

# **L2 Japanese Acquisition of the Pragmatics of Requests during a Short-term Study Abroad**

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## **1. Introduction**

Exposure to the target culture is generally understood to be advantageous in learning second language (L2) pragmatic competence. Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998), for example, found that learners of English who study English in an English-speaking community are more sensitive to pragmatic deviance than those who study English elsewhere. Cohen and Shively (2007) found that English-speaking French and Spanish learners improved their L2 request and apology performance after studying for a semester in target-language countries, regardless of whether they received instruction about culture-learning strategies. Yet, exposure to the target culture is not sufficient for developing target-like pragmatic ability (Barron, 2002).

Hence, it is informative to examine aspects of pragmatic competence that L2 learners do and do not develop during study abroad. Such a developmental perspective is also important because previous research often examined L2 *use* at a single time point rather than L2 *acquisition* of pragmatics (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). The current study examines how pragmatics of request-making *develops* in English-speaking L2 learners of Japanese over an 8-week study-abroad program by comparing their responses to the same task at the beginning and at the end of the program.

### **1.1 L2 Acquisition of Request-Pragmatics**

Based on previous studies such as Ellis (1992) and Achiba (2003), Kasper and Ross (2002) proposed the following five stages of request development: 1. Pre-basic: context dependent, no syntax, 2. Formulaic: Reliance on unanalyzed formula and imperatives, 3. Unpacking: Formulas incorporated into productive language use, shift to conventional indirectness, 4. Pragmatic expansion: addition of new forms, increased use of mitigation, more complex syntax, 5. Fine-tuning: fine-tuning requestive force according to participants, goals and contexts.

Both Ellis and Achiba examined requests produced by L2 child learners of English longitudinally. The two children that Ellis examined developed their requests from stage 1 to 4, and a child Achiba studied developed her requests from stage 2 to 5. Ellis noted that the classroom context was insufficient for learners to develop the full range of request types and strategies, possibly because it failed to provide sociolinguistic need (e.g., the need to vary language taking account of the situation such as addressees).

### **1.2 Requests in Japanese and English**

There are several studies comparing how English and Japanese speakers make requests in their native languages (L1), indicating both similarities and differences. Fukushima (1996) found that both Japanese speakers and British English speakers preferred conventional indirect requests (e.g., ‘Could you ~?’, ‘Would you mind ~ing?’ in English; *~te kudasaimasen ka* ‘(literally) Wouldn’t you give me the favor of ~ing’, *~te itadakemasu ka* ‘Couldn’t I receive the favor of your ~ing?’ in Japanese) rather

than direct requests or hints. Interestingly, despite the stereotypical notion that indirect ways of communication are valued in Japanese, L1 Japanese speakers were found to use more direct requests than English speakers in discourse completion tasks (or DCT, used in this study) (Rose, 1994), oral role plays (Fukushima, 1996), and a questionnaire assessing request strategies (Fukushima, 2002). For example, only Japanese speakers used imperatives (*~te kudasai*) in Fukushima's (1996) study, and American English speakers used hints more frequently than Japanese speakers in DCT in Rose's (1994) study.<sup>1</sup>

In Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki and Ogino's (1986) questionnaire study of requests in Japanese and in English, both English and Japanese speakers varied their requests depending on situations, but Japanese speakers' responses displayed more tacit consensus as to a specific request form for a given situation. Ide (1989) also argues that Japanese requests are much more highly conventionalized.

In terms of linguistic forms, Himeno (1991) states that in Japanese requests, it is crucial to indicate that the speaker is the beneficiary by using the beneficiary auxiliary verbs (verbs of giving *kureru/kudasaru* or verbs of receiving *morau/itadaku*) that indicate who benefits from the actions. Furthermore, Japanese speakers often used negatives and elliptical constructions (Fukushima, 1996).

### 1.3 L2 Japanese Requests

L2 studies conducted thus far seem to be limited to comparisons of L1 and L2 Japanese requests, or comparisons of L2 Japanese speakers of different proficiencies at a single time point. There appear to be no studies of the development of L2 Japanese requests.

