The Effects of Studying Abroad on the Pragmatic Development of University-level Japanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study attempts to record and analyze developments in the L2 pragmatic competence of a group of university-level Japanese learners of English as a result of time spent studying intensively in a target language community. Adopting a longitudinal method, this study focuses specifically on the realization of two speech acts: requests and apologies. Realizations of these speech acts were measured using a Discourse Completion Test with four situations based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) categorizations and the test was administered twice in a pre/post design, before and after the overseas experience. A detailed analysis of the data was carried out focusing on pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features. As a result of the study, some positive effects of the overseas experience were identified, with some specific findings on the development of syntactic, lexical, and semantic aspects. Furthermore, some implications for future research were suggested.

1. Introduction

It is widely believed that study abroad programs can contribute significantly to the development of overall communicative ability. Time spent in the target language community offers a prime opportunity for foreign language learners to be exposed to authentic input and potentially interactive opportunities for use of the target language. However, in spite of a widespread belief and intuition that the experience of studying abroad results in overall gains in L2 competence, there still remains a lack of research into the development of interlanguage pragmatic competence during a period of study abroad. Therefore, the extent to which students’ pragmatic competence develops as a result of studying abroad requires further scrutiny. Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of research with a specific focus on the ways in which pragmatic competence develops at the syntactic, lexical, and semantic levels. In view of this, the present study aims to ascertain the effects of studying abroad on university students’ pragmatic competence.
2. Background of the study

There have been a number of empirical studies investigating Japanese EFL learners’ pragmatic competence and behavior. Recent studies into interlanguage pragmatics have focused on developmental aspects by adopting a longitudinal design, unraveling the acquisitional process of L2 pragmatic competence. The aim of this study is to look more specifically at the effects of studying abroad. Barron (2002) undertook a full-length study of pragmatic development by Irish learners of German during study abroad in Germany. Above all, Kasper and Rose (2002) provide a comprehensive review of developmental research on the effect of studying abroad as a treatment variable. Highlighted studies for Japanese learners include: Kondo (1997a, 1997b) for apologies; Code and Anderson (2001) for requests; and Matsumura (2001, 2003) for offering advice. Their findings can be summarized as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of studies on the effects of study abroad on pragmatic development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kondo (1997a)</td>
<td>DCT</td>
<td>45 - high school</td>
<td>1 year in US</td>
<td>formulaic apology strategies became more explicit and approached NS practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kondo (1997b)</td>
<td>DCT</td>
<td>45 - high school</td>
<td>1 year in US</td>
<td>closer alignment with NS; developmental patterns did not always move towards target norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code &amp; Anderson</td>
<td>DCT</td>
<td>35 - high school</td>
<td>10 months in NZ/Canada</td>
<td>significant decrease in direct requests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsumura (2001)</td>
<td>MCQ</td>
<td>97 - university</td>
<td>8 months in Canada</td>
<td>improvement in level of perception; development towards similar preferences for advice types as NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsumura (2003)</td>
<td>MCQ</td>
<td>137 - university</td>
<td>8 months in Canada</td>
<td>amount of exposure has greater potential than levels of grammatical proficiency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MCQ = Multiple Choice Questionnaire

Following the earlier studies, two research questions were formulated to guide this investigation.

1. What elements of the learners’ pragmatic competence developed most during the study abroad period?
2. Does study abroad have a more positive effect on learners’ pragmatic competence than their grammatical competence?

3. Method

3.1 Subjects

The participants were 20 English-major sophomore students (14 females and 6 males) on an English education course at a national university. They spent 4-5 months studying English at universities in the United Kingdom. Their proficiency in English is at the intermediate or upper-intermediate level according to their scores in standard English proficiency tests. Prior to their departure, they were given a series of seminars regarding homestays, university courses, and life in
Britain. However, no specific instruction was given on the realization of speech acts.

3.2 Research instrument

The students were asked to complete a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) containing four situations; two situations for Requests and two for Apologies. Each pair of situations was varied according to the P (Power) variable of Brown and Levinson (1987), including +P (between status-unequal interlocutors) and –P (between status-equal interlocutors) situations. The Distance (D) and Ranking of Imposition (R) variables were held steady at –D (between people familiar with each other) and +R (high-imposition situations). Below are the DCT situations used in this research:

REQUESTS
(+P; -D; +R): One of your friends, who is studying in Warwick, wants to come and visit you. You have to ask your homestay parents for permission that s/he can stay at your homestay house. What do you say to them?
(-P; -D; +R): You go to the pub with a Spanish friend from your class, who you have become good friends with. Suddenly, you notice that you forgot to bring any money with you. You ask your Spanish friend to lend you money until the next day. What do you say?

