

HOW MIGHT THE ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT INFLUENCE B2-C2 LEVEL LEARNERS' LINGUISTIC CHOICES IN ORAL DISCOURSE?

EDIT WILLCOX-FICZERE

Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom

Abstract. The significance of pragmatic competence in L2 speakers' successful social integration has been highlighted, and the need for assessing it has increased as the number of international students in English-speaking countries has risen. Many existing pragmatic tests are based on the Speech Act Theory and employ discourse completion tasks. However, these have been criticized for overlooking the importance of the discursive side of pragmatics. Furthermore, there has been little research into gaining learners' insight into their thought processes while analyzing the given social context, which in turn will influence their linguistic choices and pragmatic performance. The aim of this research was, therefore, to examine how the depth of learners' context analysis might influence their linguistic choices in authentic tasks and impact the conversational strategies employed in order to achieve the communicative goal. Data were collected from thirty B2-C2 level international university students, who performed four monologic tasks. This was followed by a semi-structured interview to gain participants' perspectives on the contexts. Task performance was analyzed qualitatively using Conversation Analysis, and interview data was utilized to better understand language use and strategies in task performance. The results indicate that with increasing proficiency, learners not only employed more pragmalinguistic devices when deemed necessary, but they also placed a stronger emphasis on cooperation and the mutual achievement of the communicative goal. The data from the semi-structured interviews also highlighted that with increased proficiency there was a greater depth of contextual analysis, focusing more closely on the conversational partner's circumstances and potential reaction to the request.

Key words: study abroad, sociopragmatics, oral discourse, L2 pragmatic competence, advanced language learners

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, an increasing number of young people have decided to study abroad and live in a new culture. With the increasing number of overseas students

enrolling at UK universities, the transfer of L1 societal norms, which are often manifested in language use, is a topic of particular relevance. The use of English as a lingua franca may assist this transition, but it is still unclear whether the knowledge of solely linguistic forms is sufficient for people from diverse communities to interact and understand each other well. This issue has prompted much research; in sociology, the notion of intercultural communication has surfaced investigating whether the way newcomers communicate socially influences their assimilation (e.g. Geraghty and Conacher, 2014), whilst linguistics research has been exploring the link between language form and its social function within the field of pragmatics (e.g. Leech, 1983; Barron, 2003; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

According to Leech (1983: 10), pragmatic competence combines, on the one hand, knowledge of linguistic devices and strategies available to speakers in order to achieve their communicative goals (i.e. pragmalinguistic knowledge) and, on the other hand, knowledge of how these devices are used appropriately in social context (i.e. sociopragmatic knowledge). This means that a pragmatically competent speaker constantly evaluates the social context at hand and may, for instance, opt for conventional indirectness and use linguistic devices to soften the force of a request (i.e. pragmalinguistic resources) if their evaluation indicates considerable differences between the speakers in terms of power, social distance, and a high degree of imposition involved in the communicative act (e.g. employee–boss). In other words, as Kasper and Roever (2005) state, sociopragmatics involves speakers' knowledge of the link between the consideration of social attributes (e.g. power) and performing specific communicative acts. Such knowledge guides speakers when deciding what to say to whom and how. Most existing definitions of pragmatic competence (e.g. Thomas, 1983; Dippold, 2008) are based on this distinction between linguistic devices and their appropriate use in social contexts. However, a unanimously accepted definition is yet nonexistent (Roever, 2011), which raises concerns when attempting to teach, assess, or even simply describe such an ability.

Many pragmatic tests are based on models of communicative competence, such as Bachman and Palmer's (2010). In their model, language ability is viewed as a combination of two closely related components, organizational (i.e. grammatical) and pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge is defined as a combination of (1) functional knowledge, including instrumental functions (e.g. requests) and interpersonal functions (e.g. establishing relationships), and (2) sociolinguistic knowledge (i.e. employing grammatical resources reflecting social norms imposed by such factors as power or imposition). However, as Kasper and Ross (2013) point out, participants often perform numerous actions (e.g. greeting, persuading) in interaction, but functions are inadequate to reflect a series of actions because they lack a sequential structure. Besides, the Speech Act and Politeness theories, which informed such models, have been criticized lately for focusing on individual cognition and isolated utterances (Roever, 2011; Kasper and Ross, 2013), but as Thomas (1995) argues, the meaning of utterances is determined by context and their location in interaction. Consequently, the construct of pragmatic competence

should incorporate the hearer's (H) role as well as the speakers' ability to produce a sequence of actions whilst attempting to achieve their communicative goal (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012).

This view resulted in attempts to combine models of communicative competence with discursive pragmatics (Kasper, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer, 2019) and the use of conversation analysis (CA) for the analysis of L2 pragmatic competence in interaction (e.g. Youn, 2015; Ikeda, 2017). These studies have also replaced discourse completion tasks (DCTs) as test instruments, favored by earlier studies (e.g. Liu, 2006), with monologues and role-plays. Whilst this approach was innovative, as the discursive nature of interaction was taken into consideration, the insight gained into speakers' thought processes when completing speaking tasks was somewhat impressionistic. Clearly, analyzing a L2 speakers' context evaluation, particularly when completing monologic tasks, could shed some light on their linguistic choices and whether these have been based on their analysis of the social context. Such insight would enable us to better understand the level of conscious pragmatic decision-making, which in turn could also inform the assessment as well as the teaching of L2 pragmatic competence.

