Article

An Ecological Perspective on Agency: L2 Learners' Sociopragmatic Interpretations and Strategies in a Study Abroad Context

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Abstract: In applied linguistics, there has been a growing body of L2 pragmatics studies that investigate the intricate relationship between language learners' subjective pragmatic choices and various contextual factors. The current study contributes to the understanding of language learner agency by illustrating the complex processes through which language learners enact their agency in response to varying contextual factors when making their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies. To capture the ecological nature of agency, this study conceptualizes agency as contextually, interpersonally, intrapersonally, spatially, and temporally embedded. Through the in-depth examination of the accounts of three L2 learners of Japanese regarding their interactions with religious group members during their study abroad in Japan, this study demonstrates language learners' divergent ways of enacting their agency, stemming from their orientations to the unique configurations of various contextual attributes in the L2 interactions. Such differences were rooted in and guided by their past experiences, present environments, and future aspirations that impacted their sociopragmatic perceptions, expectations, and choices. This study provides a complicated picture of language learner agency as a dialogic and reflexive process in which learners interact with contextual factors and adapt their sociopragmatic choices. Thus, it calls for an ecological, processual, and holistic approach to language learner agency through the close examination of the ways in which various contextual factors come together in L2 interactions, the process of how language learners orient to dynamic configurations of contextual factors, and what guides such orientations.

Keywords: agency; complex dynamic systems theory; sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies; study abroad

1. Introduction

The social turn in applied linguistics has directed scholars' focus toward the agency of language learners in negotiating meanings in the perception and use of the target language (Block 2003). Focusing on the dialogic relationship between "structure (social relations and macro features of society) and agency (humans as agents in the human world)" (Mercer 2011, p. 428), applied linguists have considered language learners as active subjects whose agency in the L2 meaning-making process is not only subject to social structures but also engages with, changes, and influences the social structure. Thus, the concept of agency, defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001, p. 112), has been investigated with regard to its contextual—interpersonal, intrapersonal, and temporal—embeddedness (e.g., Gao 2010; Mercer 2011, 2012). Agency is interpersonally and intrapersonally situated, as its enactment is not only shaped by the ways in which language learners position themselves in relation to their interactants but also involves an individual's "self-consciousness, reflection, intentionality, cognition and emotionality" (Gao 2010, p. 29). Agency is also temporally embedded in "the dynamics of a person's

ongoing life history including their past and present experiences as well as their future goals, expectations, and imaginations" (Mercer 2012, p. 57).

Previous L2 pragmatics studies, informed by the notion of agency as contextually, interpersonally, intrapersonally, and temporally embedded, examined learners' enactment of agency in making their L2 pragmatic perceptions and behaviors based on various contextual factors, including their subjective positionality, life experiences, social relationships, and imagined identities (e.g., Ishihara and Tarone 2009; Iwasaki 2011). Building upon the work of previous scholars, the current study aims to provide an understanding of how language learners navigate agency in their L2 pragmatic meaning-making process. In particular, this study unpacks a dynamic process of how our participants enacted their agency in developing their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies, considering different contextual factors across time and space. In doing so, complex dynamic systems theory (CDST; Larsen-Freeman 2019; Mercer 2011) offers an ecological and holistic perspective, with its articulation of various contextual factors that address agency's full complexity.

Drawing on CDST as a theoretical and analytic framework, this study examines the accounts of three American students of Japanese regarding the interactions in which they were approached and recruited by religious groups during their study abroad in different cities in Japan. A thematic analysis of the students' reflection logs and a narrative analysis of interviews demonstrate the students' divergent ways of enacting their agency in developing their sociopragmatic perceptions and strategies in different study abroad settings, as well as their varying orientations to contextual factors in such a process. Moreover, the analysis reveals that these differences are rooted in the students' diverse past experiences, present engagements, and expectations for their future L2 interactions. By capturing a nuanced understanding of language learner agency as an ecological system and reflexive process, this study calls for an ecological, processual, and holistic approach to learner agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Agency

To define agency predisposes it to the debate of agency and social structure (Block 2013). Regarding their relationship, on one extreme, some emphasize the overwhelming constraints of social structures that shape individuals' activities; on the other, the individual's role is emphasized, marginalizing the role of the social structure. In applied linguistics, scholars tend to take a more balanced perspective (Gao 2010), focusing on how "structure (social relations and macro features of society) and agency (humans as agents in the human world)" interact "in a relationship of reciprocal causality" (Mercer 2011, p. 428). Specifically, the dialogic relationship between agency and social structure can be manifested in ways that agency is subject to the social structure's mediation, facilitation, and constraints. At the same time, agency engages with, changes, and influences the social structure.

An often-cited definition of agency views it as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001, p. 112). This view of agency highlights the contextual and interpersonal situatedness of agency. Moreover, Gao's (2010) definition of agency as "involving an individual's will to act as well [as] their capacity to act in sociocultural terms" (cited in Mercer 2012, p. 42) adds an intrapersonal dimension, bringing an individual's "self-consciousness, reflection, intentionality, cognition and emotionality" to the discussion (Gao 2010, p. 29). Through the examination of longitudinal data, Mercer (2011) identifies an agentive system that incorporates both a learner's sense of agency (i.e., how agentive an individual feels) and their agentive behavior (i.e., a learner's exercise of agency through their participation and action or the lack thereof). Also, Mercer (2012) views agency as not only contextually, interpersonally, and intrapersonally embedded but also temporally situated. Therefore, it is imperative to consider "the dynamics of a person's ongoing life history including their past and present experiences as well as their future goals, expectations, and imaginations" (Mercer 2012, p. 57).

To further capture the full complexity of agency, Larsen-Freeman (2019) introduces the CDST as a more ecological, fine-grained, and systematic framework. CDST argues

that "one cannot fully understand one part of a complex system, if one does not look at its relationship with another or others—internal to the system and external to it" (Larsen-Freeman 2019, p. 73). Therefore, as a theory of change, CDST can bring a "relational, ecological systems lens" and "a nonreductionist scientific holism" to the study of agency (Larsen-Freeman 2019, p. 64).

According to Larsen-Freeman (2019, p. 62), agency can be defined as "the optimizing conditions for one's own learning (or not—Duff and Doherty 2015) and choosing to deploy one's semiotic resources to position oneself as one would wish in a multilingual world (Byrnes 2014)." Agency, viewed from a CDST lens, encompasses the following attributes: First, agency is not an internal program in a person but relational. Therefore, focus should be placed on the complex, dynamic, and constant interaction between humans and contexts. Second, agency is emergent and develops in relation to people and the environment. Third, agency is spatially and temporally situated. Consequently, understanding agency necessitates placing it within a continuum that accounts for one's past and present experiences along with their future goals and expectations. Fourth, agency is not a power that one possesses, but can be achieved through one's orientation to and interactions with the environment consisting of different types of economic, cultural, and social resources as well as affordances. Here, affordances refer to opportunities that social and material resources present to enable language use and perception. Fifth, agency changes through iteration and co-adaptation. The enactment of agency differs from one time to another, and both parties in the communication process will have to adjust to one another repeatedly. Sixth, agency is multidimensional, incorporating not only behaviors, but other dimensions, including emotions, beliefs, personalities, and motivation. Finally, agency is heterarchical, with components interacting with one another in a multidirectional and nonlinear way.

