



# Learner investment, identity, and resistance to second language pragmatic norms



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how the investment in identity of English as a second language (ESL) learner guides pragmatic choices. Findings show that the participants in this study often made pragmatic choices in hopes of a better return for their social identity. Aspects of individual learners' backgrounds, such as age and length of stay in the target country as well as interlocutors' age and power were found to closely relate to learners' pragmatic decisions. However, learners' own evaluations of these factors did not lead to certain fixed pragmatic choices. Rather, more significant for pragmatic choice were learners' decisions about investment based on constant negotiations between conflicting identities and pragmatic norms in relationships with others. These findings call for greater sensitivity toward learner subjectivity by both researchers and educators to understand learner's pragmatic decisions and their performance.

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## 1. Introduction

Learners' failures in the field of pragmatics are often assumed to derive from a lack of awareness of the target language's norms or a low motivation to learn the foreign or second language's (L2) pragmatics (Kasper, 1992; Thomas, 1983). However, to assume this would neglect the possibility that learners may intentionally deviate from target language norms in order to express a particular social identity and position in relation with others. The lack of attention to sociocultural contexts and learner identity when discussing learner interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is problematic in that pragmatic decisions reflect the cultural and personal views of the learners regarding target practices and the extent to which learners are willing to conform to them (Thomas, 1983). Therefore, the current study explores how English as a second language (ESL) learners' investment in their social identity guides their pragmatic choices and examines the extent to which L2 learners exercise their agency, thereby resisting target-language norms.

## 2. Pragmatic research and learner investment

Many observational and developmental studies have examined L2 learners' pragmatic ability (e.g., Bardovi-Harling & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Rose & Kasper, 2001), often comparing it to native speakers' pragmatics, the model which L2 learners are expected to follow. Such studies assume that all learners strive to achieve native-like competence; however, such an assumption neglects the role of individuals in the language-learning process (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). For example,

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research based on relatively positivist paradigms explored the differences between individual learners as a variable related to L2 learning and use, examining factors such as age, gender, and attitude toward a language, in addition to cognitive, social, and affective factors (e.g., Cook, 2001; Ehrlich, 1997; Kim, 2000; Takahashi, 2005). Although studies examining various learner variables have focused primarily on differences among individuals, this approach has been contested because learners are viewed as stable and impervious to context variation, despite evidence that language learning is socially contextualized and often co-constructed (Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Norton (1997) introduced the notion of investment in her criticisms of the traditional view, which depicted learners as unitary, fixed, and ahistorical entities. *Investment* is an extended notion of motivation, but with emphasis on the contextual, social, and historical nature of the target language used by learners. According to Norton (2000), “a learner’s motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with the desire to speak—investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners’ identities and their desires for the future” (p. 120). As such, Norton suggests that, when learners invest in the target language, they do so expecting a good return that will benefit their cultural capital through a wide range of symbolic and material resources. In other words, when learners speak and practice the target language, they are not just exchanging information with others, but are also constantly organizing and reorganizing their identities and their relationships with others. Accordingly, investment in the target language equates to investment in a learner’s own identity.

However, investment in a language—and subsequently in an identity—may not be easy, considering the numerous options from which to choose. Norton views learners’ identities as unitary, but multiple. The multiple identities can conflict with each other at times, causing learners to struggle with change over time (Norton, 1995; Weedon, 1987). Thus, learners’ investment in using a target language can be changeable, depending on the relationship with interlocutors and the identities the learners wish to present at a given moment. Language offers a tool through which a person negotiates a sense of self within different contexts at different times.

The theoretical notion of investment focuses on the dialectical relationship between ILP and learner identity. Language learning involves the social identity of the learner as a member of groups, cultures, and societies. Learner subjectivities may conflict within an individual learner or between people and may also be constantly negotiated and co-constructed in interactional contexts (Ochs, 1993). Seen from this perspective, L2 learners are active agents who would use L2 to not only position themselves in a particular context and invest for their benefit rather than passively following the norms given to them, but also to position themselves as social relations would define them. Therefore, depending on the identity in which they want to invest for a given discourse, their language use may vary. Language use can of itself affect learners’ interactions with others, their experiences within the L2 community, and their attitudes regarding L2 and identity. Considering that pragmatics encompass various sociocultural contexts and norms, the reciprocity between learner investment and ILP requires more attention. Thus, further research into pragmatics and examination of educational practices are warranted.

### 3. Learner resistance

Few studies have documented the ILP of learners to demonstrate how they express identity, manifest resistance in social contexts, or negotiate such complicated ideas. Siegal (1996) studied a white professional woman named Mary who was learning Japanese as an L2 in Japan. Siegal highlighted the importance of discussing “the intersection of language, culture, society (and all that reflects and creates power relations, such as nationality, race, gender, social class, and age), history, and the learner’s position in that society” (p. 376). Ultimately, Siegal demonstrated the connection between society and the learner by using the theoretical construct of subjectivity (Weedon, 1987).

Siegal (1996) documented a conversation between Mary and her professor, demonstrating how Mary manipulated conversations to save face within that particular conversational interaction by using topic control, hesitancy, modality, and honorific language. Unfortunately, her attempts to appear polite were unsuccessful due to her inappropriate use of the verbal auxiliary modal *desho* and her incorrect intonations. *Desho* is an epistemic marker indicating—among other things—that the recipient knows the propositional information. Mary used it to express a polite stance, but it could have been face-threatening because of the polysemy of this form; however, the inappropriateness of her pragmatics was not viewed as a failure by her advisor, who had low expectations for foreigners. After all, Mary was engaged in the social interaction that takes management of one’s face. Mary and her professor negotiated her position and co-constructed her identity through their language use. Thus, this example demonstrates how Mary’s societal positions as a woman, student, researcher, teacher, and foreigner in Japan either helped or hindered her language-learning experiences in Japan. Furthermore, her self-position was co-created by both herself and others throughout her learning experiences.

Although Siegal (1996) analyzed an incident in which Mary attempted to portray herself in a favorable light to her advisor, it is not clear how Mary would have made pragmatic choices in other contexts. For example, would she make the same pragmatic decision in speaking with her friends as she would with a professor whom she did not know? Would she express her identity differently in other speech acts? Such questions underscore the need to gain greater insights into learner ILP, which requires a more systematic investigation of the factors that influence learner ILP.

The relationship between learner social identity and ILP use was examined more systematically by Ishihara (2006), who gathered data from seven advanced-level learners of Japanese as a foreign language to determine which L2 characteristics such learners were most likely to follow or resist and their reasons for doing so. Her study focused on the speech acts of requests, refusals, and responses to compliments, analyzing the performance of elicitation tasks, stimulated recall interviews,

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