Such analysis would also address another frequently debated issue, which is the norm against which pragmatic competence should be measured. Much research highlights the difficulties with native speaker norms as the perception of appropriacy varies even within the same speech community (e.g. McNamara and Roever, 2006). Perhaps, as House (2007) claims, L2 speakers should be permitted to make linguistic choices corresponding to their own understanding of the context. However, what could indicate that such language related decisions are conscious needs to be clarified. Previous research employed mostly questionnaires (e.g. Ikeda, 2017) to obtain this information, but interviews would perhaps allow deeper insight into speakers' thought processes. Rich interview data could aid our understanding of speakers' contextual analysis of task contexts, and through this process we might be better able to evaluate how successful or unsuccessful speakers have been in achieving their communicative goal.

A final question is whether it is proficiency or the length of exposure to L1 culture and language that determines L2 pragmatic development. Some argue that there is linear development and increased proficiency leads to progress (Taguchi, 2007; Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos, 2011; Grabowski, 2013), while others suggest that such development is mainly due to the length of stay in the host environment (e.g. Roever, 2005), indicating non-linearity. Nonetheless, most research does indicate a greater array of pragmatic features at higher proficiency. In terms of linguistic devices, Geyer (2007), for example, found a larger array of lexical and grammatical markers in more advanced learners' speech. Similarly, whilst examining the sequential organization of requests in L2 speech, Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012) highlighted the fact that higher proficiency learners employed more pre-expansion (e.g. greeting, problem statement).

In view of this, the present research aimed to examine B2-C2 proficiency L2 speakers' speech and thought processes when performing requests in

extended discourse via monologic tasks. This speech act, due to its inherently longer sequences, and this task format both allow the analysis of the sequential organization of requests and the use of pragmalinguistic devices. The aim was to better understand the issues raised by the analysis of:

- pragmatic features (i.e. sequential organization, pragmalinguistic devices) in extended L2 discourse using conversation analysis (CA); and
- the speakers' view of context and whether this is reflected in their language use, thus combining an etic viewpoint (i.e. interviews) with an emic perspective (i.e. performance of social actions as embedded in speech).

Drawing on Bachman and Palmer's (2010) model of communicative competence and conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007), pragmatic competence in the present study was viewed as:

- the ability to take sociolinguistic factors (here, power and imposition) into consideration when evaluating social context;
- the ability to display sensitivity accordingly, thereby enhancing the successful achievement of the communicative goal;
- the ability to perform pragmatic actions based on context evaluation by:
 - organizing speech sequentially, more specifically anticipating pre-expansion (e.g. an account) (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012)—this will be referred to as preliminary interactional work throughout this paper as the tasks did not involve interaction but only monologues delivered to a specific conversational partner in mind,
 - making syntactic and semantic choices to mitigate imposition (e.g. House and Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Ikeda, 2017), and
- adjusting utterances to individual evaluations of the context; and
- show pragmatic awareness by verbalizing individual thought processes regarding context evaluation and subsequent language choices.

Considering this view of pragmatic competence and the pragmatic features reviewed in the literature, the following three research questions were posed:

- 1) In what ways are *features of preliminary interactional work utilized differently by B2-C2 learners?*
- 2) In what ways are *pragmalinguistic devices employed to mitigate imposition by B2-C2 learners?*
- 3) To what extent do B2-C2 learners evaluate the given context, and *to what extent does speech reflect this evaluation?*

METHODOLOGY

1 PARTICIPANTS

Fifteen male and fifteen female international university students from UK universities took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 54 years, with only one participant being somewhat older. This range was generally very similar

at the three different proficiency levels, with medians of 21.5 at B2, 24.5 at C1, and 23.5 at C2. Most participants had a different L1, belonging mainly to European, Asian, or Arabic language families. A generally equal representation of nationalities was achieved at each level. Proficiency levels included B2, C1, and C2 (ten students at each level), which were based on IELTS and TOEFL scores using the Cambridge English conversion table to correlate IELTS to CEFR (Cambridge English) and the TOEFL conversion table (TOEFL, 2010) to correlate TOEFL to CEFR.

Their length of residence in an English-speaking country ranged from 2 months to 5 years, with C2 participants having spent the longest and B2 participants having spent the shortest time in an L1-speaking country. The B2 and C1 groups were fairly homogenous; however, there were differences amongst the C2 participants. Whilst this could be viewed as a limitation, it was hoped that the successful or unsuccessful use of pragmatic features by those C2 learners with less L1 exposure could indicate whether pragmatic competence is more related to language proficiency or length of stay.

2 TASK DESIGN

The four speaking tasks involved leaving an answerphone message expressing a request. The tasks were designed to reflect real situations at university and were suggested by the pilot study participants. The two context variables were power constellation (i.e. S<H: professor/student; S=H: flatmates/classmates) and degree of imposition. The latter was kept high in all the tasks, and any nuances were subject to the participants' assessment of the specific context.

Overall, instruction length was kept to a minimum, and efforts have been made to provide succinct, nonetheless informative, contextual information. Ideas were presented in an orderly way, thus reducing the potential for cognitive overload and ensuring that task instructions had minimal interference with speech production. These task specifications were intended to ensure a focus on pragmatic features in speech rather than on generating ideas. The tasks included:

- M1 (asking a professor for an extension on an essay deadline),
- M2 (asking a classmate to finish slides for a group presentation),
- M3 (asking a professor to clarify instructions for an assignment), and
- M4 (borrowing a book from a classmate for another week).

The tasks were presented both orally and in writing in order to ensure that comprehension of the task situation did not interfere with language production. Test sessions were both audio- and video-recorded. In addition to video recording, a hand-held IC recorder was used to audio record speech production in order to simulate a real phone.

