ABSTRACT

Pragmatic Development in Study Abroad: Proficiency and L2 Contact

Recent popularity of studying abroad has led to a growing body of studies in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) situated in study abroad contexts. There is an assumption in ILP that living and studying in the target environment, which provides second language (L2) learners many learning opportunities, may be one of the optimal means to acquire pragmatic competence. However, existing studies have yielded inconsistent findings with regard to how study abroad affects learners’ pragmatics acquisition (e.g., Barron 2003; Bataller 2010; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Taguchi 2012). In addition, these findings suggest that learners’ pragmatic development in study abroad contexts seems a rather complex and even multi-componential process, with many factors, such as learners’ L2 proficiency, interacting with L2 contact. In order to explore in-depth learners’ acquisition process during study abroad, Bardovi-Harlig (2013) also emphasizes the need for investigation of learners’ development of grammar and lexicon with pragmatics.

This study further investigates learners’ pragmatic development in study abroad contexts by exploring the development of grammar and lexicon with pragmatics in L2 Chinese. In addition, this study examined the effects of learners’ L2 proficiency on their pragmatics learning during study abroad. Two research questions are:

1. Does Chinese L2 learners’ pragmatic development benefit from their study abroad experience? If yes, does learners’ development of pragmatics correlate with that of grammar and lexicon?
2. Do different levels of L2 proficiency in Chinese influence learners’ pragmatics learning in study abroad?

Participants were 20 American learners of Chinese who studied abroad in Nanjing, China for one academic semester in spring 2015. At the beginning and end of their study abroad period, all participants completed a language contact profile that elicited their background information and contact with Chinese during study abroad, a Chinese proficiency test that assessed their proficiency in Chinese, and a simulated Oral Proficiency Interview that solicited their pragmatic performance.

Results show that learners’ pragmatic performance benefited from their study abroad experience, though the degree of development varied across different components of pragmatics (e.g., speech act strategies, modification devices, etc.). In addition, learners’ development of pragmatics positively correlated with that of grammar and lexicon. It was also found that higher-proficiency learners seemed to have made more gains in pragmatic performance than their lower-proficiency counterparts during study abroad.

References
