# Acquisition of Greetings, Requests, and Apologies by Japanese Students in an ESL vs. an EFL Environment

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## Introduction

Speech communities vary in their use of language to achieve the same outcome and this is at the heart of pragmatics. How does one express his/her thoughts in an appropriate way to achieve a desired outcome, or a communication act? Within a given situation, a person must make the correct linguistic choices to not only express his/her ideas, but to do it in a socially acceptable way. Although there are many definitions of pragmatics（Crystal, 1997; Kasper, 1997; Levinson, 1983）, Crystal provides the most specific definition by defining pragmatics as the

"the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication"（p. 301）.

L2 learners are not starting at a zero baseline in regards to pragmatic knowledge and ability since there are pragmatic universals, which are common among all language（Blum-Kulka, 1991; Ochs, 1996; Kasper and Rose, 2002）. Examples of universals include the Cooperative Principle（Grice, 1975）, in which participants must act together to construct the discourse, and politeness（Brown and Levinson, 1987）in which participants work to achieve a certain level of politeness through their discourse realizations. Even though achieving the appropriate

outcome may vary substantially between cultures, all languages have these elements within their structures. The idea of conversational routines used for speech events that happen regularly implies the need to vary language based on the context of the situation depending on such factors as social and perceived distance, social power and the degree of impositions.（Nattering and DeCarrico, 1992）. In addition, L2 learners have a wealth of L1 pragmatic knowledge from which to draw upon. Although L1 pragmatic knowledge may have salient points for L2 discourse creation, many of the misunderstandings that arise within communicative contexts may very well be from the transfer from L1.

Anyone who has lived abroad can surely supply numerous instances of misunderstanding. A review of the intercultural communication literature will show that rather than being out of the ordinary these problems happen repeatedly and are often interpreted as impoliteness（Byram et al.（1994）, Gass（1997）, Kasper/and Zhang（1995））.

Pragmatic knowledge, or the comprehension and production of pragmatic components in the target language, has received a great deal of coverage in the literature to date. However, there are few studies that address the development of pragmatic knowledge, which is a cause for concern among some authors（Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002）. Focusing on use rather than development

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does not lend the teacher much help in the designing of materials and curriculum as to best address the needs of the students.

The focus of the research may explain the lack of pragmatic coverage in English language textbooks. A good example of this is the act of giving advice. Most textbooks focus on the forms "should", "ought to" and "had better". However, these forms are rarely used by native speakers because of their directness. This observation is supported by a study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) in which both grammatical awareness of learners and teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) were compared. This study showed that pragmatic aspects in the classroom are rarely addressed although there have been some attempts to address this lack of emphasis on pragmatics of late (Kasper and Rose, 2002).

Since the students are not receiving exposure to pragmatic issues in the classroom, it seems that students must rely on their pragmatic knowledge from the L1 and transfer that to their L2 or build knowledge of L2 pragmatics through exposure. Thus, it goes to reason that a study abroad experience would be the best chance to acquire pragmatic knowledge by giving students the maximum exposure to the language in use. While this is the general intuitive thinking, Meara (1994) points out that there is little research to support this hypothesis even though vast sums of money are spent each year on study abroad.

## Research Design

This longitudinal research project aims at addressing some of the gap in SLA research regarding pragmatics by examining how three different populations (1-year study abroad, regular required English classes, regular required English classes supplemented with explicit pragmatic teaching) of Japanese L1 speakers develop pragmatic abilities in certain aspects of English, their targeted L2. The study focuses on the specific speech acts of greetings, requests and apologies.

The objective is to determine if there is any change in L2 pragmatic competence toward or away from the L2 norm in these three groups and to record the difference in competence between the three groups. The questions this research addresses are as follows:

1. Does the study abroad experience expand the learners' knowledge of speech act production? If so, to what extent?
2. How do study abroad students and those who do not go abroad differ in the acquisition of speech acts?
3. Can pragmatic issues be effectively taught in the classroom?

## Research instrument

To measure pragmatic competence there are a number of instruments (Kasper and Rose 2002) to choose from as outlined below.