3 INTERVIEWS

All participants took part in a semi-structured, retrospective verbal interview directly after task completion. Some stimuli were provided (i.e. prompts) to aid the participants' memory. Admittedly, people may not always be conscious of their

own thoughts (e.g. Dornyei, 2007) and researchers may resort to making inferences if they are unable to capture speakers' thought processes (e.g. Zheng, 2009), thus hindering the effectiveness of interview data. However, as many maintain, people are mostly able to recall thought processes, and interview data can truly enhance our comprehension of the cognitive processes behind language production (Kormos, 1998). In order to fully exploit such data, the number of pre-designed questions was limited, enabling participants to freely elaborate on ideas.

The initial questions focused on the learners' personal backgrounds, followed by a focus on their view of each task context and gradually leading to cultural issues/observations and pragmatic difficulties. The aim was to move from a larger, culture-specific perspective on task contexts to a more language-focused view so as to gain insight into how language use may have been influenced by L1 culture and context analysis.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

In order to answer research question 1 regarding preliminary interactional work, speech production was analyzed qualitatively. CA's unmotivated look was employed when identifying different interactional moves. These moves included projecting the upcoming request (Roever and Kasper, 2018), providing an account to justify the request (Schegloff, 2007), and stating the issue prompting the request (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012). Although these categories were based on prior research and pilot studies, conclusions about their actual use were only drawn as they emerged through the analysis.

Six of the thirty transcripts were double-coded (Heritage, 1984). The scripts were divided into units of analysis individually, based on categories identified in the pilot studies, and 93 percent agreement was reached. In light of the compromise regarding which coding category to use for these units, every utterance was coded, and when new functions appeared, previously coded transcripts were recoded in order to ensure consistency.

Pragmalinguistic devices were highlighted and their function examined in participants' speech to better understand whether they contributed to mitigating imposition in the given context. This was conducted so as to answer research question 2.

In order to answer research question 3, data from the semi-structured interview was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data was gathered about participants' views of imposition (Likert scale 1-4). The reason for using a 4-point scale was to ensure a clear indication of whether participants viewed a given context as either more or less imposing rather than opting for a neutral middle score (e.g. 3 out of 5). Due to the small sample size of the study ($N = 10$ per level), mean and median figures were generated as descriptive statistics, rather than inferential statistics. This may be considered a limitation; however, this was regarded as a reasonable trade-off for the detailed analysis gained from the small data set. Participants' open comments were coded under six categories based on

reference to the interlocutor's potential reaction, the interlocutor's responsibility, the nature of the relationship between speakers, the speakers' own responsibility and rights, mutual responsibility, and the consequences of the speakers' action. Following Saldana (2015: 61), the researcher's detailed notes were coded using an open coding strategy, whereby codes emerge from the data. Whenever possible, segments of the participants' own language were used for assigning codes; however, this needed to be complemented by the researcher's own terms when the participants' language did not result in clear codes. These comments were employed to draw parallels between speech production and speakers' view of context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, speech production gradually increased with proficiency (Table 1). Although the average speech produced at B2 was slightly higher (mean 96.82) than at C1 (mean 94.07), a higher standard deviation (SD) at B2 indicates bigger individual differences amongst B2 participants. As indicated by the 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) in Table 1, the mean differences between the levels are only suggestive. A further investigation with inferential statistics on a larger sample size is needed to confirm the relationship between learners' proficiency level and the amount of speech production.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of participants' speech production

<i>Words per person per task</i>			
	M/median	SD	95% CI
B2	96.82 / 81.25	38.33	96.82±23.8 [73, 121]
C1	94.07 / 94.37	28.41	94.07±17.6 [76.5, 112]
C2	137.82 / 130.5	53.51	137.82±33.2 [105, 171]

Participants' evaluation of imposition (Table 2) suggests that their perception of the degree of imposition in the different task contexts was mainly similar, although some differences existed. For example, the mean imposition identified in M3 and M4 showed similarities across levels, but in M2 it showed variation as B2 participants viewed it as reasonably high (mean 2.7, 95% CI [1.93, 3.48]) while C2 participants viewed it as the lowest (mean 1.6, 95% CI [1.08, 2.12]). While this could be viewed as a task design issue, it is argued here that decisions about imposition are always based on individuals' evaluations of the context, which may be markedly different even within the same speech community. It is only by asking speakers' to elucidate their context evaluation that we might understand their linguistic choices.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of participants' evaluation of imposition

	M1 (S<H)			M2 (S=H)			M3 (S<H)			M4 (S=H)		
	M/ med.	SD	95% CI	M/ med.	SD	95% CI	M/ med.	SD	95% CI	M/ med.	SD	95% CI
B2	2.8 / 3	.4	2.8± 0.248 [2.55, 3.05]	2.7 / 2.5	1.25	2.7± 0.775 [1.93, 3.48]	2 / 2	1.05	2± 0.651 [1.35, 2.65]	3 / 3	.47	3± 0.291 [2.71, 3.29]
C1	2.9 / 3	1.2	2.9± 0.744 [2.16, 3.64]	2 / 2	.94	2± 0.583 [1.42, 2.58]	2.2 / 2	.79	2.2± 0.49 [1.71, 2.69]	3 / 3	.94	3± 0.583 [2.42, 3.58]
C2	2.5 / 3	1.18	2.5± 0.731 [1.77, 3.23]	1.6 / 1	.84	1.6± 0.521 [1.08, 2.12]	2.2 / 2	.92	2.2± 0.57 [1.63, 2.77]	3.3 / 4	1.05	3.3± 0.651 [2.65, 3.95]

1 B2 SPEECH PRODUCTION

A certain amount of preliminary interactional work to complete each communicative event was employed by all B2 participants. Some common elements included a greeting, a problem statement, and an account. In Excerpt 1, for example, the participant opens with a somewhat unusual greeting; perhaps an attempt to show their awareness of the social distance since the tutor's surname is used. They then provide a brief account (line 2), half abandoning the verbalization of the problem, and express the request somewhat abruptly (line 3) without many supporting moves. This probably results in the interlocutor having to supply the missing thought segment. Linking ideas is attempted but is not very smooth. The stretched syllables in conjunctions (e.g. 'so:.' in lines 2, 4) might suggest that the reason for their use was perhaps gaining time to formulate thoughts. These findings are consistent with those of Ikeda (2017) and Youn (2015), who also observed that less proficient learners tended to produce requests abruptly without many supporting moves. Youn's (2015) study involved low-intermediate learners, but this tendency apparently continues to some degree at B2 level. Nevertheless, in the present study, B2 speech did contain at least some supporting moves for requests.

