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Pragmatic Task Difficulty and L2 Politeness Strategies in Disagreement Situations Across Proficiency

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1. Introduction

Since second language acquisition (SLA) research has revealed the importance of developing pragmatic knowledge as well as lexico-grammatical knowledge, an increasing number of studies have been carried out in the field of second language (L2) pragmatics instruction (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). These studies have reached a broad consistent conclusion that simply exposing L2 learners to pragmatic input is not enough for learning L2 pragmatics. In fact, Ishihara and Cohen (2010) recommend cross-cultural comparisons, explicit information, awareness-raising tasks, focused practice and a wide range of feedback as pedagogical approaches to enhance L2 learners' pragmatics awareness. Among different types of approaches to L2 pragmatics instruction, employing tasks as pedagogical tools has started to receive growing attention from SLA researchers recently. Taguchi and Kim (2018), in fact, claim that characteristics of tasks fit in L2 pragmatics instruction in a way that both tasks and L2 pragmatics are concerned with how people actually do things with language; how language functions in social contexts; and how L2 learners improve their communicative competence. From these perspectives, using task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a guiding framework would help us design and assess tasks

effectively for L2 pragmatics instruction. Despite the common features between TBLT and L2 pragmatics instruction, there are still relatively few studies on pragmatic tasks (Kasper & Rose, 1999, 2002; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015). More research is needed to explore effective uses of tasks in L2 pragmatics instruction.

Furthermore, most of these studies investigating pragmatic tasks primarily focused on requests and refusals (e.g., Alcon-Soler, 2018; Gilabert & Baron, 2013; Taguchi, 2007) and disagreements have been barely investigated in terms of pragmatic tasks so far. Therefore, the current study aims to explore effective tasks for teaching L2 disagreement speech acts. More specifically, this paper examines how L2 proficiency influences perceived task difficulty and L2 politeness strategy uses in disagreement situations. Based on results, it also would shed light on insights into appropriate task sequences and linguistic devices according to L2 proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 TBLT and Second Language Pragmatics

While SLA researchers have investigated L2 pragmatics instruction, most studies focused on the influence of implicit and explicit instruction (Taguchi, 2015). In fact, there have been few studies on the uses of tasks for L2 pragmatics instruction (Kim & Taguchi, 2015, 2016). Additionally, most studies on TBLT also have focused on only lexico-grammatical aspects of linguistic features (e.g., Sasayama, et al., 2015), not on the pragmatic competence development (e.g., Plonksy & Kim, 2016).

Despite this current tendency, Taguchi and Kim (2016) point out that effective

tasks in L2 pragmatics instruction can be helpful in a way that the tasks can create good opportunities to learn L2 pragmatics through authentic language uses. In TBLT, tasks are used as main pedagogical tools and are defined in the following four criteria:

1. The primary focus should be on meaning.
2. There should be some kind of gap.
3. Learners should largely rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to complete the activity, with some help from the task input.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language.

(Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 135)

In TBLT, tasks are not designed in terms of lexico-grammatical categories; instead, tasks are designed in socially-situated ways so that tasks can elicit L2 learners' holistic and meaningful language uses, which would be likely to happen in their real-lives. By comparison, L2 pragmatics instruction also puts an emphasis on real-world communicative goals and aims to teach L2 learners appropriate language uses in social contexts. In this respect, tasks can play an important role in L2 pragmatics instruction. Thus, it is important to explore how to effectively incorporate tasks into L2 pragmatics instruction.

Given the importance of learning readiness (e.g., Pienemann, 1998), when conducting L2 pragmatics instruction with tasks, teachers need to choose appropriately difficult pragmatic tasks according to L2 learners' proficiency. Moreover, teachers should know which L2 politeness strategies and in what order to teach them. In order

to solve these problems, the current study investigates how perceived difficulty of pragmatic tasks are different across L2 learners' proficiency and how L2 learners develop their L2 politeness strategies.

2.2 Pragmatic Task Difficulty

In SLA, there have been many studies on task complexity (Ellis, 2003). For example, Skehan (1998) advanced four criteria for grading tasks as follows: *code complexity, cognitive complexity, communicative stress,* and *learners' variables*. Additionally, Robinson (2001) and Ellis (2003) also proposed their own sets of factors to grade tasks. Although these previous studies only focused on the psycholinguistic dimensions of tasks, Robinson (2011) acknowledges the existence of communicative factors such as gender, shared knowledge and power status. Additionally, in L2 pragmatics, Taguchi (2007) also argues that social and interpersonal variables have been gradually considered as important factors in designing tasks. Following the trend, this paper focuses on and analyzes pragmatic task difficulty.

Despite its small number, studies have been carried out to investigate the relationship between task difficulty and task social demands with the importance of considering social and interpersonal variables in designing and grading tasks (e.g., Fulcher & Marquez, 2003). These studies indicate that social features could be the key to changing task complexity.

In L2 pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has been widely adopted in designing pragmatic tasks (e.g., Alcon-Soler, 2018). The theory recognizes *face* as social image that people create themselves through their behavior

and their language. In this theory, face is distinguished between *positive face* and *negative face*. Positive face involves hearers' desire to be liked, appreciated, and included in a community, while negative face involves hearers' desires not to be impeded on by others. When there is a possibility of threating to either interlocutor's positive or negative face in conversation, we use a wide range of politeness strategies so that we can maintain peaceful relationship with interlocutors. In predicting and calculating the amount of potential social threat, Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that we use three social variables as follows: power (P), social distance (D), and rank of imposition (R). Power involves interlocutors' (un)equal status such as teachers and students etc. Social distance refers to how close you and your interlocutors are. Lastly, the rank of imposition is concerned with severeness of contents; for instance, asking to borrow a pen is often considered to be lower degree of imposition than asking to borrow huge amount of money. Since these three factors are holistic and effective in predicting the amount of face-threatening, this paper also adopts PDR as social features.

