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Bidirectional Relationship between L2 Pragmatic Development and Learner Identity in a Study Abroad Context

Abstract

In recent years, the connection between learner identity and learning of L2 pragmatics has received more attention in applied linguistic research. Nevertheless, investigations on this topic have mainly focused on the role of learners' identity in their L2 pragmatic choices. The reverse influence has not been adequately investigated in empirical studies – how learning of L2 pragmatics could potentially foster learners' identity change. This article aims to expand our understanding of the link between identity and L2 pragmatic development in the study abroad context by describing a longitudinal case study which tracked the experiences of four Chinese postgraduate students sojourning in the UK. Data were generated through interviews and online chat over a 12-month period. Findings indicate a bidirectional influence between L2 pragmatics development and learners' sense of self: learners' pragmatic judgements and preferences are influenced by identity-related factors, such as internalised cultural values and their perceived foreigner and ELF identities; in return, exposure to new L2 pragmatic features can prompt learner reflection on interpersonal relationships and self-positioning, which may then lead to identity development.

Key words: second language learning, L2 pragmatics, learner identity, study abroad

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a commonly applied notion in the field of linguistics, a precise definition of which has proved elusive (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). It is mainly concerned with how meaning is interpreted and constructed in given contexts and how language is employed to achieve social purposes and manage social relationships (LoCastro, 2012; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). One's pragmatic choices are mediated by both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, or in Thomas' (1983) terms, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge: the former refers to specific linguistic forms 'conveying pragmatic meaning (illocutionary and interpersonal)' (p.77); the latter is concerned with one's evaluation of sociocultural conditions where the conversation resides, including the perception of both interpersonal relationships and linguistic conventions followed in certain relationships. One's pragmatic choices, therefore, are usually mediated by cultural assumptions shaped in present and past communities (Kesebir & Haidt, 2010; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016). Apart from sociocultural frameworks, human agency also plays a significant role in pragmatic choices. Language acts as a channel through which people 'give off' information about themselves (Blommaert, 2005, p. 204), and each conversation can be seen as an opportunity for individuals to negotiate their identities in the social world (Norton, 2010). One's pragmatic use is thus tied to the way they position themselves in the interpersonal relationship and hope to project themselves to others (van Compernolle, 2014).

Therefore, gaining L2 pragmatic competence refers to not only learners' increasing language proficiency but also their evolving understanding of culture and skills in negotiating interpersonal relationships. Previous studies have suggested that a period of study abroad (SA) is potentially a fruitful period for L2 pragmatics learning (Schauer, 2009). One possible factor

contributing to such improvement is learners' increasing exposure to L2-mediated interactions, which provides contextually appropriate language input to foster acquisition (Jackson, 2019). SA learners also need to manage new subjective positions appearing in new social and cultural contexts and interpersonal relationships, which can raise learners' L2 pragmatic awareness and encourage them to reflect on the meaning, function and use of the L2 language (Block, 2009). With more research interest attracted to students' pragmatic development during SA, the role of learners' identity in learning and use of L2 pragmatics has also been increasingly investigated. However, previous empirical studies have mostly focused on the role of learners' identity in their learning and use of L2 pragmatics, while the reverse influence has received less attention – how exposure to new L2 pragmatic features could potentially encourage learners to challenge established cultural values and sense of self and lead to identity development. Therefore, this paper aims to expand current understandings by further exploring the mutual influence between learner identity and L2 pragmatic development in the SA context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 L2 Pragmatic Development in the SA Context

Research concerning L2 pragmatic development in the SA context was first carried out in the 1990s and has covered foreign language learners of various target languages and different lengths of stay in the host country. Previous studies have mainly focused on learners' development in speech acts, including but not limited to requests (e.g. Schauer, 2009; Shively, 2011; Barron, 2019), refusals (e.g. Barron, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2013), apologies (e.g. Warga and SchöLmberger, 2007), suggestions (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1993; Matsumura, 2003) and compliments (e.g. Jin, 2012; Félix-Brasdefer and Hasler-Barker,

2015). Attention has also been paid to other pragmatic phenomena, such as the use of address terms (e.g. Hassall, 2013; Hassall, 2014) and discourse markers (e.g. Liao, 2009). Among studies in this field, Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and its varieties are used most widely for data collection, followed by role-playing simulations and naturalistic methods (e.g. field notes and recordings), and learners' pragmatic performance or development is mostly assessed by the norms and conventions observed by native speakers of the target language.