Excerpt 1: M1 – Late essay submission, S<H

1. Hello (0.1) Taylor. I'm (first name).
2. *Because* I:: (0.1) was ill (.) *so::* (0.1) my essa:::y,
3. can I got a:n (0.2) extension (0.1) on (0.1) >my essay deadline< today?
4. *So::* (0.2) yeah >can you ring me< (0.1) after you (.) heard this (.) message?
5. Thank you very much.

In terms of linguistic choices, an interrogative is used when verbalizing the request ('Can I...?', line 3) and also before closing the message ('Can you...?', line 4) but very few other linguistic devices seem to be employed to soften the force of the request. A similar tendency is noticeable in most B2 participants' speech, which might perhaps be explained by their context evaluation. When identifying this task as having a low imposition (i.e. 2; see Table 2), 50 percent of the participants referred to their own rights (e.g. 'I have an excuse.' or 'I have a reason to ask.')

and only one participant mentioned H's potential response ('It's important for professor to respect schedule.'). Therefore, despite the unequal power constellation, participants may have felt that the more businesslike nature of the context made it unnecessary to be overly polite.

Excerpt 2 is a more elaborate example of task completion, including ample preliminary interactional work but also some repetition. For example, after producing the problem statement in line 5 and the request in line 7, the participant repeats the request again in line 8. They may have simply wanted to reinforce the request, but repetition could have also been used to buy time in order to formulate ideas. This is consistent with Ikeda (2017), who also observed the use of repetition in L2 speech. Another observable feature of speech is that the focus is explicitly placed on H's responsibility and actions, hence the frequent use of the pronoun 'you', as opposed to cooperation and mutual achievement of the common goal.

Excerpt 2: M2 – Finishing project work, S=H

1. Hi Janet.
2. I've been (.) trying to call you since (0.1) yesterday but (.) *you didn't answer me.*
3. I hope is everything okay (.)
4. bu::t (.) >as you know< we (.) have a presentation tomorrow
5. a::nd (0.1) *you didn't do your task*
6. a::nd (0.2) the:: deadline is (.) tomorrow.
7. I wanna be sure that *you finish the introduction*, because *your duty* (.) *is to do introduction.*
8. Erm I wanna be sure (.) if *you finish* (.) or not (0.1)

Linguistic choices are generally held simple and, similarly to Excerpt 1, seemingly made without any attempt to soften the force of the request. A want statement is used when expressing the request (line 7), but no more mitigation is observable. When justifying the imposition (i.e. 2.7; see Table 2) in this task involving equal power constellations, 30 percent of participants made reference to H's general responsibility (e.g. 'It's her task.'). On the other hand, 20 percent of participants also commented on H's potential feelings or attitude (e.g. 'People don't want to be pushed.'). Such comments could, to a certain extent, explain the limited amount of modification employed in this task. Nevertheless, it is somewhat contradictory that even though the imposition is considerably higher in this task than in M1, the amount of mitigation and preliminary interactional work remains unchanged.

2 C1 SPEECH PRODUCTION

Speech was generally structured at C1 level, with most participants using substantial preliminary interactional work. It was common to open with a greeting and provide an account as well as a problem statement before verbalizing the request and closing the message. Naturally, there were individual differences, but it was noticeable how, unlike at B2 level, thoughts were generally complete and there was less need for the interlocutor to make inferences. For example, in Excerpt 3, the participant opens with a polite greeting using H's title ('professor') and produces a problem statement in line 2 before verbalizing the request in line 3. Some repetition is noticeable as they produce the request again, half abandoning it (line 4) and producing another problem statement in line 5 before highlighting the significance of H's assistance (line 6) and concluding the message (line 7). The transition is simple but generally smooth.

Excerpt 3: M3 – Helping with draft, S<H

1. Good afternoon professor Willson. Erm it's (first name) from your class.
2. E:rm I'm I'm just having a bit of a trou::ble (.) with the assignment (.) that is due next week.
3. A::nd I would really appreciate if you can give me (.) my dra::ft with your comments.
4. A::nd (.) I would really appreciate if you ()
5. I'm not quite sure about the task itself
6. and your comments will be really really valuable for me.
7. Thank you very much.

Linguistic choices included the use of a downtoner ('a bit', line 2), some hedging ('not quite', line 5) to mitigate imposition, and a number of upgraders to intensify the proposition (e.g. 'really', line 3). The appearance of a conversational routine expressing appreciation is also noted here (i.e. 'I would really appreciate', line 3). This is consistent with Bardovi-Harlig (2009), who observed the appearance of this type of conversational routine in advanced L2 speakers' speech.