Fulcher and Marquez-Reiter's (2003) study examines how social features of a task affect task difficulty. They find that the higher-social demanding situations make tasks perceived more difficult and conclude that social variables such as power, relationship, and the rank of imposition play an important role in predicting task difficulty and learners' output.

Taguchi's (2007) study explores what makes a task more difficult and how the task difficulty is reflected in learners' oral production for requests and refusals in role play tasks. The result shows that L2 learners perform their speech acts more easily and

quickly in PDR-low situations: power difference does not exist; social distance between interlocutors is small; and the degree of imposition is low. On the contrary, significant difference is not found in native speakers (NSs)' productions across social situations.

Kim and Taguchi (2016) analyze the relationship between pragmatic task complexity and pragmatically related episodes (PREs). They find that pragmatically more complex tasks are likely to encourage PREs concerning with sociopragmatic aspects rather than pragmalinguistic aspects.

2.3.1 Disagreement Speech Acts

The understandings of what constitutes disagreement speech acts are quite different depending on researchers. This paper adopts Rees-Miller's (2000) definition as follows:

> A speaker (S) disagrees when s/he considers untrue some position (P) uttered or presumed to be espoused by an addressee (A), and reacts with a verbal or paralinguistic response, the propositional content or implicature of which is not P (p. 1088).

In L2 pragmatics, a few studies have been conducted on disagreement (e.g., Walkinshaw, 2009); however, there are relatively more research carried out in conversation analysis. These studies have provided evidence for disagreement as *dispreferred acts* (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984). For

example, Pomerantz (1984) finds several characteristics of disagreement as dispreferred acts. While agreements are likely to be done explicitly and immediately, disagreement tends to be performed implicitly with various mitigation linguistic devices or even by the absence of agreement messages. Additionally, disagreement is likely to be conducted over multiple turns and be postponed by preface such as hesitation and verbal pause. In addition, Leech (1983) also supports this view of disagreement as dispreferred act due to its required face consideration. In his model, minimizing disagreement is seen as a component of politeness submaxims.

> AGREEMENT MAXIMS (in assertives)
>
> (a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*
>
> (b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*
>
> (Leech, 1983, p. 132)

This model explains the psychological motivation behind characteristics of disagreements found in Pomerantz's (1984) study. Leech (1983) explains that because of this conversational maxim, people make efforts in exaggerating agreement with others and mitigating disagreement with expressions of regret and of partial agreement.

It should be noted that disagreement is not always considered bad because it can bring social closeness (Schiffrin, 1984). However, many studies point out that in performing disagreements, speakers are at risk of damaging relationship and, therefore, this paper treats disagreements as dispreferred acts and it is crucial for L2 learners to make good use of L2 politeness strategies.

2.3.2 L2 Politeness strategies in disagreement speech acts

There have been various sets of disagreement L2 politeness strategies proposed so far. For example, Stalpers (1995) proposes three categories of mitigation strategy. Category (A) involves strategies to delay disagreements by a token agreement, discourse marker, appreciation or apology, pause, hesitation or by being displaced over more than one speaking turn. Category (B) includes disagreements that are accompanied with supporting arguments such as additional explanations, defense, and justification. Lastly, Category (C) contains clausal internal modifications, for example, the use of modal verbs and indirectness where there is no explicit rejection.

Rees-Miller (2000) investigates how students and professors employ disagreement strategies at an American university and she distinguishes disagreements based on used linguistic forms. Her framework consists of three broad categories based on the identifiable linguistic markers. Three broad categories are as follows: (1) those in which disagreement is softened; (2) those in which disagreement is neither softened nor strengthened; and (3) those in which disagreement is strengthened. The category of (1) softened disagreement is further divided between positive and negative politeness building on Brown and Levinson's distinction.

Kreutel (2007) contrasts the performance of L2 learners with that of NSs in disagreement situations. Kreutel's disagreement categories are distinguished between *desirable features* and *undesirable features*. Desirable features include token agreements, hedges, requests for clarifications, explanations, expressions of regret, and positive remarks while undesirable features contain message abandonment, total lack of mitigation, language devices such as *I disagree*, *I don't agree*, and *no*. This

study finds that English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners make use of *mitigation devices* such as hedging, clarification requests, and positive remarks less frequently than NSs; instead, they often resort to undesirable features. Her qualitative analysis of the data finds the three additional, repeatedly occurring features for ESL/EFL learners: suggestions (desirable features), exclamations of indignation (undesirable features), and lack of initial mitigation (desirable features).

Walkinshaw (2009) proposes disagreement L2 politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. Four categories are as follows: (1) *explicit/ direct disagreement*, (2) *disagreement hedged with positive politeness*, (3) *disagreement hedged with negative politeness* and (4) *implied disagreement*. Since his coding scheme that reflects Brown and Levinson's (1987) face represents holistic approach to dealing with disagreement face-threatening task, the current study adopts Walkinshaw's (2007) coding scheme for data analysis.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989) compare how Japanese learners of English (JLEs) and Americans NSs disagree in English. The results indicate that NSs are not always more explicit than JLEs. In fact, it is shown that, regardless of the interlocutors' status, the JLEs are more likely to employ explicit expressions whereas NSs tend to use more positive remarks and softeners, and less explicit criticisms. This finding is supported by Nguyen's (2009) study in which NSs are in favor of *non-confrontational strategies* than Vietnameses do. These studies, therefore, can lead to a conclusion that, despite the stereotype, Asian NNSs can be more direct and aggravating than NSs. This can be caused by effect of teaching typical stereotypes or by learners' lack of L2 proficiency. However, findings in Lawson's (2009) study show otherwise. Lawson (2009)

compares disagreements of JLEs and American NSs, and finds that, unlike previous studies, NSs frequently use direct disagreements, especially, the performative *I disagree*. Additionally, despite their limited variation, JLEs produce mitigated disagreements, positive politeness features, and hedges as often as NSs. Therefore, so far, we seem to have inconsistent conclusions regarding NNSs' language directness in disagreements.