Nevertheless, there has been increasing criticism of the rationale which regards NS norms as the goal of SA learners' pragmatic development and defines deviations from NS norms as communication failures. First, individuals' language use is largely shaped by their social and learning experience with various communities and networks, and thus differences in pragmatic usage can be considerable even between native speakers within similar contexts (Blommaert & Backus, 2013). Although most speakers of a language may achieve consensus on language use that is obviously improper, it is often very difficult to say what is or is not acceptable in specific social settings. Second, setting NS conventions as the standard in SLA studies also risks neglecting the possibility of learners' intentional rejection of specific forms (Ishihara & Tarone, 2009). It also seems to be inappropriate in the context where English is used as a lingua franca (ELF), as the learning purpose nowadays of many English users is not only to communicate with inner-circle NS speakers but a wider global community (Seidlhofer, 2005). Language use departing from NS conventions is not necessarily considered inappropriate when mutual understanding is achieved (House, 2009; Ishihara & Cohen, 2012; Jenkins, 2007).

The validity of data generation instruments to simulate social scenarios (e.g. DCT and role play) have also been challenged, as the results can capture how learners believe L2 pragmatics should be used in given context yet not necessarily how they do speak and act in real life (Golato, 2003). This gap has been observed by Brown (2013) through comparing quantitative data collected from DCT with qualitative data from recordings of participants' natural conversations. In Brown's study, a Korean learner employed native-like use of honorifics in DCT but chose not to employ them in conversations to avoid being involved in the hierarchical relationships. McConachy (2019), therefore, highlighted the significance of shifting research from a 'system-centred' towards an 'agent-centred' perspective (p.169), with more attention devoted to metapragmatic analysis and reflections behind learners' interpretation and construction of L2 pragmatics. The concerns mentioned above relocated the research interests of some scholars from L2 learners' improvement towards the 'NS standard' to the role of learners' identity and agency in L2 pragmatic development.

2.2 Learner identity and Language Learning

Before moving on to empirical studies illustrating the connection between learner identity and L2 pragmatic development, it is worth mentioning that the role of identity in language learning and use has been investigated widely in general SLA research. The term 'identity' usually refers to the connection between the individual and social world, with an inner/outer distinction proposed by previous scholars, that is, how one understands the 'self' and projects it to others and how the projected identity is perceived in social interactions (e.g. Benson et al., 2012). This study mainly investigates the identity from the learners' perspective, focusing on their perception of themselves and their relationship to the world and how they shape it through the negotiation of relationships. We adopt the poststructuralist perspective, viewing

identity as ‘fluid, context-dependent, and context-producing’ (Norton and Toohey, 2011, p.13). In other words, one’s identity is constantly shaped through interacting with others in the community, as individuals establish and adjust their positions in the world while at the same time receiving feedback from and being positioned by others (Gee, 2000; van Lier, 2004). Identity development discussed in this research refers to the ongoing self-interpretation process, during which the present ‘I’ constantly reflects on the past ‘me’ in order to guide the future ‘me’ as life experience accumulates (Wiley, 1994).

A foundational work in investigating the connection between identity and L2 development is Norton’s (2000) case study of five immigrant women in Canada, where Norton proposed the term ‘investment’ to denote the effort they put into learning English, arguing that this was to a large extent determined by shifts in their identities. In Norton’s (2012) view, learners invest in a language to acquire resources in the community, either symbolic, such as language, knowledge, and social relationships, or material, including money and capital goods. Therefore, the investment of learners shifts according to the changing and emerging social purposes, and the social positions people take in particular time and space can largely determine the level of investment in L2 interaction (ibid.).

On the other hand, identity development has also been investigated as an outcome of L2 learning. Intensive contact with L2, especially in the SA context, is usually accompanied by new social relations and settings, the engagement with which could ‘destabilise’ identities established in learners’ previous communities (Benson et al., 2013, p. 9). A case in point is Benson et al.’s (2012) project: with narrative data collected from SA learners, they identified two dimensions of identity closely related to second language use: identity-related L2

proficiency ('the ability to function as a person and express desired identities in an L2 setting'), and linguistic self-concept ('sense of self as a learner and user of the L2') (p.173). An example for the former is that participants explicitly articulated how improvement in English allowed them to make friends and express themselves better. In terms of linguistic self-concept, most students pictured themselves as more confident English speakers; some sensed the identity shift from a learner to user of English and developed a sense of ownership and mastery of the L2 (ibid.).