By giving full consideration of the interdependence of agency and structure, CDST provides an ecological and holistic framework for scholars to consider how spatiotemporal embeddedness and other contextual (including social, relational, structural, and cultural) factors come together with their affordances in shaping one's agency. Of importance here is that one's enactment of agency is achieved not merely by all the existing factors available in a certain situation but through a particular configuration of such factors that individuals orient to and perceive as afforded to them. Accordingly, it is imperative to explore how various factors are configured and made relevant in certain situations for one's enactment of agency.

2.2. Agency in L2 Pragmatics

In L2 pragmatics studies, the theoretical underpinnings that draw on a poststructuralist theory of agency align with those of the broader applied linguistics, which focus on how L2 learners "make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation" (Duff 2012, p. 417).

Research on agency in L2 pragmatics particularly concerns both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Thomas 1983), with the former focusing on linguistic-specific elements and the latter on culture-specific norms and conventions related to a communicative act. The majority of this literature tends to focus on examining the role of agency in learners' accommodation or resistance to target linguistic forms or speech acts (e.g., Brown 2013; Chen 2022; Hassall 2013; Hinkel 1996; Ishihara and Tarone 2009; Kidd 2016; Kim 2014; LoCastro 2001; McKay and Wong 1996; Siegal 1995, 1996; Ying and Ren 2022). Here, accommodation and resistance refer to "learners' intended (e.g., revealed in interviews) adoption or rejection of perceived L2 norms that they are aware of and linguistically capable of producing" (Ishihara and Tarone 2009, p. 106). The topics under examination regarding L2 speakers' accommodation or resistance to the L2 norms include the use of honorifics and gendered language (e.g., Siegal 1995), pragmatic routines (e.g., Davis 2007), address terms (e.g., Hassall 2013), and discourse markers (e.g., Liao 2009).

The study abroad context, among others, has been investigated as a major setting for examining how language learners negotiate identity and agency in accordance to or

resistance against their perceived L2 pragmatic norms. Previous L2 pragmatics studies of agency present the study abroad context as a crucial site that provides valuable opportunities for language learners to enhance their L2 pragmatic understanding in the target language environments. This scholarship demonstrates learners' dynamic ways of navigating subjective positions and shifting identities in relation to L2 pragmatic norms and expectations.

A pioneering study in this line of inquiry is Siegal's (1996) work on a white woman learning Japanese in Japan called Mary. This case study shows that despite grasping the societal expectations of appropriate behaviors for women in Japanese society, Mary consciously deviated from the established L2 pragmatic norms due to conflicts between her perceived gender expectations in Japanese culture and her self-perception as an independent Western woman. Liu, Lamb, and Chambers' (Liu et al. 2022) study advanced the understanding of learner agency in L2 pragmatics by investigating the bidirectional relationship between learners' sense of self and L2 pragmatic development while studying abroad. Besides reinforcing the mediating role of agency in learners' use of L2 pragmatic forms, they concluded that exposure to new L2 pragmatic features can give rise to learners' metapragmatic reflection. This, in turn, encourages learners to challenge established cultural values and their sense of self, leading to identity negotiation. Through a longitudinal study investigating how students' personal network mediated their pragmatic choices during their study abroad in China, Li, Li, and Ren's (Li et al. 2021) study sheds light on how agency affects learners' pragmatic development. They examined learners' pragmatic change over a year and highlighted that while learners did exercise their agency to converge to or diverge from the target pragmatic norms, their agency worked in synergy with their social network while studying abroad, contributing to their pragmatic change. Iwasaki's (2011) study further expanded the exploration of learner agency beyond the study abroad period and documented how the internal struggle of four male learners of Japanese led to the overuse of informal plain forms upon their return from studying abroad, as a response to the two contrasting identities the Japanese honorifics caused in them.

Methodologically, these L2 pragmatics studies on agency in study abroad settings move beyond a positivistic standpoint in traditional L2 pragmatics that often "assume straightforward or simplistic cause-effect patterns" (Ishihara 2019, p. 169) and rely at least in part on "partial quantification of patterns in pragmatic language use", mostly through Discourse Completion Tasks and its varieties. Rather, to capture language learners' complex and dynamic negotiation of shifting identities, agency, and social structures in their pragmatic perceptions and choices, this scholarship adopts a poststructuralist perspective and utilizes various qualitative data sources and analytic approaches, including case study (e.g., Siegal 1996; Liu et al. 2022), as well as ethnographic interviews and observations (e.g., Li et al. 2021; Iwasaki 2011).

In this regard, L2 pragmatics studies concerning agency in a study abroad context portray the nuanced negotiations of identities and agency, showcasing learners' pragmatic choices along a spectrum with varying degrees of accommodation or resistance to pragmatic norms (Li et al. 2021). Additionally, these studies consider various contextual factors, including social relationships, identities, life experiences, and language learners' perceptions of such features. Following the lead of scholars who foreground agency as a multifaceted construct from an ecological perspective (e.g., Ishihara 2009; Iwasaki 2011; LoCastro 2001; Siegal 1995, 1996), the current study engages in the close examination of how the diverse contextual factors come together as unique, emerging configurations in particular interactions in study abroad settings as well as learners' changing orientations to such configurations in their agentive process of negotiating L2 pragmatic perceptions and strategies.

2.3. Current Study

The current study aims to take an initial step towards providing an ecological account of language learners' negotiation of agency by adopting and demonstrating Larsen-

Freeman's (2019) conceptualization of agency as a complex system (relational, emergent, spatially and temporally situated, achieved, changing through iteration and adaptation, multidimensional, and heterarchical). An ecological approach allows for attention not only to diverse contextual factors (including social, spatial, temporal, relational, and structural) but also to the specific configurations of and learners' orientations to such factors, which both give rise to and can be shaped by language learner agency.

Specifically, this study investigates how L2 learners enact their agency in developing and negotiating their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies while studying abroad in Japan. By examining the students' accounts of their interactions with religious groups in Japan as the empirical cases, this study explores how L2 learners orient themselves to the different configurations of contextual factors as well as affordances provided by such configurations in their study abroad environment. It also considers how these orientations are guided by their past and present experiences, along with their future goals and expectations in L2 interactions. The questions that guided our analysis are as follows:

1. How did the students enact their agency in developing their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies during their study abroad?
2. What contextual factors did the students orient to in their enactment of agency and how?
3. How were the students' orientations guided by their past experiences, present engagements, and future expectations?

3. Methodology

3.1. Program Context

The participants of the current study are a group of students who were pursuing a dual degree in Japanese and engineering at an Eastern American University. This dual degree program requires students to complete one semester of study abroad in the target language country, followed by a six-month internship at local engineering companies or labs during their fourth or fifth year of college. This requirement aims to prepare students for their participation in the global professional world after graduation by enhancing their language, intercultural, and professional competencies in the target language environments.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study are those who studied and interned in Japan in the academic year 2022–2023 through the dual degree program introduced above. Given that the participants came from different backgrounds and were located in different cities in Japan, the ways the participants engaged in the interactions may vary considerably. This study introduces the accounts and narratives of three focal participants, among a total of five students who agreed to participate. These three focal participants were selected, considering the variety of their ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and gender backgrounds, as well as their past language and culture-related experiences. Meanwhile, all focal participants reported the interactions in which they were approached by religious groups despite their different locations in Japan. We thus believe that comparing these focal participants, coming from different backgrounds and residing in different Japanese cities yet engaging in similar types of interactions, would represent contrastive ways in which language learners exercise their agency in the target language interactions. This comparison would also highlight the impact of language learners' various backgrounds and past language and culture-related experiences, as well as different contextual factors, on their enactment of agency.