Viswat and Kobayashi (2008) investigate how cultures influence the interpretations of disagreements between JLEs and American NSs. They find while JLEs are likely to try to avoid confrontation due to their primary value attached to harmony (Nakayama, 1989), American culture is likely to view confrontation as acceptable and tolerable (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Therefore, while American students are in favor of making a spontaneous disagreement statement, JELs tend to view immediate responses without sufficient consideration as risky for causing misunderstanding. The study indicates that the differences in value of confrontation is reflected in how disagreement conversations unfold by NSs and JLEs. Further, Kobayashi and Viswat (2010) adopt two types of questionnaire in order to explore what kind of struggles JLEs are likely to go through when disagreeing with NSs. The results indicate that JLEs' disagreements are likely to be either misinterpreted or viewed negatively by NSs due to JLEs' lack of clear opinions and their reliance on silence and ambiguous language to show disagreement intentions.

To sum up, regarding the directness of NSs and NNSs' disagreements, what we have is mixed findings. However, what these studies consistently show is that cultural value and L2 proficiency are likely to affect the performance of disagreements. Thus,

the current study explores more on the relationship between L2 proficiency and their L2 politeness strategy use.

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions

The current study addresses the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How does L2 proficiency affect L2 learners' perceived task difficulty in disagreement situations?

RQ2: How does L2 proficiency affect L2 learners' L2 politeness strategies in disagreement situations?

3.2 Participants

Seven Japanese students majoring in English at a university participated in this study: five undergraduate and two postgraduate students. Self-reported students' English proficiency (i.e., TOEFL ITP score) was transferred into the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR) levels: Two participants were categorized into CEFR B1 level, three of them into CEFR B2 level, and two of them into CEFR C1 level. In terms of study abroad (SA) experience, two of them had no SA experience, one participant had SA experience shorter than six months, and four participants had SA experience longer than six months and shorter than one year.

3.3 Materials

15 written discourse completion tasks (DCTs) were designed adjusting two task variables: five disagreement topics (career choice, birthday place choice, club activity plan, doing volunteer, and adopting a garbage tax) and three pragmatic demands (PDR-high, PDR-medium, and PDR-low) referring to Brown and Levinson's (1987) three contextual variables: power (P) distance (D), and the rank of imposition (R). One scenario is PDR-high type where the target disagreement had a large size of imposition and was made to someone with both greater power and distance (e.g., student-teacher disagreement). In contrast, another scenario is PDR-low disagreement to someone with equal power, small social distance, and with small rank of imposition (e.g., disagreement with a close friend). In PDR-medium type, disagreements were performed to the same-status person, yet who has a large social distance like a new friend.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study was conducted via Google-form. First, participants were asked to fill out a background questionnaire regarding English proficiency score and SA experience. Then, they were asked to read the procedure to complete the survey. In a DCT, each direction specifying a given situation was presented. They were asked to write down what they would say in given 15 scenarios. Following completing all 15 DCTs, the participants were further asked to report the perceived difficulty for answering each scenario. The Likert Scale from 1 (easy) to 4 (difficult) were adopted to explore task difficulty in performing the target speech act.

To answer RQ 1, a total of 105 perceived difficulty data were quantitatively

analyzed by lang.test (Mizumoto & Plonsky, 2015) through Friedman's repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni's post-hoc multiple comparison tests to examine whether or not there were statistically significant differences in perceived difficulty across L2 proficiency. To answer RQ2, a total of 105 disagreements data were coded into Walkinshaw's (2007) four types of L2 politeness strategies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Coding Scheme for Disagreement Speech Acts (Adopted from Walkinshaw, 2007)

Strategies	Examples
1. Direct/Explicit strategy (DE)	*'I disagree with you, Sarah.'*
2. Disagreements hedged with positive politeness (DP)	*'I understand your opinion but…'*
3. Disagreements hedged with negative politeness (DN)	*'I cannot tell for sure, though.'*
4. Implied disagreement (ID)	*'There are various thoughts in this world.'*

Once L2 politeness strategies were coded, the frequencies were counted in order to examine the differences of strategy use across L2 proficiency and task types. Moreover, participants' production data were also analyzed qualitatively in terms of pragmatic routines and modality.

4. Results

4.1 L2 Proficiency and Perceived Task Difficulty

Perceived difficulty for 15 DCTs is presented in Table 1 and Figure 2. Perceived

task difficulty by each participant is demonstrated in Table 2 and Figure 3.

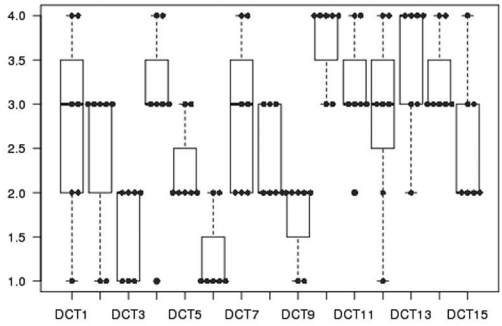
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Task Difficulty of 15 Pragmatic Tasks

	Topics	Interlocutors	PDR	*M*	*SD*
DCT 1	Career	Teacher	High	2.71	1.11
DCT 2	Career	New friend	Medium	2.43	0.98
DCT 3	Career	Close friend	Low	1.57	0.53
DCT 4	Birthday party	Senior	High	3.00	1.00
DCT 5	Birthday party	New friend	Medium	2.29	0.49
DCT 6	Birthday party	Close friend	Low	1.29	0.49
DCT 7	Club activity	Teacher	High	2.86	0.90
DCT 8	Club activity	Unfamiliar friend	Medium	2.43	0.53
DCT 9	Club activity	Close friend	Low	1.71	0.49
DCT 10	Volunteer	Senior	High	3.71	0.49
DCT 11	Volunteer	New friend	Medium	3.14	0.69
DCT 12	Volunteer	Close friend	Low	2.86	1.07
DCT 13	Environment	Teacher	High	3.43	0.79
DCT 14	Environment	Unfamiliar friend	Medium	3.29	0.49
DCT 15	Environment	Close friend	Low	2.57	0.79
M				2.62	0.66
SD				0.72	0.23

Figure 2

Perceived Task Difficulty of 15 Pragmatic Tasks



With respect to the influence of L2 proficiency on perceived difficulty, Friedman's repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant participant difference in DCT's difficulty (x^2 = 15.936 (6), p = .0141*). However, analysis of Bonferroni's post-hoc multiple comparison tests found a significant difference between participant F and G (p = .033*), both of whom had the same L2 proficiency (C1). Therefore, as can be seen in Figure 3, in the current study, task difficulty is not influenced by their L2 proficiency.

