

The Effects of Proficiency, Length of Residence, and Interaction on L2 Pragmatics

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Abstract

There are several factors influencing second language (L2) learners' pragmatic development in the L2, and a few studies have investigated experiential elements accounting for differences in L2 pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Eslami & Ahn, 2014; Matsumura, 2003; Taguchi, 2005, 2008). This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by investigating whether and to what extent L2 proficiency, length of residence, and amount of L2 interaction affect English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' pragmatic skills in understanding implied meaning. After validating the instrument with 22 native English speakers (NESs), 30 ESL students in a US based institution completed two measures: the multiple-choice pragmatic listening test assessing the ability to understand conversational implicature and indirect speech acts, and the language contact survey identifying the length of residence and the intensity of interaction in the L2 environment. The results revealed a (a) positive and strong relationship between the ESL learners' L2 proficiency and L2 pragmatic ability, (b) positive and moderate relationship between length of residence and L2 pragmatic ability, and (c) positive and strong relationship between amount of L2 interaction and L2 pragmatic ability. The findings also indicated a positive and moderate relationship between the amount of speaking and the ESL learners' L2 pragmatic ability.

Keywords: interaction, pragmatic competence, conversational implicature, indirect speech acts, length of residence

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Background

Several studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Eslami & Ahn, 2014; Matsumura, 2003; Takahashi, 2005, 2010) have examined various experiential factors' impact on L2 learners' pragmatic skills regarding speech acts and conventional expressions. Bouton also conducted several studies (1988, 1994, 1999) to investigate implicature, a term coined by Grice (1975), and its teachability to L2 learners. However, relatively fewer studies investigated the reasons accounting for differences in L2 learners' pragmatic inferential skills in understanding implied meaning (Garcia, 2004; Rafieyan, Norazman & Lin, 2013; Roever, 2005, 2006, 2013; Taguchi, 2005, 2007, 2008). While the findings of these studies help understand the developmental nature of L2 pragmatic ability vis-à-vis variables such as proficiency, exposure, and interaction, further investigations are needed to confirm the varying effects of experiential factors' on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' receptive pragmatic skills. By using Taguchi's multi-componential theoretical framework (2012) and Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) this study examined the extent to which L2 proficiency, length of residence, and amount of interaction in the L2 affect ESL learners' pragmatic competence in understanding conversational implicature and indirect refusals and requests in English.

Research Question

1. What are the individual and combined contributions of L1, length of residence, and amount of L2 interaction to ESL learners' pragmatic competence in English?

Methods

Participants

30 English as a Second Language (ESL) students participated in the study. The participants represented 9 languages (i.e., Arabic: 11; Chinese: 10; Spanish: 2; Indonesian: 2; Korean: 1; French: 1; German: 1; Farsi: 1; Swahili: 1). There were two groups of L2 learners in this study: Intensive English program (IEP) students at Program in Intensive English (PIE) (N=20) and matriculated ESL students (N=10). IEP students were enrolled in level 5, which is the low-advanced level based on the results of a placement test they take in the beginning of the 16-week-long semester.

Instruments

The study used a paper-and-pencil pragmatic listening test consisting of 24 multiple-choice questions. The speech acts of requests (N=6) and refusals (N=6) were selected for the first section and idiosyncratic implicature examples were chosen for the latter section. Each item started with a one or two-word description and included a short dialogue. Each dialogue, recorded by two NESs, was followed by the question “What does X (name of the speaker) mean?”, and three distractors and one correct answer were provided. There were 15 seconds between each item, and the test took 20 minutes 10 seconds. See Appendix A for a copy of the test.

A language contact survey was used to identify the intensity of interaction and the length of residence in the target language environment. The survey consisted of two sections: (a) L2 interaction (b) background information. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Matriculated ESL students and the IEP students took the test in two separate computer labs. While the test was a paper-and-pencil format with an audio being played by the speakers, the language contact survey was taken electronically on Survey Monkey. The participants were asked to complete the survey on the individual computers and the completion time of the survey was 8 minutes on average. All the participants first took the pragmatic listening test and then completed the language contact survey on Survey Monkey.

Results

Descriptive statistics show the variables were relatively normally distributed; therefore, Pearson's r and standard multiple regression analysis were chosen for the statistical analyses.

