Using the functional and lexical levels of requests to measure pragmatic competence – the case of German school students in Canada

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In the context of the long-term research project Pragmatic Profiling (PRA.PRO), we have pointed out the mismatch between the important role of pragmatic competence in language education frameworks on the one hand and the lack of consensus on how it can be delineated and assessed on the other (cf. Sickinger & Schneider 2014). This discrepancy is of immediate concern to the investigation of L2 learners' pragmatic development, not only in the traditional language classroom setting, but especially in the context of a study abroad experience: Being immersed in a target language environment generally facilitates an adoption of observed behavioural patterns (for a review, see Schauer 2010), potentially shifting learners' pragmatic abilities in their interlanguage (Selinker 1972) towards a more native-like state.

To explore shifts in L2 pragmatic competence over a stay abroad and to move forward the debate about how to convincingly measure pragmatic competence, we present two ways of analysing requests: One of them is a functional analysis of speech act realisation and modification strategies based on the CCSARP coding, which is commonly used for speech act analysis and requests in particular (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). The other is an analysis of the lexical material used in each utterance, with individual DCT responses transformed into lemma lists and compared for overlap with native speaker requests. These two methods of analysis capture the functional and lexical overlap respectively between learner and native speaker speech act performance, and make it possible to measure whether this overlap increases in the course of the study abroad experience. Our results are based on speech act data from German school students visiting a school in Canada for 5 to 10 months, elicited before, during and after their stay, using the DCT-based Questionnaire on English Usage (QEU, see Schneider & Barron 2008, Schneider 2005). Comparisons are made across learners' developmental stages and between learners and corresponding data from Canadian native speakers.

With our methodological investigation at the functional and lexical level of requests, we aim at providing a more holistic view of the evaluation of L2 speech act performance. As such, the study is valuable to the context of language teaching and controlled, standardised language testing and contributes to making the abstract notion of pragmatic competence more measurable.

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