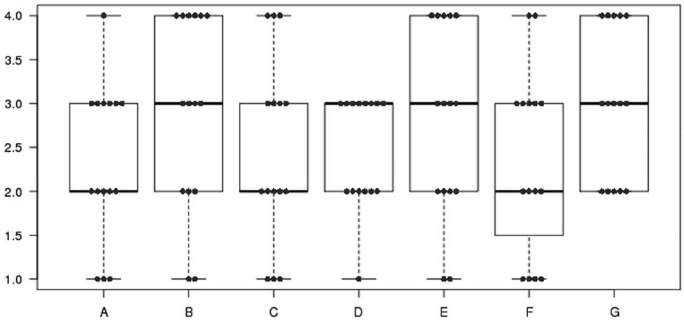
Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Task Difficulty Across L2 Proficiency

	A (B1)	B (B1)	C (B2)	D (B2)	E (B2)	F (C1)	G (C1)
M	2.33	2.93	2.47	2.47	2.80	2.33	3.00
(SD)	(0.90)	(1.10)	(1.06)	(0.64)	(1.08)	(1.05)	(0.85)

Figure 3

Perceived Task Difficulty Across L2 Proficiency



Besides the influence of L2 proficiency, the study found that situation types' influence on perceived task difficulty. As can be seen in Table 3 and Figure 4, different PDR situation types caused a significantly difference in perceived difficulty (x^2 = 35.96 (2), p = 1.56e-08*). The participants were found to be likely to perceive PDR-high situation as most difficult, followed by PDR-medium and PDR-low types. Bonferroni's post-hoc multiple comparison test revealed significant differences between every situation type (PDR low-PDR high: p = 7.9e-05*; PDR low-PDR medium: p = 4.5e-06*; PDR medium-PDR-high: p = .021*). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that situation types have an influence on perceived task difficulty.

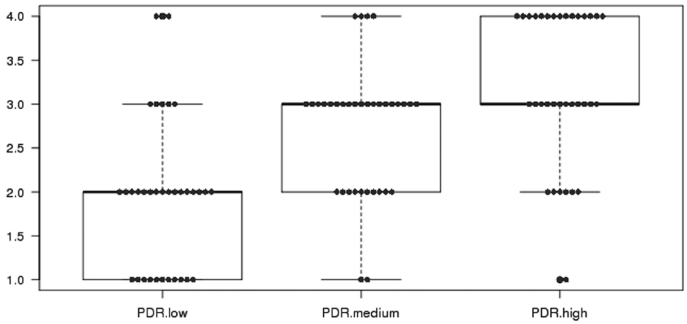
Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Task Difficulty Across Pragmatic Tasks

		PDR-low	PDR-medium	PDR-high	*M*	*SD*
Topic 1	*M*	1.57	2.43	2.71	2.24	0.59
	(SD)	(0.53)	(0.98)	(1.11)		
Topic 2	*M*	1.29	2.29	3.00	2.19	0.86
	(SD)	(0.49)	(0.49)	(1.00)		
Topic 3	*M*	1.71	2.43	2.86	2.33	0.58
	(SD)	(0.49)	(0.53)	(0.90)		
Topic 4	*M*	2.86	3.14	3.71	3.24	0.43
	(SD)	(1.07)	(0.69)	(0.49)		
Topic 5	*M*	2.57	3.29	3.43	3.10	0.46
	(SD)	(0.79)	(0.49)	(0.79)		
M		2.00	2.72	3.14		
SD		0.68	0.46	0.42		

Figure 4

Perceived Task Difficulty Across Pragmatic Tasks



4.2 L2 Proficiency and Disagreement Strategies

The average L2 politeness strategy uses across L2 proficiency are shown in Table 4. With regard to the relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 politeness strategy uses, as can be seen in Table 5, the study found significant differences across L2 proficiency in the uses of DP ($x^2 = 8.98$ (2), $p = .011$*) and DN ($x^2 = 7.60$ (2), $p = .022$*). However, Bonferroni's post-hoc multiple comparison test did not display significant differences either in DP or DN across L2 proficiency. Although there were no statistically significant differences between the CEFR levels, Figure 5 and 6 show clear tendencies for the use of DP and DN across L2 proficiency. As can be shown in Figure 5, DP was most frequently adopted by B2 participants, followed by B1 and C2 participants. In addition, Figure 6 shows that the uses of DN increased with development of L2 proficiency. In terms of ED and ID, significant differences across L2 proficiency were not found. However, Figure 7 shows that increase of L2 proficiency elicited less use of ED. In other words, as L2 learners become more proficient, they are more likely to adopt indirect strategies.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of L2 Politeness Strategies Use Across L2 Proficiency

	ED *M (SD)*	DP *M (SD)*	DN *M (SD)*	ID *M (SD)*
B1 ($n = 2$)	7.50 (0.71)	5.50 (0.71)	1.50 (0.71)	0.50 (0.71)
B2 ($n = 3$)	5.33 (3.51)	7.33 (2.08)	1.67 (1.15)	0.67 (1.15)
C1 ($n = 2$)	3.00 (4.24)	5.00 (4.24)	6.50 (0.71)	0.50 (0.71)

