development (Taguchi, 2008). In other words, the development of pragmatic competence of ELLs can be achieved if their surrounding environment provides sufficient opportunities for noticing and interactions that require input and output. This is particularly important for EFL learners in Japan where several socio-cultural factors influence their pragmatic competence.

2.2.2 English Learning in Japan

Research has shown that attention toward pragmatics is limited in the EFL classroom (Kanık et al., 2023). In the case

of Japan, the education system is not conducive to acquiring the necessary skills for pragmatic competence. Even though the national curricula of English language education established by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) recently emphasize communication-based approaches to instruction, it is still the case that most of the class time is spent on grammar exercises necessary in preparation for the entrance exam. In fact, no class time is allocated to pragmatic practice. For example, listening exercises only focus on whether students can grasp the literal meaning of dialogues without any questions that require inferential skills. Speaking exercises only entail mere thought exchange without any sociopragmatic practice (Taguchi, 2008). In such a limited environment for the input of pragmatic norms, students might be able to foster their ability to grasp the literal meaning of sentences and spoken English, but they cannot cultivate the necessary sociopragmatic skills necessary to interpret and produce language that requires underlying contextual and cultural inferences.

Textbooks used in classrooms pose yet another problem in the development of pragmatic competence. Vellenga's (2004) analysis of textbooks revealed some specific problems. She examined four EFL and ESL textbooks respectively, their use in the classroom, and whether they contribute to developing pragmatic knowledge. Her analysis demonstrated that both EFL and ESL textbooks alike included limited explicit metapragmatic information. Specifically, EFL textbooks comprised of more pages that covered pragmatic information, but ESL textbooks included more examples of speech acts and metapragmatic cues. Nevertheless, even if the textbooks covered metapragmatic

information, they were restricted in the number of expressions presented to the learners.

Regardless of these limitations, it has been noted by Vellenga (2004) that many teachers do not take the initiative to enhance students' learning. For example, an interview with four teachers in both EFL and ESL settings further revealed that much of the input of pragmatics that their students receive is through textbooks, and teachers do not have enough time, tendency, or training to bring supplementary pragmatic information into their classroom. Henceforth, it can be deduced that textbooks do not include enough information or activities related to pragmatics and the use of such textbooks alone in the EFL or ESL setting has constrained practicalities on the students' development of pragmatic competence.

2.2.3 Preference for *Wa*

According to Wierzbicka (1991), *wa* is a cultural keyword that describes the group orientation of harmony in Japan. This Japanese concept has been commonly referred to as group harmony. The preference for this cultural concept has been said to influence various aspects of learners' behavior, especially in the EFL classroom.

Harumi's (2011) qualitative study investigated some factors that lead to students' silence in the classroom and found some underlying cultural factors, including the concept of *wa*. Her study involved 197 EFL Japanese first-year English degree students, 52 native English teachers, and 58 Japanese English

teachers. She asked them some general questions as well as several open-ended questions to examine (a) some underlying factors that affect students' silence in the classroom, (b) differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of silence, and (c) teachers' and students' perceptions toward easing anxiety. One of the significant findings from the questionnaires was that the major factor that affects the students' silence in the classroom from the students' perspective is due to cultural values, namely turn-taking strategies and their choice to preserve the *wa* when they lack confidence (Harumi, 2011).

Some students in Harumi's (2011) study stated they remained silent because they did not know when they should express themselves unless called upon, and others noted that they did not want to be singled out from the group. Furthermore, they also mentioned that they remained silent when they were unsure of the correct answer or when their opinion differed from those of others. This perception stemmed from the Japanese concept of *wa* in that they valued the group's opinion more than the individual. There are students who deem that they should provide answers that match those of their group to preserve the *wa*, and they choose to remain silent otherwise (Harumi, 2011).

The consideration of these cultural values in the classroom is important because if students willingly choose to remain silent due to such cultural values, they lose the valuable opportunities for needed practice, which is especially important in the EFL environment where students have limited opportunities for interaction inside and outside the classroom. Without such opportunities, students are constrained in the development of

both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge needed for pragmatic competence.