Pearson's r showed that each variable is positively correlated with the L2 pragmatic skills of the L2 participants, and proficiency has a strong effect size while length of residence and L2 interaction had a moderate effect size. Independent Samples T-test were run to compare L2 pragmatic ability in matriculation conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for the matriculated students and the IEP group; $t(23.5) = -6.99, p = .000$ with 7.46 difference (95% CI, -9.67 to -5.26). These results suggest that proficiency does have an impact on the L2 learners' ability in comprehending implied meaning.

Separate independent Samples T-tests were run to see whether the scores were statistically different for the indirect speech acts of requests, refusals and conversational implicature parts. However, no significant differences were found.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to see the relationship between each skill and the L2 pragmatic ability, and it was found that speaking skills had a positive and strong relationship with the L2 pragmatic ability.

To analyze the predicting power of all the three variables on the outcome, standard MRA analysis was conducted. A significant regression equation was found ($F(4, 24) = 10.136$, $p < .000$), with an R^2 of .61 and adjusted R^2 of .56. Among proficiency, length of residence, and amount of interaction, proficiency was found to have the most significant predicting power.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

The study findings have important implications for IEP classrooms in an ESL context as they revealed the relationship between important experiential factors such as proficiency, length of residence, intensity of interaction, and L2 pragmatic competence. L2 proficiency, length of residence, and amount of interaction explained more than 50 percent of the variance among the L2 learners' pragmatic ability. Therefore, these factors should be considered for L2 pragmatic development by stakeholders including IEP instructors and IEP curriculum developers.

According to the findings, highly proficient L2 learners are able to comprehend implied meaning as well as NESs, so IEP instructors can introduce authentic materials produced for NESs to promote L2 pragmatic inferential skills in advanced IEP classrooms. As for the low-ability learners, Jeon and Kaya argue that "a linguistic threshold is required for the acquisition of L2 pragmatics" (2006, p. 182), suggesting low-ability L2 learners might have problems understanding implied meaning, so L2 pragmatic instruction can be tailored considering the proficiency level of the learners. Finally, the fact that L2 interaction in the form of speaking contributed to the learners' L2 pragmatic ability suggests that spoken interaction should be an important component of IEP classes. Thus, more communicative activities in IEP classes such as role plays can be used by L2 instructors to maximize interaction in the target language. This would help improve the correspondence between the target language use and the instruction, facilitating real-life success in terms of pragmatic ability in the target language.

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Appendix A
Pragmatics Listening Test**UNDERSTANDING IMPLIED MEANING IN ENGLISH**

Directions: This test will assess how well you understand what people mean when they speak indirectly. There are 24 items in this test. In each item, you will hear a conversation between two people. Then, you will be asked to **circle** the correct answer from the four answer choices. You will have one minute to answer each question. Make sure you answer **all** the questions.

Example Question:

Listen to the conversation about **a gift** between **Jane** and **Tom**.

Question: **What does Tom mean?**

- a. Tom thinks the post office is closed now.
- b. Tom thinks Jane can post her package now.
- c. Tom thinks the post office is usually open at 7 pm.
- d. Tom thinks Jane was too busy to find a gift today.

QUESTIONS

1. Listen to the conversation about **a birthday** between **Sally** and **Tom**.

Question: **What does Tom mean?**

- a. Tom is going to have coffee with Sally.
- b. Tom can't have coffee with Sally.
- c. Tom is going to spend some time with Sally.
- d. Tom is going to help Sally's work over a cup of coffee.

2. Listen to the conversation about **a favor** between **Jake** and **Mary**.

Question: **What does Mary mean?**

- a. Mary doesn't want to go to the English class.
- b. Mary can't help Jake with his paper.
- c. Mary is going to help Jake with his paper.
- d. Mary can check Jake's paper in 5 minutes.

3. Listen to the conversation about **Saturday plans** between **Susan** and **Dave**.

Question: **What does Dave mean?**

- a. Dave doesn't think Susan's party is exciting.
- b. Dave is going to attend Susan's party.
- c. Dave doesn't know his plans for Saturday yet.
- d. Dave can't come to Susan's party.

4. Listen to the conversation about **dinner** between **Ben** and **Jenny**.

Question: **What does Jenny mean?**

- a. Jenny wants to spend money on food.
- b. Jenny is going to cook Chinese food.
- c. Jenny doesn't want to go out to eat tonight.
- d. Jenny is going out to eat with Ben tonight.

5. Listen to the conversation about **a ride** between **Tom** and **Sally**.

Question: **What does Sally mean?**

- a. Sally doesn't need a ride to the airport from Tom.
- b. Sally is on her way home now.
- c. Sally is asking Tom for a ride to the airport.
- d. Sally is travelling to New York with Tom.

