Discussion note

Knowledge or control? A comment on Lundell and Erman (2012)

Tim Hassall [*]

ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Australia

Abstract

This discussion note concerns a key finding in a recent paper [Lundell and Erman (2012). High-level requests: A study of long residency L2 users of English and French and native speakers]. That paper examines how highly advanced Swedish long-stay L2 speakers of English and of French perform L2 requests, and finds that they used downgrading internal modifiers a good deal less often than did native speakers. The authors seek to explain that finding solely in terms of the learners' states of knowledge, or willingness to use that knowledge. However, an equally important cause is probably that the learners were unable to access much of their knowledge during real-time task performance. This highlights the difficulty of explaining spoken interactive pragmatic performance solely from performance data. It also highlights the value of a well-known two-dimensional model of pragmatic acquisition as a tool for analyzing L2 behavior.
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Lundell and Erman's (2012) careful study focuses on highly advanced L2 speakers who have lived for a long time in an L2 culture setting. That type of speaker is rarely studied in L2 pragmatics: a fact which lends special interest to their pragmatic performance and makes it well-worthwhile to assess the authors' explanations for that performance.

1. Lundell and Erman's (2012) finding

Lundell and Erman (2012) examine how their Swedish participants perform L2 requests in French or in English by means of an interactive role play with a native-speaking interlocutor conducted using Skype tool. In the role play scenario, the participants played an employee who requests a boss by telephone to release him or her from an obligation to attend a very important work meeting, so that he or she could attend a sister's wedding. Ten L2 speakers of French and ten L2 speakers of English performed the role play. To provide baseline data, ten native speakers of each target language also performed it.

The finding under focus in this paper is as follows. The L2 speakers of both English and of French used fewer downgrading internal modifiers—elements to mitigate the impositive force of the request—than did the baseline native speakers. They did so both within the head act of the request and within Supportive moves. Within the head act, the L2 French group used few syntactic downgraders, while the L2 English group used few syntactic and lexical downgraders. (An example of a syntactic downgrader, from French, is the 'conditionnel passé', e.g., *J'aurais voulu prendre deux jours de congé* 'I would have liked to take two days off': Lundell and Erman, 2012:766. An example of a lexical downgrader, from English, is the 'Subjectivizer', where the speaker explicitly offers his or her subjective opinion as a means of lowering the

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* Correspondence to: Baldessin Building (Bldg 110), The Australian National University, ACT 0200, Australia. Tel.: +61 2 6259 2175.
  E-mail address: timothy.hassall@anu.edu.au.

assertive force of the request; e.g., 'I wonder/I was hoping . . .': Lundell and Erman, 2012:763). As for downgraders within Supportive moves, the L2 French group used few syntactic downgraders while the L2 English group used few lexical downgraders. Lundell and Erman sum up their finding as follows: ''both L2 groups underuse downgrading devices, syntactic as well as lexical, and across the entire request sequence'' (2012:767).

2. Lundell and Erman's explanation

Lundell and Erman propose that these L2 speakers used few L2 downgraders mainly for ''socio-pragmatic'' reasons (2012:767). That is, they knew the linguistic forms of the L2 downgraders but ''may not be as apt [as native-speakers] to match a given form of expression with a given situation'' (2012:767). In other words, they matched L2 downgrading forms to the social context differently from how native speakers did it. Presumably they did so due to ''differences in cultural norms between the L1 and L2 communities'' (2012:759). For instance, the authors speculate plausibly that there might be a Swedish egalitarian boss-employee ethos in operation which made these L2 learners perceive it as unnecessary to heavily downgrade this request to a boss in French or English.

The authors implicitly leave the question open whether the learners knew what the relevant L2 socio-pragmatic norms are. Their knowledge about those norms might have been inaccurate, or alternatively, they might have known those norms but resisted them. Thus, according to Lundell and Erman (2012), these L2 speakers used few downgraders in their L2 requests either because they did not know when to use downgraders in their L2 or because they preferred not to apply that knowledge.[1]

3. Knowledge, or control?

Lundell and Erman's (2012) explanation above is perfectly plausible. However, a contributing explanation strikes me as highly important. Probably these learners lacked control over attention to their knowledge of L2 downgraders. In other words they were unable to produce downgraders as often as they might have wished to, because they lacked automaticity in their use. Bialystok's (1993) model of L2 pragmatic acquisition helps to clarify this, below.

3.1. Bialystok's (1993) two-dimensional model

Bialystok (1993) applies to L2 pragmatics specifically her earlier model (Bialystok, 1991) of how L2 learners acquire L2 proficiency, to argue that the process of acquiring pragmatic ability entails two separate cognitive components. One component is acquiring knowledge, in the form of an increasingly explicit understanding of L2 pragmatic features. The other is acquiring processing control over attention to knowledge; that is, acquiring automaticity in the use of one's knowledge. Bialystok (1993) claims furthermore that it is the second of these components—acquiring control over attention to knowledge—which is the crucial process for adult L2 learners of pragmatics. Generally speaking, they produce pragmatically inappropriate L2 utterances not because their pragmatic knowledge is inaccurate but because they are unable to draw on their pragmatic knowledge when they need it; they cannot access it rapidly enough to produce appropriate utterances in real time.

These Swedish L2 speakers of English and of French in Lundell and Erman's (2012) study are very advanced and have lived in the target culture for a substantial time. However, that does not mean they have highly automatic control over all their L2 pragmatic knowledge. The task of acquiring automaticity is still a major one even for highly advanced L2 speakers—as vividly demonstrated by House (1996), discussed below.

3.2. House's (1996) finding of low automaticity

House (1996) studied the pragmatic fluency of ''very advanced'' German university students of English (1996:229). She found that even after a 14 week course of instruction in using conversational routines, these students showed no noticeable improvement in their spoken role play performance in one respect; namely, responding to turns by the interlocutor. This was because producing utterances in a responding role required them to plan and formulate appropriate English utterances on the spur of the moment—and that they were unable to do well. They frequently gave responses which were not aligned to the previous turn by the interlocutor. For example, when an interlocutor tried to elicit a 'How-are-

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[1] Lundell and Erman (2012) also offer a minor, supplementary explanation for this finding that their L2 learners use few downgraders; namely, that they may not know every single downgrading form which the native speakers use. They may not have learned certain of them because those ones may not be salient in the L2 input they receive (2012: 767). This is once again an explanation purely in terms of states of knowledge.