Table 1 below shows the demographic information of the focal participants, including their pseudonyms, age, year in school, self-identified gender and race/ethnicity backgrounds, and language competence assessed by Oral Proficiency Interview—Computer (OPIc), conducted on 25 April 2022. In the following sections, a detailed description of each participant's background and past experience is provided. We then explore how the participants' backgrounds and past experiences play out in their sociopragmatic strategies

and degrees of agency under contextual affordances provided in a particular regional area and interaction setting in Japan.

Table 1. Focal Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Year in School	Gender	Ethnicity	Language Proficiency
Ruby	Early 20s	Senior	Female	Vietnamese American	Vietnamese (heritage) English (native) Japanese (Intermediate Mid)
Alex	Early 20s	Senior	Male	Cambodian American	English (native) Japanese (Intermediate High)
Ken	Early 20s	Senior	Male	Guatemalan and El Salvadoran American	Spanish (heritage) English (native) Japanese (Intermediate Mid)

3.3. Data Collection

To illustrate the differences among the participants in their enactment of agency guided by various contextual factors as well as spatiotemporal dynamics, the current paper juxtaposes three types of data: (1) online predeparture survey, (2) the students' online reflection logs during their study abroad, and (3) semistructured student interviews.

The online predeparture survey was collected by the second author to understand students' language and culture-related experiences prior to their departure to study abroad destinations. The survey includes students' demographic information and their language proficiency evaluated through OPIc, as well as information about their language learning and intercultural experiences.

The students' reflection logs and interviews were collected by the first author as part of a larger ethnographic study. During their study abroad, students were asked to complete four online monthly reflection logs, designed to elicit their perception of the Japanese language and culture in their interactions in Japan. The reflection logs were one of the assignments that the students submitted for the course offered remotely to direct students' awareness of their language and intercultural learning opportunities during their stay in Japan. For the reflection logs, the students were asked to observe any interactions occurring in Japan, including those they participated in, and to write about what they noticed and learned about the Japanese language and culture through the interactions. The reflection log instructions directed students' attention to surrounding environments, including location layout and their interlocutors, in reflecting on the interactions. Each student submitted a total of four reflection logs during the study abroad portion of their stay in Japan.

The first author then interviewed each participant at least twice during and after their study/internship abroad. The first interview was conducted in person during the participants' study abroad. The interview focused on their past language and culture-related experiences, as well as the internship portion of their stay in Japan, particularly language learning and intercultural experiences. In the second interview, conducted and audio-recorded via an online video conferencing platform based on the participants' preference, the participants were asked to reflect on the interactions reported in their reflection logs and elaborate on various aspects that they believed shaped their perception of such interactions.

3.4. Data Analysis

To understand how learners enacted their agency in developing their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies in their interactions and what contextual factors they oriented

to (research questions 1 and 2), we first analyzed four reflection logs using a descriptive coding method that summarizes the topic of a passage of the data in a word or phrase and then the axial coding method to categorize the codes into recurring themes (Saldaña 2016). Through this analysis, we identified the types of interactions and speech acts the participants engaged in and found notable during the study abroad, as well as the reasons behind their behaviors in the reported interactions. The analysis also provided us with information about the contextual settings surrounding these interactions, including spatial arrangements, the stage of study abroad, and the participants' interlocutors, as well as how the participants oriented to such contextual settings during the interaction.

To understand how students' orientations were guided by their past experiences, present engagements, and future expectations (research question 3), we then conducted a narrative analysis (Reissman 2008) of the interviews and survey data. The narrative analysis gave us a full picture of how the students' backgrounds and past experiences in both the U.S. and Japan influenced their enactment of agency in their reported interactions in Japan. Furthermore, the narrative analysis allowed us to explore the temporal dimension of language learner agency, examining how the participants' enactment of agency in their sociopragmatic perceptions and strategies evolved over time since their reporting of these interactions.

By juxtaposing these diverse data sources and analytic approaches, we gained valuable insights into how the unique configurations of contextual factors and language learners' orientations to such factors played out in the target language interactions during the study abroad.

4. Students' Diverse Past Experiences

We first provide the participants' accounts that illustrate their backgrounds and language- and culture-related experiences prior to their arrival in Japan, as revealed through the interviews. Before their stay in Japan, all three focal participants had learned Japanese for three to four years through formal instruction in college. Also, the participants' Japanese language proficiency ranged from Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High. However, their ethnocultural and linguistic backgrounds, past language- and culture-related experiences, and future aspirations varied considerably.

4.1. Ruby

Ruby is a female student who self-identifies as a Vietnamese American. Born in Vietnam, Ruby is a heritage speaker of Vietnamese, but she self-assessed her Vietnamese proficiency as limited to conversational skills (interview, 8 July 2023). Only six months after her immigration to the United States with her family at the age of four, Ruby's English "surpassed [her] Vietnamese", and since then, Ruby has considered English as her default language (interview, 8 July 2023). Despite her Asian background, Ruby described herself as "too Americanized" (interview, 8 July 2023).

In the interview (8 July 2023), Ruby also clarified that her decision to learn Japanese did not derive from her Asian background. In fact, Ruby at first "had no motivation" but chose to learn Japanese to fulfill the university's general education requirements. After one semester of taking a Japanese course, Ruby found joy in improving her proficiency in Japanese and learning the language with her classmates, who are now her close friends. Also, Ruby's competitive personality, as she described, kept her motivated to continue to study Japanese, which she considered one of the hardest languages to learn. In 2020, one year after she started university, Ruby learned about a Japanese major track created in 2019. Ruby then decided to participate in the dual degree program to major in a foreign language (i.e., Japanese), in addition to her existing major (i.e., biomedical engineering).

In her fourth year of college, Ruby applied to live in an international residence hall on campus and specified her preference to share a room with someone from Japan or who speaks Japanese. She was matched with a female exchange student from Japan, who helped Ruby use Japanese outside the classroom. Ruby considered this experience her

"first international exchange" (interview, 8 July 2023). Accordingly, in the predeparture survey (23 March 2022), Ruby said she had "interact[ed] with people from countries other than the United States every day". During the study abroad portion of her stay in Japan, Ruby studied at a university in Tokyo.

4.2. Alex

Alex, a male student with a Cambodian background, aspired to have a career as a computer engineer and started learning Japanese in his freshman year solely for his personal interest. As in Ruby's case, Alex became close friends with his classmates in his university Japanese classes, most of whom were already pursuing a dual major in Japanese and engineering. This enjoyable language-learning experience motivated him to consider a dual major. While Alex still considers Japanese merely an additional skill to improve his resume for future career opportunities as a computer engineer, learning the language fulfills his personal interests and desire to equip himself with a second language ability. Since Alex moved to the United States from Cambodia at the age of four, he has not used the Cambodian language and now views English as his "only language" (interview, 20 July 2023). The sense of losing a language that he knew as his native language motivated him to learn a new second language. Here, Alex's decision to take Japanese courses may have been affected by the absence of Cambodian language courses at the university.