Interview data also supports the suggested intentional use of modifiers. Participants were fairly homogenous in their evaluation of this task involving unequal power constellations. When judging the level of imposition, 50 percent of participants made reference to H's potential attitude (e.g. '*It's a natural request, but the professor may think I didn't pay enough attention.*'), whereas 30 percent of participants referred to H's general responsibility (e.g. '*It's annoying, but it's his job.*'). Such comments indicate the perception that it is not only H's responsibility but also H's potential response to the request that influences imposition. It seems that assigning a slightly lower imposition (i.e. 2.2, Table 2) may have been due to the businesslike nature of the act in this task (i.e. explaining an assignment is part of tutors' job), hence perhaps the expectation that the request will be positively received. As one participant

expressed it, *'in UK tutors are happy to help'*. Despite such evaluation, an increased level of lexical and phrasal modification was noted, especially in the form of downtoners (i.e. to soften the force of request). Thirty percent of participants also commented on difficulties selecting appropriate words or expressions to get their intended pragmatic meaning across (e.g. *'difficult to find words to get sympathy'*), which indicates that linguistic choice was conscious and deliberate, albeit not always easy.

It was also observed that C1 participants' focus has seemingly shifted from individual to mutual. For example, in Excerpt 4, the participant opens with an informal greeting, produces a problem statement (line 2), and continues with what was likely meant to be the request (line 3). The offer in line 4 does certainly imply that the speaker's assumption was that the required action (i.e. completing introduction slides) had not been carried out at the time of speaking, even if it was not stated directly. This offer also prompts collaboration (i.e. willingness to help) and concludes with a mutual aim or deadline (line 5), indicated by the pronoun *'we'*.

Excerpt 4: M2 – Finishing project work, S=H

1. Hey Jane,
2. I was e::rm (0.1) I was calling because I'm a little worried about the introduction that is due tomorrow.
3. I would like to check if you're done with it.
4. If you're not, please let me know if you need any help. I would definitely () would like to help you,
5. so that (.) *we* can finish tomorrow.

In terms of linguistic choices, softening the force of the request is attempted by employing a downtoner (i.e. *'I'm a little worried'*), a politeness marker (*'please'* in line 4), and the use of conditional structures (line 4). It is interesting to note how the participant tries to increase or restore harmony since they have to appeal to their classmate's sense of duty (finish the presentation slides) by offering their help.

When justifying the somewhat lower imposition (i.e. line 2) in M2, 60 percent of participants referred to H's general responsibility (e.g. *'She should've done it before.'*, *'It's her duty.'*). There seems to be an increasing depth of analysis in the participants' evaluations at this level. This manifests itself in the appearance of comments referring to the nature of the relationship (e.g. *'My classmate, so we know each other.'*), as well as to H's potential feelings showing empathy (e.g. *'If pushed, she might feel angry, and that causes conflict.'*), and to language issues (e.g. *'My message might be ignored, so I wanted to sound indifferent.'*). In this particular excerpt, it is worth noting how the participant seemed to act upon their context evaluation (i.e. by offering help) in order to avoid H's anticipated negative response to the request (i.e. *'If pushed, she might feel angry, and that causes conflict'*). It appears that the relatively small amount of lexical or phrasal modification to mitigate imposition (related to H's responsibility), together with the careful build-up to the actual request by several preliminary interactional moves (related to H's potential negative reaction

to the request), do seem to reflect participants' contextual analysis. The careful consideration of not only the speaker's own intentions but also of H's potential reaction to the request seems to indicate a heightened sense of anticipation at this level. Moreover, participants' comments also highlight their growing awareness of the pragmatic function of language.

3 C2 SPEECH PRODUCTION

Speech was generally well structured at this level, with the majority of participants employing a number of preliminary interactional moves before uttering their request. For instance, in Excerpt 5, the participant, having provided a problem statement (line 3) and a reason for the request (lines 4-5), clearly expresses what they want H to do (line 6). This is followed by a statement of appreciation (line 10); a common feature in C2 speech. There are also several instances of indicating cooperation (e.g. use of 'we' in lines 5, 6, 7, 8), thus being consistent with Ikeda (2017), whose monologue data highlighted similar features.

Excerpt 5: M2 – Project work, S=H

1. Hey Jane. This is (first name).
2. I'm calling you about the presentation, which is to be given tomorrow,
3. e::rm I've just noticed that you (.) still haven't finished your introduction parts of the slides.
4. I just () this is quite crucial that you do it since (.) first of all this is the introduction, secondly,
5. this presentation is sixty percent of the coursework so:: e::rm yeah *we should really get a good mark*
6. so:: if you could just make sure that you finish it today, a::nd *we don't leave anything to chance*
7. Also (.) *we could have some time to actually try to* (.) make a presentation before (.) before
8. *we actually have to do it tomorrow*.
9. Okay?
10. >That would be great.<
11. So:: erm let me know when you're finished (.) a::nd then (.) *we could arrange that meeting*
12. *and practice*

To mitigate imposition, several pragmalinguistic devices are employed in Excerpt 5. For example, although an intensifier ('quite') is used in the reason preempting the request (line 4), it seems to have a somewhat softening effect. A conditional structure ('If you could') is employed to mitigate the request (line 6) along with a downtoner ('just'). It is worth noting the use of cajolers ('actually', in lines 7-8),

where the speaker reminds their classmate of their duty. This could potentially lead to a loss of harmony, hence the need for cajolers. Interview data shed some light on this language use. Forty percent of participants commented on the delicate nature of this situation and the difficulty of selecting appropriate words (e.g. *'I don't want to get rude but want to say it's urgent', 'tact is needed', 'difficult to choose the words'*), which suggests heightened awareness of the pragmatic function of language at this proficiency level.