Takezawa (1995) gave L1 and L2 (English background) advanced-level Japanese speakers a role play task and a retrospective interview following the task. L1 and L2 speakers' performances diverged when the requestee (an instructor, higher social status) indicated her unwillingness to comply. The L2 Japanese speakers immediately started to negotiate while the L1 Japanese speakers paused to wait to hear the requestee's alternative suggestions. Nakahama (1999) also gave L1 and L2 advanced-level Japanese speakers a role play task. In addition, she instructed the L2 Japanese speakers to perform the same role play in their L1, English. She found that L2 Japanese speakers often provided excuses/justification for making an imposing request in ways similar to their English requests while L1 Japanese speakers only apologized for doing so. English speakers in both Takezawa's (1995) and Nakahama's (1999) studies appeared to have transferred to Japanese their L1 English strategies in making requests.

Kahraman and Akkuş (2007) examined requests produced by Turkish-speaking L2 Japanese speakers of four proficiency levels in a DCT questionnaire. The most salient finding was that the learners were unable to use informal requests in addressing a 'close friend', overusing the *-masu* form of verbs. They also observed non-use or misconjugation of beneficiary auxiliary verbs.

## 2. Current Study

This study examines 12 L2 Japanese learners' development of pragmatic knowledge of requests during an 8-week Japanese language program in Kyoto by assessing their responses on DCTs at the beginning and end of the program. The L2 learners were immersed in the Japanese culture (all staying with host families) and received 1 hour of instruction daily on speaking, with an emphasis on the appropriate use of language. This study, then, will reveal how students' pragmatic ability progressed during short-term study abroad, an arguably optimal context for L2 pragmatic learning.

## 2.1 Method

### 2.1.1 Participants

The 12 participants (4 males and 8 females, average age 23.8) were all from the United States and were speakers of English as their first/dominant language. They had the equivalent of approximately 2 years of instruction prior to studying abroad.

### 2.1.1 Procedure and Materials

A DCT questionnaire including 10 requests was given at the beginning and the end of the program (referred to as pre-DCT and post-DCT below). Though the DCT has limitations (e.g., Rose, 1994; Rose & Ono, 1995) and may not accurately elicit actual *use* of the language, it effectively assesses pragmatic *knowledge* (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose, 2002). It is an appropriate method to assess how L2 learners *think they should* make specific requests in given contexts if they decide to make a request. Moreover, Rintell and Mitchell (1989), who compared L2 English learners' responses on DCT questionnaires and oral role plays found that learners' responses only differed in length (in that oral responses were longer) and were very similar in types of request strategies.

Five of the 10 request situations used in this study were modified versions of Rose's (1992) DCT items that Kachru (1998) adopted, including three items below, which we examine in detail. Five additional situations that most likely simulate the students' experiences in Japan were also created. Following Kachru, only the descriptions of situations were provided in English without any scripts, and the participants were asked to write what they would say in each situation.

1. Test: A student asks a professor to be allowed to take on an alternate day a test that s/he must miss due to an out-of-town wedding (-social distance, hearer dominance).
2. Music: A student asks another student in a nearby room whom he/she does not know to turn his/her music down (+social distance, status equal).
3. Study: A student asks a friend to help him/her study for an upcoming test (-social distance, status equal).

L1 responses were also collected from 12 Japanese native speakers (4 males and 8 females, average age 30.3). L2 learners' responses were compared with these L1 responses. L2 responses to all items in pre- and post-DCTs were analyzed for comprehensibility (whether requests can easily be understood as intended if heard by unsympathetic listeners, those who may not infer the intention from given contexts: coded 1 for comprehensible; 0 for incomprehensible) and length (numbers of morphemes). For overall gains, three teachers independently compared each participant's pre- and post-DCT responses and rated the improvements: 0 for none, 1 some, 2 substantial. Further, for the three situations above, in-depth analyses were carried out, examining types of strategies (direct, conventionally indirect, hint) and internal/external modifications, based on Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989).

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Overall Improvement, Comprehensibility, and Length

The mean of the three teachers' improvement ratings (0-2) was computed for each participant's 10 requests. The mean of all the participants across all requests was 0.88, ranging from 0.57 to 1.33.

Though the teachers recognized some gains, they generally did not consider the gains as substantial.