2.3 Individual Learner Factors

In addition to environmental factors, several individual learner variables can influence the development of pragmatic competence of ELLs including their motivation, aptitude, personality, identity, and intercultural competence.

2.3.1 Learner Motivation

Motivation is a major factor that has been extensively researched in L2 studies (Takahashi, 2019). Motivation has been defined as “a phenomenon that explains the direction, vigor, and persistence of actions in the learning process” (Papi and Hiver, 2022:113). Research related to motivation has progressed over the years, and it has been recognized that motivation plays a role in various aspects of L2 acquisition (Papi & Hiver, 2022). Nevertheless, limited research has been conducted to examine its relationship with pragmatic competence. Takahashi’s (2005) and Eslami and Ahn’s (2014) research are two empirical studies that examine such a relationship.

Takahashi (2005) conducted her study to examine whether motivation and proficiency have a relationship with pragmalinguistic awareness. The participants were 80 Japanese learners of English. The target pragmalinguistic features included six types, three of which were complex bi-causal request features and the other three were non-request features. Motivation was

measured using the Motivation Questionnaire, which rated the participants of their need for achievement, intrinsic motivation, external expectation, class anxiety, attitudes to TL community, self-devaluation, test anxiety, interest in TL culture, and affiliative motive. Proficiency was measured using Listening Comprehension and the Reading Comprehension sections of the G-TELP developed by San Diego University. Awareness was measured by a 7-point Lickert scale type of immediate Awareness Retrospection Questionnaire, administered after the noticing-the-gap treatment (Takahashi, 2005).

The results of Takahashi's (2005) study showed that the bi-causal request forms were not noticed as much as other pragmalinguistic features. Furthermore, there was no correlation between proficiency and awareness of pragmalinguistic features. Lastly, intrinsic motivation was strongly related to the participants' awareness of pragmalinguistic features. Her results showed that motivation plays a more significant role than proficiency in the learners' distribution of awareness to pragmatic input. It could be argued that more intrinsically motivated learners are keener to certain bi-causal request forms because such forms present more idiomatic expressions and intrinsically motivated learners like learning the English language and enjoy the process of acquiring the skills for L2 communication. Putting it another way, knowing such expressions allows motivated learners to achieve their goals which in turn affects their degree of awareness toward such forms (Takahashi, 2005).

A recent study by Eslami and Ahn (2014) was conducted on 50 Korean graduate students studying at Texas A&M University

to examine the influence on pragmatic competence arising from their learner motivation, levels of interaction, and length of stay in the U.S. Information regarding their amount of social interaction and length of stay were drawn from a background questionnaire, while a mini-attitude / motivation test battery (mini-AMTB) was used to measure their level of integrative motivation to study EFL. Results found a weak correlation between the amount of interaction and length of residence with pragmatic competence but a much stronger correlation between learner motivation and pragmatic competence (Eslami & Ahn, 2014). This and other similar research findings show just how important learner motivation is in the development of pragmatic competence.

2.3.2 Learner Aptitude

In addition to motivation, learner aptitude has been widely studied in L2 research. Learner aptitude has been defined as a series of cognitive-based abilities that are necessary for L2 learning (Li, 2022). Various definitions and models of aptitude have been introduced, and many research studies have been conducted to examine its relationship with other individual learner variables and its overall influence on language learning (Dörnyei, 2010). While Li (2022) mentioned that it has now been widely accepted that aptitude is a good predictor of L2 development and is a relatively enduring trait, scholars such as Dörnyei (2010) argued that aptitude is not such a measure and rather determines the progress that language learners might make, assuming all the other variables are at their optimal state. Li (2017) extended this line of research regarding learner aptitude

to the pragmatic competence of American learners of Chinese.

Li's (2017) study examined the interaction between aptitude and different modalities of instruction which in turn was hypothesized to affect pragmatic gains of accuracy and speed. A total of 50 American learners of Chinese were randomly assigned to one of three groups: input-based, output-based, and a control group. The two target features were making minor requests to friends and making major requests to professors. The effects of the practice were examined with a receptive (listening judgment) task and a productive (oral production) task at pretests, immediate posttests, and delayed posttests. The scores were calculated for accuracy and speed. The constructs of foreign language aptitudes, including rote memory, grammatical sensitivity, and speed of working memory for text were measured using three different tests (Li, 2017).

