Culture and Identity in the Learning of Pragmatics during Studying Abroad: A Longitudinal Case Study

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Abstract
Studies have suggested that L2 learners are likely to experience noticeable development in L2 pragmatic competence during studying abroad owing to their exposure to rich, contextually appropriate L2 input and increasing use of L2 in communicative situations. Existing research regarding L2 pragmatic development in the context of study abroad shows two tendencies: investigations are usually focused on specific pragmatic phenomena and contexts; and L2 learning is usually assessed through comparison with language choices made by native speakers of the target language. This study aims to expand the knowledge in this field by shifting the focus: (1) from pragmatic forms chosen by researchers to moments of learning noticed and considered significant by learners themselves; and (2) from learners' approaches to the native-speaker standard to how they understand cultural meanings behind the L2 and use it to negotiate identity. Qualitative data were collected from five Chinese students in the UK throughout an academic year via semi-structured interviews and online chat. The findings indicate identity challenges that students face in daily interactions concerning L2 pragmatics; linguistic barriers and unfamiliar conventions in interpersonal communications might hinder them from expressing themselves and forming relationships in the way they desire. This process appears to be uncomfortable for some learners, but it seems differences and difficulties in L2 pragmatics nudged learners to go beyond linguistic forms to explore cultural meanings behind the language, which further triggers the development of intercultural awareness.

Keywords: Study Abroad, L2 Pragmatics, Learner Identity, Intercultural Communication

Introduction/Background

Pragmatics, a subdiscipline of linguistics, focuses on how meaning is communicated and interpreted in specific contexts and how language is applied to fulfil social purposes and negotiate interpersonal relationships (LoCastro, 2012; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Canale (1983) was the first to include sociolinguistic competence within the model of communicative competence in using a language, which refers to the ability to use appropriate language in related situations. Bachman (1990) later proposed the term 'pragmatic competence' as one of the factors to evaluate the communicative competence of language users, parallel with one's grammatical and textual abilities.

Unlike syntax, which can be explained using written standards, pragmatics somehow resembles the 'secret rules' of a language, rarely articulated explicitly, yet acting as a tacit agreement between the majority of members in a community (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). The use of pragmatics involves assessing the specific context of the situation, including social distance, power relations, and appropriateness in both meaning and form (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008; Niezgoda & Röver, 2001; Young, 2011). Unlike grammatical flaws, which might portray L2 speakers as less proficient L2 users, pragmatic misunderstandings could reflect negatively on one as a person and lead to judgements along moral dimensions, such as being impolite, arrogant or insincere (O'Keefee et al., 2011; McConachy, 2018).

The interdependence of linguistic and cultural knowledge forms the core of pragmatics (Taguchi & Roever, 2017), which could be seen from the widely accepted distinction between the two components in the field: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Thomas (1983, p. 101) positions the two notions at the two ends of a continuum from being 'language-specific' to 'culture-specific'. The former refers to specific linguistic forms 'conveying pragmatic meaning (illocutionary and interpersonal)' (p.77), while the latter is concerned with one's evaluation of the sociocultural conditions within which the conversation takes place, such as social distance between participants and the cultural conventions of a community (Marmaridou, 2011). One's sociopragmatic judgement, therefore, is usually mediated by cultural meaning and understandings of social relationships accumulated through experience in previous communities (Kesebir & Haidt, 2010; McConachy, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016).

Based on the concepts introduced above, it could be concluded that the development of L2 pragmatic competence suggests not only learners' increasing language proficiency but also a growing awareness of contextually appropriate forms, an ability to present themselves and manage interpersonal relationships in desired ways in L2, and an understanding of cultural ideologies underlying linguistic forms (Diao & Maa, 2019). Hence, the study-abroad (SA) context has been suggested as a favourable environment for the development of learners' pragmatic competence in the target language. One factor contributing to such development is increasing L2 input in meaningful, contextually appropriate contexts, which fosters unintentional language acquisition and provides resources for deliberate learning (Jackson, 2019). In addition, new subject positions appearing in the target language communities can stimulate learners to reflect on their L2 language use in maintaining interpersonal relationships and thus gain pragmatic awareness (Block, 2009).

