

Interlanguage Pragmatic Development in Study Abroad Program *A study on request and apology in Iranian learners*

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Abstract: *This research empirically studied the impact of length of stay in study abroad (SA) context on L2 learners' pragmatic development in request and apology speech acts. In this research, 72 Iranian study abroaders with the average age of 23 at the intermediate level were studied in two groups. One group (36 students) who registered in three-month and the other (36 students) that enrolled in six-month program in English language institutes in Mysore, south of India which is a destination for language sojourns, were selected as participants. Through administering a pre-test at the beginning and a post-test of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) at the end of the program on two of the most frequent speech acts (request and apology) the required data was elicited from the participants. Overall, the study revealed a significant difference pertaining to the pragmatic knowledge development in the group with longer duration in study abroad regarding the use of request and apology speech acts. Therefore, this research study puts support on the belief that longer programs of study abroad can result in more mastery in language use and communication.*

Keywords: *study abroad, interlanguage pragmatic development, length of stay, request, apology*

1. Introduction

It is often axiomatic that learning a language is easier in a second language setting as opposed to a foreign language setting because of the amount of direct exposure to the target language. Considering the superiority of the SL learning context for learning an L2, the issue that how the SL learning context differs from the FL learning context has not been explored as it deserves. For a long time it has been believed that the combination of immersion in the native speech community, and formal classroom learning, results in the best environment for learning a second language. This assumption is so common that it has developed a popular belief, among students and teachers, parents and administrators that students who spend a period abroad are ultimately the most proficient in the use of their language in special contexts. Consequently, a great number of students annually leave their home country for education abroad experiences with the expectation that they will pick up enough amount of language and get fluent in the target languages they have chosen to study and return home with greatly enhanced language skills. Kinginger (2011) claimed "research demonstrates that study abroad can have a positive impact on every domain of language competence, and that it is particularly helpful for the development of abilities related to social interaction" (p. 58).

Study abroad programs are often seen as an ideal way for students to be submerged in the target

language and culture. It seems intuitive that students will become more proficient after participating in study abroad programs. Indeed, much of the research on study abroad demonstrates that students often experience gains in proficiency in the target language through their participation in these programs. Study abroad continues to be popular with nations around the globe sending high numbers of students abroad for education.

Indeed research has repeatedly demonstrated that learners who study abroad can make gains in all skill areas -listening, speaking, reading and writing- during the term abroad. Their best performance, however, is in speaking skills including oral fluency, oral proficiency, vocabulary, pragmatics, discourse, and narrative abilities, where they not only make gains over the course of terms abroad but also typically outpace learners who remain at home in foreign language classes. As a matter of fact, among the language proficiency skills and performances one that makes the study abroad learners conspicuous, is their proficiency and gains in cultural and pragmatic ability, i.e. among language issues such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation... one that distinguishes between native speakers and non-native speakers, is their mastery on interlanguage issues, also known as interlanguage pragmatics. It is seen that even advanced language learners who have learned a great deal of words, idioms and grammar, often fail to communicate meaning perfectly in some social contexts.

1.1 Pragmatics

In language use, this fact is clear that what we say is not always what we really mean. Why aren't we sometimes understood? Language is used to manipulate, challenge or exchange ideas, but how? How is language used to show power in a social context? All these questions can be explained by linguistic pragmatics which has opened a wide scope of research areas that can elucidate what we really mean when we say something.

Pragmatics is a fast-growing discipline characterized by a large output of research. There are many reasons for this amount of attention given to this issue. As Archer, Aijmer, and Wichman (2012) suggest, lots of phenomena on context need to be analyzed in pragmatics. They debate that concepts such as presupposition are too difficult to be analyzed in semantics and therefore a pragmatic solution is needed to deal with them. In simple words, pragmatics is nothing but the study of language in its context. In other words, pragmatics is "the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language" (Levinson, 1983, p. 9). As a part of linguistics, syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions but pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed (Stalnaker, 1998). Huang (2007) states that "syntax is the most and pragmatics is the least abstract, with semantics lying somewhere in between" (p. 5). Consequently, syntax provides input to semantics and semantics provides input to pragmatics (Recanati, 2004).