2.3 The Role of Identity in Learning and Use of L2 Pragmatics

Some applied linguists have explored the role of identity in learners' adoption of NS pragmatic norms in the SA context. For example, in Hassall's (2014) study, a SA learner showed striking improvement in the use of address terms in L2 Indonesian after a four-week sojourn. Although some initial discomforts were reported due to the differences between the L2 and the participant's native language (English), such as addressing the host parents 'bapak/ibu (dad/mom)', he soon adopted the new forms willingly. From the learning diaries and interviews, it seems what drove the change was his growing sense of belonging to the target language community and the affection he wished to express to the hosts by adopting the NS address forms. A similar finding was reported in Brown's (2013) study focusing on SA learners' use of honorifics in Korean. Patrick, an L1 German speaker, reported that he always tried to use honorifics as Korean native speakers do and felt offended when others did not address him in deferential language properly considering his foreigner identity. He believed that by adopting NS forms, he presented himself as a competent language learner and claimed 'an identity of equal status to Korean native speakers' (p.292).

In addition, a bigger number of studies have focused more, or even solely, on how identity-related factors lead to deliberate divergence from NS pragmatic conventions (Gomez-Laich, 2016). From the previous research, an important reason is L2 users' cultural values internalized in previous communities that are inconsistent with L2 pragmatic conventions (e.g. Ishihara & Tarone, 2009; Kim, 2014; Siegal, 1996). For instance, Kim's (2014) research investigated L2 pragmatic development of Korean SA students studying in the United States. Having noticed that Americans usually respond to others' compliments with 'thank you', some of them still felt uncomfortable adopting the form, as they felt accepting compliments with a simple 'thank you' goes against the humbleness highly valued in their L1 culture. Some of the students felt obliged to add expressions after 'thank you' to show their modesty, such as 'you're so kind to say that to me' (p.96). Moreover, learners' perception of themselves as 'foreigners' or 'outsiders' in the target language community, either deliberately or unwillingly, could also lead to an intentional violation of NS conventions. For example, in Brown's (2013) study, a SA learner in Korea believed his foreigner identity exempted him from always following L1 norms and thus intentionally avoided using honorifics in order to establish and maintain flat, horizontal interpersonal relationships. Hassall's (2013; 2014) research on Australian SA learners in Indonesia suggests that feeling positioned as foreigners and outsiders by the target language community hinders them from adopting L2 address terms. With few connections with the NS community, some learners find it unnecessary to follow NS pragmatic rules (ibid.).

With the awareness that existing studies have mainly focused on interactions between learners and NS speakers, Nogami (2020) pointed out a lack of investigation on how identity-related factors inform learners' pragmatic use in the ELF context involving speakers from different linguacultures. Analysing Japanese English users' DCT choices and their English

learning experience recorded through diaries, Nogami (2020) identified multifaceted impacts of learners' ELF identities on their pragmatic choices. Examples include deviating from NS conventions out of the consideration that the ELF interlocutor might not hope to follow such norms, avoiding unnecessary exchanges due to lack of confidence in language proficiency as a L2 learner/non-native speaker, and applying different pragmatic strategies (e.g. different levels of directness) to ELF speakers from Europe and those from Asia due to different levels of perceived cultural closeness and similarities.

Overall, it could be argued that the connection between identity and learning of L2 pragmatics has received attention from SA researchers. However, the number of empirical studies exploring such connection is still relatively small, and research related to L2 pragmatic development is still generally investigated through quantitative data (Ishihara, 2019). Moreover, probing and analysing reasons behind adoptions and intentional deviations from NS standards, existing studies are mostly confined to how L2 learners' identity and previous cultural background affect their L2 pragmatic use and learning. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the reverse influence – how learning of L2 pragmatics could potentially foster learners' identity shift or development. Such mutual influence has been discussed in relation to general L2 learning (e.g. in Benson et al.'s study mentioned in 2.2), but it has not been adequately discussed and exemplified in existing empirical works on L2 pragmatic development. As discussed earlier, one's pragmatic judgements are mediated through assessment of sociocultural backgrounds and interpersonal connections (Kesebir & Haidt, 2010; McConachy, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016). It can thus be assumed that, in return, being exposed to new pragmatic features can present learners with different ways to negotiate relationships and identities, encouraging reflection on their current perceptions of selves, interpersonal connections and cultural values (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The aims of the investigation reported

here were to expand the existing discussion about how identity-related factors affect learners' L2 pragmatic learning and use with empirical evidence from a qualitative case study, and to explore further how learning of L2 pragmatics could potentially foster learners' identity development. The research questions were:

(1) How do identity-related factors affect learners' interpretation and use of new L2 pragmatic forms?
(2) How is learning of L2 pragmatics related to learners' identity development during SA?

3. Data Collection Process

3.1 Research Design

To investigate the connection between L2 pragmatic development and learners' sense of self, this study adopted an emic perspective, focusing on participants' understanding and reflection in learning of L2 pragmatics during SA. Most existing studies in this field have been focused on L2 learners' performance on specific pragmatic phenomena (e.g. requests, honorifics) or in specific social situations (e.g. counter service, emails). However, it needs to be pointed out that the form or context that researchers take interest in might not necessarily be considered significant by learners themselves in their sojourning experience. Therefore, this study is based on moments in learning and communication that are noticed by learners themselves, including but not limited to L2 pragmatic forms that raised interest, that caused confusions or difficulties, and that triggered sense-making or reflections.