Existing research in L2 pragmatic development in the SA context shows two obvious patterns. First, previous studies have tended to focus on learners' improvement in one specific speech act or pragmatic phenomenon within a chosen context. One example is Shively's (2011) study, which investigates requests made by SA Spanish learners during counter service, with

conversation data collected from recordings. Second, most researchers in this field have assessed learners' pragmatic improvement in simulated situations, such as Discourse Completion Tasks and role plays, before evaluating learners' progress by comparing their performance with native-speaker (NS) norms. For instance, Ren's (2019) project focused on SA Chinese learners' requests. Role-play data were collected from L2 Chinese speakers and compared to Chinese native speakers' performances in the same tasks.

However, it is worth mentioning that what researchers take an interest in might not necessarily be what learners consider important in their learning and sojourning experience. I would therefore argue that data collection within a limited scope bears the risk of restricting researchers to the prescribed agenda, while at the same time neglecting critical moments related to L2 pragmatics that learners themselves notice, that cause them confusions or difficulties, that trigger sense-making and reflections, and that are considered meaningful and influential by learners in self-development.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, learning L2 pragmatics not only involves acquiring linguistic norms but also how learners interpret the sociocultural meaning of language use and how they employ L2 pragmatics to manage social relationships and express desired identities more flexibly and freely. However, merely focusing on learners' approaches to NS conventions may disguise learners' inner struggles during L2 pragmatic use, their interpretation of meanings behind the form, and their identity investment in language choices (Ishihara, 2019; Li & Gao, 2017; McConachy, 2019). Some empirical studies have suggested that L2 learners sometimes intentionally reject native-speaker pragmatic norms, especially when the form is inconsistent with their sense of self. An example is Kim's (2014) research focusing on L2 pragmatic use among Korean SA learners sojourning in the United States. Some learners in this study refused to respond to compliments with the phrase 'thank you', even if they reported noticing such use by local American students, as they felt it conflicts with the humbleness emphasised in their home society.

This study, therefore, approaches L2 pragmatic development during SA from a different perspective, aiming at expanding existing knowledge in this field through shifting the focus: (1) from forms or contexts chosen by researchers to moments of pragmatic learning noticed by learners themselves in L2-mediated interactions; and (2) from learners' approaches to the native-speaker standard to their self-presentation through the language and their understanding of the cultural meanings behind the language. The research question is: How does L2 pragmatic learning relate to the sense of self and intercultural awareness of study-abroad students?

Methodology

Participants in this project were five students learning in a UK university for a one-year postgraduate course. There were four females and one male, aged between 22 and 32, all five from mainland China and speaking Mandarin as their native language. They had all attained English at C1 advanced level at the start of their year studying abroad (IELTS 6.5-7.5); however, before studying in the UK, none of them had sojourned outside China. Four of them also reported a lack of opportunities to use English in communicative settings in both classrooms and daily life in their home country. All of them participated in this research voluntarily, and they all signed written informed consent. Pseudonyms have been incorporated for all the participants and other names or information that could reveal their identities.

The instruments used in this study to generate data were online chat and semi-structured interviews, with the data collection lasting a total of 12 months across one academic year (October 2019 – December 2020). For online chat, the researcher first introduced the term 'pragmatics' with the definition in layman's terms and examples. The participants were then encouraged to share details of their daily encounters and conversations related to L2 pragmatics with the researcher through either voice or text messages via WeChat, a social media app widely used by mainland Chinese. Participants were told that they could report experiences they found interesting, stimulating, confusing or even awkward, and that the content could relate to specific linguistic forms and/or cultural factors impacting communication. The researcher sometimes asked questions based on stories shared by the participants and occasionally dropped messages asking about participants' SA lives. The whole process for the participants resembled informal exchanges with a friend, in the hope that an atmosphere of relaxed, casual conversation would encourage participants to share more about their pragmatic learning and express their thoughts freely.

The main aim of employing online chat as a data collection method was to capture learners' noticing of learning in daily interactions. One of the advantages of online chat is its immediacy; learners could record the details of their experience and their immediate reactions right after it happened. Moreover, it gives access to data unobservable through other data collection methods, such as recordings and observations. Online chat was also used as an optimised alternative to diaries or learning logs; it is less formal, more interactive and requires less time to use, and it is therefore considered a less demanding task for participants. In addition, the storytelling process is reflexive, and thus offers participants an external observer perspective through which to comprehend their experiences and themselves (Finlay, 2003).