Despite his transnational background as a student from a Cambodian immigrant family who occasionally visits Cambodia to meet his relatives, Alex responded in the predeparture survey (23 March 2022) that he had "interact[ed] with people from countries other than the United States" only "a few times a month." Later in the interview (20 July 2023), Alex explained that he considered his interactions with Japanese exchange students on campus (including Ruby's Japanese roommate) or students in Japan through virtual language exchange hours an intercultural interaction when responding to this survey question. During the study abroad portion of his stay in Japan, Alex was studying at a university in Niigata.

4.3. Ken

While Ruby and Alex grew their interest in the dual degree program over the course of their college study, Ken was interested in the program immediately after he learned about it in high school. Given his background as a Spanish heritage speaker with Guatemalan and El Salvadoran parents, Ken could have chosen Spanish as a foreign language to major in college (interview, 25 July 2023). However, he chose Japanese because he wanted to try a new language, and he had appreciated Japanese anime and music for a long time. Ken first considered engineering as the main focus of his studies, but his interest in the Japanese language and society grew over time. Now, his future career aspiration is to work for companies that do business with Japan.

Despite the presence of students and instructors from Japan at his American university, Ken indicated in the predeparture survey (23 March 2022) that he had "never" interacted with anyone from outside the United States. When responding to this question, Ken did not include any interactions within his Japanese classes stating that he "didn't really know people outside of the U.S. before [he] left" for Japan (interview, 10 September 2023). During the study abroad portion of his stay in Japan, Ken was studying at the same university as Alex in Niigata.

As shown below, the differences in the students' backgrounds, past experiences, and aspirations result in different sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies, as well as an enactment of agency in their interactions in Japan.

5. Students' Different Experiences and Accounts of Interactions in Japan

To illustrate how the students' diverse backgrounds and past experiences guided their orientations to various contextual factors in their enactment of agency and negotiation of sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies, we report the three students' accounts of

their interactions in which they were approached by religious groups. These interactions were chosen because students may feel uncomfortable being approached and recruited by strangers, but there may be various factors that constrained them to reject the invitation indirectly. Although the students may not encounter these kinds of interactions regularly in the target language community, the examination of these interactions is notable as they contributed to the shifts in the students' intercultural understanding, as well as perceptions of L2 interactional and sociopragmatic norms and expectations, as demonstrated below.

The students' accounts reveal that they differed in their sociopragmatic interpretations and response strategies, as well as the degrees of agency enacted in the interactions. Such differences derived from the participants' orientations to various contextual factors of the given interactions in juxtaposition with their different understandings of sociopragmatic norms from past experiences in the U.S. and Japan, as well as future interactional expectations.

5.1. From "Acting Friendly" as a Foreigner to "Simply Ignoring"

Among the three focal participants, Ruby, a female Asian American student, reported the most frequent interactions with those from outside the United States, mainly with her Japanese roommate, prior to her study abroad in the predeparture survey (23 March 2022). Correspondingly, Ruby deliberately drew on sociopragmatic perceptions and strategies in her attempts to leave the interactions with the religious group members or declined their invitations through a reflexive process of reflecting on and adapting to contextual factors given in the interactions.

In the reflection log (13 December 2022), Ruby reported that she was approached twice by the same members of a religious group, whom she identified as two female Japanese students. Both invitations occurred on the university campus in Tokyo where Ruby was studying abroad as an exchange student (reflection log, 13 December 2022). Both times, Ruby enacted her identity as a foreigner in association with her self-ascribed insufficient Japanese proficiency, or what she called "gaijin card" (foreigner card; reflection log, 13 December 2022). The term is often used in Japan to refer to non-Japanese people's intentional enactment of their foreigner identity against Japanese customs or rules with the expectation that the breach will be tolerated by the Japanese people and society since they are foreigners (Simon-Maeda 2011).

At first, Ruby indeed "did not know how to react" and enacted her foreigner identity because her first encounter with the religious group members occurred only slightly after she had moved to Japan (interview, 7 September 2023). While Ruby's proficiency level was at Intermediate Mid when she moved to Japan, Ruby perceived her Japanese fluency at the time of encountering the religious group members as "not that strong", and she had "not yet adjusted to the [Japanese] culture" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). When the religious group members approached Ruby and gave a presentation about their religious sect, Ruby barely understood what they were saying (interview, 7 September 2023). Thus, the only possible way for Ruby to respond to them was to claim her nonunderstanding of what they were saying with her "broken Japanese" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). Ruby expected her claim of nonunderstanding to serve as a way to "get [herself] out of the situation" (interview, 7 September 2023). Ruby's expectation indicates her presupposition of what her claimed nonunderstanding of Japanese, in association with her foreigner identity, could entail in interactions in Japan. Notably, Ruby's nonunderstanding might have to be clarified verbally: given her Asian background, she may be able to pass as Japanese.

However, such a strategy "didn't work" (interview, 7 September 2023). Rather, in response to Ruby's claim of her limited understanding of Japanese, the religious group members spoke Japanese at a slower pace, together with a few English terms, to continue their presentation. With Ruby's lack of a further response, the conversation did not expand as much as the religious group members intended and Ruby could leave the conversation (interview, 7 September 2023). Thus, in Ruby's first interaction with the religious group members, the degree to which she could exercise her agency about how to react to their ap-

proach was shaped by her Japanese language proficiency and the degree of her familiarity with the recruitment interactions in the target language environment.

At the time of Ruby's second encounter with the same members, which occurred after three months in Japan, Ruby's "Japanese had improved a little bit", and she was able to "understand what they were saying" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). However, recalling that the previous interaction with the same members did not expand as they intended due to her self-claimed limited Japanese proficiency, Ruby stated her limited understanding of Japanese, but intentionally this time to "get out of the situation" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). With her understanding of Japanese developing during her stay in Japan, Ruby gained more possibilities for exercising agency in making choices about how she responded to the religious group members in the second interaction. As a participant and observer in the previous interaction with the religious group members, Ruby gained prior knowledge about how to deal with the religious group members and reflected such understanding in how she responded in the second interaction.

Yet, the religious group members continued their presentation about the religious group and gave a prayer. They ultimately asked Ruby if she would be busy on Friday for their evening dining. Interpreting this question as a "pre-invitation" (Schegloff 1990), Ruby told the lie that she was busy with classes (reflection log, 13 December 2022). Indeed, in Japanese, "white lies" are often used as a common face-saving strategy when declining an invitation indirectly, especially by giving a reason that a speaker has no control over, rather than simply saying that one does not want to comply with an invitation or request (Takamiya and Ishihara 2013).

In Ruby's case, her adoption of white lies was juxtaposed with her foreigner identity and her expectations of politeness in relation to such identity. Ruby noted that as a foreigner in Japan, she had to "act friendly and be accommodating to the people around us [foreigners]", and the behavior is what Japanese people and society would expect from foreigners like herself (interview, 7 September 2023). Ruby thus viewed rejecting or ignoring random promoters and recruiters in Japan as "rude" (reflection log, 13 December 2022) or "disrespectful" (interview, 7 September 2023) and accepted all fliers when handed them.

Similarly, since she considered ignoring or refusing the religious group members directly as possibly rude, Ruby adopted indirect ways to leave the interaction or decline their invitation by telling white lies, that is, claiming her nonunderstanding of Japanese and time unavailability that she had no control over. From Ruby's accounts, her use of the term "gaijin card" in describing her rejection of the religious group members' invitation (reflection log, 13 December 2022) does not appear to completely align with its conventional meaning. While "gaijin card" refers to non-Japanese people's employment of foreigner identity to be intentionally exempt from conforming to unwritten Japanese norms or customs, Ruby enacted her foreigner identity in an effort to be respectful to Japanese people when declining their invitation.