The design was informed by Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Schmidt (1995). Counter to Krashen's (1985; 1981) suggestion that acquisition is largely a subconscious process when

learners are exposed to comprehensible L2 input, Schmidt (1995) highlights the importance of consciousness, holding the view that noticing the new linguistic features, although not necessarily guaranteeing learning or acquisition, is the prerequisite for L2 development. For L2 pragmatics learning, noticing involves awareness of pragmalinguistic features and the associated sociocultural contexts (R. Schmidt, 2010). Noticing is also considered an essential cognitive step in the metapragmatic analysis, during which learners may investigate the sociocultural meaning behind the language and make personal sense of specific pragmatic terms (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016). Inspiration also came from 'moment analysis' proposed by Li Wei (2011), a research method which 'redirects the focus to such critical and creative moments of individuals' by capturing learners' behaviours at a specific point and inviting them to reflect on and make sense of that moment' (p. 1224). Through sharing the experience, learners retrieve moments concerning L2 pragmatics that are important, or at least noticeable, to them and become more conscious of the learning. Multiple moments from the same individual together illustrate the potential connection between learning of L2 pragmatics and learners' evolving sense of self.

To realise these intentions, case study was employed as the research design, and online chat and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. The cases here refer to four sojourners and their SA stories concerning learning of L2 pragmatics. By focusing on a small number of individuals, case study allows the researchers to conduct thorough, comprehensive analysis on each case 'in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon' (Gall et al., 2003, p.436). Online chat was used as an adapted form of learning log to capture participants' noticing of L2 pragmatic learning in their daily interactions, also with the hope that the storytelling process encouraged learners to further reflect on and make sense of their experience. Interviews with pre-designed prompts then

nudged learners to further probe into participants' perspectives related to the research questions. More details will be elaborated below in 3.3 Instruments and Procedures.

3.2 Participants

The four research participants were involved in one-year taught postgraduate courses in TESOL-related subjects at a large university in the north of England. There were three females and one male, with ages ranging from 22 to 32 years old. All of them were mainland Chinese using Mandarin as their first language, and they had learned English for more than ten years in schools and universities and reached C1 advanced level (IELTS 6.5-7.5). The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through a presentation for over 200 master students, where the researchers briefly introduced the study as a project focusing on 'learning of language and culture during SA'. Before the data generation started, an information sheet was handed to each participant to make sure they understood the purpose of the study and what was required of them. All of them gave written informed consent. Pseudonyms have been incorporated for all the participants and other names or information that could reveal their identities.

According to the background information survey conducted in our first meeting, none of the four participants had sojourned outside mainland China before arriving in the UK. Moreover, even though all the participants majored in subjects related to the English language during the undergraduate study (e.g. English literature, English linguistics and English education), they all reported a lack of opportunities to use, especially to speak, English in daily life before SA. Reasons seemed to be that communicative tasks are rarely involved in English teaching in schools and universities, and English is not used as a dominant language in China. Therefore,

they regarded English more of a classroom subject than a communicative tool before arriving in the UK.

3.3 Instruments and Procedure

The platform chosen for the online chat was Wechat, the most widely used messaging and social media application within the Chinese community. The concept of pragmatics was introduced to participants with explanation and examples, and they were encouraged to share their daily encounters related to pragmatics that caught their attention as well as their feelings, reactions and thoughts about the experiences. The genre of the online chat was chosen as it accommodates causal language use and texts of different lengths, which are likely to reduce participants' burden from modifying language or feeling that they must write long, complete paragraphs. Researchers' responses or follow-up questions sometimes triggered further conversations, and the whole process was designed to imitate casual daily exchanges with a friend, with the hope that the informality would help construct a comfortable conversation environment and enable participants to externalise their thoughts freely. Considering participants might find the notion 'pragmatics' abstract and vague, they were encouraged to clarify the definition whenever they felt it was needed with the researchers, or to share unsure cases and leave them to the researchers to judge the relevance. Chat message samples were also provided to offer inspiration and loose guidance to the participants at the start. Two examples are attached in Appendix 1.

