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**The Interplay of L2 Pragmatics and Learner Identity as a Social, Complex Process: A Poststructuralist Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*In the poststructuralist view, just as language learners' sense of self-identity impacts their language learning choices, the learners' variable investment in social-cultural-political processes and discourse practices can dynamically influence their identity (re)constructions across time and space. This interpretive case study examined how 2 Iranian EFL learners' identity (re)positioning in a university context might influence their foreign/second language (L2) pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic requestive choices. The employed mixed-method data-collection procedure comprised an identity questionnaire, classroom observations, role plays, stimulated recalls, and diaries. Results indicated that the male learner with an L2-oriented identity was still under the influence of his L1 identity projections in his pragmatic choices. Although his pragmalinguistic choices in the third scenario grew increasingly L2-like, L1 appropriacy preferences still persisted in his pragmatic production. Surprisingly, however, the initially L1-identity female learner progressively demonstrated more openness towards renegotiating a newer L2-inclined social identity and employing more L2-like sociopragmatic norms. Further theoretical or pedagogical implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Identity Projections, Pragmatic Choices, Pragmalinguistic/Sociopragmatic Norms, Poststructuralist View, Complex Processes*

In recent years, the inquiry into the development (or acquisition) of L2 pragmatics, or interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), has increasingly informed the larger field of second language acquisition (SLA), mainly through the study of the processes involved in the comprehension and production of L2 communicative actions by ESL/EFL (i.e., English as a second/ foreign language) learners (Taguchi, 2019). ILP studies have thus far striven to explore the mechanisms that drive pragmatic development and the individual characteristics or contextual influences that can explain variations in developmental trajectories or might affect success in L2 pragmatics learning. Specifically, in the context of diversity-oriented but globalized world, L2 learners' pragmatic choices of appropriacy or (in)directness in performing different communicative acts in various interactional contexts are inextricably linked to their agency to enact identity, self-concept, or group membership. Accordingly, when learners engage with languages, they embark on conveying or interpreting social identities (Palmieri, 2019). The interplay between identity and pragmatics does not occur in a vacuum but discursively and dynamically evolves over time in socioculturally situated contexts of language use.

With the social turn as well as the recent surge in the dynamic systems approaches in SLA and applied linguistics, the concept of identity or self-formation has similarly undergone a major transformation. The notion is now conceptualized, not as a fixed property of an individual, but rather as variable subjectivity or intentionality within and across individuals in different contexts at different times and, thus, a site of conflict, struggle, and change (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Miller et al., 2017). This poststructuralist view of identity (e.g., Norton & McKinney, 2011) largely contributed to the field of SLA integrating the individual language learner and the wider social world, stressing the flexibility or 'agency' of the learner in portraying and jointly negotiating their identity, and characterizing "the role of language and discourse practices in the construction of identity" (Mitchell et al., 2013, p. 276). As to pragmatics, L2 learners are not deemed as merely representing passive, recipient identities, but intentionally choosing how much of the pragmatic norms, interactively negotiating social identities, and discursively reshaping their identities in a complex, dynamic way. Little research has yet been done into the nexus of L2 pragmatics and identity from this poststructuralist perspective, indicating how L2 learners' pragmatic choices and perceptions of sociocultural norms and contextual variables might vary in accord with their identity (re)constructions and agency enactments (Ishihara, 2019; Norton, 2013).

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Pragmatics: A Cognitive, Social, and Complex Process**

Pragmatics (or pragmatic competence) refers to the knowledge of appropriate use of language to achieve an intended communicative act in a specific context. Pragmatic competence encompasses pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983; Rose, 1999). The former refers to the ability to make use of linguistic resources that include "strategies like directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts" (Kasper, 1997, p. 1). The latter component, on the other hand, refers to the social-cultural norms that underlie the contextual use of such resources in terms of "what is appropriate pragmatically in a given speech community" (Cohen, 2018, p. 40). Simply put, they refer to how to do things in an appropriate way with words (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

The field of L2 pragmatics branches into various subfields: cross-cultural, intercultural, interlanguage, and instructional pragmatics. Cross-cultural (or transcultural) pragmatics probes language-specific patterns of communicative acts performed by speakers of different languages with different cultural backgrounds (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). A large number of researchers

have studied cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Al Ali, 2018; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995; Shabani & Zeinali, 2015; Stadler 2013; Thomas, 1983; Wierzbicka, 2003;), among which Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSSARP) is one of the most influential attempts in which the speech acts of apologies and requests as performed by people from eight languages or varieties were investigated.

Unlike the concern with different languages in cross-cultural pragmatics, intercultural pragmatics investigates how people with different cultural backgrounds come to communicate through a common language (Kecskes, 2014), for instance, the interaction which occurs between Japanese and Spanish interlocutors through English. Communication breakdowns and challenges that may occur as a result of intercultural encounters have inspired L2 researchers to carefully and enthusiastically investigate different intercultural pragmatic notions (e.g., Shardakova, 2005; Johns & Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; McConachy, 2019). This line of inquiry has surely helped further practitioners' understanding of pragmatics-in-interaction, that is, how interlocutors' L1 conventions are jointly "negotiated and re-defined as they seek common ground during interaction" (Taguchi, 2019, p. 3), ultimately creating a "third culture that combines elements of each of the speakers' L1 cultures in novel ways" (Kecskes, 2014, p. 13).

As noted earlier, the burgeoning research in ILP (or L2 pragmatics) has dramatically captured SLA practitioners' attention in recent years (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). The term interlanguage, first coined by Selinker (1972), refers to the developing system of a learner's target language. Pragmatics, originally introduced by Charles Morris (1938) within the field of semiotics, refers to the study of signs, characterized as elements of communication, and how they relate to their interpreters. Soon, along with the rise of the social trend, the term was used to refer to the way an utterance is used by a speaker to perform his or her social action and the way it is interpreted by the hearer (LoCastro, 2012). As such, ILP inspects how the ability of L2 learners to comprehend and perform pragmatic functions in a target language develops over time, or in Bardovi-Harlig's (2010) sense, the acquisition of coordinated rules for language structure and use.