6. Listen to the conversation about **summer plans** between **Dr. Walker** and **Jack**.

Question: **What does Jack mean?**

- a. Jack is going to take some summer classes.
- b. Jack is doing fine with his classes.
- c. Jack doesn't want to take any summer classes.
- d. Jack has plans to study more this summer.

7. Listen to the conversation about **an exam** between **Jane** and **Dr. Brown**.

Question: **What does Jane mean?**

- a. Jane is asking Dr. Brown when her exam is.
- b. Jane is telling him that the exam is too early.
- c. Jane is telling Dr. Brown that she needs his help for the exam.
- d. Jane is asking Dr. Brown to give her exam this week.

8. Listen to the conversation about **tea** between **Ally** and **Kevin**.

Question: **What does Kevin mean?**

- a. Kevin would like to have some coffee.
- b. Kevin is sorry that he caused so much trouble.
- c. Kevin is asking Ally to make him a cup of tea.
- d. Kevin is making himself a cup of tea.

9. Listen to the conversation about **a paper** between **George** and **Dr. White**.

Question: **What does Dr. White mean?**

- a. Dr. White is asking George to come back tomorrow.
- b. Dr. White doesn't want to go over George's paper.
- c. Dr. White doesn't like George's paper very much.
- d. Dr. White is asking George to help his work.

10. Listen to the conversation about **a song** between **Sally** and **Tom**.

Question: **What does Sally mean?**

- a. Sally is telling Tom that she is at home.
- b. Sally is asking Tom to stop the music.
- c. Sally is telling Tom that she likes the music.
- d. Sally is asking Tom which CD he bought.

11. Listen to the conversation about **a football game** between **John** and **Barbara**.

Question: **What does Barbara mean?**

- a. She wants John to get some drinks for his friends.
- b. She wants John to help her in the kitchen.
- c. She wants to have some food before John leaves.
- d. She wants to go out to get some food for John's friends.

12. Listen to the conversation about **a raise** between **Sally** and **Tom**.

Question: **What does Sally mean?**

- a. Sally wants to know how much raise Tom got.
- b. Sally is very pleased with her job.
- c. Sally wants to know if Tom's happy with his life.
- d. Sally doesn't care that Tom got a nice raise.

13. Listen to the conversation about **a book report** between **Jane** and **Dr. Brown**.

Question: **What does Dr. Brown mean?**

- a. He thought that Jane 's book report was very good.
- b. He didn't like Jane's book report very much.
- c. He hasn't read Jane's book report yet.
- d. He thought that Jane didn't follow the directions.

14. Listen to the conversation about **a summer trip** between **Mary** and **John**.

Question: **What does John mean?**

- a. John doesn't know where Mike is right now.
- b. John thinks Mike is probably at the library.
- c. John has never seen Mike's blue car before.
- d. John likes blue cars and wants Mary to see it.

15. Listen to the conversation about **a movie** between **John** and **Barbara**.

Question: **What does Barbara mean?**

- a. Barbara thought that the movie was very good.
- b. Barbara fell asleep at the end of the movie.
- c. Barbara liked the end of the movie.
- d. Barbara didn't enjoy the movie very much.

16. Listen to the conversation about **a car** between **John** and **Barbara**.

Question: **What does Barbara mean?**

- a. Barbara doesn't know where Tim is.
- b. Barbara hasn't seen Tim today.
- c. Barbara thinks that Tim's music is too loud.
- d. Barbara thinks Tim is probably in his room.

17. Listen to the conversation about **neighbors** between **Dave** and **Susan**.

Question: **What does Susan mean?**

- a. Susan likes her neighbors very much.
- b. Susan doesn't know her neighbors.
- c. Susan doesn't like her neighbors.
- d. Susan has never visited her neighbors since she moved in.

18. Listen to the conversation about **a party** between **Mary** and **Kevin**.

Question: **What does Mary mean?**

- a. Mary had a good time at the party.
- b. Mary was very busy during the party.
- c. Mary didn't enjoy the party so much.
- d. Mary thought people at the party were polite.

19. Listen to the conversation about **spring break** between **Jane** and **Dr. White**.

Question: **What does Jane mean?**

- a. She had a good time in California.
- b. She thought her trip was too short.
- c. She liked the car she rented during the trip.
- d. She didn't enjoy her trip very much.

