

Individual Differences in Pragmatic Development

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Abstract. Conventionally, L2 learners are assumed to be able to absorb both linguistic and pragmatic competences simultaneously. Then, researchers find out the importance of an authentic environment for L2 learners and assume that the learners will learn the pragmatic rules of the L2 automatically under an authentic setting. However, even this informed point of view discounts a number of other factors such as “individual factors” and “societal factors.” As a result, several different learner characteristics, including age, gender, motivation, proficiency, and social identity/learner subjectivity, in L2 pragmatic development are scrutinized in this paper. With the advancement of technology, it is suggested that individual difference factors should be incorporated into different genres of research on second language acquisition, especially on computer-assisted language learning since many different social network websites and web 2.0 studies are here to stay in this 21st century.

Keywords: pragmatics, second language acquisition, individual difference.

1 Introduction

The study of individual differences has been a subfield of second language acquisition (SLA) research for a long time, but in pragmatics, there are only a few studies focusing on the L2 pragmatic individual differences (IDs) [1].

Conventionally, L2 learners are assumed to be able to absorb both linguistic and pragmatic competences after their L2 proficiency reaches a certain adequate level [2]. Then, researchers find out the importance of an authentic environment for L2 learners and assume that the learners will learn the pragmatic rules of the L2 automatically simply by being exposed to an authentic setting [2]. However, even this informed point of view discounts a number of other factors such as *individual factors* and *societal factors* [3]. In other words, pragmatics competences are not only closely related to sociocultural aspects but also IDs, such as age, gender, language proficiency, learning style, personal view, and motivation [1].

This theoretical based research focuses on the relationship between IDs and the development of L2 pragmatics, and a number of different learner characteristics—age,

gender, motivation, proficiency, and social identity/learner subjectivity—in L2 pragmatic development are discussed respectively.

2 Methodology

This theoretical based research investigates the relationships between L2 learners' individual characters, including age, gender, language proficiency, motivation, and social identity/learner subjectivity, and their pragmatic development. Each factor is discussed respectively in the next session.

3 Discussions

As stated earlier, since individual difference (ID) factors are fairly complex and only a few studies have been done in this area, it is necessary to look at each specific factor individually in order to unveil the complexities of the relationship between ID and second language learners' pragmatic development.

3.1 Age

In second language acquisition (SLA), age is a critical issue on whether L2 learners can completely achieve language proficiency as native speakers of that target language [1]. However, the findings of this field have been mixed. For example, some contended that full language proficiency can only attained before puberty, but others critically argued that adults were able to learn new languages under a various of different learning conditions as well, just like the way children learn their L2 [4].

The issue remains debatable. Even though there is a lot of SLA literature on the issue of age, Kim's study is the only one investigating the effect of age on pragmatics.

Kim [4] inspected if the adult Korean ESL learners' different starting ages, informal language input, and cultural identity could cause the differences between their pragmatic and grammatical competence. The results with regard to the issue of age showed (1) there was a statistically significant correlation between the age of arrival in the U.S. and speech act performance, indicating that the earlier the participants arrived in the U.S., the better they were equipped with pragmatic competence; and (2) a strong correlation was found between the "age of arrival in the U.S." and "cultural identity," implying that the earlier they came to the States, the closer they identified themselves as Americans. These findings were consistent with previous research findings in which a positive correlation was found between learners' starting ages of SLA and their grammatical and speaking abilities.

Almost all of the studies so far have adult language learners as their participants [5]. However, younger learners may require different instructional measures to support their learning of second language pragmatics because L2 learners in different ages would engage in different activities, and a native speaker of English may react differently according to these L2 learners' ages [1].

Even though research on the effect of age in L2 pragmatic development is limited, it strongly suggests that age may have an impact on the acquisition of pragmatic norms [1]. Therefore, the influence of age on pragmatic development deserves much further investigation.

3.2 Gender

The reasons that women and men use and learn language differently are not because of their natural characteristics, but because they engage in different social activities; however, besides gender, individuals' social status and race are also potential factors that may influence their choices on what kinds of activities to take part in [1].

With respect to individual differences in factors such as age, gender, and proficiency level, Rintell [6] conducted a study about English as a second language (ESL) learners' perception of emotion in speech. The results showed that females' performance were slightly better than that of males,' but not statistically significant. Then, Rintell [6] concluded that "non-linguistic variables were of less influence than predicted.

Only a small body of research investigates the role that gender plays in pragmatic development so far [1]. Therefore, much work is needed to address this issue further.

3.3 Motivation

In SLA, the most influential theory of language learning motivation is Gardner's socioeducational model [1]. Although much of the work on motivation has focused on L2 proficiency such as grammatical competence and pronunciation, more recently, SLA researchers are interested in pragmatic competence because it has been deemed as another vital sociolinguistic factor in L2 learning [2]. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to explore correlations between attitudes and motivation on second language learning and pragmatic competence development with regard to individual differences.

Many studies suggest that motivation and proficiency are two important ID variables that may highly affect pragmatic attention and awareness [7]. In her study, she explored 80 Japanese EFL learners' pragmalinguistic awareness in processing six types of L2 implicit input and to what extent their awareness of the target features is related to motivation and proficiency. The results were: (1) The three motivation factors, "intrinsic motivation, attitudes to TL community, and affiliative motive," showed higher degree of relationship to Japanese EFL learners' pragmatic awareness, and among them, intrinsic motivation was the most significant factor, which implied that they learned L2 because of their personal interest instead of external motivation, such as acquiring a good job or passing an exam; (2) With regard to the relationship with L2 proficiency, no significant correlation coefficients were obtained between the learners' pragmalinguistic awareness and their proficiency; in other words, learners with higher L2 proficiency didn't necessarily mean they were able to notice the L2 pragmatic features better.