Ruby's foreigner identity appears to have a contradictory impact on her sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies about how to respond to the religious group members. On the one hand, Ruby's foreigner identity, in association with her self-claimed limited Japanese proficiency, served as a possible way for her to maneuver her way out of the interaction with the religious group members. On the other hand, Ruby's foreigner identity and assumptions about obligations to politeness in relation to such identity shaped the ways in which she rejected the religious group members.

Also, Ruby's self-expectation around politeness based on her foreigner identity was closely associated with friendliness or "act[ing] friendly" (interview, 7 September 2023). This expectation came from her personal experience of a similar interaction in an American setting. Prior to her encounters with the religious group members in Japan, Ruby's only interaction with promoters or recruiters was at her American college campus on an official event day when student organizations distribute fliers and promote their groups to prospective students (interview, 7 September 2023). Notably, given that the interactions with the religious group members occurred on campus in Japan, as did her previous experience of

similar interactions in an American setting, Ruby might have also assumed that she should be friendly to the religious group members who could be a part of the university. In this regard, Ruby's perception of interactions with the religious group members and how to communicate with them was situated temporally and spatially.

Because Ruby only had amicable interactions with promoters in an American setting, she thought she should be friendly even towards random flier distributors or promoters on the street in Japan (interview, 7 September 2023). That is, Ruby's assumptions about politeness in association with friendliness had derived from her experiences in an American setting and affected her sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies in similar interactions in Japan. In addition, Ruby was oriented to another factor of the interactions (i.e., her interlocutors) in making her sociopragmatic interpretations. Ruby explained that the recruiters were "girls" to make their approach appear "calmer" or "not as dangerous" (reflection log, 13 December 2022) and "easy to talk to … [and] to approach people" (interview, 7 September 2023). However, Ruby still found the interaction with the religious group members "scary" because of the "2 vs. 1 situation" (reflection log, 13 December 2022); that is, Ruby was alone when dealing with the interactions with the two religious group members approaching her.

In making sociopragmatic interpretations and actions, Ruby was oriented to various contextual factors of the interaction, including spatial arrangement (i.e., college campus) and perceived identities or properties of herself and her interlocutors (i.e., her Japanese proficiency in association with her foreigner identity and religious group members' gender identity and number). Such orientations juxtaposed with her sociopragmatic understanding of politeness and friendliness, which were historically and culturally established from her prior experiences of interactions in Japan and in an American setting.

Further, Ruby's interactions with the religious group members provided an opportunity for her to make more agentive and reflexive sociopragmatic observations, connecting past and present experiences with her orientations to future interactions. As noted above, Ruby used to accept all fliers handed to her on the street in Japan because of her pre-existing expectations of politeness and friendliness as a foreigner in Japan. However, after her exchanges with the religious group members, Ruby started observing how other people in Japan reacted to random promoters and noticed that "people will usually walk away without grabbing [fliers] by putting their hands out of sight, holding something else, or simply ignoring" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). Eventually, Ruby stopped taking fliers handed to her on the street (interview, 7 September 2023).

The interactions with the religious group members also changed Ruby's rather stereotypical understanding of Japanese people as "shy" or reserved regarding expressing themselves directly because "even after rejecting their invitation, the [religious group members] continued to walk with [Ruby] until the end of the street to persuade [her] into joining" (reflection log, 13 December 2022). This made Ruby think that Japanese people can be "very persistent" (interview, 7 September 2023) when they have "an obligation that they need to fulfill" (reflection log, 13 December 2022).

Ruby's accounts thus show a reflexive process of enhancing her agentive and critical awareness towards socially and culturally constructed sociopragmatic expectations in the target language environment over multiple interactions with the religious group members.

5.2. Increased Attentiveness toward Strangers

Alex is a male student with a Cambodian background who immigrated to the U.S. with his family at four years old. Despite his transnational background, Alex reported that what he perceived as intercultural interactions occurred occasionally with Japanese exchange students on campus in the U.S. or with college students in Japan through virtual language exchange hours prior to coming to Japan (interview, 5 September 2023). In Japan, Alex was studying abroad at a university in Niigata, but he had few opportunities to interact with others in person during the first semester because his courses were offered online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, Alex at first did not know what to

expect when strangers approached him in Japan. However, from multiple interactions with the same religious group members in different settings over time, Alex had developed his understanding of and attentiveness toward how he could manage the interactions with strangers in Japan, especially religious group members.

The most notable aspect of Alex's encounters with the religious group members was that he was not approached on the street but on the doorstep of Alex's apartment, located near his university in Niigata (interview, 5 September 2023). Because their first visit occurred only slightly after his arrival in Japan, he did not have a full understanding of who to expect at his doorstep and "used to just . . . open the door to whoever knocked on [his] door" (interview, 5 September 2023). In fact, Alex received emails from the university cautioning against religious group recruitment in his area. However, because Alex did not pay much attention to such emails given the overwhelming number of emails he received from the university, he "wasn't expecting [the religious group members] to actually come to [his] doorstep" (interview, 5 September 2023). Alex's insufficient orientation to and familiarity with who to expect at his doorstep and how to identify them shaped how he responded to his door less cautiously.

When Alex answered and opened his door, the two women introduced themselves as a "less known Buddhist religious sect" in Japanese (reflection log, 12 January 2023). The religious group members simply handed him a pamphlet about their religious group. Alex expressed gratitude for their introduction and responded that he would read the pamphlet later. Because the religious group members then left without extending any further explanations or suggestions (interview, 5 September 2023), the first encounter with the religious group members hardly impacted Alex's interpretations about how he should respond to people at his door.

Indeed, when the same religious group members showed up at Alex's doorstep about three months after their first visit, Alex again opened the door without checking who they were. This time, however, the religious group members further elaborated on their group with "the Japanese terminology relating to . . . religion" (interview, 5 September 2023). Alex recognized the religious terms the visitors used because Alex was introduced to some of them when he learned about Japanese religious culture in a Japanese language course he took at his American university. Yet, he "didn't really expect to be using [them]" in real life and "forgot about a lot of those . . . terminolog[ies]" (interview, 5 September 2023). With his partial understanding of the terminology, Alex "made it clear to [the religious group members] that it was hard to understand" (interview, 5 September 2023). Here, it is worth noting that as Ruby did, Alex might have needed to claim only partial or nonunderstanding of Japanese verbally, considering that his Asian background may pass as Japanese. Indeed, in the interview (5 September 2023), Alex mentioned that he sometimes felt Japanese people assumed him to be Japanese by talking to him in completely fluent Japanese that he could not fully understand.

In response to Alex's claim of nonunderstanding, the religious group members "kindly switched to simple Japanese for [him]" (reflection log, 12 January 2023). Alex's description of the religious group members' rearrangement of their Japanese for his understanding as "kind" is notable. This contrasts with Ruby who viewed the religious group members' continuous efforts to make their presentation accessible to her as a failure in her attempt to leave the conversation by similarly claiming her nonunderstanding. Thus, Alex's description of the religious group members' restructuring of Japanese for his understanding as "kind" can be interpreted as an indication of his willingness to try to understand what the religious group members were saying. Indeed, Alex stated that he "was curious what [the religious group] was about" (reflection log, 12 January 2023).