The five interviews were evenly distributed over the 12 months, each lasting 30 to 90 minutes, and all in the semi-structured form following a flexible agenda. Semi-structured interviews were adopted in the belief that it encourages participants to express their thoughts freely or bring up topics that interested them without feeling constrained by the structure, while at the same time helping to avoid the possibility that participants stray away from the research topic (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Prompt questions were designed to probe further into participants' perspectives in relation to the research question based on experiences they shared via online chat, which was why the duration of interviews varied, as sometimes students experienced more L2 contact, which provided more resources for discussion during the interview.

Qualitative data were transcribed, organised and coded for thematic analysis. I first read each participant's stories intensively, trying to approach data without established hypotheses in order to explore each person's distinctive development trajectory and look for connections and patterns across both time and social space within the same case. Next, I compared and contrasted individual cases to find differences and common patterns and to see whether their narratives were consistent with, or provide counter-evidence to, existing theoretical frameworks. The following section will present three themes that appeared from data analysis.

Findings

Table 1 presents the amount of data generated from each participant. As easily observed in the table, some of them were more active in online chat than others, and the difference was mainly due to the varying amounts of exposure to L2-mediated interactions and learners' willingness to share. Tina, for example, proactively expanded connections with other English speakers and specified that she enjoyed chatting with me, as she felt sharing stories helped to distract her

from academic pressure and to develop in-depth understanding of the world. Despite the differences in word quantity and sharing frequency, each research participant provided rich and relevant data. This section will introduce three themes identified from qualitative data collected from both interviews and online chat, each supported and explained by one example.

Participants	Interviews	Online Chat
Chloe	4 times, 191mins in total	12,400 words
Tina	5 times, 174mins in total	37,000 words
Win	5 times, 232mins in total	2,700 words
Hanguang	5 times, 228mins in total	3,300 words
Mary	5 times, 168mins in total	2,400 words

Table 1: Qualitative Data Generated from Online Chat and Interviews

Theme 1: Identity Inconsistencies behind L2 Pragmatic Struggles

The first theme is concerned with struggles in L2 pragmatics shared by all the participants, despite differences in their English proficiency levels. It appears that difficulties reported usually went beyond the language itself and were related to identity negotiation and interpersonal relationship management. 'Identity inconsistencies' here refer to the cases in which SA students hoped to establish connections, negotiate relationships or present themselves in a certain way while failing to achieve that goal. A case in point is Win's small talk experience with a stranger before a workshop:

Win: Everyone in the room was chatting… I asked the Belgian guy next to me: 'Shall we talk? Everyone is talking. I feel a bit awkward.' He said he didn't mind remaining silent, and he didn't feel awkward. His response made me even more awkward.

Researcher: Did you chat with him because everyone was chatting, and you felt you were obliged to chat? Or you really wanted to talk with him?

Win: Yes, it's just because everyone was talking. I didn't know why they were talking. I would feel more comfortable just sitting there silently. I think I started the conversation with an awkward question.

Researcher: You preferred to sit there and remain silent. Is that because Chinese don't usually talk in this kind of situation?

Win: Yes. I didn't know what to do when all of them, who were strangers to each other, just started talking.
(Interview: December 2019)

This failed attempt at small talk seems to be a result of Win's lack of pragmatic knowledge about starting and maintaining casual conversations with strangers. It seems Win was not aware of either the communicative purpose of the small talk or L2 pragmalinguistic resources suitable for the context. One reason, as Win has pointed out, is that she had rarely done small talk with strangers in her L1 society, and therefore she had barely acquired the sociopragmatic skills required for this genre that she could refer to when encountering this situation. It also suggests that she had received only limited instructions or support on L2 pragmatics related to daily communication. All these factors combined contributed to the failed attempt to reach out and her struggles in identity negotiation. By starting the conversation, it seems Win hoped to project herself as a friendly and sociable person and attempted to integrate into the L2 speaking community through imitation; however, it appears that she was interpreted in a different way by her interlocutor.