### 1. Spoken Interaction
   a. Authentic discourse – actual taped conversations
   b. Elicited conversations – conversation generated in response to a given prompt in order to collect data
   c. Role plays – simulated social or human interaction

### 2. Questionnaires
   a. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) – The respondents complete a dialogue based on a written situational description and limited to the spaces provided.
   b. Free Discourse Completion Tasks (FDCT) – The same as a DCT; however, this is open ended and thus can be as long or short as the

c. Multiple Choice – used mainly to elicit information on pragmatic production and comprehension

d. Scaled Response – making a judgment on the level of appropriateness on a scale from usually 1 to 5.

## 3. Oral/ Written Self Reports

a. Interviews – talking directly with the participant

b. Diaries – written observations

c. Verbal Protocol – verbalization of thought process during a task

   ** For a more comprehensive analysis of the different types of research instruments available to the pragmatic researcher please see Kasper and Rose (2002). Pragmatic Development in a Second Language.

While each type of research instrument has its own strengths and weaknesses, an FDCT was chosen for this research since this study is focused on the students' knowledge rather than the ability for the students to produce or comprehend an utterance. Being that all Japanese EFL learners have a more grammar oriented rather than communication oriented background, it is reasonable to assume that they may have the knowledge of how a specific utterance should be produced without the communicative ability to produce it on the spot for an oral test. The FDCT was also chosen over the DCT because it is not limiting and does not hint at the appropriate length for a response.

In formulating FDCT situations, attention was paid to make the tasks as realistic as possible for both students studying abroad and students who remained in Japan for their studies. In addition, they were designed to reflect a wide range of social distance between the people in the conversations. Unfortunately, due to the logistics ethnographic

observations as recommended by Bardovi-Harlig (1999b) were impossible to carry out. However, five questions for each category (greetings, requests, and apologies) were generated and tested on a group of 10 Japanese students. After responding to the questionnaire, the students were interviewed regarding how realistic and appropriate the questions were. Slight modifications to the questionnaire were made prior to beginning the study. The questionnaire was also translated into Japanese and the translation was checked to make sure the English and Japanese versions were exactly the same. All respondents were given the Japanese version so that there would be no misunderstandings.

The exact same instrument was administered at the beginning and the end of the students' one-year study abroad or at the beginning and end of the semester for students who were staying in Japan in a pre-/post- testing format.

## Participant Information
### I. Study abroad

All of the 10 study abroad students who participated in this project were Japanese high school students who were 15 to 17 years old. They were also from the same high school in Tokyo, Japan and attended the same private high school in Santa Cruz, California living in dormitories, which they shared with native-speaking students or students, who did not speak Japanese. There were advantages in testing students with the same educational backgrounds and study abroad experiences. Firstly, the amount of English language preparation prior to studying abroad was nearly the same for all of the participants. Secondly, they received equal and like exposure to English during their study abroad experience.

These students began their initial experience in the U.S. studying English in ESL classes and participating in "regular" content courses on a

limited basis for the first four-months. They then enrolled in a regular class load as the native speaker students.

The data for these ten students was collected over a two-year period with six students participating in the 2006-2007 school year and four students participating in the 2007-2008 school year. These students as part of their studies took the TOEFL test. The students averaged an increase of 75 points with most students scoring in the low 500s upon completion of their one-year study abroad. Unfortunately, similar data for the students who stayed in Japan was not available.

## II. Domestic EFL participants

As for the students remaining in Japan, the students consisted of 17- to 18-year-old freshman college students, who were enrolled in required first-year English classes. The classes used for this study consisted of those with students in the highest proficiency group as determined by their entrance exam scores. The control class that received no added instruction on pragmatic usage had 24 students. The other class that received 20 minutes of explicit explanation in class once a week over 14 weeks had 22 students in the class.

Table 1. Participant Backgrounds (Gender and Age)

| Group | Total # | Male | Female | Age (Median) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| USA ESL | 10 | 0 | 10 | 16 |
| Japan Control | 24 | 8 | 16 | 18 |
| Japan EFL | 22 | 5 | 17 | 18 |

Rather than one study, the data collected should be considered two separate, although related, studies. While the data between the students that stayed in Japan cannot be compared directly against the students who studied abroad due to the difference in the length of time being compared, 3.5 months versus a year. Generalization can be drawn about whether instruction was effective in the pragmatic teaching component.

## Points of Analysis

The particular speech acts, which were chosen for this study were greetings, requests and apologies. These particular speech acts were chosen for specific reasons.