APOLOGIES
(+P; -D; +R): One day, whilst having breakfast, you accidentally knock a glass onto the floor and it breaks. What do you say to your host mother?
(-P; -D; +R): You arranged to meet your Spanish friend for lunch. You arranged to meet in front of the restaurant. It is a cold and windy day, and you arrive 20 minutes late. What do you say when you meet him/her?

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The pre-test DCT was carried out in February, 2003 before departure from Japan. After studying in U.K from either March to August or April to September, they were asked to take the same test as a post-test (with the situations re-ordered) in early October 2003.

Analysis of the DCT responses focused on four areas:
- verbosity: the number of words used for the response
- grammatical accuracy: the number of error-free clauses per response
- linguistic downgrading: the use of syntactic and lexical forms of mitigation
- semantic formulae (only focused on for apologies)

First, t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-test data for verbosity and grammatical accuracy. Secondly, descriptive statistics were calculated for linguistic downgrading and semantic formulae, and later, qualitative analysis of individual development was carried out.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Verbosity

Figure 1 shows the average number of words used in each situation. There is a consistent increase in verbosity across all four situations. Further analysis using t-tests showed that the
increase was statistically significant in all situations (see Table 1). This finding is very much in line with other studies on pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p.228). There is no major difference in verbosity between the +P and -P situations, so it appears that the Power factor does not have an effect on verbosity.

![Figure 1: Verbosity in all situations](image)

### Table 1: Comparison of number of words in pre- and post-tests in four speech act situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech acts</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Post-Pre</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M  (SD)</td>
<td>M   (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request +P</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20.55 (7.75)</td>
<td>27.10 (6.88)</td>
<td>6.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request -P</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19.10 (5.00)</td>
<td>25.15 (5.93)</td>
<td>6.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology +P</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11.05 (5.38)</td>
<td>17.25 (5.98)</td>
<td>6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology -P</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.15 (6.84)</td>
<td>20.00 (11.20)</td>
<td>6.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01  *p < .05**

4.2 Grammatical accuracy

Figure 2 shows the percentage of error-free clauses in all situations, in the pre- and post-tests. Negligible improvement can be seen in the accuracy of responses after study abroad. However, it does need to be taken into account that in the post-test some subjects used more complicated syntactic structures than in the pre-test (see below) and therefore there may be some grammatical improvement not shown by this data. These findings are in line with previous studies that have found study abroad programs to have a much lesser effect on grammatical development.

![Figure 2: Percentage of error-free clauses in all situations](image)
than on pragmatic development, especially in the case of learners, such as those under investigation here, who have already reached an intermediate level of grammatical competence.

4.3 Pragmalinguistic change: Requests - downgrading

Each request was analysed for examples of syntactic and lexical downgrading. Counts were made of the number of subjects who used prominent types of downgrading for each situation in the pre- and post-tests. This section will show both the overall pattern of change across the subjects as a whole, and also look at individual cases which demonstrate typical changes after the study abroad period.

4.3.1 Syntactic downgrading

It was decided to focus on three main types of syntactic downgrading: (1) interrogatives; (2) past tense form; (3) conditional. Figures 3 and 4 show the percentage of subjects using these forms in the pre- and post-tests. A clear increase in the use of the past tense and the conditional form in both situations can be observed. However, the use of the interrogative is more ambiguous, with a clear decrease in the +P situation and a slight increase in the –P situation. Probable reasons for this will be discussed below, with examples from the data collected.

![Graphs showing syntactic downgrading](image)

Figures 3 & 4: Requests: Use of syntactic downgrading

4.3.1.1 +P Request

The +P request involved asking a homestay parent to permit a friend to come and stay. This is a high-imposition request requiring strong mitigation. The example below represents the typical changes from the pre- to post-tests:

Example 1 [Student 01] [Note: student responses are quoted verbatim from the original, including all errors]

Pre: One of my friend who's in Warwick want to visit me and stay our house. Can I invite her?
Post: One of my friends, who's staying in Warwick, is now planning to visit Edinburgh. And I'm wondering if she could stay our house...