Furthermore, considering the religious group members' repetitive visits to his place, Alex thought the religious group members might visit him again even if he did not further pursue the conversation (interview, 5 September 2023). Alex also hoped that the religious group members would stop showing up to his place once he tried their prayer and expressed his lack of further interest afterward (interview, 5 September 2023). The

religious group members suggested that he "can always leave whenever" he wanted (interview, 5 September 2023), which made Alex feel more comfortable about following them to their temple. These accounts show how Alex's past experiences (i.e., the religious group members' persistent stance, as interpreted by Alex from their repetitive visits) and his orientations to future interactions (i.e., expectations for the religious group members to stop coming to his place or let him leave the temple whenever he wanted) came together to impact Alex's sociopragmatic interpretations and decision making regarding how he should respond in the given interaction.

It was only after Alex went into the religious group members' car that he felt uncomfortable interacting with them. Reflecting on this moment, Alex shared his regret about getting into their car by noting that it "was a bad idea because it was a stranger's car" (interview, 5 September 2023). In the car, the religious group members asked Alex to sign a paper, which he believed was a form to join the group, and he wrote down his personal information, including his email address, messaging app account information, and home address (interview, 5 September 2023). However, Alex noted that he "wasn't really comfortable with saying no . . . because [he] was trapped in the car with them" (interview, 5 September 2023). The degree to which Alex perceived that he could exercise his agency in responding in the given interaction was thus constrained by the change in spatial settings of the interaction from Alex's apartment to the religious group members' car.

After they arrived at the temple, the religious group members gave a prayer book to Alex and explained how he should give a daily prayer according to the book. Alex claimed his limited reading proficiency in Japanese, particularly kanji (Chinese script used as one of the Japanese writing systems) used in the book (interview, 5 September 2023). In response to Alex's claim of limited knowledge of Japanese, a religious group member provided and wrote down the reading aid in hiragana (Japanese syllabary). Despite feeling uncomfortable in the religious group members' car, Alex still found the lady's help with the reading aid "nice" (interview, 5 September 2023), which again contrasts with Ruby who found the religious group members' help with Japanese as an indication of a failure of her efforts to leave the conversation. Yet, Alex did not consider the religious group member's assistance with Japanese as an extraordinary gesture, given there were "a lot of other foreigners there at that temple" (interview, 5 September 2023). Here, Alex's orientation to a certain factor of the interaction, in this case the presence of other non-Japanese attendees like himself at the temple, shaped his sense-making of what was an interactional norm in the given interaction.

After the religious group members demonstrated how to give a prayer according to the book, they drove Alex back to his place. Because the religious group members did not ask Alex whether he "was interested in the religion or if [he] wanted to continue", Alex assumed that the religious group members would no longer pursue his involvement with them (interview, 5 September 2023).

Contrary to his expectation, a religious group member started contacting Alex regularly through Alex's messaging app to check if he gave his prayer and if he had any concerns to share with her, as indicated in the prayer book (interview, 5 September 2023). The religious group members' continuous attempts to communicate with Alex were against his expectation that they would stop pursuing further communication with him after his visit to the temple. Thus, Alex's perception of the religious group members changed from "kind" or "nice" to "very adamant on trying to get [him] to get more involved" (reflection log, 12 January 2023). Later, Alex shared his regret over having filled out the form in the religious group members' car because it had his personal information, which allowed the religious group members to contact him later (interview, 5 September 2023).

To keep his distance from the religious group members, Alex repeatedly responded that he had not tried a prayer and did not share his concerns with the religious group members. Yet, the religious group members continued sending messages to him and Alex ended up ignoring the messages. The religious group members then started "coming by [his] doorstep every so often" (reflection log, 12 January 2023). However, at this time, Alex be-

came "more careful, . . . looked through the peephole" to see who showed up at his doorstep and "started ignoring [the religious group members]" (interview, 5 September 2023).

Alex's interactions with the religious group members informed how he should react in similar situations. In the reflection log (12 January 2023), Alex wrote that he "decided that it was better for [him] to not involve [himself] further in the future settings." Indeed, Alex reported an incident in which he was approached by an elderly man at a local park. At first, Alex viewed him as "very friendly" and the conversation with him as "good" (interview, 5 September 2023). However, the man later pulled out the pamphlet that Alex recognized from the same religious group. This time, he did not further expand his engagement with the man.

Alex's experiences show his increased awareness and attentiveness towards who to expect at his doorstep and how much he should expand an interaction. The changes in his sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies occurred through a reflexive process in which Alex became more oriented to different contextual factors over the past instances with strangers of interactions and reflected such orientations to the present and future interactions.

5.3. From Being Silent to Finding Learning Opportunities

Among the three focal participants, Ken was the only one who reported a lack of experience interacting with people from outside the U.S. (survey, 23 March 2022). In fact, Ken took Japanese classes with instructors from Japan, but Ken did not consider the interactions with them as such when responding to the survey (Interview, 10 September 2023). Also, for the study abroad portion of his stay in Japan, Ken mentioned that he "didn't have any . . . connections" and thus "felt kind of isolated" because all the courses at his destination university in Japan were still offered entirely online under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (interview, 10 September 2023).

In addition, Ken reported that during his overall stay in Japan, "the biggest thing that was holding [him] back [in speaking Japanese] was . . . [his Japanese] proficiency" (interview, 10 September 2023), although his confidence in Japanese proficiency had gradually improved over time. In describing himself as "not the most social person," Ken pointed out his introverted personality as another reason for his lack of confidence in talking about himself in Japanese (interview, 10 September 2023). Ken's comments point to how the degree to which he could exercise agency in engaging in interactions in Japanese was based on various properties of his own, including his perceived language proficiency and personality.

Indeed, Ken mostly remained silent in his interaction with religious group members. This was likely because Ken "was with [his] friend and let him carry the conversation" when he was approached by people Ken identified as two Japanese middle-aged women with a female child on their way to Niigata station (reflection log, 8 November 2022).

Ken's friend, a male student from the same dual degree cohort, was visiting from another city in Japan. With, respectively, Hispanic and African American backgrounds (survey, 23 March 2022), Ken and his friend were identified as foreigners immediately by one of the ladies approaching them. In Japanese, the lady started the conversation by asking questions about their motivation to come to Japan and their interests in Japanese culture. The types of questions indicate that the lady identified Ken and his friend as not originally from Japan. Also, such identification contrasts with Ruby and Alex, who claimed their non or partial understanding of the religious group members' presentation for recruitment in Japanese for different reasons.

Before the interaction with the ladies, Ken had been asked questions about his motivation to learn Japanese and come to Japan only in settings of university-related extracurricular events or social gatherings as an international student who recently came to Japan from the United States (interview, 10 September 2023). Ken also felt that being approached by strangers was more unusual in a relatively smaller city like Niigata, compared with major Japanese cities like Tokyo with much higher population density, where he believed interac-

tions with strangers may not be so uncommon (interview, 10 September 2023). Accordingly, Ken found it "weird" and "not really common" (reflection log, 8 November 2022) that passing strangers started talking to him and asking questions to get to know him. In other words, Ken's perception of sociopragmatic norms regarding asking questions by strangers was impacted by his previously structured interpretations of similar interactions as well as social and spatial settings in which such interactions occurred.