### 1. Greetings

The anecdotal evidence of problems with this structure along with high occurrence of this speech act made it of interest. Goffman (1971) defined greeting exchanges as "access rituals" and these serve to reestablish social relationships, acknowledge status differences and provide safe ground between strangers. Laver (1981) defined greetings with three parts: 1) formulaic phrases, 2) address forms and 3) phatic communion or small talk. Thus, since greetings are part of the initial communication between people, they play a significant role in the act of communicating.

### 2. Requests

Requests have received a great amount of attention in the literature making it easy to compare the results from this study with other studies. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe requests as face threatening acts that involve face saving on both the speakers' parts. Thus, it has high relative importance as to how the people are seen. Depending on the status, distance and imposition, requests will consist of some or all of the following elements: 1) Alerters, such as the person's name; 2) presupportive moves or reasons; 3) a head act or the request element itself; 4) Downgraders such as "do you think"; 5) Upgraders and post supportive moves such as "I promise to do something by a specific time." (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (Eds.), 1989)

## 3. Apologies

Goffman (1971) points out that apologies help people to understand how society is maintained through an individual's conduct. Apologizing shows acceptance of one's guilty and also indicates that one will not violate the rules again. Apologies also can be broken down into specific components that may or may not be present depending on the status, social distance and degree of imposition. These include 1) explicit alerters such as "I'm sorry"; 2) responsibility; 3) explanation; 4) offer of repair; and 5) forbearance. (Blum-Kulka. House. and Kasper (Eds.), 1989)

## Results and Discussion

In the questionnaire (Appendix 1), each of the three targeted speech acts had five situations, which were varied as much as possible across status, social distance and degree of imposition in the cases of requests and apologies. Each of the three study groups' responses were judged for appropriateness based on an American English perspective and the results of each group are listed below each question according to the following groupings:

1) Group A – non-study abroad, pre-/post test over one semester with no extra instruction regarding pragmatics. (24 total respondents)
2) Group B – non-study abroad, pre-/post test over one semester with 20 minutes of explicit pragmatic explanation per class. (22 total respondents)
3) Group C – study abroad students in American, pre-/post- tests over one year.

## 1. Greetings

Percentage of improvement (upper) and total (lower) in native-like responses

| Group | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| A | 4.2 62.5 | 4.2 50.0 | 0 100 | 0 91.7 | 0 91.7 |
| B | 22.7 68.2 | 13.6 72.7 | 45.5 86.5 | 0 95.5 | 0 100 |
| C | 40.0 80.0 | 60.0 100 | 20.0 100 | 10.0 90 | 10.0 90 |

** See appendix 1 for the complete questionnaire.

In the initial testing, students that were judged as non-native like in their responses either did not follow the ritualized pattern of using formulaic expressions plus an inquiry into the interlocutor's health. In many cases, the students talked about themselves. This can be seen in the following example from one of the responses:

A: Good Afternoon. I'm very tired. I'm surprise that you study.

B: I'm tired, too. But, I should study after school.

Many responses also seemed to be a direct translation of what Japanese would say in their own language. For example, many of the students used "I'm home", which is a direct translation of "tadaima". However, this phrase would rarely be used by native speakers of English. This difficulty with greetings is supported by the Ebsworth, Bodman, and Carpenter (1996) study comparing NNS and NS realizations of greetings. They found that greeting competence is very much language-specific. Much of the failure in greetings were attributed to not understanding NS assumptions in the greeting situation.

Students also were deemed non-native like when they did not vary their greetings. Students had limited range of greeting strategies and used the phrase, "How are you?" across the board to greet everyone no matter the difference in social distance or status. while, this ritualized greeting is appropriate with greater social distance, it sounds overly formal

and stilted in situations with very little gap in social status or distance. Although the results showed a movement away from standardized formal greetings to more informal, colloquial greetings between close friends, the FDCT format did not elicit the use of title and name in the greeting as the researcher had hoped.

This avoidance of name and title in address could in and of itself be considered a lack of pragmatic appropriateness since the NS norm would be to follow the following formula (Salutation, Name of interlocutor and inquiry into interlocutors health or activities.) However, interlocutor address was not deemed essential to an appropriate greeting and was not factored into improvement or decline in the acceptability of the greeting. The fact that the majority of the students did not use the interlocutor's name in their greeting exchanges may be an example of the communicative strategy of avoidance, or opting out. As Rose (1994) and Rose and Ono (1995) point out the avoidance of certain speech acts are difficult to investigate especially in written form. This observation provides another avenue for research in the future that may be accessible through other testing formats. Understanding avoidance is important because it can help explain differences in NSs and NNSs speech act realizations (Bonikowska, 1988).