The analysis of the other C2 participants' comments in the subsequent interview provides further insight into their context evaluation. Participants assigned a generally low imposition (mean 1.6) to this task, involving an equal power constellation. When justifying this choice, 60 percent of participants referred to H's general responsibility (e.g. *'She should know when the deadline is.'*). A greater depth of analysis at C2 was indicated by numerous comments about the consequences of the communicative act (e.g. *'It's a potentially damaging accusation which can damage work relationship.'*, *'Potentially upsetting someone, maybe a friend.'*) as well as the nature of the relationship (e.g. *'It depends on how well you know the person. I imagined that I knew you well'*) and anticipating H's circumstances (e.g. *'I didn't know why she hasn't finished and didn't want to be harsh but show some sympathy'*). Comments seem to suggest that in most C2 participants' views, imposition was perhaps most affected not only by H's responsibility but also by H's potential response and circumstances. They also seem to show foresight and anticipation with regard to the probable outcome of the situation, which could have prompted C2 participants to show cooperation and achieve a mutually agreeable solution (line 11) rather than merely putting the blame on H. As one participant expressed it, *'I don't like complaining. Maybe they have some problems so tact is needed.'* Such depth of context evaluation tends to support their language use (as seen above: downtoner, intensifier, cajoler) to mitigate imposition.

Some repetition was observed in C2 data as well; however, it is used quite naturally. For example, in Excerpt 6, the participant starts with an introduction (line 1), provides a reason for the call (line 2), and states the request (line 3). This is followed by an account (line 4), a problem statement (line 5), and the repeated request (line 7) almost as if to remind H again of the purpose of the message. Transition is simple but generally smooth and natural.

Excerpt 6: M1 – Late essay submission, S<H

1. Good morning professor Taylor, this is erm (first name) from the Applied Linguistics Department.
2. I I was ca::lling (.) to:: see::
3. if it's possible to get an extension fo::r the essay that was due tomorrow.
4. Erm I I >need that extension basically because< I've been ill for (0.1) the pa:st week (.) or so.
5. E::rm a::nd I (.) rea:lly tried (.) but I wasn't able to do much for the essay.
6. E::rm (.) I:: do have (.) a doctor's note with me so::: erm
7. I wa:::s really hoping you could (.) grant me (.) an extension e::rm until e::rm maybe next Monday,

This task, involving unequal power constellations had been assigned a somewhat higher imposition (mean 2.5), and the number of lexical and phrasal modification seems to reflect this. A conditional structure and a downtoner ('possible', line 3) are employed to soften the force of the request. The increased utilization of upgraders ('really', lines 5 and 7) is noticeable in this task, where speakers had to appeal to the professors' understanding. Interestingly, when participants commented on language use, the majority indicated how easy it was to find the appropriate words in this context (e.g. '*the language was relatively easy*', '*Easy because I've done it many times.*'). This might suggest that despite the higher imposition in some contexts, L2 speakers may find it easier to communicate their pragmatic intention due to the amount of practice they may have had of the specific context (e.g. requesting an extension at university) and the more straightforward relationship between speakers (e.g. student–teacher). Conversely, other contexts may be assigned a lower imposition, but speakers may have difficulty finding the language that reflects the appropriate pragmatic force due to the delicate nature of the specific context and the relationship between speakers.

Somewhat differently from B2/C1 participants, when judging the imposition, 40 percent of C2 participants made reference to their own rights or responsibilities (e.g. '*I've got a reason, illness.*'), another 40 percent referred to H's potential negative response (e.g. '*He might think it's just an excuse.*', '*What if the prof will say no?*'), while only 10 percent mentioned H's responsibility (e.g. '*It's his job.*'). Such context analysis indicates that most C2 participants anticipated a potential refusal on H's part and therefore utilized more linguistic caution to avoid such an outcome. Not only did participants use much lexical and phrasal modification to mitigate imposition, but they also employed ample preliminary interactional work in order to prepare H for a demanding request.

4 COMPARISON OF PERFORMANCE

Overall, some degree of preliminary interactional work was employed in each task at each proficiency level (Figure 1).

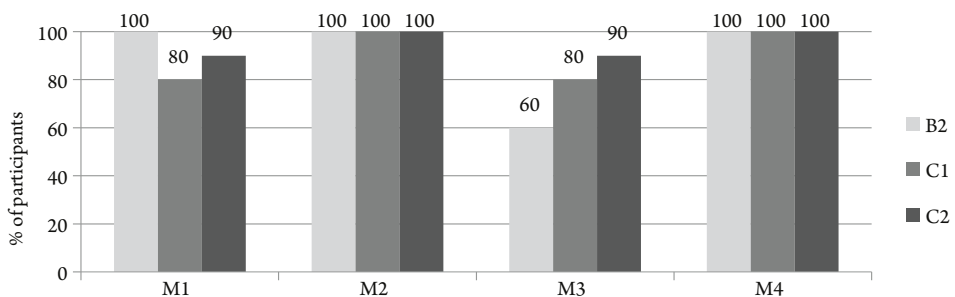


Figure 1 percentage of participants employing preliminary interactional work

In terms of elaboration in speech, a number of observations have been made. Firstly, C2 participants used preliminary interactional features most consistently, followed by C1 and B2 participants. For example, as Figure 1 exemplifies, projecting the upcoming request was more consistently incorporated in each task with increased proficiency. Trosborg (1995), using the speech act framework, found that although L2 learners' speech generally lacked support for requests, some development was noticeable with the increase in proficiency. The CA framework employed here also indicates a similar trend. This is consistent with other research (Youn, 2015; Ikeda, 2017) highlighting increasingly more natural and elaborate expansions in speech with the development of proficiency.