The stories the participants shared then fed our discussions in the five interviews, each lasting 30-90 minutes, distributed evenly over 12 months with each participant. The interviews followed a loose agenda with prompts designed to probe into participants' perspectives on L2

pragmatics and their holistic changes and development (e.g. new understandings of self, management of interpersonal relationships, cultural awareness and language learning). Moreover, some individualised topics were developed from stories they shared via online chat. During the interview, participants were encouraged to express their thoughts freely or bring up topics that interested them without feeling constrained by the questions proposed by the researchers. Interviews were also used as opportunities to complement online chat, with the question 'Are there any new stories you hope to share with me today, which you haven't mentioned in Wechat?' asked by the end of each meeting. It turned out to be a very helpful prompt: understandably, the participants were not always prioritising this research during SA and reporting their encounters right after they happened, while they were usually happy to share during our conversation if anything came to mind.

All the participants chose to use Chinese as the primary language in both interviews and online chat. Data were analysed in Chinese prior to translation. Clips presented in this paper were translated by the author, and the validation of translation was checked and confirmed by two Chinese English teachers with high proficiency in both languages.

4. Results

This section will present extracts from data generated in both interviews and online chat that suggest connections between learner identity and L2 pragmatic development. Table 1 presents the amount of data from each participant. As easily observable from the table, some participants were more active in online chat than others, and the main reasons behind the difference was the learners' desire to share and their level of exposure to L2-mediated communication. Regardless of word quantity or frequency of sharing, each research participant contributed rich and relevant stories. Data analysis generally followed the emic,

inductive method: through iteratively reading participants' self-reported SA experiences, the researchers attempted to approach the data with minimised hypotheses, immerse themselves in contexts where the participants were situated, and interpret learning incidents with the background of the person and their SA trajectory. Findings are mainly categorised under two themes according to the research questions: (1) evidence of identity in L2 pragmatic choices (2) evidence of L2 metapragmatic analysis leading to identity development.

Table 1

Qualitative Data Generated from Online Chat and Interviews

Participants (pseudonyms picked by participants themselves)	**Interviews**	**Online Chat**
Tina	5 times, 174mins in total	37,000 words
Win	5 times, 232mins in total	2,700 words
Hanguang	5 times, 228mins in total	3,300 words
Mary	5 times, 168mins in total	2,400 words

4.1 Evidence of Identity in L2 Pragmatic Choices

The section consists of three cases where two participants, Hanguang and Mary, noticed and reflected on new L2 pragmatic forms from their daily life. Hanguang had a strong enthusiasm for classical literature in both Chinese and English. Out of his interest in the Bible as a classic literature, he joined a Christian community, and the context for the following extract is an informal chat at a Sunday church gathering, where Hanguang noticed a man asking his friend: 'Where is your lady?'.

Hanguang: I like 'Where is your lady?' more compared with 'Where is your wife?'. 'Lady' sounds like '尊夫人 (zūn fū rén)' (an honorific title to address others' wife in Chinese). I feel it suits my personality.

(Online Chat: November 2020)

This quotation exemplifies the mental portrait of Hanguang that I built up over one year of frequent contact. In our first interview, Hanguang shared his understanding of British English as 'a language whose speakers are always elegant, formal and polite'. His passion for British English motivated him to come to study in the UK, for he believed as the supposed place of origin of the language, British English is the 'most authentic form', and 'the beauty of a language lies in its most original and classical'. Hanguang also left me an impression of being very polite, perhaps even a little over-polite in his way of speaking. He used hedging devices frequently and insisted on using '您' (nín) (polite/formal 'you' in Chinese) instead of '你' (nǐ) (informal 'you' in Chinese) to address me as a peer even if I had suggested that both of us use the latter. His behaviours, as he described, were greatly influenced by his passion for classical literature. See the example below:

Hangaung: I really admire literature from Pre-Qin and Han Dynasties [221 BC - 220 AD]... These books do not explicitly teach you how to speak but implicitly emphasise 'morality', 'courtesy', 'elegance' and 'harmony'… I was attracted by the profound wisdom and treated it as guidance of my behaviours and language use.

(Online Chat: January 2021)

It could thus be speculated that Hanguang's pragmatic choice and preference in this case were influenced by values he appreciated from classical literature as well as his aesthetics of language. This also explains why the expression 'Where is your lady?' earned his attention in the first place. It seems that Hanguang interpreted the use of 'your lady' as a polite, formal and elegant way to speak, found the expression authentic-to-self and was willing to adopt this expression in future conversations. On the other hand, Hanguang reported a completely opposite attitude to the British people's use of 'cheers' as a synonym for 'thank you':

> **Hanguang:** Britons say 'cheers' a lot rather than 'thank you'. I feel I'm not used to it… It's too casual and informal… Like what I read in an article, British are losing their identity, and English is losing its quality.
>
> (interview: September 2019)