20. Listen to the conversation about **the police** between **Mary** and **Kevin**.

Question: **What does Kevin mean?**

- a. Kevin thinks the school year is always hard to keep up.
- b. Kevin didn't get caught by the police after the finals' week.
- c. Kevin got caught by the police after the finals' week.
- d. Kevin is going to celebrate the end of the finals' week.

21. Listen to the conversation about **a wedding** between **Ally** and **Jake**.

Question: **What does Ally mean?**

- a. Ally doesn't remember the wedding.
- b. Ally thought the cake wasn't so good.
- c. Ally liked the wedding very much.
- d. Ally didn't enjoy the wedding very much.

22. Listen to the conversation about **going for a run** between **Jenny** and **Kevin**.

Question: **What does Jenny mean?**

- a. It's surprisingly cold for August.
- b. It's so warm that it feels like August.
- c. It's warm like usual in August.
- d. It's hard to predict the temperature in August.

23. Listen to the conversation about **a Biology class** between **Dave** and **Susan**.

Question: **What does Susan mean?**

- a. Susan likes the Biology class.
- b. Susan doesn't want to be in another class.
- c. Susan doesn't want to talk to Dave.
- d. Susan doesn't like the Biology class.

24. Listen to the conversation about **a movie** between **Mary** and **Dave**.

Question: **What does Dave mean?**

- a. The movie was great.
- b. The theater was great.
- c. The movie was not good.
- d. Dave likes popcorn.

END OF TEST. THANK YOU!

Appendix B
Survey

General Instructions

The purpose of this questionnaire is to examine your attitudes toward learning about American culture in the regular language classroom, and various factors affecting your language learning experience. The questionnaire consists of three sections. Before you begin, read the directions carefully and answer the questions honestly. Thank you!

SECTION A. ATTITUDE TOWARD LANGUAGE CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Instructions: State how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by choosing a number from 1 to 6. Make sure to respond to every statement. Examples of English-speaking countries are: The United States, The United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand etc.		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Example: I like learning English.		1	2		4	5	6
A1.	I like listening to the music of English-speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A2.	I like reading English magazines, newspapers, blogs, or books.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A3.	I like watching TV series, movies, TV shows etc. made in English-speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A4.	I like living in an English-speaking country.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A5.	I like to be friends with native speakers of English.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A6.	Most of my friends here are American.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A7.	I want to improve my English so that I can talk to native speakers of English.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A8.	I like to see cultural information in my English classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A9.	I like learning about the culture of English-speaking countries in my English language classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A10.	Learning about the culture of English-speaking countries helps me develop my English skills.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A11.	My English language courses have had a positive impact on my view of cultures of English-speaking countries.	1	2	3	4	5	6
A12.	I feel close to the culture of the United States.	1	2	3	4	5	6

SECTION B. WEEKLY ENGLISH USE

Instructions: *In this part, you will be asked about your English use while studying in the United States. Read each question and respond carefully by circling the appropriate numbers.*

B1. On average, how many days *per week* do you spend **speaking** in English with **native or fluent English speakers**?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

On those days, usually how many *hours per day*?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

B2. On average, how many hours *per week* do you spend **listening to native or fluent English speakers**?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

On those days, usually how many *hours per day*?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

B3. On average, how many days *per week* do you spend **reading** in English?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

On those days, usually how many *hours per day*?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

B4. On average, how many hours *per week* do you spend **writing** in English?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

On those days, usually how many *hours per day*?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

SECTION C. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Instructions: *Fill out this section based on your personal information. This information will be kept secret and will not be shared with anyone except the researcher.*

C1.	Age:	
C2.	Gender:	<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male
C3.	Native (First) Language:	<input type="checkbox"/> Arabic <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify)
C4.	If you're a PIE student, your level is:	<input type="checkbox"/> Level 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Level 6

C5.	If you're NOT a PIE student, you are a	<input type="checkbox"/> Freshmen Student (1 st year) <input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore Student (2 nd year)
C6.	Have you ever received any instruction on the following topics in any of your English classes?: _____	Yes _____ No _____ a) Implicature* (*inferred/implied messages such as irony, sarcasm, indirect criticism) b) Speech Acts (e.g., refusals, requests)
C7.	How many months have you spent in an English-speaking country so far?:	_____ months
C8.	How many months have you spent in the United States so far?:	_____ months

**END OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE.
THANK YOU!**