Li's (2017) research results showed varied relationships between learner aptitudes and pragmatic gains. For the input-based group, there was a positive correlation between working memory and reductions in judgment response rate. For the output-based group, there was a positive correlation between grammatical sensitivity and an increase in production speech rates. Lastly, the output-based group showed a negative correlation between rote memory capacity and a decrease in planning time for production (Li, 2017). Results found that learner aptitude can be used to tailor the modalities of instruction of pragmatics based on the ultimate goals of instruction, and resources can be optimized and tailored to learner aptitude profiles.

2.3.3 Learner Personality

The role of personality in language learning has not been examined from an academic perspective in comparison to other individual differences factors (Dörnyei, 2010). However, within the limited research, several models and indicators of personality have been constructed and applied to measure personality in the learners and its effects on various aspects of language learning. These studies have yielded mixed results and the direct impact of personality traits on language learning success has not been clearly defined. Furthermore, more recently, personality has been examined from several constructs, such as willingness to communicate, which encompasses a broader perspective (Dörnyei, 2010).

Despite the lack of research and ambiguity of the constructs of personality in academia, Taguchi (2014) mentioned that personality is a significant topic to explore because pragmatic competence includes a broad aspect of linguistic and social knowledge which is oftentimes nurtured through interaction and integration with a learner's L2. Along the same lines, Dörnyei (2010) noted that personality traits might better act as a modifying variable. That is, people's personalities might affect the ways in which they react to their environment which in turn affects their participation inside and outside the classroom.

Taguchi (2014) conducted her study with 48 Japanese university students in Japan. The study used a DCT speaking test that measured students' production of two speech acts, requests and opinions, in two situations, high-imposition and low-imposition.

These speech acts were rated for appropriateness, which was rated by four NSs, and fluency was measured by planning time and speech rate. The participants' personalities were determined by a temperament sorter. The DCT test was administered three times over one academic year to determine whether the different personalities influenced changes in appropriateness and fluency (Taguchi, 2014).

The results of Taguchi (2014) showed that the feeling-thinking personality dimension influenced both appropriateness and planning time. In terms of appropriateness, even though the “feeling” type showed a greater score for Time 1 than the “thinking” type, the “thinking” type increased their scores over time while the “feeling” type decreased their scores. As for planning time, the “feeling” type became faster in planning during the first semester, while the “thinking” type did not show any differences over time. Lastly, speech rate was unaffected by personality. This research helps illustrate how personality may influence some components of pragmatic competence, such as appropriateness and planning time, and henceforth, is one factor that could be considered when helping ELLs develop their pragmatic competence.

2.3.4 Learner Identity

Closely related to the other individual variables is learner identity. The term identity has been defined in many ways, and there are numerous models that have been introduced to illustrate the construct. In the language learning context, one of the conventional models of identity was the monolingual model,

which viewed language learners as unsuccessful duplications of perfect NS language (Ishihara, 2019). Similarly, a learner's interlanguage pragmatic competence was measured by how well they conformed to L2 norms. Nevertheless, the author argued that in the era of globalization, a model that focuses on language socialization theory is more appropriate.

Such a socialization model of identity considers sociocultural values as it demonstrates the dynamic processes in which the learners negotiate their multiple identities through mediation and socialization. The learners do not conform to the L2 norms passively, but instead dynamically and selectively co-construct their norms through their interactions. This selectivity implies that there are aspects of the L2 norms that learners choose not to adopt as part of their identities. In fact, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) noted that the ultimate goal for learners may not always be to obtain native-like pragmatic use; their choice is often associated with their identity and they may feel resistance toward their L2 norms. Along the same lines, Norton's definition of identity from the poststructuralist perspective mentioned that identity is constructed on one's relationship with the social world and is built on relation terms (Darvin & Norton, 2022).