Research approaches of interest in ILP can be inspected from cognitive, social, and complex perspectives. Needless to say, ILP development is a higher-order cognitive process that involves intrapersonal mentality. As Kasper (2006) highlights, in cognitive approaches, pragmatics is treated as fixed and predominant linguistic formulas used in communicative acts and remains, by and large, immune from interactional effects. Amongst the cognitive theories employed in L2 pragmatics research, Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis and Bialystok's (1993) two-dimensional model of L2 proficiency development stand out. In contrast, social approaches, such as sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Compernelle, 2014; Vygotsky, 1986) and language socialization (Ochs, 1996), view L2 pragmatics learning as susceptible to the learner's active participation in social interactions in different cultural-institutional contexts. In this sense, exploring the dynamics of originally cognitive notions, such as identity, agency, and investment, and their interplay with sociopragmatic or pragmlinguistic variability cannot be separated from the sociocultural-political-institutional arena in which they take place.

Interestingly, this view that pragmatic learning and development is a situated process (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2008; Block, 2007; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Timpe-Laughlin, 2013) has recently been given a new spirit by the surge of complex, dynamic theories in SLA research. In this theoretical framework, pragmatics learning can be construed as a complex and dynamic system at the interface of language, cognition, and social-cultural context impacted by a medley of

variables related to attributes of the target language, the language learner, and the interactional or learning situation. Dynamic systems theory (DST) (Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 2008), chaos or complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and the emergentist approach (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Timpe-Laughlin, 2016) are the most significant approaches in this paradigm. From a DST outlook, pragmatics learning dynamicity can be portrayed as a function of moment-to-moment trajectory of the complex system, where small differences in the initial intentionality or investment conditions of different learners in the sample can lead to surprisingly diverse ILP developmental trajectories across them. Moreover, the envisaged ILP development is fluid, transient, and non-linear, that is, disproportionate to its causal elements (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and ecologically self-organizes into some emergent, coherent patterns of behavior, schemas, or skills out of the complex interactions of multiple heterogeneous components of the system (Dörnyei, 2009).

### **Learner's Social Identity: A Poststructuralist Perspective**

A poststructuralist conception of language is largely associated with the work of scholars like Michel Bakhtin (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Stuart Hall (1997), and Christine Weedon (1997), who argued that language is a situated phenomenon in the globalized multilingual world used not only to exchange information but also to negotiate a sense of self or identity. Therefore, social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics significantly impact linguistic and identity choices (Palmieri, 2019). In other words, language is viewed as not only a linguistic system but also a social practice in which diverse meanings and multiple identities are negotiated. Hence, dynamicity, multiplicity, and negotiability of identity are greatly emphasized in this approach (Bektas, 2015; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), contrary to the unitary and stable notion held for long by the traditional view, essentialism. Identity was traditionally conceptualized as a static and monolithic entity already established in any particular interaction (Ho, 2010). In poststructuralism, however, it is not beforehand anticipated, and, as Norton (2000, 2010, 2013, 2016) asserted, it is a multiple and dynamic entity changing over time while socially constructed as a site of struggle and change.

Drawing on poststructuralism, researchers have introduced some new notions into the field of SLA, inextricably linked to learner identity as a dynamic process. One of these is investment (Norton, 2000) that accounts for learners' desires or aspirations to devote themselves to learning and practicing a target language with the expectation of acquiring new symbolic, material, and cultural capital returns (Palmieri, 2019). The economic metaphor of investment, in essence, captures how L2 learners feel committed to learning languages and engage in imagined identity (re)constructions as resources to obtain access to and participate in particular imagined communities or social groups (Palmieri, 2019). The process is, therefore, dynamic and a function of moment-to-moment trajectories of a complex system that constantly evolves over time. Among the studies that have probed L2 learners' investment and identity construction, Zhou's (2020) case study portrays trajectories of a Chinese EFL learner's negotiation of identity and investment in L2 oral communicative tasks in the L2 classroom. The learner initially invested greatly in participation in class oral tasks as a symbolic mechanism to achieve her imagined student identity highly regarded by her teacher and peers. Soon, she realized a conflict between her desired identity and her learner identity practically perceived by the teacher, resulting in a change in her identity construction with little investment in the oral tasks afterwards.

Another notion is agency, which is inherently linked to identity construction. Duff (2012) defines agency as "people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals" (p. 417). As a dynamic entity, an individual's agency is essential to the

selection, negotiation, and enactment of his or her identity. For instance, a learner might encounter with certain constraints, positionings, or mediations of the social world, such as interlocutors' unequal power relations or institutional constraints. Enacting social identities, then, requires the learner, as an active agent, to make deliberate choices to resist the constraints and discursively negotiate social identities or agentive capacities (Ishihara, 2019; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). In this sense, agency, while being shaped by the structure itself, has the potential to impact the sociocultural structure, leading to the transformation of the structure and its practices in a shared, dynamic, and interactive context (Ishihara, 2019). In practice, language learners' agency allows them to make use of (non)linguistic tools available so that they can wittingly choose and position themselves in the roles they like, not to be positioned by others in the roles they do not in a communicative event. This way, they are able to construct and enact the identities to which they feel attached and belonged (Norton Peirce, 1995). Tian and Dumlao (2020), for instance, reported that Thai EFL learners constructed multiple identities during classroom interactions and sometimes showed resistance in responding to their teacher and peers through verbal or nonverbal signals as a means of mutual empowerment.

### **Nexus of L2 Pragmatics and Learner Identity**

In light of the social turn in SLA, the recognition of the dynamic interplay between aspects of language use and learner identity (re)construction has recently engendered illuminating insights pointing to the multi-directionality and emergent nature of the process that is impacted by social-cultural-political-institutional dynamics, especially emphasizing how these dynamics lead to linguistic choices and identity projections (e.g., Fuentes, 2016; Norton, 2010, 2013; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Tulgar, 2019). Given this complex, constitutive nexus, an increasing number of scholars have recently argued that learners' variably preferred social identities might well have ecological, transient, and moment-to-moment influences on their understanding and use of L2 pragmatics (e.g., Al Rubai'ey, 2016; Gomez-Leich, 2016; Ishihara, 2019; Ishihara & Tarone, 2009; Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020). Accordingly, L2 learners may display either convergence into the use of target-like norms or resistance and divergence from use of them. In both cases, L2 learners' self-images, membership tendencies, and identity projections can play substantial roles in their sociopragmatic or pragmlinguistic choices and, in turn, variable pragmatic performance (Al Rubai'ey, 2016).