In this case, Hanguang considered 'Cheers' as an inferior linguistic choice compared with 'Thank you' to express gratitude, and it did not seem that he was planning to use the form in his L2, although he was aware that it is widely used among the British. Hangaung's negative comments on this specific linguistic form and the identity of the British suggest his disappointment on the mismatch between what he observed during SA and the ideal British community in his expectation before SA, as a group of people 'always being elegant, formal and polite'. Apart from the perspective of language aesthetics, the use of 'cheers' also did not seem to suit Hanguang's communication style, which could also explain his rejection of the form. 'Cheers', in British English, is employed as a casual form of 'thank you' to friends, acquaintances and strangers mostly in informal situations. However, from Hanguang's use of address terms to me, it is not hard to see that he valued interpersonal distance and preferred to talk in a rather formal way especially the first time meeting a stranger. Therefore, the use of

‘cheers’ for him, under some circumstances, might suggest an uncomfortably close and casual interpersonal relationship and thereby positioned him in an awkward position in the conversation.

Another example of rationalising pragmatic choices is from Mary. In our interview, she shared her thoughts about a phrase learned from a British team leader during a school trip, ‘I want to spend a penny’, as a more indirect way to state the need to urinate, compared with ‘I want to go to the toilet.’:

> **Mary:** I will not use ‘I want to spend a penny’. Using ‘toilet’ might be weird, but this is also weird. First, it is rarely used. I don’t think my friends, either Chinese or other non-British students, would understand. I also feel it’s a bit of a ‘showing off’. It’s like a foreigner suddenly says something like ‘猪八戒照镜子 (zhū bā jiè zhào jìng zi)’ (Chinese idiom: pig monster looks into the mirror; Meaning: someone being stuck in a dilemma). I would say ‘I want to go to the lady’s room’. I wouldn’t use ‘toilet’, but I wouldn’t use ‘a penny’, either.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you think it is too local and you feel you are not British [interrupted]
>
> **Mary:** Yes.
>
> **Researcher:** And you feel strange to say it?
>
> **Mary:** Yes, strange.
>
> (Interview: November 2019)

Although Mary had expressed her intense enthusiasm for learning ‘authentic’ native-like English many times in our interviews, here she refused to use the expression learned from a

native speaker. Her choice not to use 'spend a penny' was mainly due to concerns about its communicative effectiveness and her ELF user identity who hope to exploit English as a lingua franca as a medium to reach and interact with a wider global community. Mary's identity as a foreigner also plays a role in her rejection of the new form here. It seems Mary viewed idioms and local phrases as insider language typically shared in the L1 group, and believed using such language would be regarded by others as an awkward attempt trying to approach a community that she did not belong.

4.2 Evidence of L2 Metapragmatic Analysis leading to Identity Development

Section 4.1 has presented data showing how learners' sense of self and identity-related concerns could affect their adoption or rejection of newly learned L2 pragmatic forms in the SA context. This article will now move on to the reverse influence through unpacking pragmatic-related reflections shared by three participants – how exposure to new L2 pragmatic features encourages metapragmatic analysis and may lead to identity development.

The first example is reported by Hanguang about his change of speech act strategy when accepting compliments after staying in the UK for five months:

> **Hanguang:** I feel when I speak English, I can admit what I have and what I don't have. For example, when I receive compliments here in the UK, I would just say: 'Thank you'. However, when speaking Chinese, I used to say: 'No, no, it's not like that' to show modesty.
>
> **Researcher:** Why? Do you behave differently in two languages?
>
> **Hanguang:** It's more accurate to say that I used to behave differently, but I feel the two languages are mixing up. Now, if I think I am good at something, I will not try to hide it

when others compliment me. Maybe my thought has changed somehow. I feel if it's true that I'm good at something, there shouldn't be any reason why I can't admit it.

(Interview: December 2019)

It could be seen from the data clip above that Hanguang had been through different stages on the speech act of responding to compliments. Before studying abroad, he would use depreciatory expressions to deflect the praise and so show humility, as many people in his L1 community would do. Such behaviour is consistent with the meaning of 'Hanguang (含光)', the Chinese pseudonym he picked for himself, which means to 'dim the glare and be humble'. It could be assumed that responding to compliments with 'thank you' was merely an imitation of most NSs' linguistic choices initially, probably with an intention to acculturate to the L2 community. However, it seems accumulated conversation experience in L2 regarding compliments encouraged Hanguang to analyse more in-depth values beyond pragmalinguistic forms. This process of analysis was not elaborated systematically in the interview. Still, it seems that such reflection somehow reshaped Hanguang's sense of self and the identity he hoped to project to others in similar contexts — from being modest to being confident and frank. The new values and sense of identity, in turn, reflected on not just L2 use but his changed pragmatic choices in L1.