Despite Ken's perceived exceptionality of being approached by strangers in Japan, Ken was oriented to his and his friend's foreigner identity in understanding the ladies' intentions behind approaching them. Given the types of questions one of the ladies asked, Ken assumed they might simply want to interact with him and his friend because they had not seen foreigners much before. Ken particularly thought so because of his assumption about Japanese people's expectation of foreigners as more likely to be open to interaction with strangers (interview, 10 September 2023). Such an assumption came from Ken's observation of how other foreigners in Japan "usually love to . . . just talk to the natives and the locals" in Japan (interview, 10 September 2023). Ken's sociopragmatic interpretation of strangers approaching them was thus influenced by his previous observations of how Japanese people expected foreigners like himself to behave in such interactions.

In addition, Ken oriented his attention to the presence of a female child with the ladies and thought that they were probably being "very friendly" (reflection log, 8 November 2022) for the child's social engagements, such as the mere exchange of greetings or smiles with random strangers on the street (interview, 10 September 2023). However, when the ladies began to introduce their religious group, Ken started feeling "uncomfortable" and wanted to leave the interaction promptly because he believed that religious group members "are not always the nicest people and [he] fear[ed] for any active involvement with them" (reflection log, 8 November 2022).

In fact, as Alex did, Ken was aware of the presence of religious group members in the area because of his destination university's emails warning about the continuously growing religious groups in Niigata, although he did not expect to actually encounter recruiters (interview, 10 September 2023). Also, in the city where he lives in the United States, Ken had previously encountered recruiters from religious groups attempting to hand fliers to him several times, but the recruiters were neither persistent nor trying to expand any conversation once Ken rejected to accept their fliers (interview, 10 September 2023). In other words, as the interaction unfolded, Ken connected the given interaction with his prior knowledge about the possibility of encountering recruiters in the area as well as a previously established understanding of how to deal with similar interactions in an American setting. Based on such a connection, Ken made his sociopragmatic interpretations of the interaction with the religious group members at the moment and how to respond to the interaction, that is, leaving the conversation immediately.

However, Ken sensed that his friend wanted to continue the conversation to practice speaking and socializing in Japanese despite acknowledging that the ladies were from a religious group. Since Ken did not want to interrupt his friend, he remained silent (interview, 10 September 2023). Here, the degree to which Ken could exercise his agency in responding to the religious group members was constrained by his interlocutor (i.e., his friend), which was one of the contextual factors in the particular setting of the interaction.

Ken viewed his silence and lack of engagement in the conversation as "less polite" than usual because he would be more welcoming in interacting with people in Japan if they were not religious group members (reflection log, 8 November 2022). Again, Ken's perception of his silence as impolite derived from his previously structured perception of Japanese people's expectations of foreigners as friendly and welcoming interactions with strangers (interview, 10 September 2023). Here, Ken associated politeness with friendliness, and such association impacted his sociopragmatic interpretation of his lack of response in the interaction with the religious group members.

Ken and his friend ended up being invited to the religious group's next gathering. However, with his prior knowledge of how to deal with unwanted interaction with religious

group members, Ken refused to give any personal information such as his phone number and email address when the religious group members asked for it. Thus, the conversation did not expand any further (interview, 10 September 2023). Like Ruby, Ken and his friend then relied on a white lie, stating that they were in a rush to catch a train. While Ken and his friend were indeed on their way to the train station, they were not necessarily in a rush but simply said so to decline the religious group members' invitation and leave the conversation (interview, 10 September 2023).

In the interaction with the religious group members, Ken remained silent and appeared less agentive. As noted above, Ken's reported insufficient confidence in the level of his Japanese proficiency and introverted personality (interview, 10 September 2023) may have prevented him from engaging in the interaction with the religious group members and made him rather rely on his friend.

However, his lack of engagement can be seen as an agentive result of his sociopragmatic understanding of how he perceived the interaction and his interlocutors, as well as his decision-making about how to respond. Such understanding had developed and adapted, based on his different orientations to various contextual factors, including properties of his interlocutors in the course of the interaction (i.e., the questions one of the religious group members asked, the presence of the child, and his friend's reaction) as well as previously established sociopragmatic understandings about interactions with strangers in Japan or religious group members in America and politeness expected of foreigners in Japan.

Reflecting on the interaction with the religious group members in the interview (10 September 2023), Ken mentioned that he could have engaged in the conversation more actively and used such a brief or even unwanted interaction as an opportunity to improve his Japanese, as his friend did. That is, for future orientations, the interaction with the religious group members gave Ken an indication of how he would engage in the next interactions with more agency.

6. Discussion

This section summarizes the findings from our detailed analysis of the three participants' reported interactions in the study abroad context in response to our research questions and considers the implications of the findings for future research of agency in L2 pragmatics.

The first research question asked how students enacted their agency in developing their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies in their L2 interactions. The findings revealed divergent ways in which students established, negotiated, and reinstated meaningful interactions between themselves and the environment (Buhrmann and Paolo 2017). Through multiple interactions with the same religious group, Ruby had come to make more agentive observations about sociopragmatic expectations in Japan when responding to strangers and enhance her intercultural understanding of Japanese people. Alex showed more attentiveness towards various factors that could be risky in communicating with strangers, as opposed to his careless attitude in interacting with religious group members initially. Ken, on the other hand, shared his aspiration to actively engage, even in random interactions with strangers as language learning opportunities, unlike in his interactions with the religious group where his friend led the conversation. These findings demonstrate that agency is not only relational but also emergent, borrowing Larsen-Freeman's (2019) terms.

The findings also identified the multidimensionality of agency, incorporating not only behaviors but also emotions, beliefs, personalities, and motivation. In Ken's interaction with the religious group members, for instance, we observed that his agentive behavior (Mercer 2011), made through the lack of participation, was influenced by his emotions, beliefs, personality, and motivation. His enactment of agency was subject to his emotions ranging from initially seeing them as "being friendly" with the presence of a little girl, to feeling "uncomfortable" after realizing they were affiliated with a religious group. His agentive behaviors were also affected by his belief that religious group members were "not

always the nicest people", his introverted personality, and his motivation to improve his Japanese proficiency by viewing the encounter as a learning opportunity.

Moreover, the findings show that agency changes through iteration and co-adaptation. This is demonstrated through two instances in which Ruby encountered the same religious group and how both Ruby and the religious recruiters changed and adapted their respective behaviors accordingly. Situated in almost identical situations, Ruby adopted similar strategies, namely, enacting her "gaijin card" to extricate herself from unwanted interactions. However, the reality behind the seemingly identical strategies contrasted, with Ruby genuinely having limited understanding during the first encounter, while intentionally claiming such to escape the situation during the second encounter. Additionally, there was co-adaptation between Ruby and the recruiters. During the first encounter, upon recognizing Ruby's lack of understanding, the recruiters ceased their presentation. On the other hand, during the second encounter, even after Ruby claimed limited understanding, the recruiters persisted with their presentation and even extended an invitation to their regular gathering. This led to changes in Ruby's enactment of agency regarding how to leave the conversation, ultimately prompting her to utilize a white lie as a means of declining the invitation.

With regard to the second research question about the contextual factors the students oriented to in their enactment of agency, the analysis illuminated the unique configurations of contextual factors present throughout the interactions, each playing a role in shaping the participants' agency and different orientations in the development of sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies. Notably, spatial settings such as the university campus (for Ruby) and locations like the apartment doorstep, car, and temple (for Alex) influenced the participants' sociopragmatic perceptions regarding friendliness, politeness, and indirectness, as well as affective stances.