One typical theoretical framework which can be employed with this line of inquiry probing pragmatic variability at the intersection of ILP and learner identity is speech accommodation theory that seeks to address how people come to converge on their language, communication, and social practices in intergroup contexts (Beebe 1988; Beebe & Giles, 1984; Beebe & Zungler, 1983; Faerch & Kasper 1987; Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991; Zuengler, 1982). This theoretical account is much recently referred to as communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2016). It is believed that, just below the apparent surface of communication accommodation, interlocutors draw on a host of less straightforward requirements, expectations, preferences, resources, and mechanisms to manage social encounters in cross-linguistic situations (Gasiorek, 2016). One of the applications of the theory can be how L2 users and learners accommodate their pragmatic behaviors to cross-cultural communicative acts as well as individual and social identity forces that might come into play. Therefore, implicit in this framework is the notion that L2 pragmatic performance is both proactive and reactive, integrating elements of personal self-concept, intentionality, agency, and social-cultural-institutional identities, both anticipated and context-arisen, in working out just how much to invest.

Typically, pragmatic transfer seems to probably emanate from L2 learners' conscious choices to show pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic (dis)identification with target norms in order to seek their approval, if convergent, or maintain native identity but simply obtain new material resources, in the case of divergence. From an intergroup perspective, the learner might aspire membership with an attractive community, the in-group, or intend to dissociate with the undesirable out-group. For example, in a study by Eslami et al. (2014), a Korean English learner, supposed to be a computer lab assistant, used indirect pragmalinguistic choices as a request strategy to ask a computer user to share the system with others. In retrospect, she attributed her indirect strategy preference (e.g., Why don't you ...) to her tendency to enact Korean politeness, although she was aware that English speakers expect a direct one in this situation (e.g., You must yield your computer to other students). Therefore, Korean membership still functions as the in-group for the learner. In a similar vein, Al-Issa (2003) reported that Jordanian L2 learners' refusals diverged from American English conventions due to their prevailing negative perceptions against imitation of a different culture. Finally, Ishihara and Tarone (2009) examined the nexus of seven Japanese learners' subjectivity and their conscious pragmatic choices while requesting, refusing, and responding to compliments as well as use of Keigo honorifics on a US campus. It was revealed that learners on occasion deliberately resisted L2 pragmatic norms based on their L1 subjectivity and agency to identify with certain cultural values.

## Research Questions

Considering the complex nexus of learners' identity projections and their pragmatic choices, this interpretive case study aimed to examine how Iranian EFL learners might come under converging or diverging influences of L1 and L2 identity (re)construction forces when they are using English for particular communicative acts, such as making requests. Hence, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. How might Iranian EFL freshman students' requests vary along with their identity-(re)construction trajectories during an academic term?
2. What perceptions or attitudes do they associate with their varying pragmatic choices when it comes to L1 or L2 identity projections?

## Method

### Setting and Participants

This interpretive case study was carried out with two 18-year-old students (one male and one female) in an EFL Listening-Speaking class (Lab 1) populated with 15 freshmen in a language laboratory of an Iranian university. The students had just passed the National University Entrance Test especially designed for EFL candidates and entered the university in the fall that year to major in English Translation. As expected, their first language was Persian and, before matriculating into university, they had studied English for about six years in their schooling in Iran with a focus on L2 scripted dialogues, vocabulary, reading, and grammar. However, because the entrance exam for the EFL requires more developed L2 lexico-grammatical skills than those normally nourished by the mainstream EFL programs at junior and senior high schools in Iran, students who plan to successfully go through this test and graduate in one of English majors (i.e., Translation, Teaching, and Literature) at university already attend private language institutes which by and large adopt a

more communicative language teaching approach. The students ranged in age from 18 to early 20 and came from various academic disciplines from central and southern provinces in Iran. None of them had already traveled to English-speaking countries. Based on two weeks of observations as well as the results of the identity questionnaire administered to the whole class, the two students, with pseudonyms of Parsa (male) and Negin (female), with initial L2- and L1-oriented identities, respectively, were selected as the participants to be focused on. The two selected students' consent to be part of the intended study was obtained.

The EFL program at the university offered two levels of English Listening-Speaking classes (Lab 1 and Lab 2) for the first and second semesters as well as one complementary 'Subject-based Conversation' course at the third semester. The Lab 1 course was held two sessions a week, for about 16 weeks during an academic term, and the instructor was the first researcher. Each week, the first session was mainly devoted to the provision of aural or audiovisual input. In the second weekly session, free discussions were conducted on the same topic, with one of the students moderating the discussion each week. Furthermore, every other week, the students were divided into groups and given five minutes to preplan and perform role-plays with the topic in mind. Then, they evaluated and rated each role-play using a general 10-point scale.

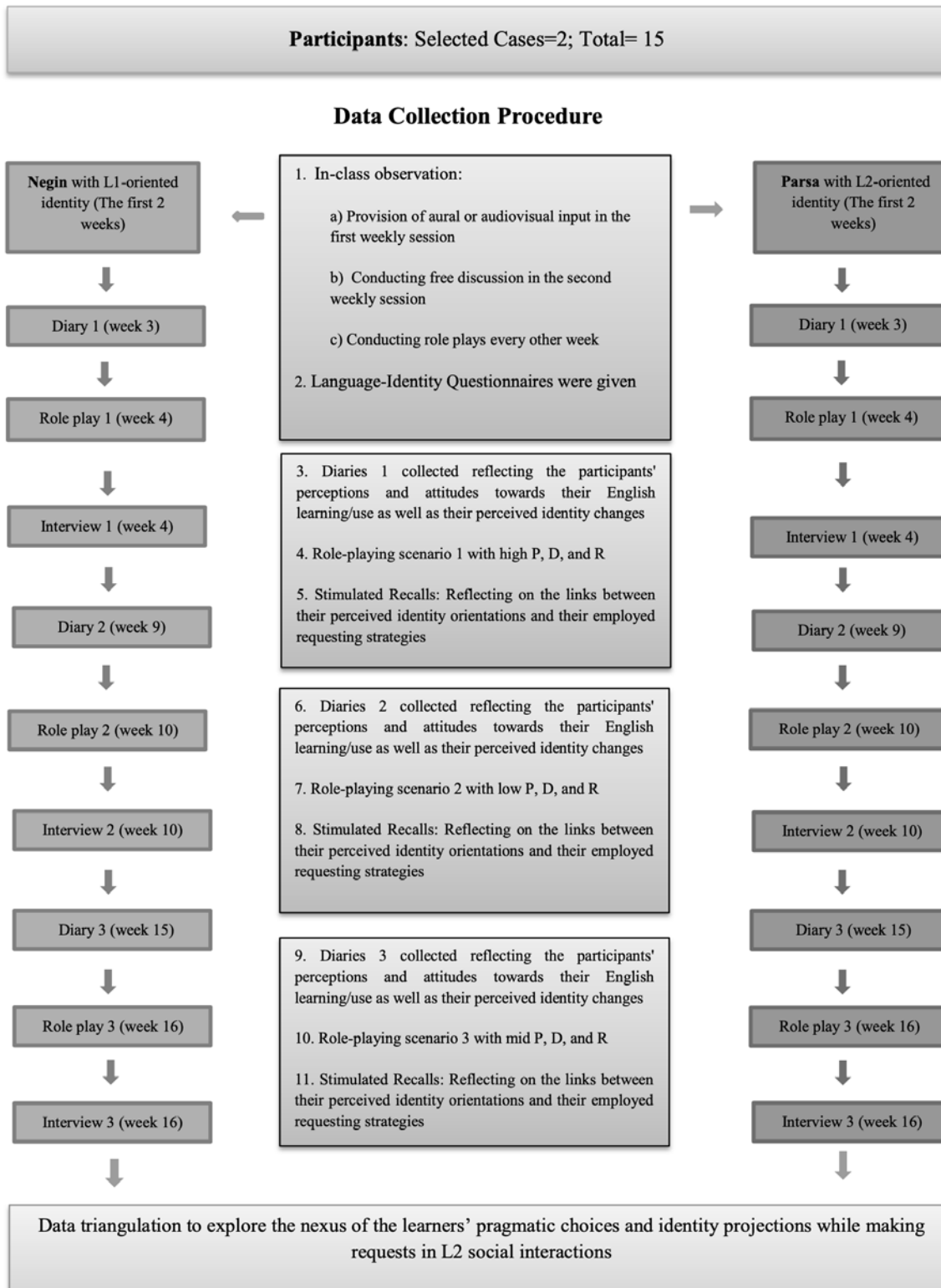
Both researchers were present in the class, one as the instructor and free discussion co-participant and the other as the observer. The observer constructed a friendly relationship with the students and sometimes joined the talks in an attempt to minimize the effects of his presence. They were told by the instructor that the observer's presence is simply due to a research project, and anonymity was promised to be considered in any subsequent report in the future.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