Table 5

Friedman's Repeated Measures ANOVA Across Three CEFR Levels B1-C1

	$x^2(2)$	*p*	Post hoc test
ED	4.98	.08	B1, B2, C1
DP	8.98	.01*	B1, B2, C1
DN	7.60	.02*	B1, B2, C1
ID	0.67	.72	B1, B2, C1

$p <. 05$ *

Figure 5

DP Strategies Use

Across Three CEFR Levels B1-C1

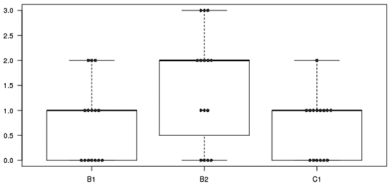
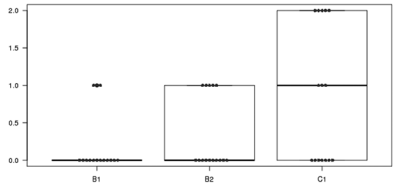


Figure 6

DN Strategies Use

Across Three CEFR Levels B1-C1



Moreover, as can be seen in Figure 8, how to use L2 politeness strategies is different across L2 proficiency level. In fact, while B1 participants used ED most frequently compared with DP, DN and ID, B2 participants employed DP the most, followed by ED, DN, and ID. C1 participants adopted DN more than DP, ED, and ID.

Figure 7

L2 Politeness Strategies Use

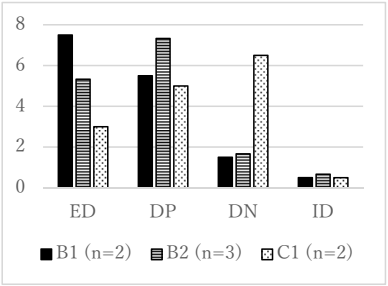
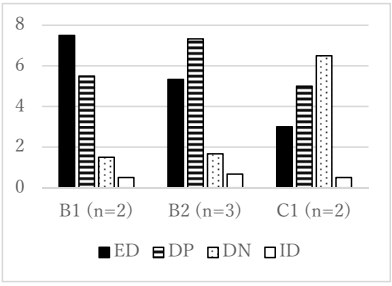


Figure 8

L2 Politeness Strategies Use Across L2 Proficiency



Furthermore, Table 6 shows how the participants adopted L2 politeness strategy differently across situation types. As can be seen in Table 7, concerning DP, significant differences were found across pragmatic situation types (x^2 = 8.88 (2), p = .011*). However, Bonferroni's post-hoc multiple comparison test did not reveal significant differences across situation types. Although there was no statistically significant difference between the CEFR levels, as shown in Figure 9, it seems that PDR-high pragmatic situations are more likely to elicit DP than PDR-low situation.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics of L2 Politeness Strategies Across Pragmatic Tasks

	ED *M (SD)*	DP *M (SD)*	DN *M (SD)*	ID *M (SD)*
PDR-low	2.57 (1.81)	0.86 (0.90)	1.57 (1.51)	0 (0.00)
PDR-medium	1.57 (0.98)	2.00 (1.15)	1.29 (1.38)	0.14 (0.38)
PDR-high	1.14 (1.07)	3.29 (1.38)	0.14 (0.38)	0.43 (0.53)

Table 7

Friedman's Repeated Measures ANOVA Across Pragmatic Tasks

	$x^2(2)$	*p*	Post hoc test
ED	5.43	.07	Low, Medium, High
DP	8.88	.01*	Low, Medium, High
DN	4.26	.12	Low, Medium, High
ID	4.67	.10	Low, Medium, High

$p <. 05$ *

Figure 9

DP Strategy Uses Across Pragmatic Tasks

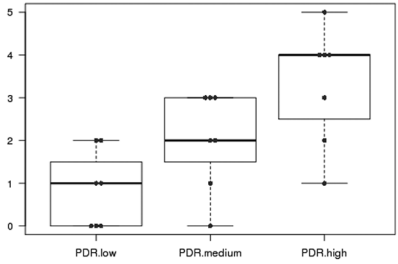
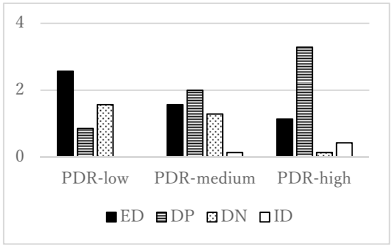


Figure 10

L2 Politeness Strategies Across Pragmatic Tasks



As can be seen in Figure 10, regarding ED and DN, PDR-low situation types elicited them most, followed by PDR-medium and PDR-high. This means that, as pragmatics situations' demands get higher, ED and DN are less likely to be adopted. On the other hand, DP and ID show opposite tendency; DP and ID were employed most in PDR-high, followed by PDR-medium and PDR-low. That is to say, as pragmatics situations' demands increase, L2 learners tend to adopt more DP and ID. To sum up, it seemed

that, with increase of social demands, the number of ED and DN decreases, whereas that of DP and ID increases.

5. Discussion

5.1 L2 Proficiency and Task Difficulty

The aim of current study was to explore the influence of L2 proficiency on the perceived difficulty of tasks and the uses of L2 politeness strategy. Regarding the tasks' perceived difficulty, the study only found a significant difference between the participants with the same L2 proficiency level (CEFR C1). This finding indicates that there is no L2 proficiency influence on the perceived difficulty. Rather, the difference in perceived difficulty can be explained by participants' individual differences (Taguchi, 2012). As in Figure 4, across all proficiency levels, the participants with same proficiency tend to vary their answers on perceived task difficulty. In fact, in each level, one participant always perceived DCTs as more difficult than other participants in the same level. This implies that study involving more participants is needed in the future in order to get insights into the relationship between perceived task difficulty and L2 proficiency.