Theme 2: Transcultural and Translanguaging Coping Practices

Theme two summarises cases where participants proactively engaged previous knowledge and experience acquired in different languages and cultural communities to interpret new pragmatic use and respond to unfamiliar situations. The prefix 'trans' here refers to the flexibility in language and cultural practices, whereby learners 'move through and across, rather than in-between, cultural and linguistic boundaries' (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019, p. 472). The following clip from Tina's online chat data, in which she shared her experience of being invited to a Polish family to celebrate Christmas, is a good illustration of transcultural and translanguaging practices:

Tina: I didn't know how to address my friend's mother-in-law when I first arrived. My friend told me I could call her 'Helen'. However, I felt Polish people are relatively conservative, and it would be blunt if I just called her Helen. My friend calls her 'Mom'. I then also called her 'Mom'. I didn't mean that she is my mom. For me, it's like how we call older people 'Aunt' in China to show politeness and respect, but my friend told me I couldn't call Helen 'Mom', so I started to use her name again.
(Online Chat: January 2020)

It could be seen that Tina also struggled with self-presentation in her interactions with the Polish lady, as elaborated in Theme 1. Similarly, the difficulty she experienced was caused by unfamiliarity of the pragmalinguistic conventions followed by the target language community. However, the interesting finding that I would like to highlight in this case is Tina's elucidated decision-making process. Her initial assumption about modes of address, which later proved to be inappropriate, was based on the fusion of her knowledge of different languages and cultures. The use of 'Mom' illustrated her attempt to show respect to her senior in this context, which she considered appropriate within the Polish society. At the same time, she borrowed and adapted expressions from her L1 used in similar situations to achieve the communicative purpose. In other words, her language choice here was influenced by both pragmalinguistic conventions in her L1 society and her general impression (or perhaps stereotypes) about the sociocultural background of Polish people. Similar transcultural and translanguaging coping practices were reported by other participants, which will not be presented here due to the space limit. These cases demonstrate how SA learners creatively and flexibly engage cultural and language knowledge when attempting to decode new sociocultural encounters, even though this can lead to wrong assumptions and sometimes to further misunderstanding.

Theme 3: Meaning behind Language - Developing Cultural Inclusiveness

It seems that SA learners are more likely to notice new pragmatic features that deviate from conventions followed in their previous communities, which can be seen in the two data clips presented earlier. Rather than adopting or rejecting the new form intuitively, most participants reported a rationalisation process when encountering unfamiliar forms, in which they tried to understand the cultural meaning behind different language uses and behaviours. Their reflections and analysis can then foster their understanding of differences and greater empathy. One example is Tina's reflection at the end of the year about the changes that happened to her while participating in this study:

Tina: I think my identity, I mean from the cultural perspective, has changed a bit. First, I'm not viewing cultures as binary oppositions anymore. I used to make comparisons and reach conclusions like 'Culture A is better than culture B on a certain aspect', but I've realised there are deeper things under the surface, under our intuitive good/bad evaluation.
(Online Chat: September 2020)
Many cases could be found among Tina's L2 pragmatic learning experiences during the year that exemplify her general reflection on her change of cultural awareness and identity. See the example below:

Tina: The Polish are more direct when they express their feelings. Before Christmas dinner, each of us had a pancake on the table, and we walked around, took pieces from others' pancakes, kissed and hugged each other and said blessings. I feel this is impossible in a traditional Chinese family. We tend to express ourselves more implicitly. I think it has something to do with our traditional arts. We (Chinese) like the beauty of being implicit and hazy. In garden design, for example, we like those kinds of designs where people are surprised by nice views when looking through a door, rather than letting everything be exposed explicitly. For them (the Polish), it seems more important to be direct about expressing their feelings… I like their way of expressing love, though. I believe the care people have for their families are the same in both countries. If we have these feelings, why don't we simply tell our loved ones? I feel sometimes we are too implicit, and it causes unnecessary misunderstandings between families and partners.
(Online Chat: January 2020)

Although Tina mentioned no specific linguistic forms, I still decided to categorise her reflection here as pragmatic learning, as she was analysing different ways to communicate meanings and to use language in relationship management, which is consistent with the definition of pragmatics provided at the beginning of this paper. It could be seen that Tina went beyond the surface of linguistic/behavioural practices to investigate in-depth sociocultural meanings that lay behind the disparity. She creatively rationalised the implicit way to express affection, which she commonly experienced in her L1 society, by explaining the consistency between self-expression and aesthetic preference. At the same time, she recognised the positive impact of expressing affection directly in intimate relationships in her experience with the Polish family. Through this process, Tina developed understanding and empathy for both cultures and language communities, which contributed to her growing intercultural awareness and sense of inclusion.