In the present study, five complementary methods, as described below, were employed for collecting the data, namely, a language identity questionnaire, classroom observations, role plays, stimulated-recall interviews, and learners' diaries. Figure 1 also illustrates different phases of the data collection process undertaken in this study.

**Language-identity inventory.** First, a language-learner-identity inventory, which was originally designed and validated for a conceptually related but larger study by the authors, was given to the whole class to estimate their current L1 or L2 identity directions while interacting with people through English. The questionnaire made use of a five-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, encompassing the theoretical assumptions underpinning identity aspects of the language learning process of investment (Norton, 2000), imagined identity (Anderson, 2006), intercultural identity (Kim, 1992, 1996, 2015), and Wenger's (1998) five aspects of identity understanding of an individual, which are negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of multi-membership, and relation between the local and the global. Following that, based on the results of the questionnaire, the observations (below), and the instructor's general evaluation of the class, a male (Parsa, with an L2-oriented identity) and a female (Negin, with an L1-oriented identity) students were chosen as the participants.

**In-class observations.** Regular in-class observations were held throughout the fall semester by the second researcher to come to know the students, build a basic rapport with them for the subsequent work, become familiar with the class activities employed by the instructor, and, most importantly, develop subjective evaluations of the students' initial identity orientations as well as their developmental changes in their performances or attitudes just along the way.



**Figure 1. Data Collection Procedure of the Study**



**Role-playing pragmatic scenarios.** To explore the interplay between the learners' identity projections and L2 pragmatic choices in terms of their use of request speech act strategies, three role-playing scenarios were constructed after reviewing the literature (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Marquez Reiter, 2000) and careful consideration of differential mixture of the contextual variables of social distance, power, and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Both selected L2 learners then were coordinated to participate in video-recorded simulated conversations with proficient partners role-playing dialogic parts of the scenario. It is important to add that the learners' identity trajectories and, in turn, their influences on their use of request strategies were tracked across three hypothesized junctures: beginning of the term, middle of the term, and end of the term. To analyze the data, their performances were video-recorded. The characteristics of the scenarios are presented below.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Scenarios across Three Junctures.**

1<sup>st</sup> juncture, beginning of the term: High D (Distance), P (Power), R (Imposition)  
 Scenario: a student asks his/her professor for a ride

2<sup>nd</sup> juncture, middle of the term: Low D, P, R  
 Scenario: a friend asks his/her friend to cover for him/her at work

3<sup>rd</sup> juncture, end of the term: Mid D, P, R  
 Scenario: a student asks his/her classmate for borrowing his/her notes

**Stimulated recall interviews.** After performing the role-play scenarios at each juncture, the learners immediately participated in stimulated recall interviews. They were asked to reflect and express their reasons behind the request strategies they used in the scenarios as well as possible influences of their L1 or L2 identity orientations on their pragmatic choices. Furthermore, they were inquired about their knowledge of the possible choices or structures that Persian and English speakers most probably use in their own language with the same scenario. It should be noted that their responses were audio-recorded for analysis.

**Diaries.** To further triangulate the data, the learners were also asked to hand in three diaries kept at their leisure on their feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of their own English learning and use experiences in accord with their identity transformation across the three junctures. The participants were allowed to use their L1, Persian, where they thought it was needed both for the interviews or the diaries.

## Results

First, the two language learners' role-played pragmatic choices at three points in time are presented (Table 2) and described using Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) coding scheme. Then, to analyze their choices in relation to their identity projections, Parsa's and Negin's L2 identity accounts as portrayed in their diaries as well as stimulated recalls are discussed. Finally, for each L2 learner, the (hypothesized) nexus between his or her pragmatic choices and trajectories of his or her social identity constructions is interpretively examined based on their pragmatic performance in the role-played scenarios, their diaries, and their stimulated recalls.

## Research Question One: Pragmatic Choices

The first research question sought to examine Iranian EFL students' pragmatic variability in making requests at three hypothesized identity-based junctures during their first academic term at university. As shown in Table 2 below, with regard to requestive head-act strategies, both learners preferred to use (non-)conventionally indirect strategies at all the three junctures regardless of L2 appropriacy conventions, which normally allow for direct pragmalinguistic structures in contexts with lower-value sociopragmatic variables. This was taken to demonstrate the learner's sociopragmatic tendency for an adherence to L1-like social-cultural conventions. In other contexts where using indirect head acts was in congruence with L2 norms, at some points, non-conventional or even erroneous pragmalinguistic choices were made.