1.2 Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)

As a domain within L2 studies, pragmatics is usually referred to as interlanguage pragmatics. Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) studies the *interlanguage*, which is related to the second language acquisition research and *pragmatics* which is the study of language in context. Therefore, ILP studies the second language acquisition in its context. The definition presented by

Kasper and Rose (2002) shows the interdisciplinarity or hybrid nature of interlanguage pragmatics as belonging both to pragmatics and SLA as well:

As the study of second language use, interlanguage pragmatics examines how nonnative speakers comprehend and produce actions in a target language. As the study of second language learning, interlanguage pragmatics investigates how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform actions in a target language (p. 5).

The definition above by Kasper and Rose highlights that there are two important aspects in ILP research which focuses the attention on both *production* and *comprehension* aspects of language as part of learners' pragmatic competence in their L2. The second part of this definition supports that interlanguage pragmatics is also concerned with the development of pragmatic competence. On the other hand, as a subject of pragmatics, ILP is a sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic or simply linguistic issue that mostly depends on how one defines the scope of pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

1.3 What Learners Acquire Through Study Abroad?

Because of the context and direct exposure to the native speakers, learners certainly acquire some pragmatics features to some extent. This claim is supported by studies on different learners of different target languages (e.g., American Spanish learners in Felix-Brasdefer, 2004, Japanese English language learners in Matsumura, 2003). Moreover, studies that compared the pragmatic development in study abroaders with at-home control groups demonstrate greater gains (Collentine, 2004; Freed, Segakwitz, & Dewyer, 2004). Kinginger (2011) asserts some results indicate that study abroad intensifies identical differences in achievement. She adds that some students are successful while some others fail. Hassall (2012) listed what learners acquire in SA context:

Routines

The most remarkable success in context is acquiring some pragmatic routines. That is the formulaic expressions that are used in performing different speech acts (e.g., "can I have...?" "Sorry about that," "good job," "Would you like a ...?," "What I want to say is that," or "See you later"). A number of studies showed a rapid development in acquiring routines. Marriott (1995) found that low-level Australian Japanese learners developed rapidly in acquiring routines regarding opening and closing requests. In another similar study Lafford (1995) found that low-level Americans learning Spanish acquired a great deal of ability in using routine forms for opening and closing encounters. Results in a study by DuFon (2000) revealed that beginning and intermediate level learners of Indonesian language acquired a good repertoire of greeting routines during a short term stay. Advanced Irish learners of German acquired a number of appropriate routines in making requests and offers and also for refusing offers (Barron, 2003), and advanced American French learners improved well in taking a range of applied routines for taking leave (Hoffman-Hicks, 2002).

Informal Style

Another remarkable gain by study abroaders is their development in informal speech style. Marriot (1995) discovered that Australian learners developed to use plain style as opposed to

polite style in language. American learners also improved in understanding colloquial words and phrases in French (Kinging, 2008).

Sociopragmatics

Some SA groups also demonstrated development pertaining to the social “end” of pragmatics (Hassall, 2012). It refers to the learners’ ability to assess the context and determine how to make a request or apology appropriately. This kind of pragmatic knowledge is not easy to acquire, especially in study at-home situation which is outside the L2 culture (Barron, 2003; Kasper & Rose 2002). Evidence from research studies supports that SA equips learners with certain amount of cultural and pragmatic knowledge (see Felix-Brasdefer, 2004; Kinginger, 2008; Matsumura, 2003).

Modifiers

Study abroaders also improve in other aspects of pragmatics. During their stay, they also acquire some features to make their speech acts work better. For instance, learners in study abroad learn to use external and internal modifiers. ‘Modifiers’ are the elements that are used to soften or intensify the illocutionary force of a request. For example, the learners acquire to mitigate their requests by using downtoners such as “possibly” or “maybe” or to learn to use “really” to intensify a request. Context greatly helps learners to acquire request and apology strategies which can help them produce applicable speech acts and make for example requests and apologies which function as they like (see for example, Barron, 2003; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Schauer, 2009; & Warga & Scholmberger, 2007).

Global Sensitivity

There is evidence on the effects of SA to increase the general sensitivity to pragmatics. In a study by Schauer (2009) on German learners of English, it was found that study abroaders were able to detect pragmatic errors at the end of their program and they were also able to recognize the importance of pragmatic errors more than before. This increase in the pragmatic awareness among 12 learners with a long-term stay in the target culture was similarly testified in another study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei in 1998.

