Difference Between the Pragmatics of L1 & L2 English Speakers in America

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Abstract

Pragmatics plays a big role in communication. English is remarkably used by people from different languages and cultural backgrounds. This presumably indicates the different English pragmatics that comes with the cultural baggage of the speaker. This research explores the differences between the pragmatics of speakers of English as their first language and speakers of English as their second language in the United States of America. To find out the differences, the answers of twelve students at Andrews University from similar ethnic backgrounds to a survey prepared by the researcher were saved and analyzed. The survey included scenarios wherein participants had to choose a response closest to how they would respond. The results showed that speakers of English as their first language chose assertive responses, while speakers of English as their second language chose passive responses to a body-shaming scenario. The results also showed that speakers of English as their second language chose responses that gave credit to other people when being complimented. Finally, the results showed that there was no significant difference in when apologizing and requesting between the two groups. This research emphasizes the differences in cultures and how it affects communication despite speaking the same language, English. The findings of this research can contribute to English teachers' mindfulness of their students' cultural background to help them obtain academic success in English by tackling and connecting the differences in English pragmatics.

Keywords: ESL, English, pragmatics, culture

INTRODUCTION

Language has been associated with grammar and vocabulary. In addition to those, pragmatics also play a big role in language. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionary, pragmatics is "the study of the way in which language is used to express what somebody really means in particular situations, especially when the actual words used may appear to mean something different." Pragmatics also plays a big role in the cultural aspect because "it addresses intentions, assumptions, beliefs, goals, and actions that people perform by means of language in socio-culturally appropriate ways" (Hinkel, 2014). In this paper, the language that will be studied in connection to pragmatics is English.

English has become a global language. People from many different countries know how to speak English. People who speak English as their second language all come from different

cultures, and thus, pragmatics play a big role in intercultural communication. In this paper, however, the focus will be on the first language (L1) English speakers and second language (L2) English speakers in America.

Statement of the Problem

English is a global language; thus, English is a language that connects people from different cultural backgrounds and nations. America is known as the melting pot, referring to the fusion of many different cultures and nations in it. There are people in America who speak English as their L1 and those who speak it as their L2. However, the way they communicate, or their pragmatics, may or may not be different from each other even when both parties speak English.

Purpose of the Study

Pragmatics play a big role in communication. Learning about the differences in the pragmatics of different cultural backgrounds will help ESL teachers be aware of the differences in order to teach their students better. Another purpose of this study is for people to be mindful when communicating with others from different or same ethnic backgrounds but not from the same country (i.e., United States of America).

Research Question and Objectives

The research question is, how are the pragmatics of English L2 speakers in America different from the native English speakers in America that are not of American ethnicity? The objective of this research is to find out the differences between the L1 English speakers of other ethnicity and L2 English speakers' pragmatics in America.

Importance and Significance

An empirical study for this research question is needed in order to determine the differences in their pragmatics. This will serve as an exploratory study of language and culture through pragmatics. This study will help one learn about pragmatics in order for him or her to connect and understand the language, culture, and society. It is important to learn about pragmatics as it is "a central role for speech act theory" and "application to language teaching of findings from speech act research" (Rose, 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the meaning and importance of pragmatics and the different pragmatics from the cultural backgrounds that will be represented in the research study. These literary texts were found on Google Scholar as well as Ebsco with the search words: pragmatics, culture, language, English pragmatics, Indonesian pragmatics, Korean pragmatics, Latin American pragmatics, and intercultural communication.

Meaning and Importance of Pragmatics

Eli Hinkel's article focuses more on the connection of pragmatics to culture and socio-cultural competence and how this needs to be taught in ESL classrooms. The article gives many crucial arguments as to why pragmatics and socio-cultural competence are important, especially to ESL learners. R. Delecta Jenifer and Dr. G. P. Raman's article focuses on pragmatics and its impact in the workplace. He emphasizes stereotyping and ethnocentrism as barriers to good intercultural communication.

According to Hinkel, language learning cannot depend on the mastery of grammar and vocabulary alone. Learners need pragmatics in order to communicate to others in the L2.

Although it is essential for learners to attain language proficiency to be linguistically competent, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, language proficiency alone is not sufficient. Overall, to become proficient and effective communicators, learners need to attain second language (L2) socio-cultural competence. Knowing how to say thank you, for example, does not automatically confer the knowledge of when to say thank you, how often to say thank you, and whether any additional action is called for. Quite reasonably, learners first tend to apply the standards that exist in the first or native language (L1) communities where they were socialized (Hinkel, 2014).