LoCastro (2001) explored the Japanese EFL learners' attitudes towards their L2, their self-identity, and the extent to which Japanese EFL university students sought to accommodate to L2 communicative norms based on descriptive accounts. For analysis, the students' group discussions, writing assignments, language awareness worksheets, and questionnaire responses provided in the context of four courses were used. The results

showed that most students had a positive view towards English and many of them were motivated to study English for integrative purposes. Furthermore, some students mentioned that they prefer to retain their own identities as Japanese rather than follow L2 pragmatic standards, which implied how students' attitudes, self-identity, and motivation might sometimes inhibit their willingness to accommodate to L2 norms (LoCastro, 2001).

Henceforth, considering the hegemonic power of English-speaking countries that non-English speaking countries face, LoCastro (2001) suggested that it is important for students to form an identity that includes both aspects of being a competent speaker of English while simultaneously embracing a learner's L1 and its norms. The findings of her study corroborated the socialization model explained by Ishihara (2019), which is especially applicable to the EFL context, such as Japan.

2.3.5 Intercultural Competence

Just as with the other constructs of individual learner differences, many definitions and models of intercultural competence have been introduced in various fields. For example, in the L2 acquisition field, one definition of intercultural competence is “their [the learners'] ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram et al., 2002:10). Byram's model of intercultural competence consisted of the following components: intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and

interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

Some factors used to measure intercultural competence include emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, perceptual acuity, and personal autonomy. Even though many models have been introduced in the field of L2 acquisition, intercultural competence is situated in the framework of differences in cultures and describes some “personal qualities, attitudes, knowledge, and skills” that assist the learners in managing the cultural differences (Taguchi et al., 2016:776). Intercultural competence has been a significant topic during the era of globalization, and it has been said that intercultural competence poses an influence on pragmatic competence.

Taguchi et al.’s (2016) study examined the relationship between intercultural competence, amount of social contact, and pragmatic competence. The participants were 109 American students partaking on a study abroad program for one semester at a university in Beijing, China. Intercultural competence was measured by a Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), amount of social contact with a questionnaire that consisted of questions pertaining to interactive and noninteractive social activities, and pragmatic competence with a spoken DCT test that was rated for appropriateness, clarity, and grammaticality by two NSs of Chinese. The tests were administered twice in a three-month period during the students’ study abroad (Taguchi et al., 2016).

The results of their study showed that intercultural competence and social interaction accounted for 26% of pragmatic competence.

There was a direct correlation between social interaction and pragmatic competence. Additionally, there was an indirect correlation between intercultural competence and pragmatic competence with social interaction acting as the mediating factor. In other words, intercultural competence affected the learners' social interaction which in turn affected their intercultural competence (Taguchi et al., 2016). Their study showed that intercultural competence and social interaction together can affect the development of pragmatic competence and have various implications for ELLs.

3. Strategies for Teaching Pragmatics

Various teaching strategies may be implemented that improve the development of pragmatic competence for ELLs. These include an increased exposure to authentic language materials through the use of technology, an increase of student-centered social interaction, and teacher participation.

3.1 Use of Digital Technology

An increased use of digital technology to provide authentic language materials for ELLs can help improve their pragmatic competence. This includes the use of audiovisual (AV) materials, electronic games, and augmented reality (AR) platforms for the study of English.

The use of AV materials is one way to provide authentic language materials to ELLs. Omar and Razi's (2022) research showed the benefits of using movies and television (TV) series

videoclips over traditional written learning through textbooks on both the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects amongst Kurdish learners studying English language in an EFL environment. In line with such research results, Kosimov (2023) outlined three advantages of using audiovisual materials in the classroom for pragmatic competence. The use of AV materials such as TV shows, movies, music videos, and news broadcasts provide learners with authentic language use. In other words, they provide learners with practical language use and cultural norms. Additionally, such materials are usually interesting, raising the motivation of the learners. Finally, they foster the development of comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge.

Rose (2001) examined the degree to which films portray real-life situations in the context of compliments and responses to compliments. He collected scenes containing compliments from 40 films and compared them with the two corpora constructed by Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Miles (1994) in natural-occurring speeches. Then, he compared the corpora based on eight categories, which included features of both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. The results showed that most scenes in films resembled real-life situations at the pragmalinguistic level, such as the syntactic formula of speech acts. However, differences between the corpora data and film clips were observed in the sociopragmatic features, especially gender distribution; that is, a comparison of the extent to which female and male actors received and gave compliments (Rose, 2001). Hence, although there may be some constraints on the sociopragmatic aspects, films are sources that may enhance the pragmalinguistic knowledge of the learners as they are exposed

to ways to formulate their speech acts resembling those in the natural setting.

