

# Pragmatic and grammatical competence, length of residence, and overall L2 proficiency

Wei Xu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Rod E. Case<sup>a</sup>, Yu Wang<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Nevada, Reno, College of Education, Reno, NV 89557, USA*

<sup>b</sup> *Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, Liaoning 116024, PR China*

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## Abstract

This study examines the influence of length of residence in the target language community and overall L2 proficiency on L2 pragmatic competence with a reference to L2 grammatical competence. Participants were 126 international students in the US with two academic levels of English proficiency from 17 countries, speaking 20 languages. A questionnaire consisting of 20 scenarios was administered to the participants measuring their pragmatic and grammatical competence. Results revealed that both length of residence and overall L2 proficiency influenced L2 pragmatics significantly with overall L2 proficiency demonstrating a stronger influence. Findings also showed that there was a strong and positive correlation between pragmatic and grammatical competence for advanced participants and all participants as a group.

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## 1. Introduction

For the past 30 years, the question of to what extent the length of residence (LOR) in the target language (TL) community and overall second language (L2) proficiency contribute to pragmatic competence has been an ongoing discussion in the study of L2 pragmatics. Researchers who tackle the question have taken one of two methodological orientations. The first, which is the most prevalent, has been the single variable design. Under this approach, researchers isolate and measure the influence of one variable and report on its influence on L2 pragmatic comprehension and production. This approach has allowed researchers to amass a large body of findings and argue convincingly for the primacy of either LOR (e.g., Barron, 2006; Bouton, 1988, 1992, 1994; DuFon, 2000; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004; Kinginger and Farrell, 2004; Matsumura, 2001, 2003; Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985; Schauer, 2006, 2007; Shardakova, 2005; Takahashi, 1996) or overall L2 proficiency (e.g., Cook and Liddicoat, 2002; Garcia, 2004a,b; Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2003; Rose, 2000; Taguchi, 2005, 2007; Trosborg, 1995). Areas of investigation within the LOR literature have included

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [xuw@unr.nevada.edu](mailto:xuw@unr.nevada.edu) (W. Xu), [rcase@unr.edu](mailto:rcase@unr.edu) (R.E. Case), [karenwangyu2004@163.com](mailto:karenwangyu2004@163.com) (Y. Wang).

requests and apologies (Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985), implicatures (Bouton, 1988, 1992, 1994), address forms (Barron, 2006; DuFon, 2000), forms of advice (Matsumura, 2001, 2003), refusals (Felix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2004), pragmatic awareness (Schauer, 2006), and employment of external modifiers (Schauer, 2007). Within the studies of L2 proficiency, researchers have investigated requests, apologies and compliment responses (Rose, 2000), requests (Cook and Liddicoat, 2002; Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2003), and indirectness (Garcia, 2004a,b).

The second methodological orientation has been to measure the influence of both LOR and overall L2 proficiency within one study. This body of research represents a stronger measurement of the role that LOR and overall L2 proficiency might play in determining L2 pragmatics, but it is limited to a small number of studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgoda and Rover, 2001; Yamanaka, 2003). As a result, the effects of LOR and overall L2 proficiency on L2 pragmatics are unclear and the extent to which the two variables contribute to L2 pragmatics is less understood.

This study measures the extent to which both LOR and overall L2 proficiency influence the development of L2 pragmatics. One hundred and twenty-six L2 learners from 17 different countries speaking 20 languages and of advanced and intermediate proficiencies in English participated in the study. The research instrument is adapted from the seminal study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998). The results of the research contribute broadly to the growing body of research on L2 pragmatic competence.

## 2. Literature review

To date, there are few studies which have investigated the influence of both LOR and overall L2 proficiency on L2 pragmatics (e.g., Yamanaka, 2003), particularly with reference to its relationship to the two components of communicative competencies – pragmatic and grammatical competence (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Niezgoda and Rover, 2001). The relationship among the three variables, however, is counterintuitive and seems to question at least two assumptions about the nature of L2 acquisition. First, because pragmatic competence represents a part of overall L2 proficiency, the common-sense assumption would be that an increase in overall L2 proficiency would be followed by an increase in L2 pragmatic competence. This, however, is not the case. As Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) first noted, “It has been shown repeatedly in the literature that second language learners fail to achieve native communicative competence even at a rather advanced stage of learning (or acquisition in the natural setting)” (p. 321). Bardovi-Harlig (1999) further elaborates on this statement when she explains that “grammatical competence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for interlanguage pragmatic competence” (p. 686).

The second assumption is that an increase in LOR is followed by an increase in L2 pragmatic competence. In other words, learners who spend a considerable amount of time in the target culture will see greater gains in L2 pragmatic proficiency than their peers who spend a small amount of time. This common-sense assumption, as with the research concerning L2 acquisition and pragmatic proficiency, has not been documented conclusively in the research. Learners maintain what Scarcella (1983) terms a discourse accent, regardless of their overall L2 proficiency or LOR. That is, they maintain and employ speech acts associated with their L1 when using their L2. Below, an examination of the limited number of studies which have explored this counterintuitive relationship between overall L2 proficiency, pragmatic competence, and LOR follows. The discussion highlights which variable, LOR or overall L2 proficiency, makes a stronger impact on L2 pragmatics.

Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) present an early study in which they investigated learners' ability in recognizing pragmatic and grammatical errors. The variables under investigation were the learning environment, LOR, and overall L2 proficiency. To this end, the researchers recruited students and teachers from Hungary and Italy who studied and taught English as a foreign language (EFL) and students and teachers from the US who learned and instructed English as a second language (ESL). Five hundred and forty-three learners in Hungary and the US and their 53 teachers supplemented by 112 Italian EFL speakers were first asked to watch a series of 20 scenarios exhibiting four speech acts: requests, apologies, suggestions, and refusals. They were further asked to identify the appropriateness of the last utterance of each scenario. If a negative judgment was given, they needed to scale the severity of the problematic utterance.

Data analyses indicated that the learning environment, LOR, and overall L2 proficiency made significant differences on learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness. The ESL learners in the US paid more

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