The mean comprehensibility rate increased from 0.73 to 0.79. Generally, L2 learners' requests became easier to understand, or the expressions conveyed the intended requests more often. However, not all 12 participants improved: 3 participants produced more incomprehensible requests on the post-DCT, and 2 participants' comprehensibility remained the same. On the pre-DCT, major problems that led to incomprehensibility were use of permission request *~te mo ii desu ka* for requested action (e.g., [*ongaku wa*] *sukoshi chiisaku narite mo ii desu ka* 'Would it be alright if the music is turned down?' Situation 2, Participant 9)<sup>2</sup> and nonuse of the causative (*sa*)*sete* 'let' where needed (e.g., [*shiken*]-o *totte itadakemasen ka*. 'Couldn't I receive the favor of your taking the test [at a later date]?' S1, P11)<sup>3</sup> On the post-DCT, the major problem was the use of non-potential form of the auxiliary verb *morau* 'receive' or *itadaku* 'receive (humble)' where its potential form was needed: e.g.,...*tasukete morai masen ka*. 'Am I not going to receive your help?' (S3, P11). The learners became more aware of linguistic resources for requests—such as causatives, negatives, and beneficiary auxiliary verbs, but it appears that they did not fully develop their grammatical knowledge to use them accurately.

In terms of length, all participants produced significantly longer requests on the post-DCT (from the mean of 23.1 to 29.1 morphemes), which approximates L1 speakers' requests (29.3). While this may reflect participant's ease of using language on the post-DCT, some caution is required to interpret this result because L2 learners' have been reported to be verbose in making requests, possibly because of inability to utilize standardized routines and 'insecurity' (Edmondson & House, 1991).

### 3.2 Request Strategies and External/Internal Modifiers

Table 1 summarizes the request strategies used by L1 and L2 speakers. L1 speakers predominantly used conventionally indirect requests while L2 speakers did not necessarily do so.

Table 1: Request strategies used by participants

		Direct	Conventionally Indirect				Hint	Other	
			Beneficiary		Permission	Possibility			Want
			Receive	Give					
Situation 1 'Test'	L1	1	6	0	0	4	1	0	0
	L2-pre	0	2 (2)	0	3	3	0	3	1
	L2-post	0	4 (1)	0	3	0	3	0	2
Situation 2 'Music'	L1	0	10	2	0	0	0	0	0
	L2-pre	3	1	2	2 (2)	0	0	2	2
	L2-post	0	1	7	0	0	0	2	2
Situation 3 'Study'	L1	2	2	5	0	0	0	0	6
	L2-pre	2	3(2)	4	0	0	0	1	2
	L2-post	0	2(1)	7	0	0	0	0	3

Note: The numbers in parentheses indicate attempts of using the respective strategies.

For comparison's sake, Table 2 shows the frequency of request strategies used by L1 English and L1 Japanese speakers in Rose's study (1994) for the same three situations.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentage of request strategies for English (n=46) and Japanese (n=89) (Rose, 1994)

	Forgo		Direct		Conventional		Hint	
	English	Japanese	English	Japanese	English	Japanese	English	Japanese
Test	0 (0)	1 (1.1)	0 (0)	3 (3.4)	46 (100)	81 (91)	0 (0)	4 (4.5)
Music	2 (4.4)	1 (1.1)	4 (8.7)	15 (16.9)	40 (87)	71 (79.8)	0 (0)	2 (2.3)
Study	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	24 (27)	24 (52.2)	55 (61.8)	22 (47.8)	10 (11.2)

Note: The numbers in parentheses indicate the percentage.

Both L1 English speakers and L1 Japanese speakers in Rose's (1994) study predominantly used conventionally indirect strategies in the 'test' and 'music' situations, but they varied substantially in the 'study' situation. Of the L1 Japanese speakers' responses, 27% used direct requests while none of the English speakers' responses used direct requests; 22% of English speakers used hints while only 10% of Japanese speakers used hints. L1 Japanese speakers' request strategies in the current study (Table 1) indicate a similar trend albeit in very small numbers.

In terms of external modifications, most L1 and L2 speakers in the current study (both on pre- and post-DCTs) provided reasons for making requests in all three situations. For each situation, the following section describes L1 strategies and L2 pre- and post-DCT strategies, highlighting other notable aspects of modifications.