## 2. Requests

Percentage of improvement and total ( ) in native-like responses

| Group | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| A | 16.7 33.4 | 16.7 33.4 | 16.7 54.2 | 8.3 66.6 | 13.0 65.2 |
| B | 18.2 63.7 | 13.6 54.5 | 22.7 77.2 | 4.5 90.9 | 36.4 72.8 |
| C | 40.0 100 | 40.0 100 | 30.0 100 | 10.0 100 | 30.0 80.0 |

** See appendix 1 for the complete questionnaire.

The results from the requests indicated that students in all three groups showed about the same limited amount of improvement in informal situations. This may be due to the fact that in more informal situations the students can use the standardized version of a request often taught in the classroom such as "would you…" or "could you…" and maintain native-like communication. However, when the social distance or imposition is increased, students showed more noticeable increases in their appropriateness in the groups that studied abroad and that received instruction in the classroom. Students in these two groups used down graders and post supportive moves more, which helped to increase the level of politeness. The control group did not use these features nearly as often.

The high percentage of students who made native-like responses both at the beginning and end of the study may be explained by the similar response strategies in Japanese L1 and American English L1. In both groups, respondents relied more heavily on "May I…", "Can/Would you …" and "Please lend me". This is shown in Hill et al. (1986) correlations between job categories and the social position people hold in relation to their work. As for the Japanese equivalents, Mizuno's (1996) research in strategy types indicates that 59% of the samples analyzed fell into this same category with realizations as follows: 1) "…. Ano ichido kashite kudasai." 2) "…. Cyotto kashite moraenai ka na." 3) "… ano kashite itadake masenka." More indirect responses are also seen in Japanese with possibility and permission making up 13% of strategy types used in Mizuno's (1996) study.

While having linguistic equivalence in an L1 does not necessarily mean there will be transfer to the L2, there is certainly a greater likelihood of this happening when respondents are unsure of the appropriate L2 response.

## 3. Apologies

Percentage of improvement (upper) and total (lower) in native-like responses

| Group | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 8.3<br>37.5 | 4.2<br>25.0 | 4.2<br>16.7 | 4.2<br>16.7 | 0.0<br>25.0 |
| B | 31.8<br>54.5 | 65.0<br>70.0 | 40.0<br>50.0 | 40.0<br>65.0 | 45.0<br>65.0 |
| C | 30.0<br>80.0 | 40.0<br>80.0 | 40.0<br>90.0 | 30.0<br>100 | 30.0<br>90.0 |

** See appendix 1 for the complete questionnaire.

Although the universal strategies (offer of repair, a promise of forbearance, expression of concern, and intensifiers and mitigators) for realizing speech acts have been found in both Japanese and English (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996), Having equivalent politeness markers in an L1 does not necessarily transfer to the L2 and learners often underused words marking politeness in the L2. From the results, it seems that the difficulty for NNS is how to use intensifiers and mitigators appropriately in English to convey the necessary concern for what might be considered more major offenses.

Again as seen in both greetings and requests, the greater the social distance and power, along with the degree of the imposition cause more problems for the learners. This should be intuitive since these situations require higher levels of politeness. These situations would call for the speaker to employ all of the strategies mentioned above. The simple "I'm sorry" statement that most students rely on can leave the impression that there is little real concern. Intensifying this statement with "so", "very" or "really" is a necessity that many learners miss.

## Conclusion

The results of this study support earlier studies. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) reported Japanese ESL learners were closer to native speaker norms than EFL learners. Similarly, House (1996) also found that students who studied abroad had developed greater pragmatically. However, House also shows that pragmatic development can be improved in the FL (German) setting. Both of these observations were substantiated through this research project.

The finding that ESL learners have an advantage developing pragmatic competency is explained by Bardovi-Harlig and Harford (1993) and Kasper (1996) as due to the amount of input the learners receive. Learners need sufficient input to notice the target features and then gain control. Kasper (1997) points out that classrooms offer only limited context and, therefore, learners do not develop pragmatic control as rapidly as ESL learners.