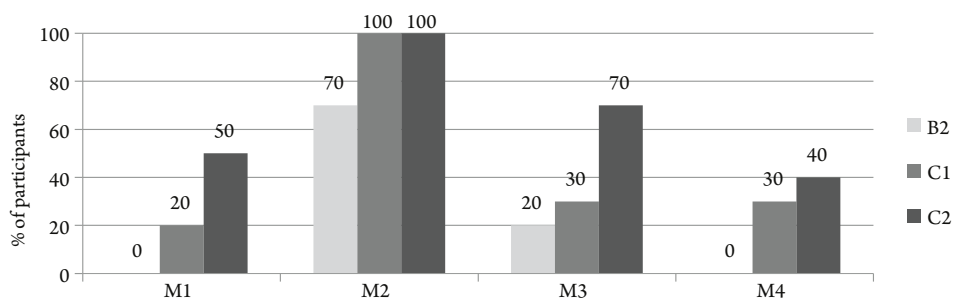


Figure 2 percentage of participants projecting the upcoming request

Opening and closing forms were mostly appropriate at all levels. However, some of these at B2 level were occasionally either more typical in written style or somewhat awkward, but this trend was not consistent across the whole level. No C1 or C2 participant displayed a similar tendency in speech. These findings corroborate Takenoya's (2003), who found that despite higher proficiency learners being more competent in producing appropriate address forms than less proficient learners, the difference was insignificant.

Overall, participants at each level made similar but not exactly the same evaluations regarding the imposition of the four tasks (see Table 2). This may suggest that imposition is a nuanced concept and that individual learners' evaluations may differ slightly from those of test designers or teachers. Therefore, when attempting to assess or teach pragmatic competence, learners should either be instructed in this respect or should be allowed to identify the level they perceive it to be. In the former case (i.e. assessment), without a clear indication of the test takers' own evaluation of imposition, judging their test performance might be misinformed.

The comparison between participants' context evaluations and linguistic performance revealed several traits. At B2 level, attempts have been made at adjusting language to context evaluation, although it was not always possible to establish a clear relationship between the two based purely on interview comments. On the other hand, C1 participants analyzed the different contexts in great depth and

a generally good attempt was made at adjusting language to their analysis. Interview comments highlighted their awareness of language use reflecting pragmatic intention and seemed to indicate some conscious linguistic decision-making. C1 participants also seemed to lower the amount of lexical and phrasal modification to reflect the lower level of imposition. The analysis of preliminary interactional work at this level also shed light on the fact that C1 participants' focus seems to have shifted from individual intention to mutual cooperation, thus correlating with other research (e.g. Ikeda, 2017). Similarly, C2 participants' context analysis showed great depth, frequently referring to H's potential attitude, thus seemingly anticipating the potential outcome of the communicative act. Interview comments also indicated their awareness of the linguistic choices available in different social contexts. Participants successfully employed these, alongside preliminary interactional work, as a means to prevent a negative outcome of the communicative act and to achieve a mutually agreeable solution for the conversational partners. This was true for the majority of C2 participants regardless of the length of stay in the UK, which would indicate that, as Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) claim, proficiency rather than length of stay has an impact on pragmatic development. Interestingly, there was one C2 participant (ID: S24), who employed considerably more downtoners than anyone else. This participant had spent seven years in the UK by the time of the study and observed the frequent use of downtoners, and as they stated: *'The British overstate polite sentences and I adapted that style'*. To some extent, this supports research (Roever, 2012) claiming that the length of stay in an L1 speaking country influences the acquisition of pragmatic devices. However, it is also important to note the consciousness in decision-making regarding pragmatic usage. Such ability to observe and make conscious choices regarding language use in social contexts shows advanced pragmatic competence and enables L2 speakers to decide whether to include pragmalinguistic devices at all and/or to what extent.

Regarding the tasks involving different power constellations, it was noted that, especially at C1-C2 levels, more lexical and phrasal modification was used in the task involving an unequal power constellation. Participants' comments suggested that despite the unequal power constellation and higher imposition in the task, it was easier to verbalize their pragmatic intention owing to the amount of experience they have had with that particular context and to the more conventional relationship between speakers. Conversely, equal power constellations and lower identified imposition in the other context caused more linguistic difficulties due to the delicate nature of the task and relationship between speakers. This is perhaps something that test designers and language teachers may consider when developing pragmatic material for language assessment and instruction.

CONCLUSION

The current study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the ways and extent to which B2-C2 learners display their pragmatic competence in oral

discourse and are able to verbalize their thought processes in context analysis. Results provided evidence that with increasing language competence, participants not only employed more extensive preliminary interactional work to better prepare the ground for the request and utilized more lexical and phrasal modification, but that their context analysis had greater depth, including H's potential reaction to the request and the consequences of their verbal actions. Such careful consideration was reflected in their task performance, which indicated that speakers' focus has shifted from individual to mutual involvement. This could mean that proficiency level may indeed influence the development of pragmatic competence (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Other studies (e.g. Youn, 2015; Ikeda, 2017) have already investigated the increasing development of pre-actions and pragmatic language use in L2 speech, but the present study has additionally provided interview data with regard to the contextual analysis conducted before and during the speech event. A notable feature of this study is the use of semi-structured interviews, which highlighted another aspect of pragmatic competence, namely pragmatic decision-making and awareness of the consequences of language choice on H and how the latter contributes to achieving the communicative goal.

Although this study addressed some limitations in prior empirical research investigating L2 pragmatic competence, namely the lack of interview data providing an insight into L2 pragmatic decision-making and language use, there is still a clear need for more research in this area. Firstly, there has been little attempt—the current study being no exception—at investigating the impact of L2 pronunciation features (e.g. Taguchi, 2007; Ikeda, 2017). They can have a significant impact on the outcome of a conversation and, hence, cannot be ignored. More investigation into non-verbal signs (e.g. gestures or gaze) would also be beneficial to understand how these might further influence the interpretation of pragmatic meaning. Their use may not be proficiency-related but could still be used for educational purposes to raise L2 speakers' awareness. Lastly, the current study also sought to discover how speakers' thought processes relate to their speech production. However, generic conclusions were drawn to describe specific proficiency levels without analyzing individual participants and their speech production. The examination of individual discourse in task responses and the interview comments from the same person may be triangulated in future research. This could allow further insights into L2 speakers' attempts at adjusting their language to context.