Nonetheless, the current study found the significant influence of situation types on perceived difficulty. The results indicate that pragmatically more demanding situation (PDR-high) is more likely to be perceived as difficult. This tendency is in the line with previous studies (e.g., Fulcher & Marquez-Reiter, 2003; Taguchi, 2007). This can be explained by Wolfson's (1988) bulge theory: the most linguistically polite

behavior is likely to occur with people who are neither complete strangers nor intimate family and friends. This means that with close people, their relationship is already fixed and L2 leaners can feel free to use language, which might result in their perceptions as easy. Moreover, this tendency can also be explained by Japanese culture that puts an emphasis on giving respect towards higher-status people. JLEs are likely to be more sensitive to power and age differences than English speaking people do. Especially, when JLEs need to express opposite opinions towards someone superior, they tend to become hesitant and reluctant (Henstock, 2003). This might have caused L2 learners to perceive PDR-high situations more difficult. To summarize, the findings of the current study support previous studies (e.g., Fulcher & Marquez-Reiter, 2003; Taguchi, 2007) in that social variables do affect task perceived difficulty. Hence, it is important for teachers to take social features into account when designing tasks.

5.2 L2 Proficiency and Disagreement Strategies

Another goal of the current study was to investigate the effect of L2 proficiency on the uses of L2 politeness strategies. The results demonstrated that L2 proficiency influences how to use L2 politeness strategies. Significant differences were found in the uses of DP and DN across L2 proficiency. As shown in Figure 5, DP was used most frequently by B2 participants followed by CEFR B1 and C1 participants. This might be reflection of intermediate L2 learners' tendency to overuse formulaic sequences (Achiba, 2002; Ellis, 1992; Schmidt, 1983). Evidently, many DPs found in the current study were formulaic expressions of gratitude. Since articulating gratitude takes place

frequently and the forms are simple and ready-made, CEFR B2 level participants might have relied on those expressions. As Kasper and Rose (2002) point out, as L2 proficiency gets higher, L2 learners start to make greater use of formulaic sequences. However, once their L2 proficiency reaches native-like proficiency, they start to use more differentiated and fine-tuned formulae according to situations. That might be the cause of CEFR C1 participants' less use and B2 participants' heavy use of DP.

Although B2 level participants used DP significantly more than other participants, all in all, DP was used frequently by all proficiency level participants compared with other strategies. This is inconsistent with Beebe and Takahashi's (1989) study that found that DP was less likely to be used by JLEs. However, some other studies (e.g., Bjørge, 2012; Kreutel, 2007; Lawson, 2009; Toomaneejinda & Harding, 2018) are in line with the findings of the current study. According to Lawson (2009) and Toomaneejinda & Harding (2018), DP allows L2 learners not to reject interlocutors completely, which helps them maintain the L2 learners' interpersonal relationship. Moreover, another possible reason for many uses of DP is Japanese cultural preference to ceremonial formulaic expressions. JLEs tend to consider that ceremonial formula would work effectively to show their respect towards others, and in the case of the current study, it was expressions of gratitude. According to Loveday (1982), while native English speakers prefer utterances that sound original and suitable in specific situations, JLEs view ceremonial formula as a safe and certain way to show politeness (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). This cultural preference might explain the current study findings of predominant uses of gratitude expressions as DP.

(1) Examples of DP

a. …*Thank you* for your advice… (C1)

b. …*Thank you* for your advice, but… (B2)

c. …*Thank you* for your recommendation. But⋯ (B1)

However, as Lawson (2009) mentions, it should be noted that JLEs' too much reliance on ceremonial formulae can be risky in that those expressions might sound banal and insincere, which can damage interlocutors' face. Therefore, it is important to raise students' awareness for the importance of making an original expression depending on situations.

Furthermore, a significant difference was found in the uses of DN. As in Figure 6, increase of L2 learners' proficiency elicited greater use of DN. In addition to the number differences, the variety of DN seemed to be different across L2 proficiency. While CEFR B2 and C1 participants adopted a wider range of DN such as *minimizing imposition, conventional indirectness* and *stating disagreement as a personal opinion,* CEFR B1 participants restricted their uses to *the question form* as DN.

(2) Example of DN

a. …I cannot tell *for sure*, though. (C1)

b. …I *just wonder* how the system could be maintained. (C1)

c. …Uh, It's a *difficult* question, but … (B2)

d. …*What make you think so*? … (B1)

This reliance on question forms is also found in Beebe and Takahashi's (1989) study where JLEs often use the question forms to elicit interlocutors' self-discovery in disagreements. The restricted variety of DN by CEFR B1 participants can be explained by their inadequate L2 proficiency. Since they are not familiar with other complex expressions to show polite intentions, they might have sticked to the question forms. However, the question forms need to be adopted with caution because it might be seen as wasting interlocutors' time or as causing hearers' embarrassments (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). Thus, when teaching L2 negative politeness strategies, teachers need to make sure that L2 learners encounter great variety of expressions besides the question form. If L2 learners can use conventional indirectness (e.g., *I'm not sure if…,* or *I don't know if…*), can minimize imposition by using language devices (e.g., *I just, maybe, kind of, I'm not sure but…*, *I don't know but…*, *I don't really want to…* and *I don't think that's necessarily/always true.*), or can express their disagreement as just a personal opinion (e.g., *personally, in my opinion,* and *I wouldn't say…*), their disagreements become more sophisticated, which would lead L2 learners to deal with disagreement situations more effectively.

Although significant difference was not found in the uses of ED, as in Figure 7, it seemed that development of L2 proficiency leads to less use of explicit/direct strategies. This finding is compatible with previous studies (e.g., Behnam & Niroomand, 2011) which report that the increase of L2 proficiency elicits more indirect language uses. They argue that, as L2 proficiency increases, L2 learners start to have the enough linguistic resources to elaborate their language. In fact, as in example (3a), explicit disagreements by C1 participants were more likely to hedge

their utterances with negative/positive politeness whereas lower L2 proficiency participants often use explicit disagreement by itself. In example (3a), the explicit disagreement of *I don't think I'm doing it…* is accompanied with the token agreement (positive politeness) and minimizing imposition (negative politeness). This is what Kreutel (2007) calls *sandwich pattern of mitigation* where mitigation takes place both before and after disagreements. In Kreutel's (2007) study, many NSs make great use of this pattern, but NNSs rarely adopt it. Given her study's finding and the current study's result that this pattern mostly appeared in higher-proficiency L2 learners, it seems that using this pattern can be one of the keys to reaching native-like performance of disagreements.