In the pre-test an interrogative is used but with the present tense verb ‘can’. In the post-test the interrogative is not used and instead a conditional declarative structure is used with the past
tense form ‘could’. Furthermore, the downgrader ‘I’m wondering’ is used. By avoiding the use of an interrogative, the level of directness is further reduced, making this a highly mitigated request appropriate for a high imposition request to a senior.

4.3.1.2 -P Request

The -P request involved asking a friend to lend ‘you’ some money. This is also a high-imposition request but the major variable change is that this request is to a status-equal rather than a senior. The example below represents typical changes from the pre- to post-tests:
Example 2 [Student 05]:
Pre:  Will you lend me some money until yesterday?
Post:  I’m so sorry to bother you, but could you possibly lend me money until tomorrow?

In the pre-test an interrogative with a present tense verb form ‘will’ is used. In the post-test the verb is put into a past tense form ‘could’ . The overall data shows that this is a common change. Also, 35% of subjects chose to use the conditional in the post-test for the -P request. However, this is much less than the 75% that used it for the +P request. This appears to show clear variation with respect to the P(ower) variable, and is further supported by the fact that 90% of subjects used the interrogative in the post-test for the -P request, as compared to 55% for the +P request. A conditional declarative, as opposed to an interrogative with a past tense modal verb, appears to represent a higher degree of mitigation, and many subjects appear to be able to differentiate effectively in the degree of mitigation used between a +P and -P request.

4.3.2 Lexical Downgrading

It was decided to separate out two ‘groups’ of lexical downgraders: (1) ‘please’; (2) other lexical downgraders (eg, ‘possibly’). The reason for placing ‘please’ separately is that it does not carry the same degree of mitigation as other lexical downgraders and ‘may best be considered a requestive marker than a politeness marker’ (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p.142). Figures 5 and 6 show the percentage of subjects using these ‘groups’ in the pre- and post-tests. It can be seen that in both situations, the use of ‘please’ decreases (although it was used only by a minority in the pre-test)

![Figures 5 & 6: Requests: Use of lexical downgrading](image-url)
whilst the use of other lexical downgraders increases sharply after the period of study abroad. There are some small differences between the +P and −P situations, which will be discussed below.

4.3.2.1 +P Request

The example below is broadly representative of the change in the use of lexical downgrading between the pre- and post-tests for this situation:

Example 3 [Student 06]:

Pre: One of my friends is going to come to Edinburgh to visit me. Would she stay here?

Post: May I ask a favor of you, Sandra... On this weekends one of my friends is coming to Edinburgh and if you could possibly have her stay here. She looked for some YH but couldn't find any.

In the pre-test, this subject used no lexical downgrading at all, which is quite typical according to the data above. In the post-test, however, she uses ‘possibly’ which was by far the most commonly used lexical downgrader. The large jump from 20% to 70% of subjects using an ‘other lexical downgrader’ is quite remarkable. It is clear that the use of words such as ‘possibly’ to increase the mitigation of requests had been learnt by many of the students by the end of their period of study abroad.

4.3.2.2 -P Request

This situation is exemplified by the following example:

Example 4 [Student 11]:

Pre: I forgot to bring money! Could you lend me some money? I back that money tomorrow. Please.

Post: I'm terribly sorry but, I forgot to bring any money with me, so if possible, could you lend me some money until tomorrow?

Five (25%) of the subjects used ‘please’ in the pre-test; only one (5%) used it in the post-test. As used here in sentence-final position, ‘please’ appears to convey the impression of a direct request. In the post-test, ‘please’ has been omitted and ‘possible’ used instead, with a conditional structure. The politeness of the post-test request is further developed by the use of the intensifier ‘terribly’ with the initial apology (see below for more details on this). These two modifiers play a strong role in making the request more effective in terms of the interpersonal dimension.

It remains to be answered whether the Power variable has an effect on the choice of lexical downgraders. There is little significant difference in the use of either ‘group’ in the two situations. It is interesting that slightly more subjects use other lexical downgraders in the −P situation than the +P situation, when it could be assumed that the opposite would be the case. One possible reason for this is that lexical downgraders such as ‘possibly’ are quite informal and may demonstrate a stronger degree of ‘closeness’ to the addressee than the use of a conditional structure, which appears to have more of a distancing effect.
4.4 Pragmalinguistic change: Apologies – lexical intensification

It was decided to analyse the use of lexical intensification in the Head Act of the apology. Figures 7 and 8 show the use of three categories: (1) no intensifier; (2) ‘very’; (3) other intensifying adverbs. The reason for putting ‘very’ in a separate category is that it is considered to be more of a neutral (and therefore less ‘interpersonal’) intensifier than adverbs such as ‘so’ or ‘really’. It can be seen from the two graphs that very similar changes take place between the pre- and post-tests in both situations. The number of subjects using intensifiers increases in the post-test.