### 3.2.1 Situation 1: Asking a professor for a make-up exam

When the addressee was a professor, who is distant and has higher social status, L1 speakers' responses showed a great degree of consensus. Eleven used conventionally indirect requests, six of which were negative questions containing a potential form of the auxiliary verb *itadaku*, such as *~ukesasete itadakemasen ka* 'Couldn't I receive your favor of letting me take (the test on a later date)?'. There were also three inquiries of possibilities *ukerarenai desyoo ka* 'Would it be possible (for me) to take...?' and one 'want statement' *doosite mo shusseki shitai n desu ga* 'I would like to attend [my cousin's wedding] by all means, but...'. Interestingly, there was one direct request: *betsu no hi ni tesuto o ukesasete kudasai* 'Please let me take the test on another day.' Five L1 speakers provided preparatory expressions such as *jitsu wa go-soodan shitai koto ga aru no desu ga*. 'Actually, I have a favor to ask you' and *sumimasen (ga)* 'I am sorry [to bother you] (but)'. Six used the phrase, *jitsu-wa* 'actually,' which helps the interlocutor to prepare for an upcoming request.

In contrast, none of L2 learners successfully used conventionally indirect requests containing the auxiliary *morau/itadaku* on the pre-DCT—though two of them attempted to (e.g., P11's response missing a causative, *mae no hi ni shiken o totte itadakemasen ka* 'Could you take the test the day before?'). They also used other conventionally indirect responses: 3 permission requests *hoka no hi ni tesuto o shite mo ii desu ka* 'May I do the test on another day?' (P9) and three inquiries of possibility *hoka no hi ni shiken o toru koto ga dekimasu ka* 'Can I take the test on another day?' (P7). None used direct requests. Three used hints: *hoka no hi ni siken o dekitara ii noni...* 'It would be good if the test could be done on another day, but...' (P4). Five used preparators including one non-target-like *Sensei, sitsumon ga arimasu* 'Teacher, I have a question' (P8), but none used the phrase *jitsu-wa*.

On the post-DCT, their responses became more target-like. Three successfully used conventionally indirect requests utilizing negative questions containing *itadaku*, such as *yasumasete itadakemasen ka* 'Couldn't I receive your favor of letting me be absent?' (P6, 7). There were three inquiries of possibilities and three want statements such as *sono mae ni siken o ukeshite itadakitai n desu ga* 'I

would like to receive your favor of letting me take the test before, but...’ (P10). None used direct requests or hints. Seven used preparatory expressions; five used the phrase *jitsu-wa*.

### 3.2.2 Situation 2: Asking another student to turn down music

When the addressee was an unacquainted student (status equal), L1 speakers showed even greater conformity than in Situation 1. All used conventionally indirect requests, 10 of which were negative questions utilizing a potential form of auxiliary verbs of receiving: eight *~moraemasen ka* and two *~te itadakemasen ka*. Only two used the auxiliary verb *kureru* ‘give’ *~kuremasen ka*. L1 speakers also largely conformed on a choice of lexical mitigator. Nine used (*moo*) *sukoshi* ‘a little (more)’.

L2 learners’ responses greatly varied on the pre-DCT, consisting of three direct, five conventionally indirect, two hints and two others. The conventionally indirect requests were: one negative question containing the auxiliary *itadaku*, two *kureru*, and two attempted permission requests (e.g., *chiisaku na oto tsuketemo yoroshii desu ka* ‘May I turn on soft sound?’ P10). Two used direct requests such as *shizuka ni shite kudasai* ‘Please be quiet.’ Two of the 3 participants who used hints for Situation 1, P2 and P5, used hints again: *ashita daijina shiken ga arimasu kedo..ongaku wa chotto urusai desu ga...* ‘I have an important exam tomorrow, but the music is a little too loud but...’ (P5). Four used *sukoshi/chotto* ‘a little,’ similarly to the use of (*moo*) *sukoshi* by L1 speakers.

On the post-DCT, L2 learners’ responses were more uniform. They no longer used any direct requests. Eight used conventionally indirect requests, mostly utilizing the auxiliary verb of giving *kureru* (contrary to L1 speakers’ preference of *morau*). Participant 5 continued to use a hint, and another (P12) used a hint. Seven learners used (*moo*) *sukoshi/chotto* ‘a little (more)’.