In the paragraph above, Hinkel highlights how pragmatics is connected to when, how, and where a particular saying should be spoken. This creates a good relationship between people from different cultural backgrounds. Pragmatics, in relation to intercultural communication, enhances the grammar and vocabulary used in order to avoid misunderstanding when communicating in different social situations, including the workplace (Jenifer & Raman, 2014).

Misunderstanding is the foremost barrier to communication in a multicultural environment. This is common among people of different cultural backgrounds whose values and beliefs vary. The variation in the different cultures results in a high level of anxiety and uncertainty and ends up in a misunderstanding. The misunderstanding which has been raised due to anxiety and uncertainty continues in their entire tenure (Jenifer & Raman, 2014).

Learning pragmatics is essential in language and culture as it opens people's eyes to intercultural communication. People will learn to understand another culture's way of saying things, responding to things, etc. Learners of English should also know this importance, as "not understanding the socio-cultural expectations can negatively impact learners' ability to function in an L2 community" (Hinkel, 2014). This connects to what Jenifer and Raman say about ethnocentrism in intercultural communication in the workplace. Ethnocentrism becomes an issue in a multicultural group because it creates anxiety. Thus, it is important to learn to communicate with people from different backgrounds and to keep in mind that there is no "standard" culture. Every country's pragmatics is important. It is important for people to "become aware of the sociolinguistic norms reflected in the ways of speaking in the target community" (Hinkel, 2014).

Through these articles, we can conclude that, indeed, the pragmatics of different cultural groups is important to learn in order to connect better to other cultural groups.

Indonesian, Korean, and Latin America Pragmatics

Research about the Indonesian pragmatics argues that Indonesian's frequencies of politeness strategies depend on the "different status levels and social distances" rather than the type of politeness (Wijayanto et al., 2013). The research focused on the response of Indonesian English learners to complaints. According to the research, positive politeness was used more than negative politeness across the different "status levels and social distances" (Wijayanto et al., 2013). Positive politeness and negative politeness are two different kinds of politeness.

Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) distinguish between positive and negative politeness. Both types of politeness involve maintaining--or redressing threats to--positive and negative face, where the positive face is defined as the addressee's 'perennial desire that his wants . . . should be thought of as desirable' (p. 101), and negative face as the addressee's "want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded" (Koester, 2006).

Both positive and negative politeness gives a sense of respect, but positive politeness leans towards friendliness while negative politeness leans towards showing deference.

Research regarding the interlanguage pragmatics in Korean as Foreign Language Learners explored the Korean pragmatics. Positive and negative politeness was also discussed in this research, just like the research on Indonesian pragmatics. While positive politeness strategies "emphasize closeness between speakers and listeners by confirming or establishing common ground, or by referring desirable attributes in the listener," negative politeness strategies emphasize the "distance by accenting the listener's right to territorial claims and freedom from imposition" (Ahn, 2005). This means that when one shows negative politeness, one does not necessarily have to compromise their principles to come into agreement. One simply respects the other party's view and shows deference. Another concept explained in this research is the use of honorifics in Korean as a special linguistic form. This shows that honorifics and politeness play a big role in Korean pragmatics.

Another finding is that "Bald on record," or the level of one's straightforwardness, also scored high in the research results (Wijayanto et al., 2013). The more unfamiliar the relationship is with the person they speak to, the higher the "Bald on record" score. However, since the researchers used an oral discourse completion task, the responses may not have reflected the answers of the participants if they were in a natural setting. This research proves that Indonesian English learners adapt to the pragmatic and have a good standing of pragmatic competence in terms of politeness.

Different pragmatics are shown in different Latin American countries. In general, they include "speech acts (e.g., invitations, compliments) and revisions to a culture-specific politeness theory" (Félix-Bradsefer, 2021) into their pragmatics. Some countries, like Argentina, use comments that are impersonally directed and indirectly toward the physical appearance and personality as

complements. Research by Aguilar Peña (2015) also showed that the older citizens in Chile showed more positive politeness strategies, while the younger "utilized more grammatical mitigations" together with some positive politeness strategies. This shows that in Latin America, positive politeness is common in their pragmatics.

The three articles have shown different yet similar aspects of the pragmatics of Indonesia, Korea, and Latin American countries. As a whole, positive politeness strategies tend to be overpowering compared to negative politeness strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative ethnographic research that explores pragmatics and its relation to different cultural backgrounds. Twelve Andrews University students with similar ethnic backgrounds or cultures participated in this research by answering the survey provided by the researcher through Google forms. There were 6 male and 6 female participants. Participants were English L1 & L2 speakers. They were from the following countries or ethnicity in America: Indonesia, Korea, and Latin American countries.