Figures 7 & 8: Apologies: Use of intensifying adverbs

for both situations. It is of note, however, that no subjects used ‘very’ in the post-test, whilst there was a large increase in the number of subjects using ‘so’, ‘really’ or ‘terribly’ to intensify their apology. This shows clear pragmalinguistic development.

4.5 Sociopragmatic change: Apologies – semantic formulae

The apologies were also analyzed for the use of semantic formulae. The two different situations (+P: apologizing for breaking a glass; -P: apologizing for being late) appear to require the use of some similar and some different semantic formulae. Figures 9 and 10 show the most commonly used formulae, and the percentage of subjects using them, in the pre- and post-tests. It can be seen that the most commonly used formulae in both situations (an acceptance of...
responsibility) was used by the same number of subjects in both tests in the +P situation and by 11% more in the −P situation, representing very little change overall. The following example exemplifies this:

Example 5 [Student 12]:

Pre: I’m very sorry, I accidentally broke a glass.
Post: I’m terribly sorry that I accidentally knocked a glass on the floor and it broke.

Whilst pragmalinguistic change is evident here in the use of ‘terribly’ rather than ‘very’, no sociopragmatic change is evident in the use of semantic formulae (just an increase in verbosity). It can also be seen in the +P situation that there was a slight increase in the use of an offer of repair, which usually consisted of offering to clean up, or to buy a replacement. Likewise, in the −P situation there was a slight increase in the use of this semantic formulae, although a much smaller percentage of the subjects used this; probably because in this situation it is not so obvious how you can ‘repair’ for being late. Another change, albeit also slight, was in the use of an ‘excuse’ in the −P situation. The following example from the data shows this:

Example 6 [Student 6]:

Pre: I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting.
Post: Maria... I’m terribly sorry for you. I’m late. Well actually, I had a flat tire of my bike and I couldn’t come here on time.

This is interesting because it would appear to be quite standard in British culture at least to give a reason for being late, and the addressee would probably expect to hear one. On the other hand, in Japanese culture it would not appear to be so necessary. The minimal increase in the use of an excuse could show sociopragmatic development in a small number of subjects. However, it could also be the result of increased confidence and verbosity, i.e., the subjects feel more able to give a fuller response in the situation.

5. Conclusion

Before summarizing the main findings of this study, it is important to outline its main limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 20 students, whilst supplying a large amount of data for qualitative analysis, is slightly small for accurate quantitative analysis. Secondly, it would have strengthened this research to have had a control group of subjects who stayed in Japan whilst the other students went abroad. By comparing putative post-tests of the two groups, the variable of studying abroad could be separated from the variable of five months of language development. However, it is suggested here that the considerable improvement in the use of pragmalinguistic forms is highly unlikely to have occurred during five months of standard study of English in Japan without explicit input. Finally, the nature of input to which the subjects were exposed during the study abroad period could not be detailed here. Data on the variation in input between subjects was...
similarly unavailable. Information on input during study abroad would have enabled triangulation of the production data. Further research of this kind would ideally include research into identifying what aspects of the study abroad experience have the strongest effect on pragmatic development: classroom input; interaction with peers; interaction with homestay family; and so on.

Despite these limitations, it can be said with reasonable confidence that this study demonstrates the effectiveness of study abroad programs with regard to the development of pragmatic competence; in particular, pragmalinguistic competence. Firstly, it could be seen that, as expected, learners became more verbose in their production of speech acts after the study abroad period. As regards the first research question, learners’ use of syntactic and lexical mitigation in requests and apologies, and of lexical intensification in apologies, clearly developed as a result of studying abroad. However, sociopragmatic competence appeared to develop less, although the data gathered here may not be extensive enough in order to uncover such development. As regards the second research question, it does indeed appear that study abroad has a greater benefit on learners’ pragmatic competence than grammatical competence, at least for learners at the intermediate level and above who have already acquired a strong foundation of grammatical knowledge.

References