Moreover, it seems that this new pragmatic feature not only triggered L1/L2 comparisons but also encouraged Tina to re-evaluate, and finally changed her previous pragmatic choice. Behind the change lay Tina's new preferred way to express herself and negotiate intimate rela-

tionships. Therefore, it could be argued that pragmatic-related reflections triggered Tina's identity change and development not just as a L2 speaker but holistically as a SA learner and a person.

Discussion and Conclusion

The initial objective of the project was to identify the connection between SA learners' L2 pragmatic development and their evolving sense of self and intercultural awareness. Evidence indicated identity challenges students face in daily interactions concerning L2 pragmatics, as linguistic barriers and unfamiliar conventions in interpersonal communications might hinder SA learners from expressing themselves and forming relationships in the way they want. This finding supports the significance of L2 pragmatic competence highlighted in previous literature: unlike grammatical flaws, which might portray sojourners as less proficient L2 learners, pragmatic misunderstandings can influence learners' abilities 'to do things with words and to function as a person' (Benson et al., 2012, p. 183).

This process appears to be uncomfortable for some learners, but it seems differences and difficulties in L2 pragmatics encourage learners to proactively engage their linguistic and cultural repertoires in order to interpret and cope with unfamiliar situations. The meta-pragmatic analysis reported by learners themselves indicates their translanguaging and transcultural competence in communication – to be more specific, their ability to move beyond cultural and language dichotomy and flexibly mediate between structures. Such competence is considered important especially in the context of English as a lingua franca (ELF), in which the language is used by the global community (Baker, 2011). In the ELF environment, sociocultural references of language become more fluid and diverse. The new reality thus requires speakers of the language to negotiate intercultural communication 'in a flexible and context-specific manner' (p. 202). However, the research findings also suggest that learners' attempts to decode meanings in intercultural communication using resources acquired from previous experience might sometimes lead to wrong assumptions and further misunderstandings.

Another interesting finding is that noticing and analysing pragmatic differences sometimes trigger SA learners to reflect on and even reshape their established values. Mathews (2000) used a 'supermarket' metaphor to explain this process; people moving from their original society to an intercultural zone are like those going from local shops to supermarkets. More types and sizes of goods are available, stimulating them to compare their initial options with new possibilities. There seem to be two possible consequences: consumers either changing their minds or staying with the original choice. For SA students, the case might be more complicated than the either/or situation — they could form unique perspectives through which they interpret cultures and languages and develop a communication style without fully conforming to conventions from either home or host culture (Blackledge & Creese, 2017). The process might also help develop learners' intercultural awareness and sense of inclusion (Kinginger, 2013). It could be thus concluded that pragmatic-related reflections could trigger not only language learning but also the holistic development of SA learners as people.

The study also generates insight into how institutions and tutors might help international students find their place in their adopted communities through providing pragmatic-specific support. Many SA learners in the UK come from countries where English is a foreign language and not used in daily communication. For them, expressing themselves and establishing connections in L2 can be challenging. Their interaction with the L2 community can raise awareness of their lack of pragmatic knowledge. Nevertheless, the support that most students receive from

their university is only related to their academic subjects. As a result, they have to deal with the frustrations and confusions of daily L2 communication using their own resources. Through probing into the SA experience from the students' perspective, this study highlights the necessity of pragmatic-related support in SA preparation courses and the higher education context.

In terms of teaching practice, this study suggests the necessity for teachers to familiarise learners with the connection between forms and meanings in the L2 community, more specifically, to help learners understand how specific actions can lead to certain communicative effects (Padila Cruz, 2015). This could equip students with the competence to express themselves in the way they want and prevent them from unintentionally presenting themselves negatively (e.g. being rude or insincere). More importantly, instructors should assist SA learners in unpacking the cultural and interpersonal meanings behind sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic forms, in order to scaffold learners' development not only as L2 speakers but holistically as reflexive and culturally aware individuals during studying abroad.

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