(3) Examples of ED

a. …Well, enjoying myself is a self-satisfaction, but *I don't think I'm doing it to feel good about myself*. I cannot tell for sure, though. (C1)

b. …I know what you mean, but It sounds your prejudice. *I don't agree with you*. (B2)

c. Really? *I do not think so*! Why do you think so? (B1)

As regard with the use of ID, all in all, the participants in the current study barely used ID. As in (4), the only ID strategies used were to make utterances vague by using the word *someone*, to overgeneralize the situations, and to be incomplete. This shows the necessity for teachers to teach how to adopt implicit disagreement. In

order to explore more about the uses of ID by L2 speakers, we need more study that involves many participants.

(4) Examples of IDs

a. *Some* people do this foe self-satisfaction but thanks to them, *some* people may be helped. (C1)

b. They might be. But I think *there should be various thoughts in this world*. (B2)

c. …But *I'm wondering whether I have enough money*… (B1)

Moreover, the current study found the influence of task situation types on L2 politeness strategies. The results show that as pragmatics situations' demands get higher, the participants are likely to adopt more DP and ID and less ED and DN. The finding of more use of DP in disagreements with someone superior does not concur with previous studies (e.g., Walkinshaw, 2007). In Walkinshaw's (2007) study, for disagreement with superior, JLEs were reluctant to adopt complex hedging devices such as DP and DN, while for disagreements in power-equal relationship, they tended to adopt those hedges. Although Walkinshaw's (2007) study does not align with the current study, there are previous studies (e.g., Guodong & Jing, 2005) that show similar tendency that high socially demanding situations are likely to encourage more indirect language. Moreover, this finding is also in line with Wolfson's (1988) bulge theory. In this light, it makes sense that as social distance increases (PDR-high), less ED and more DP and ID occur.

Besides the differences in L2 politeness strategy types, L2 modality seemed to have been influenced by L2 proficiency. Previous studies (e.g., Salsbury & Bardovi‐Harlig, 2000) report that L2 learners, especially at the low proficiency level, adopt the modals *would* and *could* a lot less frequently than native English users do. In line with these previous studies, the current study's results indicate that as L2 proficiency increases, the use of modals such as *would* increases. Whereas CEFR C1 participants made use of *would* 12 times, CEFR B1 and B2 participants' uses only added up to six times altogether. Moreover, *would* in C1 and B2 disagreements contained the variety of uses; however, when it comes to B1 participants' disagreements, as in Example (5c), the modal uses were limited to the formulaic phrases, '*I would like to....*' From this perspective, it seems reasonable to say that with increase of L2 proficiency, L2 speakers start to adopt modal verbs more frequently and more differently.

(5) The use of *would* across L2 proficiency

a. …I think the restaurant I decided *would* be better… (C1)

b. …*would* you mind if we go to the Italian restaurant for the next time? (B2)

c. I *would* like to practice, but we have many exam… (B1)

In addition to the L2 modality uses, development of formulaic language was found in the current study. The studies on L2 pragmatics formulaic expressions (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2009; Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Tateyama, 2001) have provided evidence for L2 learners' lack of variety in conventional expressions. The

current study supports previous studies in the way that lower-proficiency participants' formulaic language variety was rather limited than higher-proficiency learners. In the current study, as can be seen Example (6), this tendency was especially very clear with conditional structures (e.g., *I'm not sure if*..., *I would be grateful if*... and *I don't know if*...). With increasing L2 proficiency, L2 learners started to adopt more conditional formulaic languages. Given the importance of language formula (Edmondson & House, 1991), it is important for teachers to teach L2 learners a wide range of formulaic sequences such as conditional language formulas.

(6) Examples of language formula

a. …But honestly, *I don't know if* it's the right place for us this time… (C1)

b. …*We would be grateful if* you could set up practice for half a day this weekend. (B2)

To summarize, as L2 proficiency increases, their disagreements seemed to become more sophisticated with a wider range of vocabulary and grammar. As previous studies implied (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), this paper also concludes that L2 proficiency can be the key to improving L2 learners' pragmatic competence. The development in L2 proficiency leads to bigger pragmalinguistic resources, which would enable L2 learners to deal with pragmatic situations more appropriately and more instantly. Hence, being high-proficient is not adequate; however, it is an essential condition for L2 learners to fully function in variety of communication situations.

6. Conclusion

The current study explored the influence of L2 proficiency on perceived task difficulty and L2 politeness strategy uses. In terms of task perceived difficulty, the current study did not find significant L2 proficiency influence; however, the influence was found among task situation types (PDR-high, medium, and low). It seemed that pragmatically more demanding tasks (PDR-high) were more likely to be perceived as difficult. As regard with L2 politeness strategy uses, L2 proficiency had influences on the uses of L2 politeness strategies. It was shown that the increase of L2 proficiency were likely to lead to fewer ED and more indirect L2 politeness strategies. In fact, higher-proficiency L2 learners tended to be more deferential and included more mitigation linguistic devices than lower-proficiency L2 learners did. In addition to the influence of L2 proficiency, the current study found task situation types' influence on the uses of L2 politeness strategies. Overall, the current study results demonstrate that L2 proficiency as well as task situation types can be the factors to affect how to perceive task and how to choose L2 politeness strategies.

As pedagogical implications, teachers should take those factors into account in choosing and creating pragmatic tasks. Since the results show that pragmatically higher demanding tasks are likely to be perceived as difficult and to lead to L2 learners' limited language uses, teachers should employ PDR-low tasks first for lower L2 proficiency learners. Moreover, given that L2 learners tended to rely on DP more than any other strategies, teachers need to represent a wider range of L2 politeness strategies for disagreements so that L2 learners can elaborate their disagreements

according to various situations.

