Second language pragmatic appropriateness in telecollaboration: The influence of discourse management and grammaticality

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Context-specific enactment of pragmatic appropriateness requires high levels of second language (L2) pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. In order to elucidate the appropriateness of request production in telecollaboration for professional purposes, this study examines the role of grammaticality and discourse management in oral synchronous interactions between L1 and L2 speakers of German. Findings indicate that ungrammaticality and lack of discourse control impeded the appropriateness of the learners' interaction with L1 speakers. Conversely, those learners displaying higher levels of grammaticality and more attention to discourse-level organization were able to produce more appropriate requests. To conclude, empirical findings are discussed in relation to pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence is a fundamental component of overall communicative competence, enabling speakers to make appropriate linguistic choices depending upon the opportunities and constraints of particular social settings. Second language (L2) learners may face challenges in this area due to potential mismatches between the pragmatic norms of their first language (L1) and the target language (Baumer & van Rensburg, 2011; Tannen, 1984; Thomas, 1983; Wierzbicka, 2003). Learners in a foreign language (FL) setting are particularly challenged: without access to the wide array of speech events that learners in a second language setting have, FL learners may receive little exposure to authentic communicative contexts in which maintaining social face becomes relevant (Kramsch, 1985). With the rise of telecollaboration, however, FL learners around the globe have gained increased access to L1 speakers and, with that, opportunities to engage in communication where pragmatic appropriateness matters (Taguchi & Sykes, 2013).

To date, the majority of research on pragmatic production in telecollaboration has focused on linguistic development and the role of instruction. Belz and Kinginger (2003; see also Kinginger & Belz, 2005) examined the acquisition of pronominal address forms in e-mail interaction between age-similar participants in Germany and the USA and found that such engagement over several weeks led to more target-like usage of informal address forms by the learners of German. Belz and Vyatkina (2005; see also Vyatkina, 2007) found that, over time, learners of German increased the frequency and accuracy of modal particle production when interacting with their German partners and taking part in focused instruction. Showing a

similar outcome, Kakegawa (2009) documented that explicit instruction and participation in a 10-week e-mail exchange enabled learners to produce Japanese sentence-final interactional particles with greater variety and more frequency. While these studies demonstrate that asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) and text-based synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) can be a very productive domain for developing and demonstrating pragmatic competence in interaction, they do not fully elucidate how appropriateness is interacted in oral SCMC. The current study therefore aims to expand an underrepresented strand of research by systematically describing the construct of appropriateness and demonstrating how it was instantiated by learners of German as they interacted orally and synchronously with L1 German-speaking professionals.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining pragmatic appropriateness

At the outset, it is necessary to clarify precisely what is meant by appropriateness as it relates to request production in telecollaborative discourse. Schneider (2012) notes that the study of linguistic politeness has generally taken two diverging perspectives: so-called second-order politeness (e.g., Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996) involves the consideration of purely theoretical constructs, whereas first-order approaches (e.g., Locher, 2004; Watts, 2003) have emphasized how politeness is constructed on the discourse level. The current study, in concert with Schneider's (2012, p. 1023) observation that a first-order perspective on appropriateness (as distinct from politeness) has been neglected, conceives of appropriateness as a dynamic phenomenon that is "locally constructed" and entails "evaluations of an orientation to what is being said and how it is being said from moment to moment within a given communicative interaction" (van Compernolle, 2014, p. 40, p. 40).

Pragmatic appropriateness calls for high levels of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. Whereas pragmalinguistic knowledge refers to the syntactic and lexical resources needed to formulate appropriate utterances, sociopragmatic knowledge involves understanding the social parameters that govern various discourses and registers. As Hymes (1972) put it, language users need to know "what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it" (p. 277). van Compernolle (2014) offers a perspective on appropriateness that "centers on two fundamental parameters:

1) The degree to which a particular instance of language use – whether conventional or unconventional – is interpretable by one's interlocutor(s) or audience given the discourse situation in which language is being used.
2) The degree to which a particular instance of language use – whether conventional or unconventional – is effective in reflecting and (re)shaping activity types, social relationships and/or social identities" (pp. 40–41).

Informed by van Compernolle's (2014) notion of appropriateness (i.e., utterances in a specific communicative context must be both interpretable and reflect social relationships), this study investigates the appropriateness of request production of L2 users of German in the context of a telecollaboration for professional purposes with L1 speakers of German in Germany.

2.2. Measuring pragmatic appropriateness

When measuring pragmatic appropriateness, studies differ in whether they combine measures of pragmatic knowledge with measures of grammaticality or treat them as separate variables. While Bardovi–Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Chen (2001) demonstrate a link between grammatical and pragmatic knowledge, their studies treat these two types of L2 abilities separately. In contrast, Taguchi (2006) traces the development of the pragmatic production of Japanese learners of English by linking the concepts of grammaticality and discourse control to overall appropriateness in requesting behavior. That is to say, major errors in grammar or word choice affected the perceived appropriateness of a given request to the same extent as excessive pausing, repetition, and illogical or incoherent speech. In a later study, Taguchi (2011a) rated appropriateness and grammaticality separately, but discovered that these measures developed similarly. Moreover, she suggests that "analyses of learners' knowledge and the development of grammatical forms necessary for pragmatic performance (e.g., syntactic mitigations in requests) could reveal how the knowledge of the forms mediates the pace and pattern of development in pragmatic functions that necessitate the forms" (Taguchi, 2011b, p. 624). Taken together, these studies present strong evidence that measuring pragmatic appropriateness involves consideration of participants' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic abilities, the approach taken in the current study.

2.3. Request production

At its core, a request is a kind of directive, in which the function is to get the interlocutor to do something for the speaker (Searle, 1976). Since the seminal Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989a), requests have become a commonly studied speech act in both cross-cultural pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics, which has resulted in a rich taxonomic description of the various linguistic elements that comprise this speech act. Based on the CCSARP framework, a request contains a core or "head act," which serves as the "minimal unit which can realize