This research used a survey made by the researcher through Google Forms. The link to the survey was distributed online through personal messages on Facebook and Instagram.

Data Collection

The participants clicked the link that led to the survey. In the survey, there were 11 questions: 7 were questionnaires regarding the participants' backgrounds, and 4 were survey questions with multiple choices. The purpose of these questions was to find out the participants' answers and reactions to specific situations, namely: body shaming, receiving compliments, saying sorry, and asking for help. The reason why the four questions (see figures 1.1 – 1.4) were chosen is that these are common situations wherein cultures have an unspoken rule for giving responses. The participants filled out the survey and clicked submit when finished. The answers were all recorded on Google Forms. All answers were anonymous, and all the participants were aware that their answers would be used for this research.

Data Analysis Procedure

The summary of the answers was automatically made into a pie chart by Google Forms. However, in order to know which answer was connected to which ethnic background and which group (L1 or L2), the individual answers were written down on a separate sheet of paper and organized into the different ethnic background groups. Then the answers were made into a column chart in order to compare the statistics of each answer and their connection to L1 and L2 groups.

RESULTS

The survey showed that 8 out of 12 people were from ages of 18-25, and 4 people were from ages 26-30. There were 6 out of 12 who were non-Americans, and the other half were Americans. There were 2 Indonesians, 2 Koreans, 2 Latinos, 2 Indonesian-Americans, 2 Korean-Americans, and 2 Latino-Americans. Unexpectedly, there were 8 participants who identified English as their L2, and 4 who identified English as their L1. Eight out of twelve participants were very fluent in English, and seven out of twelve participants were very comfortable speaking English to native English speakers.

The answers to the four survey questions were different. The following pie charts show the different answers and the percentage of the answer's frequency.

Figure 1: Results to the first question

1. You go to the store to buy a pair of jeans. The shop owner smiles at you and asks how she may help you. You ask her which pair of jeans would m...ooking at you. How would you most likely respond?
12 responses

- a. Stay silent and smile shyly at the workers
- b. Give an awkward laugh
- c. Leave the store right away
- d. Thank the coworker for helping
- e. Tell the coworker that he/she was being rude
- f. Challenge or debate with the coworker

Figure 2: Results to the second question

2. Your teacher compliments you for your well-organized and well-presented presentation after class. How would you most likely respond?
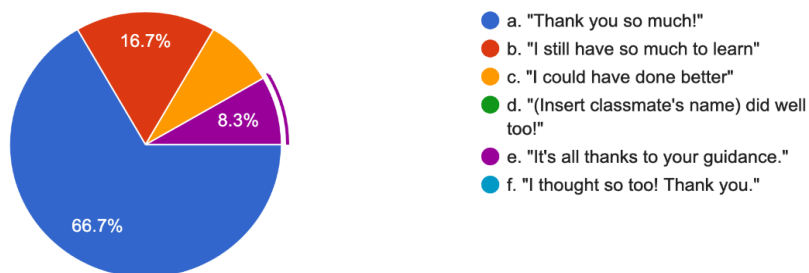12 responses

- a. "Thank you so much!"
- b. "I still have so much to learn"
- c. "I could have done better"
- d. "(Insert classmate's name) did well too!"
- e. "It's all thanks to your guidance."
- f. "I thought so too! Thank you."

Figure 3: Results to the third question

3. Your friend invited you to eat with a couple of friends for his/her birthday. You said you would come, but didn't show up until 2 hours later due to...le. What would you most likely say to your friend?
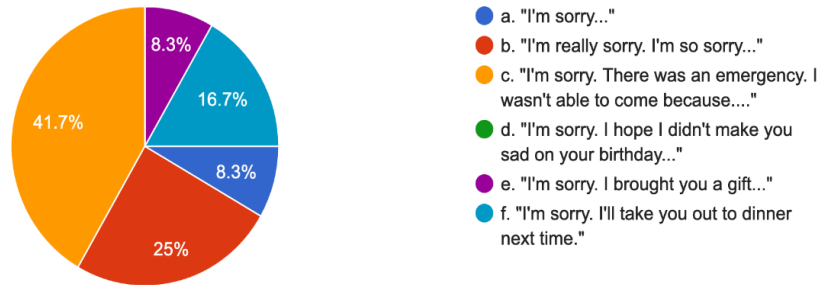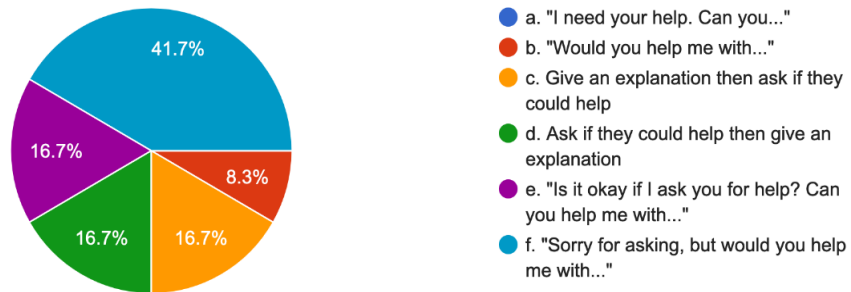12 responses