.1.4 Factors Affecting Achievement in Study Abroad

It is often considered honest that studying abroad generally results in the learning of many aspects of the language which they will not experience in at-home study. However, it is often the case that the extent of language input depends on numerous variables. These variables can be individual differences in learning styles, motivation and aptitude, the features of the specific language to be learned, and the degree to which they are actually submerged in the target speech community and the interaction of these variables with formal classroom instruction in the study abroad context. Martinsen (2010) listed these factors as follows:

- Interaction,
- cultural sensitivity,
- living arrangements,
- length of stay, and
- motivation

Besides the factors listed by Martinsen (2010) above, Hassall (2012) added two more factors namely *input* and *identity*. Among these, length of stay seems to be more beneficial, as other factors can be subordinated by duration. Longer programs can certainly bring more improvement in interaction, input, cultural sensitivity, living arrangement, and even motivation and identity. Therefore, I chose the length of stay as the most prominent factors affecting proficiency in study abroad.

In a study with the purpose of classifying the program types for SA, Engle and Engle (2003) presented interesting suggestions. Before presenting the levels of classification, they stated:

It is undeniable that there are fundamental differences in the academic and cultural experience offered by study abroad programs today. We consider that the creation of a level-based classification system for program types would address this situation honestly and responsibly. Compare, if you will:

- a one-month summer term, requiring little or no host language proficiency, with subject-matter classes in English, collective housing and American roommates; with
- a full-year program for students of advanced linguistic proficiency housed individually in a host family and directly enrolled in local university courses or engaged in a professional internship or service-learning project (p. 2).

In addition, some authors have found that length of stay is an important factor in both cultural and linguistic learning while abroad (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004, Dwyer, 2004). As mentioned previously, participation in study abroad is growing rapidly, but most of the growth has come in the form of short-term study programs. So called “January abroad”, “Maymester” or “Summer abroad” programs typically take students abroad for less than a semester. Such programs allow many students to participate with native speakers and even the learners can have a self-test and distinguish their achievement level and it can be helpful to adjust their learning strategies to the real mode language. At present, the majority of research involving SA has focused on semester or year-long programs. This raises important questions. If students in semester or year-abroad programs do not always improve their language skills as much as hoped, one has to ask how much progress a student could reasonably expect to make in their understanding of language and culture during shorter programs.

Provided that learners who are living in the host community are exposed to sufficient and adequate input, studies have investigated whether learners benefit from a longer period of residence in the L2 community. Results indicate that length of residence is positively correlated with level of achievement in various areas of pragmatic ability, e.g., conversational routines for pragmatic fluency (House, 1996), acceptance of L2-specific request strategies (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985), decreased verbosity through the use of fewer external modifications (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986), appropriate mapping of speech acts to speech events (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993).

Taken as a whole, research has suggested that second language learning settings provide both quantitatively and qualitatively richer input than foreign language learning settings and that learners tend to show gradual convergence to native speakers’ pragmatic behavior as their length of residence increases. However, as mentioned above, whether living in the target community truly leads to a learner’s intake of input is debatable due to a lack of studies which follow this

specific line of inquiry.

2. Methodology

In the present research study, the researcher compared the amount of interlanguage pragmatic achievement in two groups of study abroad programs, one with three-month and the other with six-month length of stay. The researcher investigated to find out the overall success in two frequent speech acts of request and apology.

2.1 Participants

The sample selection in this research study is that of available samples. The samples are already placed at the intermediate level through a placement test and interview by the language institutes. Two groups of Iranian learners with 36 students in each group (total 72) that have already registered at study abroad programs in English language institutes in Mysore, India were chosen as participants. The average age was 23 with both men and women learners.

2.2 Instruments

In the current study the researcher used an open questionnaire called Discourse Completion Task (DCT) on request developed by Schauer (2009) and another DCT on apology which is a modified version of 'Discourse Completion Task' used in Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, 1982). The abovementioned CCSARP project focused on two speech acts (requests and apologies) in eight languages or varieties.

Because these two speech acts (apology and request) are culture specific, the researcher used a taxonomy which is modified by two Iranian researchers Afghari and Kaviani (2005) selected from categories presented by CCSARP and other scholars which fit the Iranian culture.

