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Language learners' metasociolinguistic reflections: A window into developing sociolinguistic repertoires

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1. Introduction

There is widespread consensus among researchers in instructed second language acquisition (SLA) that form-focused instruction (FFI) is necessary for language learners to improve their communicative competence (Loewen & Sato, 2017; Spada, 2011). The vast majority of FFI research thus far has primarily focused on the development of linguistic competence (i.e., grammar features and to a lesser extent vocabulary and phonetics, see Loewen, 2015). However, recently, there has been increased interest in FFI as a means to foster the development of the target language with respect to social use and conventions. On the one hand, there is considerable interest in instructed *pragmatics*, “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (Crystal, 1997, p. 301). These specific FFI studies focus on the acquisition of speech acts (e.g., requests or apologies), sociopragmatic (e.g., T/V distinction) or pragmalinguistic features (e.g., semantic formulas) and have targeted a variety of languages such as French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and to a much larger extent English (for a recent review see Taguchi, 2015). On the other hand, there is also a growing literature on FFI and *sociolinguistic competence* (Geeslin & Long, 2014), which encompasses the ability to reveal or conceal one's social identities and membership in a particular speech community (e.g., their gender, age, race, ethnicity, class)

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or perceive these identities in others through changes in speech patterns (McKay, 2017). These studies typically focus on the acquisition of common sociolinguistic variation phenomena (e.g., -in/-ing) to broaden learners' receptive and productive sociolinguistic repertoires (for a recent overview of studies conducted with French and Spanish, see Geeslin et al., 2018).

Interestingly, although sociolinguistic competence, in one's first (L1) and additional languages, is certainly a vital asset for social interactions in today's globalized world (Blommaert, 2010; Hazel, 2016), relatively little is known about how learners' sociolinguistic repertoires actually develop over time (Howard, Mougeon, & Dewaele, 2013), particularly in an instructed setting. Therefore, to gain insight into how to bring language learners to focus their attention on specific properties of the language that may lead them to broaden their sociolinguistic repertoires, we created a 45-h advanced French L2 course at a large French-medium university in Canada. The course was designed specifically to increase students' awareness about the use of some of the most common sociolinguistic features found in (Canadian) French.

The present study is part of a larger project investigating the effectiveness of explicit pedagogical interventions which aim to foster the development of sociolinguistic repertoires in (Canadian) French (e.g., French & Beaulieu, 2016; Beaulieu, French, & Gagnon, forthcoming). The study reported here focuses primarily on learners' metalinguistic reflections about language use, as these have been shown to provide invaluable insight about different aspects of language use (Hu, 2011; Simard, French, & Fortier, 2007; Schmidt, 1995; 2001; Swain, 2006; Woll, 2016) and, thus, are particularly useful when examining the development of learners' sociolinguistic repertoires.

2. Literature review

2.1. The development of sociolinguistic repertoires in instructed settings

Sociolinguistic research has shown that sociolinguistic competence evolves over one's lifetime through individual trajectories of socialization (Agha, 2004; Blommaert & Backus, 2013). In general, studies have found that the experiences in the L1 or the additional language, or the degree of richness of one's social network, lead to larger sociolinguistic repertoires (Chevrot, Chabanal, & Dugua, 2007; Gautier & Chevrot, 2015; Nardy, Chevrot, & Barbu, 2014) suggesting, in turn, that sociolinguistic competence develops largely implicitly through language contact experiences (Segalowitz & Trofimovich, 2012). However, explicit interventions seem also to positively affect sociolinguistic competence. In fact, research has shown that explicit feedback in reaction to sociolinguistic blunders in real-life contexts, (e.g., French, Beaulieu, & Huot, 2017) or explicit instruction about sociolinguistic variation phenomena in language classrooms can also help both L1 and language learners develop more accurate receptive or productive sociolinguistic knowledge (e.g., Melo, 2014; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012).

To date, few studies have investigated the effects of explicit instruction on the development of sociolinguistic repertoires. In this line of research, two main types of pedagogical interventions have been found to help language learners develop receptive or productive sociolinguistic knowledge necessary to expand one's sociolinguistic repertoire. First, there are approaches that highlight sociolinguistic conventions in the target language through various explicit instruction treatments: metalinguistic explanations about frequent sociolinguistic features, consciousness-raising activities about sociolinguistic variation, language awareness tasks about social factors influencing speech patterns, as well as input- and output-based communicative tasks. These types of interventions have been used in Spanish as a foreign language context (Shenk, 2014), Spanish as a heritage language (Mendoza, 2017) and French as a second language (French & Beaulieu, 2016). In all these studies, learners made gains between the pre and posttest measures in terms of learners' ability to differentiate appropriate use of sociolinguistic features according to social conventions or ability to make more socially appropriate use of these features. In addition, French and Beaulieu (2016) found that, similar to language learners in naturalistic environments (see Regan, Lemée & Howard, 2009), sociolinguistic features differ in terms of how easily that are acquired by learners. Performance data revealed that it was easier to make native-like usage of the morphosyntactic variable (absence/presence of preverbal morpheme *ne* in negative statements) than the phonological variable (absence/presence of *l*/in third person subject pronouns).

Whereas the interventions above introduced learners to sociolinguistic forms and then mapped their sociolinguistic meanings onto them, another approach, adopted by van Compernelle and Williams (2012) and van Compernelle (2013), follows the reverse order, i.e., linguistic forms are mapped onto sociolinguistic meanings. Using concept-based instruction, learners are first introduced to overarching abstract concepts (e.g., self-presentation and social distance) related to sociolinguistic variation and, in a later phase, are introduced to forms that carry these social meanings. Concept-based instruction proved useful for intermediate American learners of French to not only gain awareness of the target sociolinguistic feature (i.e., presence or absence of preverbal morpheme *ne* in negative statements), but they were also able to make more target-like appropriate use of that feature in context.

2.2. Metalinguistic reflection as a window into metalinguistic activity

Although the pedagogical interventions presented above differ in terms of how explicit instruction was manipulated to create the conditions introducing changes to learners' receptive and productive sociolinguistic repertoires, they do share very similar objectives. First, they all made explicit the possible social meanings of the target sociolinguistic features; students learned that sociolinguistic variants do not have fixed meanings, yet competent language users do not use them randomly.

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