- a. "I'm sorry..."
- b. "I'm really sorry. I'm so sorry..."
- c. "I'm sorry. There was an emergency. I wasn't able to come because...."
- d. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't make you sad on your birthday..."
- e. "I'm sorry. I brought you a gift..."
- f. "I'm sorry. I'll take you out to dinner next time."

Figure 4: Results to the fourth question

4. You need help from an acquaintance. How would you ask?
12 responses

- a. "I need your help. Can you..."
- b. "Would you help me with..."
- c. Give an explanation then ask if they could help
- d. Ask if they could help then give an explanation
- e. "Is it okay if I ask you for help? Can you help me with..."
- f. "Sorry for asking, but would you help me with..."

The following graphs indicate how many people chose each answer from the multiple choices.

Figure 5: Number of persons for the first question
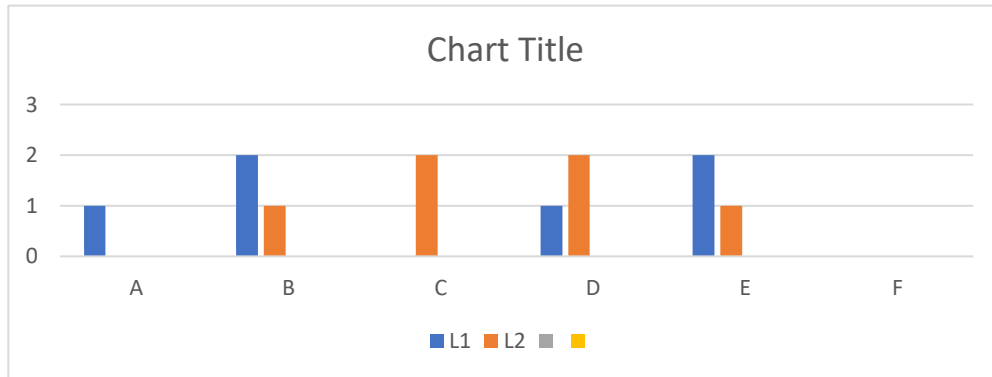

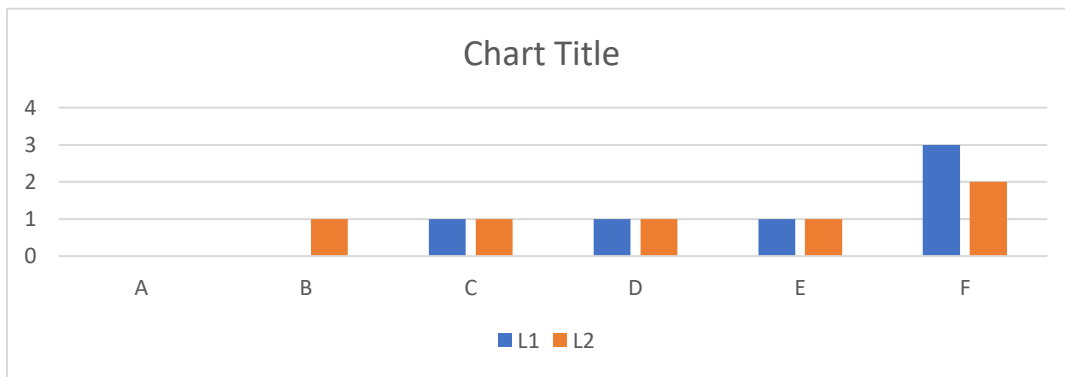*Figure 6: Number of persons for the second question*