The second case is Tina's analysis and reflections on modes of address in English and Chinese in a conversation with her language exchange partner, a British lady in the same course who practised Mandarin speaking skills by having regular chats with Tina:

> **Tina:** My language partner is in her 50s. I was supposed to address her '您 (nín)' (polite/formal 'you') in Chinese, but I just naturally transferred 'you' from English into Chinese and used '你 (nǐ)' (informal 'you'), because we were communicating a lot in English beforehand. I feel the age gap was greatly eliminated through the use of '你'. In Chinese, I usually feel I'm obliged to show respect to the elder in my language. However, I viewed her as a peer, and I can just communicate freely, openly and more comfortably with fewer concerns… I now think showing respect to one's age is unnecessary. When I use the polite form, I feel the interpersonal distance is suddenly lengthened, and I feel we can never become friends.
>
> (Online chat: April 2020)

During the one-year data collection period, Tina has also reported similar experiences and reflections in her conversations with her host family and a doctor. The unconventional use of '你', as a back transfer from English to Tina's L1, triggered comparison and analysis of different forms of address used in the two languages, and how they differently impact and reflect interpersonal relationships. Through meta-pragmatic analysis, Tina saw new possibilities in negotiating senior-junior relationships, a genre she had been familiar with but negotiated differently in her L1 community before SA. Tina also developed a new ideal position in such relationships: as the junior, she hoped to present herself and be identified by the interlocutor as an individual with equal voices and social status without being constrained or distanced by a socially defined, age-related hierarchical social structure.

Tina also applied her new thoughts on forms of address when reflecting on her relationship with a friend in China, who is three years older than Tina:

> **Tina:** I call her 'elder sister' in Chinese, and many kids we grew up with did the same. Although we see each other as close friends, I still sense some distance between us. Because I call her 'elder sister', she probably feels she should act as a role model… In daily life, she always behaves moderately and sometimes feels depressed. I think being called 'elder sister' is part of the reason. She is the 'elder sister', so that she cannot fully be herself or do crazy things… I don't think this sort of 'respect' necessarily leads to happiness for the one who receives it.
>
> (Interview: September 2020)

Tina's encounters with L2 forms of address provided her with a new dimension when reviewing her previous experience. In the conversation with the language partner, Tina observed the conversation as the younger speaker, while in this case she approached the same topic from the perspective of the senior. Realising how the senior could also be restricted and positioned uncomfortably by using honorifics, she gained a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of different address terms on interpersonal relationships, stoking her preference for more egalitarian modes of communication.

The use of address terms was a topic frequently brought up by Tina throughout the year, and the two instances of reflection presented above, as well as others not mentioned here, happened at different points of time during the SA. It seems Tina's understanding of this topic was gradually developing with new experiences. The process of metapragmatic analysis also appears to foster Tina's intercultural awareness and competence. Although Tina expressed new pragmatic preferences, she regarded the new forms as 'a new version of communication' added to her cultural and language repertoire rather than a replacement of her previous choices: 'If you also like it, I'll use it with you, or I can still switch back to my old way' (Interview: September 2020).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study employed a qualitative methodology and investigated the bi-directional relationship between learner identity and L2 pragmatic development during studying abroad. In addressing the first research question, evidence suggests that sojourners' interpretation and use of new L2 pragmatic forms are mediated by identity-related considerations. The findings suggest that learners, even those claiming a solid motivation to learn British English, sometimes resist what they perceive as British NS norms to invest in particular identities, consistent with findings reported by Kim (2014) and Ishihara & Tarone (2009). The results also echo the factors reviewed earlier in Section 2.3 that affect whether learners adopt the new pragmatic features: learners' internalised cultural values from previous communities and the perceived foreigner and ELF speaker identity.

More specifically, through SA students' reports and reflections on L2 pragmatics in daily interactions, this study elaborates how learners engage with new L2 pragmatic forms explicitly and analytically. When encountering new L2 pragmatic features, they tend to decode the social meaning behind the linguistic units by referring and relating to existing knowledge of culture and language and their previous understandings (sometimes stereotypes) of the host country. Their interpretation, therefore, can be coloured by what they bring to their SA interactions and may not necessarily match speakers' intentions or the conventional meaning of the new L2 form (McConachy, 2018). Learners then evaluate whether the perceived meaning of the new pragmatic form is consistent with their identities in two aspects: (1) whether the new form is authentic-to-self and helps project a desired self-image in social activities, (2) whether the projected identity is considered appropriate and

favourable in the target language communities. An example for the former is Hanguang's willingness to use the sentence 'Where is your lady?' to present himself as a courteous and cultured person and his rejection of 'cheers' for the same reason. An example of the latter is Mary's reluctance to use the newly learned phrase 'spend a penny', as she believed using local idioms might position herself as an awkward intruder of the L1 community.