Additionally, Washburn (2001) describes six advantages of using audiovisual (AV) materials such as TV shows in the classroom. First, they are accessible and available for viewing in many countries. Second, learners are not physically involved in the conversations and therefore have time to sit down and analyze the pragmatic discourse in the shows. Third, TV shows may be recorded, paused, re-winded, and fast-forwarded to a specific scene of interest. Fourth, TV shows present scenes in different contexts, many of which resemble real-life situations. Fifth, TV shows can portray pragmatics not just verbally but also visually and nonverbally. And finally, laughter from the audience signals violations in pragmatics, so learners can judge for themselves what is appropriate or not. In short, TV sitcom shows provide learners with opportunities for noticing through input and make cultural norms that may be difficult to capture with just student-to-student or teacher-to-student interactions more understandable.

Based on such research findings, it may be argued that the use of AV materials might help build intercultural competence in the learners and enrich them with opportunities for input and noticing even in the EFL environment where they have limited opportunities for such real-life encounters outside of the classroom. The learners may notice a gap in their knowledge, which is an important part of pragmatic competence development, while being motivated to learn with such authentic language in use.

Sykes and Dubreil (2019) outlined several characteristics of using games and AR environments in relation to pragmatic learning. First, goals can be determined by the learners themselves, not necessarily predetermined by the teacher. Furthermore, the design of those games could be tailored to those goals. Consequently, learners gain autonomy and can manage their own learning. Second, digital games can foster an authentic environment that promotes social interaction and provides opportunities for output. Such opportunities for output allow the learners to notice a gap in their knowledge. Third, feedback could be provided to the learners in various forms within those digital games. Fourth, digital games and augmented realities provide learners with authentic environments, which leads them to feel the direct impact of their pragmatic behaviors and adds emotion to their experiences.

Aside from the four characteristics listed above, one of the most important advantages of the adoption of games and AR environments in the classroom is that when designed well, they increase motivation by encouraging the ELLs to keep playing the games and promote risk-taking (Sykes & Dubreil, 2019). Such risk-taking opportunities are significant in the EFL context, such as in Japan, where students feel obligated to align their opinions with their peers – these AR environments might help encourage them to at least try without having to care as much about the answers and opinions of others.

In addition to the advantages of the implementation of AR environments, Sykes and Dubreil (2019) stated that although still limited in number, there are a few empirical studies that have

examined some positive results of using games and virtual reality environments in the classroom (Taguchi et al., 2017). Even though they mention that more research is still needed in this area, the use of games and virtual reality environments seems promising, especially in the EFL context as they can provide learners with opportunities for output and encourage them to take risks with minimal emotional distress. Additionally, as Sykes and Dubriell (2019) discussed, games and virtual reality environments foster social interaction in the classroom, and as will be discussed in the next section, social interaction plays an important part in the development of pragmatic competence.

3.2 Increased Social Interaction

In addition to using digital technologies to provide learners with exposure to authentic materials, increased social interaction is a good way to improve learner pragmatic competence. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Lev Vygotsky in the Sociocultural Theory describes the hypothetical distance between what learners can do by themselves and what they can do with external support. Teachers may use the ZPD theory as a tool to distinguish what learners can do themselves, and the potential development of pragmatic competence with sufficient help (Lantolf et al., 2020).

One practical application of the ZPD is an increase in interaction between NSs and novice learners in the classroom. Through such direct social interactions, learners may internalize practical knowledge and ultimately reach a point where they may not have to depend so much on outside support (Lantolf et al.,

2020). As such, a practical pedagogical approach that considers the ZPD is a student-centered classroom through collaborative learning as opposed to the traditional teacher-centered classroom found in many EFL contexts (Bi, 2023). It has been said that social interaction within the ZPD aids the development of various aspects of L2 learning, and the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge is no exception (Ohta, 2005).