Table 1. Tools used for data collection the present study

Variable Considered	Tools Used	Developed by
Request	Discourse Completion Test on Request	Schauer (2009)
Apology	Discourse Completion Test on Apology	Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Modified by Afghari and Kaviani (2005)

2.3 Procedure

The required data was elicited through manipulating the above mentioned instruments step by step as follows:

*Three-month program**Step 1: test one (DCT on request and apology) was conducted as pre-test.**Step 2: (three months later) test two (DCT on request and apology) was conducted as post-test.**Six-month program**Step 1: test one (DCT on request and apology) was conducted as pre-test.**Step 2: (six months later) test two (DCT on request and apology) was conducted as post-test.***2.4 Final step:**

The pretest and post test papers were scored by three native speakers based on the *Speech Act Measure Rating Criteria* prepared by Cohen et al. (2005) see appendices A and B.

Halo effect is one of the factors that may influence the raters' evaluation. In this kind of research study participants' handwriting may have a negative or positive effect on the scores given by the raters. To this end, the researcher transferred the respondents' answers to the specifically prepared questionnaire with measurement guide below the scenarios (sample in, Appendix B) in order to decrease the effect of respondents' handwriting effect on their scores (as in this study the focus is on pragmatic knowledge) and on the other hand this devised procedure made the evaluation easier and more accurate for raters to score and for investigator to make decisions.

3. Results and DiscussionTable 2. Results of Pre and Post Tests on the **Three-month Program**

Students	Scores (out of 5)			Students	Scores (out of 5)		
	Pre	Post	Gain		Pre	Post	Gain
1	2.50	3.57	+1.17	19	3.26	4.23	+0.97
2	2.22	3.50	+1.28	20	2.15	3.55	+1.40
3	2.17	3.35	+1.18	21	3.35	4.58	+1.23
4	2.01	3.27	+1.26	22	3.20	3.75	+0.55
5	1.93	2.40	+0.47	23	2.41	3.70	+1.29
6	2.40	4.10	+1.70	24	2.06	3.60	+1.54
7	2.88	3.22	+0.34	25	2.10	3.45	+1.35
8	2.51	3.30	+0.79	26	2.60	3.74	+1.14
9	1.89	3.28	+1.39	27	2.20	3.25	+1.05
10	2.54	3.26	+0.72	28	2.35	3.50	+1.15
11	2.56	3.84	+1.28	29	2.16	3.32	+0.16
12	3.35	3.69	+0.34	30	2.58	3.11	+0.53
13	3.61	4.13	+0.52	31	2.18	3.55	+1.37
14	2.29	3.45	+1.16	32	1.72	3.00	+1.28
15	1.90	2.33	+0.43	33	2.49	4.30	+1.81
16	2.46	3.92	+1.46	34	1.38	2.13	+0.75
17	3.13	4.62	+1.49	35	2.65	4.72	+2.07
18	3.39	4.68	+1.29	36	2.17	2.50	+0.33
Total				88.75	127.9	38.24	
Average				2.46	3.55	1.06	

Table 3. Results of Pre and Post Tests on the **Six-month Program**

Students	Scores (out of 5)			Students	Scores (out of 5)		
	Pre	Post	Gain		Pre	Post	Gain
1	2.25	3.78	+1.53	19	2.44	3.85	+1.41
2	2.28	4.73	+2.35	20	2.52	3.45	+0.91
3	2.41	4.39	+1.98	21	2.53	3.53	+1.00
4	2.15	3.17	+1.02	22	2.15	4.85	+2.70
5	2.43	4.56	+2.13	23	2.04	4.30	+2.26
6	3.01	4.25	+1.24	24	2.47	4.50	+2.03
7	2.14	4.38	+2.24	25	2.25	4.20	+1.95
8	2.81	4.40	+1.59	26	3.25	4.69	+1.44
9	2.30	4.30	+2.00	27	2.25	4.50	+2.25
10	2.38	4.00	+1.62	28	2.50	4.25	+1.75
11	2.76	4.55	+1.79	29	2.54	4.63	+2.09
12	2.35	4.59	+2.24	30	2.67	4.52	+1.85
13	2.04	4.69	+2.65	31	3.13	4.70	+1.57
14	3.77	4.71	+0.94	32	2.50	4.65	+2.15
15	2.62	4.65	+2.03	33	2.87	4.65	+1.78
16	2.46	4.70	+2.24	34	2.33	4.41	+2.08
17	2.58	4.50	+1.92	35	2.54	4.60	+2.06
18	2.16	4.73	+2.57	36	1.72	4.50	+2.78
Total				89.6	157.8	68.14	
Average				2.48	4.38	1.89	

Table 2 illustrates the amount of gains in request and apology in both three-month and six-month programs. As it can be seen, in the three-month program the mean for pre-test was 2.46 which increased to 3.55 with the average of 1.06 gain in the post-test after three months of study abroad instruction. Table 3 depicts the amount of gain in the six-month program. In this group the mean for pre-test was 2.48 which rose up to 4.38 in the post-test with the average of 1.89 gain compared with pre-test. Therefore a comparison between the gains in the two groups indicates that six-month program is associated with more gain in language intake especially in request and apology speech acts.