**Table 2. Parsa's Role-Played Requestive Choices across the Three Junctures.**

Parsa (P)

*1<sup>st</sup> juncture (high P, D, R): Parsa asks his professor (R, Requestee) for a ride*

P: Hi Professor

R: Hi

P: Sorry to bother you ... My bus has just left, and you know that the next bus will be here like in an hour ... and you are living in the same neighborhood as me ... So, **I was just wondering if you can give me a ride.**

R: Ok, I will give you a ride; that's no problem.

P: Thank you so much.

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*2<sup>nd</sup> juncture (low P, D, R): Parsa asks his friend (R) to fill in for him at work*

P: Hi

R: Hi

P: How are you?

R: How are you?

P: What are you doing?

R: I need to do some stuff here.

P: OK, actually, I came to you to do me a favor. I have something to do downtown and it's really important so I can't stay for another two hours ... **Would you mind fill in for me?** (sic)

R: Yes, of course, but does it take too much time?

P: No, about one or two hours, not much.

R: I guess it's okay with me ... that's why friends are for ... I will do it for you, but after these two hours I have to be in my own job, and I have to do something... **Would you arrive on time?**

P: Yeah, sure, Thank you ... Goodbye now.

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*3<sup>rd</sup> juncture (mid P, D, R): Parsa asks his classmate (R) to edit his article*

P: Hello

R: Hello, how are you?

P: How are you?

P: I've been writing an article for Professor x ... OK ... and you know ... she is really not easy one ...

**Would you mind edit it for me?** (sic) Because I've heard that you are good at it

R: OK, that is not any problem with me but I think you should get help of other students besides me and I'm totally ok with that.

P: Sure I would appreciate that

For instance, Parsa, at the first juncture, had to make a request to a very higher status person for a ride (high R). Parsa used four types of pre-supportive external modifiers of alert *Hi Professor*, apology *Sorry to bother you*, grounder *My bus has just left and you know that the next bus will be here like in an hour*, and disarm, *You are living in the same neighborhood as me*. Then, he produced

a non-conventionally indirect strategy *I was just wondering if you can give me a ride?* through which Parsa used a hearer-oriented perspective as well as four types of internal modifiers to convey a better sense of appropriacy, including interrogative, consultative device *I was just wondering*, embedded *if ... If you ...*, and the softening adverbial *just*. Parsa also used post-supportive external modifier of appreciation *Thank you so much*. At the second juncture, Parsa, addressing a close friend, still used similar pre-supportive external modifiers of alert, small talk *How are you*, pre-commitment *do me a favor*, and grounder *I have something to do downtown*, which can implicitly foreground a request in Iranian L1 contexts (e.g., Allami & Boustani, 2017). Then, he produced a conventionally indirect strategy *Would you mind fill in for me?*, grammatically faulty though, and took a hearer-oriented perspective. At the third juncture, Parsa, requesting a classmate (mid P/D), similarly, used external modifiers plus a conventionally indirect strategy *Would you mind edit it for me?* (still faulty), encompassing the interrogative and consultative device of *Would you mind*. After making all three requests, Parsa expressed words of appreciation.

On the other hand, Negin, as displayed in Table 3, used three pre-supportive external modifiers at the first juncture, an alert *Hello*, a reason (or grounder) for her request *Actually I missed the bus*, and the pre-commitment phrase *I had a request*. She then used a non-conventionally indirect pragmalinguistic structure *Can you give me a ride to my house?* for the request head act. In terms of appropriacy, besides preparing the ground, she employed a hearer-oriented perspective but with an informal, internal interrogative/consultative modifier *Can you*. At the second and third junctures, Negin used pre-external modifiers, exchanged greetings and small talks such as *Hello*, *How are you*, provided grounders, and finally opted for the non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies of *Can I use your help to cover for me for some hours?* and *Would you please edit it for me?*, for the two scenarios, respectively. In the second, she took a speaker-oriented, (still) informal pragmalinguistic structure *Can I* with the internal interrogative/consultative device and a diminutive *for some hours*. However, for the third, she preferred a hearer-oriented perspective with an internal interrogative/consultative device *Would you* and the politeness marker *Please*. Again, words of appreciation followed.

To round off this section, it was revealed that both freshman students relied largely on employing external modifiers for making their requests in almost all the contexts. This tendency might indicate that they maintained their L1-based appropriacy orientations and subjectivity despite revealing positive outlooks and identity flexibility potentials, especially in Parsa's case. Support for this ingrained Persian disposition can be found in the relevant research reporting that Iranian people tend to use a great number of external modifiers (Eslamirasekh, 1993). A provisional implication at this point might be that mere reliance upon a learner's self-identity reconstruction or investment does not do the trick in terms of L2 pragmatics, and other mediational or instructional affordances seem necessary. Interestingly, however, Negin, presumptively an L1-identity-oriented language learner, used less (just two) external modifiers as well as a conventionally indirect head act at the third juncture, apparently converging increasingly with L2 cultural conventions, despite her initial adherence to L1 sociopragmatic norms. Further links of the learners' L2 pragmatic use to identity or agency dynamics will be pursued below by exploring their diaries or stimulated recalls.

**Table 3. Negin's Role-Played Requestive Choices across the Three Junctures.**

*1<sup>st</sup> juncture (high P,D,R): Negin (N) asks her professor (R) for a ride*

N: Hello Professor

R: Hello

N: Actually, I missed the bus, and I had a request ... **Can you give me a ride to my house?**

R: Yeah, no problem, I will give you a ride

N: Thanks a million.

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*2<sup>nd</sup> juncture: (low P,D,R): Negin asks her friend (R) to fill in for her at work*

N: Hi

R: Hi

N: How are you?

R: Fine, how are you?

N: Fine, something emergency happened right now. **Can I use your help to cover for me for some hours?**

R: Yes, no problem but when will you come back?

N: I'll come back soon ... Maybe two or three hours.

R: OK, I'll stay for you

N: Thank you

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*3<sup>rd</sup> juncture: (mid P,D, R), Negin asks her classmate (R) to edit her article*

N: Hello

R: Hello how are you?

N: Fine, thanks, how are you?

R: Fine

N: Mr. x?

R: Yes

N: The professor wants me to deliver my article and I have completed it ... **Would you please edit it for me?**

R: There is no problem I can edit it, but when do you need it?

N: Actually, as soon as possible.

R: OK, there is no problem.

R: Thank you.

R: You're welcome.

### **Research Question Two: Identity Projections through Pragmatic Use**

The second research question aimed at exploring Iranian EFL students' retrospective perceptions or attitudes as to the probable links between their observed pragmatic choices in each scenario and their perceived L1 or L2 identity assertions.