Admittedly, the current study contains several limitations. One is its limited number of participants who took part in the study. Future studies should be carried out with more participants so as to make sure that the findings in the current study are applicable to other L2 learners. The second limitation is the current study's framework for task types, PDR. The current study treated senior students as higher-status interlocutors (+P). However, given the cultural differences in terms of senior students, it should be changed in the next study, to interlocutors who have clearer and more fixed power-differences such as a teacher or a tutor. The third limitation is the data's limited quality collected through DCTs. Although DCTs are helpful in collecting a huge amount of comparable data in short time, DCTs contain several limitations by nature. Data through DCTs might not correctly reflect the actual language uses and DCTs ignore the possibilities for L2 learners to say nothing or disagree with several turns. Future studies, therefore, need to deal with these limitations.

In conclusion, disagreement is frequently used speech acts, and it poses a huge risk of hurting social relationship. Thus, it is important for L2 learners to know appropriate language devices and L2 politeness strategies according to various contexts. Therefore, the L2 pragmatics instruction should incorporate appropriate level tasks and helpful L2 politeness strategies into classroom.

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Appendix

状況１－状況15まで状況を紹介する文が書いてあります。まずどのような状況か読み取ってください。その上で、英語で書かれたように相手に言われた時に、あなたならどう反対意見を述べるか英語で書いてみてください。

状況１：あなたは先生と授業後進路について話をしています。先生は、あなたが教師になることを勧めてきます。しかし、あなたは会社で働きたいと思っています。
Teacher: “You should be an English teacher. What do you think?”

状況２：あなたはよく一緒に遊ぶ親友ハナと進路について話しています。ハナは、あなたが教師になることを勧めてきます。しかし、あなたは会社で働きたいと思っています。

Hana: “You should be an English teacher. What do you think?”

状況３：あなたは最近塾で知り合ったミクと進路について話しています。ミクは、あなたが教師になることを勧めてきます。しかし、あなたは会社で働きたいと思っています。

Miku: “You should be an English teacher. What do you think?”

状況４：あなたは友達の誕生日会の幹事を担当していて、使うお店をもう決めています。あなたの先輩ミサはイタリアンの高いお店に変えるべきだと言っていますが、あなたは値段を考慮すると反対したいと思っています。

Misa: “I strongly recommend this Italian restaurant. It would be better. What do you think?”

状況５：あなたは友達の誕生日会の幹事を担当していて、使うお店をもう決めています。あなたの親友マユはイタリアンの高いお店に変えるべきだと言っていますが、あなたは値段を考慮すると反対したいと思っています。

Mayu: “I strongly recommend this Italian restaurant. It would be better. What do you think?”

状況６：あなたは友達の誕生日会の幹事を担当していて、使うお店をもう決めています。新しく仲良くなったリカはイタリアンの高いお店に変えるべきだと言っていますが、あなたは値段を考慮すると反対したいと思っています。

Rika: “I strongly recommend this Italian restaurant. It would be better. What do you think?”

状況７：あなたは部活動のミーティングで、今後の予定について先生と話しています。先生は土日も全部一日練習を行うべきと主張していますが、あなたはテスト勉強で忙しいので半日練習の方がよいと考えています。

Teacher: “We must practice all day.”

状況８：あなたは部活動のミーティングで、今後の予定について仲良しの友達ハナと話しています。ハナは土日も全部一日練習を行うべきと主張していますが、あなたはテスト勉強で忙しいので半日練習のほうがよいと考えています。
Hana: “We should come and practice all day. What do you think?”

状況９：あなたは部活動のミーティングで、今後の予定について普段は交流のないミクと話しています。ミクは土日も全部一日練習を行うべきと主張していますが、あなたはテスト勉強で忙しいので半日練習のほうがよいと考えています。
Miku: “We should come and practice all day. What do you think?”

状況10：あなたは部活動の練習試合の後、先輩エリカと帰っています。そこで、募金のボランティア活動のメンバー募集のチラシを見かけた先輩はボランティア活動を偽善だと馬鹿にして、あなたにも同意を求めてきました。しかしあなたは同意できません。
Erika: “People must be doing good deeds for self-satisfaction. They just want to feel good about themselves. What do you think?”

状況11：あなたは部活動の練習試合の後、昔からの友達リサと帰っています。そこで、募金のボランティア活動のメンバー募集のチラシを見かけたリサはボランティア活動を偽善だと馬鹿にして、あなたにも同意を求めてきました。しかしあなたは同意できません。
Risa: “People must be doing good deeds for self-satisfaction. They just want to feel good about themselves. What do you think?”

状況12：あなたは部活動の練習試合の後、昨日から部活に転部してきたエミと帰っています。そこで、募金のボランティア活動のメンバー募集のチラシを見かけたエミはボランティア活動を偽善だと馬鹿にして、あなたにも同意を求めてきました。

しかしあなたは同意できません。

Emi: “People must be doing good deeds for self-satisfaction. They just want to feel good about themselves. What do you think?”

状況13：あなたは授業で環境問題について議論しています。先生は、ごみの有料化（ごみ収集の際にごみの量に応じてお金を払う）を日本も取り入れるべきだと主張しています。しかしあなたは反論したいと思っています。

Teacher: “I strongly believe garbage tax should work effectively. What do you think?”

状況14：あなたは授業で環境問題について議論しています。昔からの友達サラは、ごみの有料化（ごみ収集の際にごみの量に応じてお金を払う）を日本も取り入れるべきだと主張しています。しかしあなたは反論したいと思っています。

Sara: “I strongly believe garbage tax should work effectively. What do you think?”

状況15：あなたは授業で環境問題について議論しています。普段は交流のないクラスメイトのミサは、ごみの有料化（ごみ収集の際にごみの量に応じてお金を払う）を日本も取り入れるべきだと主張しています。しかしあなたは反論したいと思っています。

Misa: “I strongly believe garbage tax should work effectively. What do you think?”