Regarding the second research question, one might conclude from the findings that noticing and analysing pragmatic differences can trigger SA students to reflect on and even reshape their sense of self, which usually leads to development not just as an L2 learner but holistically as a person. Although this article shares only a small number of data clips from the large amount available, the examples are representative, and all four participants reported significant personal changes in different aspects of life closely related to their metapragmatic reflection throughout the year of SA. Some of the changes were shared (e.g. three participants expressed a new preference for less hierarchical interpersonal relationships mediated by egalitarian address forms in English), and some are idiosyncratic, closely connected to the person's background and L2 resources available during SA. As Benson et al. (2013) argue, individuals' L2 learning and use are interwoven with their life experience, and thus the process of 'becoming a different person' proceeds with the development of language skills and knowledge (p.32). In L2 pragmatics, especially when learners notice differences between unfamiliar L2 usage and norms that they have conformed to, they are capable of transcending L1/L2 comparison at a surface level to investigate how identity is presented with the language and how interpersonal relationships are negotiated differently. The new alternatives can stimulate sojourners to reconsider how they hope to position themselves and to be positioned by others, through which learners gain a deeper awareness of both the 'self' and its connections to the social world. The identity development may lead to adoption or rejection

of the new L2 pragmatic forms, and even cause cross-linguistic influence with new pragmatic choices and strategies transferred back to their L1. By probing into sociocultural meanings behind different pragmatic forms, sojourners may also develop a transcultural/translingual self, with enhanced understanding and empathy for different values and practices and competence to transcend existing structures, react to different linguacultural systems flexibly and challenge established structures when necessary.

The findings generate insights into how sojourners engage sociocultural knowledge acquired in previous communities in understanding new L2 pragmatic forms and how identity-related considerations affect their pragmatic decisions. It has also been a successful attempt to investigate how learners' identity development is mediated by metapragmatic reflections and analysis, prompting a call for further research to look at the bi-directional, mutually complementary relationship between learners' pragmatic competence and holistic development. A limitation of this study is that the data generated were based on participants' recall of daily interactions concerning L2 pragmatics. Their descriptions failed to capture every detail in the conversation and their recollections might not be completely accurate. However, the methodology captured critical learning moments and their meanings to learners in various daily situations, which were important in accelerating their language and holistic development yet were not accessible for direct observations or recordings. Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that the commitment to this research likely influenced participants' SA lives, as journal keeping, interview discussions and the researchers' continuing involvement might have unavoidably fostered noticing and reflection on issues related to L2 pragmatics, culture and identity. Admitting such influence does not negate insights generated from this study, yet it is important to consider this research as a part of participants' learning context while reading and interpretating the qualitative data (Croker, 2009).

As for practical implications, although the present study was conducted in the SA setting, the findings might translate learning and teaching in other contexts. For L2 instructors, it is important to recognise various roles that learners may take up in the target language community in the classroom and 'exercise sensitivity in accepting and assessing learners' unique negotiation of identity' to foster authentic and communicative language teaching (Ishihara, 2019, p. 170). The findings also suggest the benefits for teachers to move beyond a rigid NS-centred normative system in pragmatics teaching and to encourage explicit analysis of the cultural meanings behind the new forms. Learners' previous linguistic and cultural knowledge, even deviated from NS norms, should not be simply labelled as incorrect forms or negative transfer, but can be actively engaged as resources in unpacking meaning of L2 pragmatic features. It is important for learners to understand the sociocultural values behind the language rather than simply imitating the form, as it lays the foundation for learners to mediate different pragmatic choices, negotiate identities flexibly and avoid unintentional misunderstandings. Moreover, the process to compare and analyse the gap between the new pragmatic form and previous knowledge can foster learners' development not only as L2 users but as culturally-aware and reflexive individuals.

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Appendix: Chat Message Samples

Sample 1:

My British friend came to my place to have dinner together, and after she finished the food on her plate, I asked her if she wanted some more. She said: 'I'm fine. Thanks'. I noticed this is a more polite way to reject an offer. I usually say 'No, thanks', but I feel 'I'm fine' sounds milder and less direct. It is a better choice to say no when my friend kindly offers me something. I think I'll use this phrase in the future.

Sample 2:

I wrote an email to my tutor to ask him to read and comment on my writing, but I worried he might be busy, and I didn't want to hurry him, so I wrote 'Please take your time' at the end of the email. However, my friend later told me 'Take your time' is usually used by people with a higher power, like teachers to students or supervisors to team members. I felt a little bit embarrassed. I hope my tutor wouldn't think I was arrogant or rude. I guess he would understand because I'm an international student. International students make mistakes.