**Parsa (male, 18) with an initially L2-oriented identity.** Table 4 below summarizes the characteristics of Parsa's L2 pragmatic performance of the three role-plays as described above and analyzed based on his retrospective interviews or diaries below. As seen, despite his perceived orientation towards and investment in learning English, he practically opted for L1 appropriacy norms in his simulated L2 social encounters across the three scenarios.

**Table 4. Parsa’s Pragmatics-Identity Nexus across the Three Junctures.**

EFL Learner	Scenario P-D-R	Pragmatic Choices			Identity Projections	
		L2 Div/Con.	Pragma.	Socio.	Identity Orientation	Investment
Parsa	1 High	Div.	+N-C Indirect	L1	L1	L2
	2 Low	Div.	-C Indirect	L1	L1	L2
	3 High	Div.	-C Indirect	L1	L1	L2

**Notes:** P (Power), D (Distance), R (Imposition); Div/Con.. L2 Divergence or convergence; Pragma., Pragmalinguistics; Socio. Sociopragmatics; ± Pragmalinguistically in/accurate; N-C, Non-Conventional

At the first juncture, in his diary, Parsa referred to his perceived talent and investment in English even before being admitted to university. He noted:

*For many years I have been involved in studying English independently because I could find out that I had talent in English and also loved it so much. For this reason, when I was supposed to choose my university major, I chose the major of English Translation with no doubt.*

At this point, he seemed to have largely relied upon L1 normative conventions transferred to his L2 performance using pre-supportive external modifiers of alert, salute and occupational title *Hi Professor*, plus apology *Sorry to bother you* to express his concern for sociopragmatic appropriacy. Interestingly, similar discourse opening strategies were evidenced in other Asian countries (e.g., Kim, 2014). This way, the learner tends to tacitly enact L1 identity showing his awareness of the implicated and imposed infringement. For the request head act, he then used a non-conventionally indirect strategy *I was just wondering if you can give me a ride*. As seen, he used two internal modifiers, an implicit interrogative, consultative device *I was wondering* as an L2 pragmalinguistic strategy as well as the embedded *if* clause *if you can give me a ride ...*. In the interviews, he reflected this way:

*I used Hi Professor (or Salam Ostad) because this expression is common among Iranian students when they are required to call their professors whether in Persian or in English. The English students I have seen in movies would use different structures such as Hello Master. Well, the reason for the use of apology was showing respect as the requestee was my professor.*

In terms of the use of non-conventionally indirect strategy, he added:

*Because it is considered impolite in our culture (Iranian culture) for a student to request a professor to do something with high imposition for you, I used a polite structure to seem more polite and reduce the embarrassment. I think English speakers would use more direct strategies as they tend to express their message with no ritual compliments (or T’arof in Persian). (power and imposition)*

As for the use of consultative device and embedded *if* clause, he commented that:

I was wondering *is a strategy commonly used by English speakers while Iranian speakers would use Can I ... (mitunam) structure. Also I used if clause because this is a prestigious structure that I have seen to be used by English speakers in such delicate situations.*

Parsa revealed his desire to further enact a type of L2-oriented identity at the second juncture as he encountered proficient classmates. He reported in his diary that:

*As soon as I entered the university, I was amazed by seeing high-level students. This made me try hard in order to compete with them and to improve my skills. For example, one of the things I did more than before was increasing my participation in classroom activities.*

At this second juncture, he used the external pre-expansion modifier of grounder *I have something to do downtown and it's really important so I can't stay for one or two hours*. In terms of the requestive head act, he used a conventionally indirect (but inaccurate) strategy *Would you mind fill for me?* (sic) despite their friendship. As for internal modifiers, he used a consultative device *Would you mind* as an L2 pragmalinguistic strategy. As the post-supportive external modifier, he used cost minimizer *About one or two hours, not much* as an L1-based sociopragmatic strategy after being asked by the requestee when he would come back. In the interview, with regard to the use of grounder, he explained:

*We Iranian people tend to give a reason for what we want others to do for us but at the same time we do not specifically reveal our real intention because of privacy issues, that is why I avoided mentioning the exact reason for going downtown.*

Concerning the use of a conventionally indirect strategy, he stated:

*Due to the fact that I was supposed to request another person to do something for me, I used a formal linguistic feature to show my politeness while English speakers would use more direct sentences in such a situation because of their friendly relationship.*

Although they were friends with no different power relationship and he had acknowledged L2 membership tendencies, he still preferred to conduct the speech act based on L1 self-image assumptions and speak indirectly and politely. With respect to the use of the consultative device, he commented:

*Well, Would you mind is a common linguistic feature used so often by English speakers when they want to make a request and that was the reason I used it. On the other hand, I could use the requestive structures that are commonly used by Iranian speakers Can you (mitunam).*

In terms of the use of a cost minimizer, he pointed out that:

*I used it to increase the chance of my request to be accepted; because of this, I promised him that I would come back soon.*

In his diary at the third juncture, he insisted on keeping and even enriching his L2-oriented identity. He remarked:

*Finishing this term, I have found a lot of talented friends in the English class and found English major very interesting such that my enthusiasm for learning new things in English is intensified. Because of this, I am now more determined to devote much more time than before to learning English.*

For the third scenario, Parsa reused the same conventionally indirect (sill inaccurate) strategy *Would you mind edit it for me?* (sic) as the head act. Again, note the use of the internal modifier *Would you mind* as a consultative device and the post-supportive external modifier, *I have heard you are good at it*, an L1-based sociopragmatic sweetener. Afterwards, he used appreciation words *I would appreciate that*. In the interview, he recalled:

*This structure that I used reflects politeness as I needed to ask for the notes of the requestee. If I had not intended to make a request, I would have spoken more directly because the requestee did not have power; however, I know that English speakers would make their requests more directly in this situation.*

Finally, with respect to the use of consultative device, sweetener, and appreciation, he revealed:

*The reason why I used it was to show my ability in applying more L2-oriented structure, or I could use mitunam yadashaye shoma ra dashte basham, or Can I have your notes? ... I used this structure (sweetener) to affect my requestee's emotions to increase my chance for the request to be accepted because we Iranian people are soon emotionally affected, and finally I said man ghadrdan hastam or I would appreciate that to indicate my L2 linguistic ability or I would use the structures that Iranian people tend to use like xeili mamnunam (Thank you so much).*

**Negin (female, 18) with an initially L1-oriented identity.** Table 5 summarizes the characteristics of the pragmatics-identity interplay witnessed in Negin's L2 pragmatic performance across the three role-played scenarios based on her retrospective interviews or diaries, as further analyzed below. As seen, Negin's perceived orientation towards L1 Persian culture and her inconsiderable interest in L2 English, surprisingly, gave way to nascent transformations at the second juncture, which were progressively reinforced in her conspicuous L2 repositioning, investment, and (convergent) pragmatic choices in the third talk-in-interaction.