### 3.2.3 Situation 3: Asking a friend for study help

When the addressee was not only socially equal, but also close, L1 speakers’ strategies varied most<sup>4</sup>: two direct (e.g., *chotto tasukete yo* ‘Help me a little!’), seven conventionally indirect, and 6 others (including three suggestions *issho ni kondo no tesuto-benkyoo shinai?* ‘Why don’t we study for the next test together?’). What was uniform across all L1 speakers was the use of informal style (expressed by verb morphology) and other markers of informality (e.g., sentence final particles *~kana*, *~nee*, *~yoo* {lengthened *yo* and *ne*}): e.g., *chotto oshiete morae nai kana* ‘I wonder if you can teach me’ and *chotto oshiete yoo* ‘plea:se teach me’. Five used imposition minimizers such as *jikan ga attara* ‘if you have time’. There were also other types of requests, more like suggestions or invitations, such as *Kondo issho ni benkyoo shinai?* ‘Why don’t we study together?’ L1 speakers used informal (and direct) requests while at the same time using imposition minimizers more often.

L2 learners also greatly varied in their strategies on the pre-DCT: two direct, five successful conventionally direct, one hint and two suggestions. Participant 5, who used hints in Situations 1 and 2, also used a hint in this situation: *raishuu no shiken ga totemo muzukashii to omoimasu kedo...* ‘I think next week’s test will be very difficult but...’. None used imposition minimizers. Only one L2 learner (P4) used the informal style *benkyoo o tetsudatte kurenai?* ‘Won’t you help me with my study?’.

On the post-DCT, L2 learners became more uniform in their choice of strategies: nine conventionally indirect negative questions (seven *kureru*, two *morau*) and three suggestions. Four used imposition minimizers such as *dekitara* ‘if possible’. Many maintained their use of the polite style, and only four successfully used the informal style *tetsudatte kureanai?* ‘Won’t you help me?’ (P4, 6, 7) and *issho ni benkyoo shinai ka* ‘Why don’t we study together?’ (P10).

## 4. Summary and Discussion

Most L2 learners demonstrated some gains in pragmatic knowledge. First, their knowledge at the end of the program often resulted in easier-to-understand intended requests, though sometimes their attempts to use more sophisticated linguistic devices for requests led them to produce incomprehensible or unintended requests. This suggests that L2 speaker's development of Japanese requests may not be linear. Second, the L2 learners produced requests that were equal in length to the L1 speakers' requests at the end of the program.

The comparisons between L1 speakers' and L2 learners' pre- and post-DCTs revealed that L2 responses also became more target-like in important ways. In contrast to the pre-DCT, L2 learners used more conventionally indirect requests on the post-DCT, utilizing negative questions containing beneficiary auxiliary verbs. But some of the L2 learners' failure in using potential forms of the beneficiary auxiliary verbs or causatives suggests that some of the learners are still in the process of learning how to use these auxiliary verbs. Moreover, L2 learners also demonstrated gains in their knowledge of words (*moo sukoshi* 'a little more') and phrases (*jitsu-wa* 'actually', *dekireba* 'if possible', *yokattara* 'if that's okay') that are essential for making requests.<sup>5</sup>

The L2 learners appeared to be at stages 2-4 at the beginning of the program. At the end of the program, most L2 learners remained at or progressed to stage 4 (Pragmatic expansion). One aspect in which many of them still diverged from L1 speakers was the use of informal style in requests addressed to a friend, which is similar to a finding of Kahraman and Akkuş's (2007), whose participants had not studied abroad. An 8-week experience in Japan did not seem sufficient for them to learn when to use the informal style and how to make appropriate requests to a close friend. To reach Stage 5 (Fine-tuning), more than a short-term study abroad seems to be required. More research, ideally longitudinal research assessing development of both pragmatic knowledge and use at multiple points in time, is called for in order to uncover the patterns of development to Stage 5.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rose and Ono (1995) suggest that this result may be an artifact of the method of data collection. They found that Japanese speakers chose more hints in a multiple-choice questionnaire than in DCTs.

<sup>2</sup> The examples are all actual responses from the DCTs. Some of them contain errors; only errors that are relevant to the discussion are indicated in bold. The square brackets indicate some material (word or phrase) is deleted and not shown here.

<sup>3</sup> This error also contains a lexical error *totte*. Though the translation equivalent of *totte* is 'take', another verb, *ukeru* (*ukete* in this context), should be used for 'taking exams.'

<sup>4</sup> Three of the responses used two request units in this situation, making a total of 15 request strategies.

<sup>5</sup> To assess the development of other aspects of requests that were found to be different between L1 and L2 Japanese speakers discussed in the introduction (such as the use of elliptical constructions and use of pauses to allow the requestees to offer alternatives), DCTs seemed inadequate.

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