However, the result in proficiency was not consistent with some earlier studies, which demonstrated that L2 learners with more proficiency were able to notice pragmatic features better than less proficient learners [7].

Along the same line, Kasper and Rose [1] maintained that Takahashi's study was noteworthy because the study examined how motivation affects students' attention in processing specific pragmalinguistic features rather than asking how motivation may directly affect individual differences in acquiring L2 pragmatics, such as in Kim's [4] study. Unquestionably, it is not convincing to generalize from one sophisticatedly designed study to different learner groups and contexts, but Takahashi gives us an excellent blueprint for future studies on motivation as an individual difference variable in pragmatic learning [1].

In sum, motivation may be one big factor to explain the differences between noticing input, acquiring the knowledge base of L2 pragmatic norms, and making dynamic use of L2 pragmatics in various contexts.

3.4 Proficiency

Various studies have demonstrated that pragmatics can be taught both explicitly and implicitly to learners with different L2 proficiency levels. For beginning L2 learners, some studies have showed examples of how to raise novice learners' pragmatic awareness successfully. The majority of studies have included learners of immediate proficiency level, and these results are mixed. As for more advanced learners, Kim [4] argued that advanced learners showed imbalance between their grammatical and pragmatic competence.

In Matsumura's [8] study, he argued that few studies have made causal inferences on the relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic development, and he designed a three-wave latent longitudinal study to examine the cause-effect relationships among pragmatic development, levels of L2 proficiency, and amount of exposure to L2. The result showed: (1) Amount of exposure was partly affected by levels of proficiency; and (2) Both the direct and indirect effects of *proficiency* and *the amount of exposure* did not show a lasting effect on pragmatic competence. In sum, Matsumura concluded that it could be said that Japanese students with a high level of proficiency did not necessarily develop their pragmatic competence in the target speech community and that those with a low level of proficiency might have developed their pragmatic competence; however, it was not to suggest that proficiency had nothing to do with pragmatic development. It is worth noting that since the participants, both native and non-native speakers of English were not randomly selected, the results of this study could not be referred to the whole population of Japanese' EFL learners.

Matsumura's [8] finding about proficiency was consistent with Takahashi's [7]. However, his contention about 'the amount of exposure' as a factor in pragmatic development might differ from other research findings, which argued that simple exposure to the target language was insufficient because pragmatic functions and relevant contextual factors were often not salient to learners, and it was very difficult for L2 learners to notice or even pick up the pragmatic norms by themselves without any instructions.

3.5 Social identity/learner subjectivity

More and more SLA studies nowadays have focused on the learner's self-identity or the presentation of self, based on the assumption that the learner's identity is implicated in their pragmatic performance [9].

For L2 learners, Kim [4] found that the more strongly Korean ESL learners identified themselves as "very American," the higher the ratings of their apology and request performances. However, in Kim's study, cultural identity did not have an independent effect on learners' speech act performance but interacted with informal input and age of arrival. It would be particularly important to investigate in future research how L2 learners, who have bi-cultural or multicultural identities, perform in various speech act realization.

Siegal [3, 10] analyzed specifically occasioned speech events and genres by engaging subjectivity theory to interpret her participants' use and learning of Japanese. Siegal [3] carried out a case study of an American white woman learning Japanese in Japan. The position of women in Japanese society played an important role in what interactions she could participate in, how she was expected to use language, and how she was viewed. Siegal [3] further argued that learners might actually be creating a 'face' that was outside the guidelines of appropriate behavior in the society because they are not proficient enough to use the target language properly, or they might not accept certain societal rules of the target culture. If learners learn a target language or live in the L2 community for a substantial period of time, their life experiences are likely to cause effects on their subjectivities, language use, and language awareness.

In a similar vein, one of the participants, Arina, in Siegal's [10] case study stated that she didn't accept the way Japanese women talk because it was way too humble, and she didn't want to talk like that. However, through various social events she participated in, Siegal [10] found that Arina gradually changed her *self* and switched to humble honorific forms to suit some particular *foreign-only* social contexts.

In short, it is a socialized process for a learner to create his/her own desired social identity. In this process, how much a L2 learner can assimilate to the target sociolinguistic and pragmatic norm is various from one person to another. Some L2 learners may not be willing to devote themselves to the target cultural norms because of some distasteful experiences, such as being discriminated, marginalized, or simply refusing to de-value their L1 cultural identity..

4 Conclusion

We began this literature review by mentioning the differences in the amount of research that has been done in SLA and L2 pragmatic development. Although there are only a limited number of studies inspecting the various ID factors, such as age, gender, motivation, proficiency, and social identity or learners' subjectivity, these studies did help us understand more and stimulate our desire to experiment more research on individual differences in pragmatic development.

5 Suggestions for Future Research

More studies in the relationship between individual differences and L2 pragmatics development is certainly needed. With the advancement of technology, it is suggested that individual difference factors should be incorporated into different genres of research on second language acquisition, especially on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) since many different social network websites and web 2.0 research are here to stay in this 21st century.

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