Negin's lack of investment into learning English to assume L2 community membership was obvious in her diary at the first juncture. She noted:

*Before entering university, I have not been involved in learning English for a long time, causing me to forget so many English words and to lose my interest in English. Accordingly, it was hard for me to identify myself with English culture.*

**Table 5. Negin’s Pragmatics-Identity Nexus across the Three Junctures.**

EFL Learner	Scenario P-D-R	Pragmatic Choices			Identity Projections	
		L2 Div/Con.	Pragma.	Socio.	Identity Orientation	Investment
Negin	1 High	Div.	+N-C Indirect	L1	L1	L2
	2 Low	Div.	+N-C Indirect	L1	L1	L2
	3 High	Div.	-C Indirect	L2	L2	L2

**Notes:** P (Power), D (Distance), R (Imposition); Div/Con.. L2 Divergence or convergence; Pragma., Pragmalinguistics; Socio. Sociopragmatics; ± Pragmalinguistically in/accurate; N-C, Non-Conventional

For the first scenario, like Parsa, she used a pre-supportive external modifier of alert, *Hello Professor*. She then provided a pre-expansion grounder *Actually, I missed the bus* and a performative or speech act phrase *I had a request*, presumably, to cater to her L1 appropriacy concerns and mitigate her request. Then, she used a non-conventionally indirect strategy *Can you give me a ride to my house?*. In other words, she used the informal consultative device *Can you ...* as the pragmalinguistic template. For post-supportive external modifier, she used appreciation, *Thanks a million*. In the interview, she expressed her reason for the use of alert:

*This structure is rooted in Iranian culture and it is so difficult for us to avoid it in situations where we need to call our professors like English when they say Hello Sir.*

In the case of the use of the non-conventionally indirect, consultative device, she reflected:

*Because I needed to request my professor with a higher status to do something unexpected for me, I tried to be polite; so, I used a formal structure. ... I believe that as English speakers have generally more friendly relationship with each other, they would express their requests to their professors more freely. ... I used Can you... because nothing else flashed through my mind. It is possibly related to this fact that I have encountered and used it a lot that has been fossilized in my mind.*

In terms of the use of appreciation, she commented that:

*There are so many structures commonly used by both Iranian and English speakers when they want to thank somebody for what he or she has done or wants to do but I preferred to use an L2-like strategy, or I could use xeili xeili mamnunam or Thank you so much.*

At the second juncture, Negin, in her diary, emphasized more investment and intentionality in learning English since she started to experience the new L2 learning environment at university. She highlighted:

*After entering the university, I have been exposed a lot to English learning experiences so that I could feel I was able to improve my English abilities. To do so, I turned my attention to*



*learning more words and watching more movies, resulting in increasing my interest in learning English. At the moment, I can feel somehow I am ready to take on more L2-oriented identity, but along with maintaining my L1 identity.*

According to the role-play data, she used a pre-supportive external modifier of grounder *Something emergency happened right now* to provide context for her request. As for the request head act, she again used a non-conventionally indirect strategy, *Can I use your help to cover for me for some hours?*, still inserting the word *help* to emphasize the cooperative tenor of her request. Again, she used a consultative, pragmalinguistic device *Can I*. Afterwards, in terms of the post-supportive external modifier, when she was asked when she would come back, she used *I'll come back soon maybe two or three hours*, striving to minimize the probable costs. In retrospect, she reflected on her use of grounder and the informal, indirect strategy:

*I tried to avoid telling what had happened to me since we Iranian people are so sensitive about our private lives. ... Since I was supposed to make a request, I chose to use a more polite strategy to reduce the force of my request even though the requestee was my friend. In fact, Iranian people try to do so in such situations because it is not acceptable to make a request without using politeness structures. I think English speakers would use more direct strategies in the same situation as frankness is one of their characteristics. ... I could have used strategies that highly reflected my L2 identity such as Would you please... or Would you mind ... but that structure came into my mind, which may be grounded in the excessive use of this structure throughout my life.*

In terms of the use of cost minimizer, which in a way resonates with Parsa's subjectivity, she noted:

*When the requestee asked when I would come back, I should have promised her that I would come back soon to convince her to fill for me, so I promised her to come back soon.*

According to her diary at the third juncture, she felt more attachment to the L2-oriented identity by her greater investment in learning English. She reported:

*As I had more contact during this term with my classmates who were so interested and competent in English along with more engagement with a variety of activities in and outside the class relevant to learning English, I felt more re-oriented towards an L2 identity. So I decided to act more like English speakers although I believe that I will never forget about my L1-oriented identity.*

In line with her identity repositioning claim were the results of the related role-play scenario for this juncture. Negin demonstrated flexibility in redirecting her language learner identity and reconstructing agency in adapting more to L2 pragmalinguistic or appropriacy norms. For this purpose, she used grounder *because I was sick* as an external pre-expansion modifier. Further, she used a conventionally indirect L2 pragmalinguistic strategy *Would you please give me your notes?* as the request head act. She then recalled:

*I deliberately decided to make my reason explicit to show that I am not telling a lie and at the same time to show my L2 identity. ... As I had to make a request, I tried to use a strategy to seem polite for having more chance to get acceptance and not to seem rude. In fact, this is also the way Iranian people behave when they want to make a request, no matter who they are*

*talking to. ... This structure is used more frequently by English speakers and I preferred to use it. On the other hand, I would use Can you or May I ask you to which Iranian speakers mostly use.*

## **Discussion**

This interpretive case study sought to examine the links between the pragmatic choices of two Iranian EFL students and their identity-construction trajectories during their first semester at university by focusing on their retrospective perceptions and attitudes. Multiple data sources, namely, classroom observations, an identity questionnaire, pragmatic role plays, stimulated-recall interviews, and learners' diaries, were used to triangulate in seeking explanations of the interplay between the learners' pragmatic choices and their identity projections while making requests.