The results of this research through quantitative analysis suggest that learners' overall performance on the requests and apologies has been higher in the group with longer stay i.e. those who have been abroad longer appear to access more on interlanguage pragmatics in using request and apology strategies. Table 4 below also illustrates the statistics on the output regarding learners' performance in the two groups on request and apology tests.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

	Length of Stay	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
TOTAL_Pre.test	Three-month Program	2.4653	.51839	36
	Six-month Program	2.4889	.38043	36
	Total	2.4771	.45162	72
TOTAL_Post.test	Three-month Program	3.5581	.62919	36
	Six-month Program	4.3850	.39280	36
	Total	3.9715	.66677	72

Table 5. Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source		df	F	p	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Test	Sphericity Assumed	1	739.283		.000	.914
Test *GROUP	Sphericity Assumed	1	53.405	.05	.000	.433
Error (Test)	Sphericity Assumed	70				

Table 5 represents the statistics yielded by SPSS. In this table we can see that there is a significant relationship between the length of stay and interlanguage pragmatic development in using request and apology speech acts at the level of $p = .05$, with $F(1, 70) = 53.405$ and the $\text{sig}=000$, indicating a statistically meaningful relationship.

4. Conclusion

This study has come out to be an empirical support for the common belief in the linguistic and pragmatic advantages of study abroad. Regardless the effectiveness of the combination of classroom language teaching and context, this study focused on the impact of length of stay on the learners' pragmatic development in request and apology speech acts. This comparative study on study abroad programs revealed the proficiency in the study abroad learners with longer sojourn outshines their counterparts in pragmatic proficiency because of their longer sojourn in the native context with a classroom support. The results support the folk belief that study abroad is an excellent means to develop learners' pragmatic mindset and the longer the sojourn, more proficient in pragmatics. The measured gains in the pre-test and post-test in both groups confirmed a significant improved pragmatic ability of sojourners in study abroad group with longer residency. In other words, learners living and studying longer in an L2 context are more likely to make more progress in language use.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Speech Act Measure Rating Criteria (by Cohen et al. 2005)

Notes:

- “Respondent” refers to the research subject who completed the *Speech Act Measure* (i.e., the “You” on the instrument). “Hearer” refers to the person rating the measure, imagining that they are in the position of the interlocutor talking to the research subject.
- Do not give the respondent a lower score for grammatical errors, UNLESS those grammar errors inhibit the ability of the hearer to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate. But if you cannot understand what the speaker is trying to communicate because of grammar errors, you can give him/her a lower score.
- Do not give the respondent a lower score for spelling errors. The instrument is meant to reflect oral speech, in which case spelling errors would not be important.

1. Speech Act Measure Rating Criteria: Request vignette

A. Overall Success of the Request Item:

Please judge the overall success of the request made by the respondent. Think about whether you would want to comply with the request if you were in the position of the hearer. Please rate each answer with **1-5** based on the speaker’s responses using the criteria listed below, if you were the hearer...

5 = I would happily comply with the speaker’s request

4 = I would comply with the speaker’s request, but somewhat reluctantly

3 = I would comply with the speaker’s request, but reluctantly

2 = I would comply with the speaker’s request, but only very reluctantly

1 = I would absolutely not want to comply with the speaker’s request

Note: same rating criteria was also used for apology

Appendix B

A sample of grading sheet for an item (scenario one in request)

Scenario 1

(i) Asking a professor to open a window

You are attending a seminar. It is a very sunny day and the classroom is hot. The professor is standing near the window. You ask him to open it.

You say: could you open the window please. It’s very hot in here.



Dear Respondents: Please do **Not** mark this part.

Rater’s Evaluation Section

A. Overall Success of the Request Item (Rq.1): (1-5) _____.