REFERENCES

- Al-Gahtani, S. and Roever, C. (2012) Proficiency and sequential organisation of L2 requests. *Applied Linguistics*, 33 (1): 42-65. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amr031> [Accessed on 24 January 2015].
- Bachman, L. and Palmer, A. (2010) *Language Assessment in Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2009) Conventional expressions as a pragmalinguistic resource: recognition and production of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics.

- Language Learning*, 59 (4): 755-795. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2009.00525.x> [Accessed on 27 September 2016].
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2013) Developing L2 pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 63 (1): 68-86. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00738.x> [Accessed on 18 March 2017].
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. and Bastos, M.-T. (2011) Proficiency, length of stay, and intensity of interaction and the acquisition of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 8 (3): 347-384. Available from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2011.017> [Accessed on 17 February 2018].
- Barron, A. (2003) *Acquisition in Interlanguage Pragmatics: learning how to do things with words in a study abroad context*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. and Kasper, G. (eds.) (1989) *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Felix-Brasdefer, J. C. (2019) Speech acts in interaction: negotiating joint action in a second language. In N. Taguchi (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics* (pp. 17-30). London: Routledge.
- Cambridge English IELTS-CEFR Comparison Table*. Available at <https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework> [Accessed: 5 August 2014].
- Dippold, D. (2008) Reframing ones experience: face, identity, and roles in L2 argumentative discourse. In M. Putz and J. A. Neff-van (eds.) *Developing Contrastive Pragmatics. Interlanguage and Crosscultural Perspectives* (pp. 131-154). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geraghty, B. and Conacher, J. E. (2014) *Intercultural Contact, Language Learning and Migration*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Geyer, N. (2007) Self-qualification in L2 Japanese: An interface of pragmatics, grammatical, and discourse competences. *Language Learning*, 57: 337-367. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2007.00419.x> [Accessed on 20 December 2022].
- Grabowski, K. (2013) Investigating the construct validity of a role-play test designed to measure grammatical and pragmatic knowledge at multiple proficiency levels. In S.J. Ross and G. Kasper (eds.) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics* (pp. 149-171). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heritage, J. (1984) A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In M. J. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis* (pp. 299-345). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- House, J. (2007) What is an 'Intercultural Speaker?'. In E. A. Soler and M. P. S. Jorda (eds.) *Intercultural Language Use and Language Learning* (pp. 7-21). Dordrecht: Springer.
- House, J. and Kasper, G. (1981) Politeness markers in English and German. In F. Koulmas (ed.) *Conversational Routine* (pp. 157-185). The Hague: Mouton.
- Ikeda, N. (2017) *Measuring L2 Oral Pragmatic Abilities for Use in Social Contexts: development and validation of an assessment instrument for L2 pragmatics performance in university settings*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Kasper, G. (2006) Beyond repair: conversation analysis as an approach to SLA. *AILA Review*, 19 (1): 83-99. Available from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/aila.19.07kas> [Accessed on 15 December 2018].
- Kasper, G. and Roever, C. (2005) Pragmatics in second language learning. In E. Hinkel (ed.) *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 317-34). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Kasper, G. and Ross, S. J. (2013) Assessing second language pragmatics: an overview and introductions. In S. J. Ross and G. Kasper (eds.) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics* (pp. 1-40). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kormos, J. (1998) Verbal reports in L2 speech production research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (2): 353-358. Available from <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587590> [Accessed on 28 September 2016].
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Liu, J. (2006) *Measuring Interlanguage Pragmatic Knowledge of EFL Learners*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- McNamara, T. F. and Roever, C. (2006) *Language Testing: the social dimension*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Roever, C. (2005) *Testing ESL Pragmatics*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Roever, C. (2011) Testing of second language pragmatics: past and future. *Language Testing*, 28 (4): 463-482. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532210394633> [Accessed on 16 April 2015].
- Roever, C. (2012) What learners get for free: learning of routine formulae in ESL and EFL environments. *ELT Journal*, 66 (1): 10-21. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq090> [Accessed on 22 June 2017].
- Roever, C. and Kasper, G. (2018) Speaking in turns and sequences: interactional competence as a target construct in testing speaking. *Language Testing*, 35 (3): 331-355. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532218758128> [Accessed on 18 November 2020].
- Saldaña, J. (2015) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2007) *Sequence Organization in Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taguchi, N. (2007) Task difficulty in oral speech act production. *Applied Linguistics*, 28 (1): 113-135. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/aml051> [Accessed on 5 June 2015].
- Takenoya, M. (2003) *Terms of Address in Japanese: an interlanguage pragmatics approach*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Press.
- Thomas, J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction*. London: Longman.
- Thomas, J. (1983) Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4 (2): 91-112.
- TOEFL (2010) *Linking TOEFL iBT Scores to IELTS Scores – A Research Report ETS*. Available from www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/linking_toefl_ibt_scores_to_ielts_scores.pdf [Accessed on 5 August 2014].
- Trosborg, A. (1995) *Interlanguage Pragmatics. Requests, Complaints and Apologies*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Youn, S. J. (2015) Validity argument for assessing L2 pragmatics in interaction using mix methods. *Language Testing*, 32 (2): 199-225. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532214557113> [Accessed on 21 July 2017].
- Zheng, Y. (2009) Protocol analysis in the validation of language tests: potential of the method, state of the evidence. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 5 (1): 124-137.

Edit Willcox-Ficzere (Dr., Senior Lecturer) is currently working at Oxford Brookes University. Her research interests include pragmatic competence and politeness.

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4544-3449>

Email: e.ficzere@brookes.ac.uk