Since the sample size in this study was quite a bit smaller for the study abroad students with only 10 participants compared with 22 and 24 respectively in the explicit instruction and control groups, the data is not easily compared across groups. However, some general trends can be seen through this data. Firstly, study abroad students do seem to have an advantage at moving toward native speaker norms due to the increased amount of input in the ESL setting. Secondly, explicit instruction regarding the speech acts in this study would suggest that speech acts can be taught effectively in the EFL setting. These findings indicate that through classroom instruction in pragmatics, teachers can also better prepare students for a study abroad experience helping them to achieve greater success abroad.

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# English Usage Questionnaire

Directions: *Please write a dialogue for each situation below. Fill in both your part of the conversation and the part of the person you are talking with. The conversation may be as long or as short as you would like; write enough to accomplish the task requested. Please think carefully about the situation described and your relationship with the other person.*

*Example:*
Situation: *Your friend comes to class with a new jacket that you think looks very nice. You want to complement her on the jacket.*

*You:*
*Friend:*

PART A:
Situation #1: You are returning to your dorm room after a long day of classes. Your roommate has returned to the room before you. As you enter the room, you notice your roommate sitting at his desk. You want to get his attention and greet him. What would you say to your roommate?

*You:*
*Roommate:*

Situation #2: At the beginning of the term, your English instructor begins the class by introducing himself and writing his name, office number and office phone number (Mr. Steven Jones, Office 485, 854-7855) on the board and welcomes the students to the class before beginning the class. Later in the term, you see your instructor on campus and would like to get his attention and greet him. What would you say?

*You:*
*Teacher:*

Situation #3: You are walking across campus on your way back to your room after classes and you meet your best friend. Your friend greets you first and you respond.

*Friend:*
*You:*

Situation #4: Your roommate's parents are visiting the MBA campus. You have never met them before. Your roommate brings them by your room to introduce them to you.

*Roommate:* Hi（You）. I would like you to meet my parents, Bill and Mary Smith.
*You:*
*Parents:*

Situation #5: You have gone home with a friend to their home for the holiday. You wake up early and go out to the kitchen. Your friend's grandmother is the only one there. Greet her.

*You:*
*Grandmother:*

PART B:

Situation #1: The students in the room next to yours usually stay up late at night watching TV and talking loudly, which keeps you awake. You have finally decided to ask them to be quieter at night. You go next door and make this request of them.

*You:*（Knock on the neighboring door）
*Neighbor:* Oh ！ Hi, James.
*You:*
*Neighbor:*

Situation #2: You have missed a few days of class because you were sick and are having problems with the homework. You go to your teacher's office after class and ask for help.

*Teacher:* Hello,（You）. Come in. What can I do for you?
*You:*
*Teacher:*

Situation #3: You have a project for your health class to ask ten people about their eating habits. You decide to ask your mother to answer the questions for you. How would you make this request of your mother?

*You:*
*Mother:*

Situation #4: You missed a class because you were sick. You want to borrow your friend's notes, so you know what happened in class and can do the homework.

*You:*
*Friend:*

Situation #5: You need to ask your dorm dean to give you a ride to the doctor because you aren't feeling well. Although the dean is busy, you really need to visit the doctor now.

*You:*
*Dean:*

PART C

Situation #1: You have made arrangements to go to Jane's house at 6:00, but you are running late because your teacher asked you to speak to you after class. It is now 6:30.

*You:* Hi Jane.
*Jane:* Hi. I've been waiting for over a half an hour for you. You were supposed to be here at 6:00.
*You:*

Situation #2: You stop by your teacher's office to ask about an assignment. While you are there, you knock over a pile of books on his desk by accident.

*You:*
*Teacher:*

Situation #3: You have borrowed a book from Tim and promised to return it today. Tim needs the book back, but you have forgotten it at home.

*Tim:* Hey, (You). Do you have the book I gave you last week?
*You:*

Situation #4: While visiting your friend's home for the holiday, you knock over and break an expensive-looking vase in the room you are staying in. You take the broken pieces to your friend's mother and apologize.

*You:*
*Mrs. Smith:*


Situation #5: You are waiting in line at a store. You turn quickly to get something from a shelf and accidentally step on someone's foot. By looking at the person's face, you can see that you have hurt them slightly.

*You:*
*Customer:*