Domakani and Felfelian (2012) compared the interlanguage pragmatic development of English language learners of either equal or unequal interaction with those who received the traditional teacher-centered method. A comparison of their pre-test and post-test MDCT scores after four weeks revealed that those in the ZPD group had shown more development than the control group. Furthermore, their results also showed that ZPD does not assume that one requires more pragmatic ability than one's partner in the activities (Domakani & Felfelian, 2012). In fact, their research showed that there was no significant difference in the development of pragmatic knowledge amongst the pairs who worked with a student of equal or unequal level in their English proficiency. Even if two partners were at the same level, a collaborative effort was evident. This point is especially important in the EFL environment where students have limited opportunities to interact with NSs that might foster learning in the ZPD.

3.3 Active Teacher Participation

Even though language classes should be primarily student-centered, that is not to say that teachers do not have any roles

in the classroom (Bi, 2023). Teachers should be mindful of creating a safe and encouraging environment that promotes the students' willingness to communicate. Especially in the EFL environment, both non-native and native teachers alike should be aware of socio-cultural factors that affect students' participation and adopt localized pedagogical techniques accordingly (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). For example, Harumi's (2011) study described above demonstrated how the turn-taking strategy was one factor that played into the Japanese learners' silence in the classroom. Therefore, it would be best if responses from the students were initiated by the teachers in such classrooms. Furthermore, Japanese students in her study also mentioned that they expect to have psychological support from the teachers, especially through conversation interjections to signal active listening referred to as *aizuchi* in Japanese. The adoption of such a localized pedagogical approach that takes account of cultural values can help build confidence in the learners and provide more opportunities for output.

Motivated by the noticing hypothesis, one of the prominent and ongoing debates surrounding the acquisition of pragmatic competence is whether explicit instruction yields greater results for L2 learners than implicit instruction (Taguchi et al., 2023). Based on an analysis of previous empirical studies, Taguchi (2015) concluded that explicit instruction is generally more beneficial for L2 learners than implicit instruction and learning comes more from noticing rather than merely being exposed to different pragmatic forms. For explicitness and saliency of pragmatic norms, learners might benefit if some conscious-awareness tasks are adopted in the classroom. Bi (2023) suggested that teachers

could ask the learners about the similarities and differences between their own culture and that of the L2. Specifically, learners could be given a specific scenario and asked what they would do if they were in their own culture. Such cross-cultural comparisons might decrease pragmatic transfer and help build intercultural competence. It is important that teachers explain the underlying reasons for certain L2 pragmatic behaviors (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

Nevertheless, conscious-raising activities do not imply that learners need to adopt those L2 norms. A factor that plays into this is identity. As stated above, it is up to the discretion of the learners to decide whether to adopt certain L2 norms. Henceforth, the choices that learners make in terms of pragmatics should be evaluated based on their intentions, not how close they are to L2 native-like norms (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Teachers should encourage learners to understand norms and express themselves however way they wish. Simultaneously, however, it is the teacher's role to explain the interpretations of the learner's statements and the expected consequences of their utterances and behavior in the community of the L2.

Lastly, the materials used in the classroom should be carefully examined. Vellenga's (2004) study showed that pragmatic knowledge presented in EFL and ESL textbooks is highly limited. In such cases, teachers need to adapt or present supplementary materials. Nonetheless, not all materials convey the same amount of information nor do they all present the same type of information. In certain cases, there are materials that include overly simplified explanations and examples of pragmatic norms.

Therefore, teachers need to check to what extent the information contained in the materials they intend to use reflects the reality of the L2 community first before they make their decisions (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, pragmatics is an important aspect of language acquisition for ELLs but is difficult to learn as it requires an understanding of L2 norms well beyond simple language skills. Factors that influence the acquisition of pragmatic competence include learner fluency levels, sociocultural influences, and other specific learner variables including learner motivation, aptitude, personality, identity, and intercultural awareness. By recognizing these and other factors that affect L2 learner pragmatics, various learning and teaching strategies can be adopted to further improve the pragmatic competence of ELLs, especially EFL learners in Japan. In particular, strategies that include the adoption of digital technology for exposure to authentic learning materials, promoting student-to-student interactions, and adopting teaching strategies that take into consideration sociocultural and individual learner differences will greatly improve the overall development of pragmatic competence of both ESL and EFL learners.

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