## **Summary of Findings**

It was witnessed that both Parsa, with an initially L2-oriented identity, and Negin, with an initially L1-oriented identity, tended to rely heavily on the use of external modifiers as well as non-conventionally indirect requestive head acts, an enduring L1-like strategy used almost indiscriminately in different scenarios, especially by Parsa. This was found consistent with previous research reports (e.g., Eslami-Rasekh, 1993) that Persian speakers make use of more external modifiers than American speakers. In fact, the key to the participants for pragmatic choices was apparently politeness at any cost, even in symmetrical-power and close relationships. Surprisingly, however, Negin's initial pragmatic divergence and cross-cultural transfer gradually gave way to more L2-reoriented pragmatic choices. She used more internal modifiers at the second juncture along with her reports of more investment in learning English after feeling the new L2 learning environment at university. Her agency repositioning was evident at the third juncture using a conventionally indirect head act, among others, as she demonstrated greater flexibility in negotiating a newer identity and associating more with L2 pragmalinguistic or appropriacy norms.

## **Limitations**

This case study, as noted, was conducted with only two EFL students in a rather short period of time, an academic term; therefore, the findings or possible interpretations cannot be confidently generalized to account for the (trans)formation of selves or social identities of other language learners in relation to their pragmatic choices in the wider globalized multilingual world. Nonetheless, the study is not devoid of insights for language education, in general, and L2 pragmatics, in particular.

## **Interpretations**

In retrospect, the learners saw links between the realized sociopragmatic levels of appropriacy for their performed requests and their ingrained L1 sociocultural orientations, especially in equal-status, friendly contexts with minimal social distancing. Interestingly, Parsa, known and chosen for his freely expressed tendency to reconstruct a new identity associated with English communities, was shown to be still constrained to L1 conventions in his sociopragmatic choices as well as faulty pragmalinguistic structures, due to his inner adherence to the Persian culture or his limited access to L2 pragmatic repertoire as a freshman student. If the former is the case, it might be due to the fact that L1 cultural dispositions and sociopragmatic conventions are so deeply consolidated, or from a complex perspective 'entrenched' (MacWhinney, 2008), in the rather adult learner's subjectivity and self-identity that strongly compete with the weaker new L2 patterns in guiding

online appropriacy decisions. If the latter interpretation was the case, the learner simply lacked access to accurate and native-like pragmalinguistic resources or was unaware of the implicated L2 sociopragmatic conventions in the contexts despite his intentionality to renegotiate his L2 social identity. Divergences from L2 cultural or contextual norms and, on the other hand, negative L1 pragmatic transfer were thus inevitable due to insufficient pragmatic competence (Ishihara, 2019). As noted earlier, both learners had passed a national entrance examination specifically designed for selecting English major students for Iranian universities. The test generally targets test-takers' attainment of mainly L2 lexico-grammatical knowledge. Therefore, despite adequate access to lexical or grammatical resources, both learners mostly opted for non-conventional or informal requestive head acts even in symmetrical-power contexts with little social distancing or imposition.

More striking was Negin's more L2-reoriented pragmatic choices incrementally demonstrated in her use of more L2-like elements as well as her increased investment in L2 learning. Her agency repositioning was especially evident at the third juncture using a conventionally indirect head act, among others, as she demonstrated greater flexibility in negotiating a newer identity and associating more with L2 pragmalinguistic or appropriacy norms. Again, this may be explained from a poststructuralist social, dynamic perspective. In this view, firstly, the language learner tends to negotiate and renegotiate her sense of self, subjectivity, or identity as a social process influenced by various social-cultural-institutional forces and dynamics (Norton, 2010). These influences can impact linguistic and identity choices in a mutually constitutive way (Norton & McKinney, 2012; Palmieri, 2019). Secondly, as noted, an individual's identity is no longer perceived to be a unitary, fixed, or static concept, but rather an inherently complex, dynamic, and situated notion which is constantly evolving in interaction with multiple internal forces and external events (Nowak et al., 2005). Therefore, it is conceivable why Negin's identity or subjective openness has undergone transformation as a result of engaging with different L2 learners' communities of practice in the new social, academic milieu.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Therefore, it can be said that the interplay of pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic dimensions of L2 development or use and learners' identity (re)constructions represents a site of complexity, conflict, struggle, and change (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Ishihara, 2019) that warrants further mixed-method explorations. In effect, this dynamic, social interplay requires language educationalists, practitioners, and teachers to probe the ways through which learners or multilingual interlocutors can shuttle back and forth in their cross-linguistic identities, making nuanced pragmatic choices, which reciprocally influence their self or subjectivity projections as well as their learning trajectories (e.g., González-Lloret, 2019; Liaw & English, 2017).

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As to Parsa's sociopragmatic divergence from L2 norms and his adherence to L1 sociocultural conventions, it can be argued that, from the poststructuralist, complex perspective, the degree of entrenchment or commitment among different language or cultural items may still change and grow L2-like as a function of enhanced awareness of L2 sociopragmatic norms as well as repeated activation of a repertoire of multiple identities (Jost & Christiansen, 2017). In other words, a poststructuralist conception of identity envisions that more pragmatic awareness, flexibility, and continued discursive L2 interactivity would stimulate the learner's reconstruction of self- or social identities, his investment in L2 subjectivity (Palmieri, 2019), and, in turn, progressive convergence with new L2 pragmatic choices (Ishihara, 2019).

With respect to the second interpretation that Parsa may have lacked the required native-like pragmalinguistic resources to appear pragmatically competent, it in a way echoes a recent observation in the fields of ILP or instructional pragmatics that grammatical competence does not necessarily ensure a corresponding level of pragmatic competence (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). In other words, mere reliance upon the exposure or instruction of L2 lexico-grammatical aspects in ESL/EFL classrooms is not enough for the development of students' pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, 2013; Eslami et al., 2015; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Therefore, in brief, learners need instruction or mediation in L2 pragmatics (Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

More interestingly, Negin's demonstration of emergent, increased flexibility in negotiating new identities in her pragmatic choices resonates with the poststructuralist observation that, just in the same way that the language learner's identity positions may afford her or limit opportunities to speak, read, write, and shape discourse, continued discursive L2 use and discourse experience can help reshape identity or self-images in the globalized multilingual society. In this sense, an individual learner's identity can be envisioned to emerge out of the dialectical tension and dynamicity between the learner and the community (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

## Conclusions

Nowadays, learners are increasingly involved in interculturally off-line and on-line multilingual interactions, typically through English. In such international social, political, and institutional contexts, they readily move from one group to another, engage in different activities or careers due to variable personal histories, goals, and current abilities, and, as a consequence, may (dis)associate memberships with multiple cultural or language communities at the same time (Norton Peirce, 1995; Palmieri, 2019; Thorne, 2005). From a poststructuralist, dynamic perspective, this social, cultural, and language mobility will inevitably impact their linguistic choices and identity projections in complex ways, an assumption which warrants the adoption of innovative multi-method research approaches by ILP studies in the future.

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