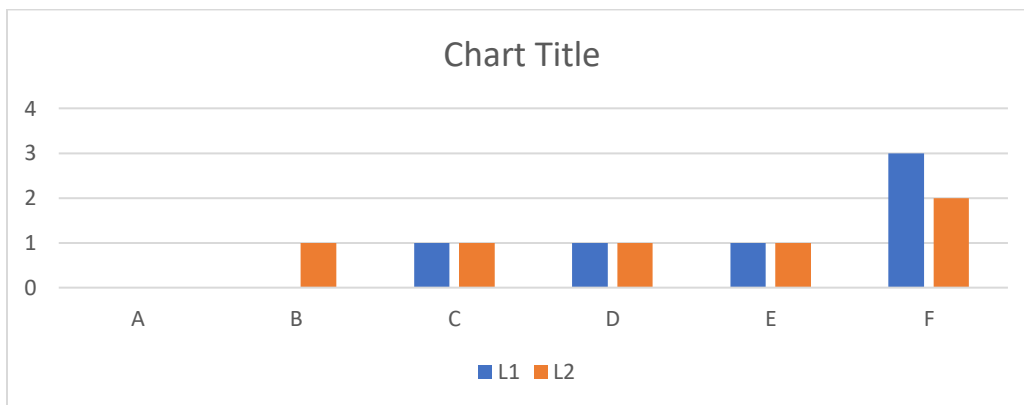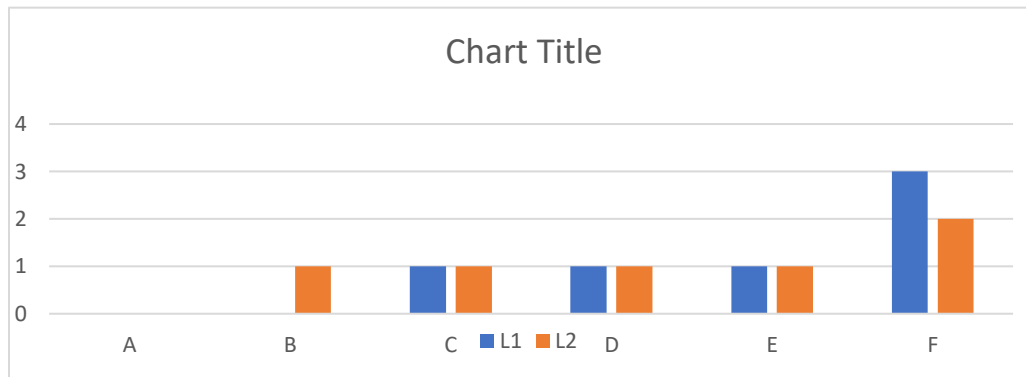*Figure 7: Number of persons for the third question*

Figure 8: Number of persons for the fourth question

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation is that there were only 12 participants. Some of the participants may have been third-culture kids, and some of the participants who were American may not have English as their first language. There were only some ethnic backgrounds/countries represented. This paper will only focus on the results between L1 and L2. It does not focus on the fluency and whether it affects the answers, as well as the answers between participants from a certain country (i.e., Indonesian) and participants from that ethnicity (i.e., Indonesian-American). The delimitation was that there was no option for "other" in the answers. The participants were not given the opportunity to write their own answers.

Findings

There is a difference in response to body-shaming comments between L1 & L2, which was shown in the results of Question 1. L1 English speakers chose more assertive responses, while L2 English speakers chose more passive answers. Another finding is that there is a difference in the responses to compliments between L1 & L2, which was shown in the results of Question 2. However, there isn't that much of a difference in the different apologies and strategies for asking for help between L1 & L2, which was shown in the results of Questions 3 & 4.

Discussion

The fact that L2 English speakers chose more passive responses to body-shaming comments shows that the literature analysis articles were true. Indonesians, Koreans, and Latin Americans lean more toward positive politeness strategies as part of their pragmatism. The responses chosen by the L2 English speakers were: 1) Stay silent and smile shyly at the workers, 2) Thank the coworker for help, and 3) Give an awkward laugh. All these answers were answers that showed

more friendliness rather than deference toward the comment. In the responses to compliments, L2 English speakers' responses were not so focused on themselves, but rather they gave credit to other people. This shows their way of being polite. Polite may not always mean saying, "Thank you!" but it could also mean giving back the credit to the speaker or to someone other than themselves. The two other responses were similar to each other. Although there was one answer that was only chosen by L2 speakers and not L1, the answer was more or less the same as the other choices. For instance, in Question 3, B was answered only by an L2 speaker, and it was a repetition of sorry, similar to the other answers. Question 4, "Would you help me," was only chosen by one L2 speaker. This answer was as polite as the other answers, however. It was not as direct as "I need your help."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while there are differences between English L1 & L2 pragmatics in terms of response to body shaming and compliments, there is not much difference between their answers in apologizing and asking for help. L1 and L2 pragmatics have a difference, but they can also be alike in some ways. Some L2 speakers may have learned English in the United States, but their roots still are within them. The L1 speakers are more direct, but there were some answers that were indirect. L2 speakers emphasize positive politeness strategies in their pragmatics more than L1 speakers.

Acknowledgment

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