Additionally, the identities of the participants and their interlocutors were notable contextual factors. All the participants drew on their foreigner identity, but in different ways. Ruby enacted her foreigner identity by claiming her nonunderstanding of Japanese to leave the interactions. Alex's claim of limited understanding of Japanese stemmed from personal curiosity about the religious group. Meanwhile, unlike Ruby and Alex whose ethnic backgrounds are Asian, Ken's foreigner identity was made relevant by the religious group members in initiating the conversation.

The participants also considered their interlocutors; Ruby felt intimidated by the presence of two religious group members as opposed to herself being alone, while Ken noted the presence of a little girl with the religious group members, shaping his interpretation of the interaction. Furthermore, the presence of Ken's friend influenced the degree of enacting his agency in response to the religious group members.

These findings highlight that agency is heterarchical, in the sense that each interaction forms a unique constellation of various contextual factors and affordances. Agency is also achieved reflexively by students exhibiting dynamic orientation to and constant interactions with these factors in a multidirectional and nonlinear manner. Therefore, the findings emphasize the importance of examining how learners adapt their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies to the specific configurations of each interaction, navigating a complex interplay of spatial, social, and interpersonal factors.

The third research question explored how students' orientations were guided by their past experiences, present engagements, and future expectations. The findings underscored the temporal situatedness of agency, corroborating Mercer's (2012, p. 57) claim to consider "the dynamics of a person's ongoing life history including their past and present experiences as well as their future goals, expectations, and imaginations." In navigating sociopragmatic norms in Japan, the participants were guided by their prior experiences in the U.S. and/or Japan. For example, Ruby's self-expectations of politeness and friendliness, shaped by her U.S. experience and juxtaposed with her foreigner identity in Japan, led to her rather indirect stance in declining the religious group members' invitation. Alex had prior knowledge of the presence of religious groups in his area, but insufficient orientation to who to expect

at his doorstep and how to identify them shaped his less cautious response to screening guests at his door. On the other hand, Ken's experience as an international student in Japan and his observations of Japanese norms informed his understanding of being approached by strangers as uncommon. Ken's prior U.S. experience also helped him determine how to respond to the religious group members.

Through the reflexive processes over their instance(s) of interaction with the religious groups, the participants further established their expectations and orientations for future engagements in Japan. Ruby, having encountered the same religious group members multiple times and with improved Japanese proficiency, anticipated the constraints of her foreigner identity on the degree to which the interaction could expand. Subsequently, Ruby adopted a more careless stance, moving away from self-imposed politeness and friendliness and making more agentive sociopragmatic observations. In contrast, Alex became more attentive to strangers following repeated visits and communication from the religious group. Ken, though initially silent, expressed a willingness to engage more actively in such interactions, seeing them as learning opportunities. These findings highlight the ongoing nature of agency in sociopragmatic development. Learners continually negotiate their identities and agency in response to evolving experiences and aspirations. As such, the findings underscore the significance of examining the processual and reflexive aspects of learner agency in shaping sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies over time. Together with the findings from the second research question, we highlight learner agency as spatial and temporally situated.

Based on these findings, the current study contributes to an understanding of the ecological, spatial, and temporal dimensions of language learner agency through the in-depth examination of the interplay between language learner agency and contextual factors. In particular, through the employment of CDST and its conceptual attributes, this study not only addressed the dynamic nature of agency but also uncovered the complex processes in which our participants enacted their agency and navigated their L2 sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies in response to varying spatial, temporal, social, and interpersonal contexts. Thus, this study argues the necessity of not merely identifying different contextual factors that shape language learner agency but also how these factors are temporally and spatially situated, configured, and made relevant by language learners and their interlocutors in the immediate settings of the interactions. Also, this study calls for the importance of investigating the process of how language learners orient to various contextual factors and what guides such orientations.

Empirically, the current study's focus on language learners' interactions with strangers provided an intriguing case and context. Despite the infrequent occurrence of such interactions in language learners' everyday lives in the target language community, these interactions held importance, as they impacted shifts in the participants' pre-established intercultural understanding of Japanese people in general, as well as perceptions of interactional and sociopragmatic norms.

Yet, such interactions may not fully capture the longitudinal consequences of shifting sociopragmatic perceptions and strategies that have noteworthy implications for participants' social integration and professional advancement. Indeed, although the participants shared feeling increasingly uncomfortable about being repeatedly approached by a religious group in the interviews, they did not indicate asking for any help from their institutions or instructors in handling the situations, which may suggest relatively little impactfulness of the interactions on their academic or professional lives. Thus, for future research, we could explore more impactful interactional contexts, for instance, within academic or professional settings that better reflect the potential and longitudinal consequences of language learners' shifting sociopragmatic choices and resulting shifts in agency, identity, and positioning in the target language community.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could track learners' sociopragmatic development over extended periods to capture the evolving nature of their identities and agency within diverse sociocultural contexts. The longitudinal studies can be conducted by incorporating

other types of qualitative methods and data sources, including ethnographic observations and recording of naturally occurring social interactions. Such future endeavors would provide deeper insights into the complex interplay between language learner agency, pragmatic choices, and identity negotiation.

7. Conclusions

Informed by L2 pragmatics studies of agency taking a poststructuralist lens, this study expanded the discussion of the intricate relationship between language learner agency and the multifaceted contextual factors inherent in specific interactional settings. In doing so, this study focused on the language learner agency in the negotiation of sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies in the study abroad setting. To capture the ecological nature of language learner agency as a complex system, we adopted Larsen-Freeman's (2019) CDST and uncovered the dynamic ways in which language learner agency emerges from the individual learners' interaction with social structures.

The detailed analysis of the students' accounts of their interactions in Japan from a holistic and ecological perspective unpacked the dynamic and reflexive processes in which language learners enact their agency in adapting their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies differently. Despite the similarities in the interactional contexts where they all were approached by religious group members in Japan, the participants' sociopragmatic interpretations and decision-making processes varied by the interplay between their agency and various contextual factors in specific interactional settings. The students directed, adapted, and adjusted their orientations to different contextual factors afforded in particular interactions, including spatial settings and arrangements, as well as identities of themselves and their interlocutors. Such divergent orientations were temporally situated and rooted in the students' preunderstandings of sociopragmatic norms, historically and culturally established from their backgrounds and past experiences, as well as their expectations of how they want the interactions to unfold and how they aspire to engage in similar interactions in the future.

Based on these findings, this study provided a complex picture of the dialogic and dynamic relationship between language learner agency and contextual factors, particularly in the negotiation of sociopragmatic understandings and strategies. The findings of this study not only address the dynamic nature of agency but also elucidate the complicated processes of how language learners navigate diverse spatial, temporal, and interpersonal contexts in adapting their sociopragmatic interpretations and strategies.

Accordingly, this study argues for an ecological, holistic, and processual examination of language learner agency and its implications for learners' sociopragmatic development. It is imperative to conduct a detailed examination and articulation of learner agency for a nuanced understanding of how various contextual factors are configured and navigated over different moments of interactions and shape language learners' dynamic negotiation of agency in their sociopragmatic interpretations and choices. Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of taking the processual perspective to unfold an ongoing process in which learners orient to different contextual factors and the guiding spatiotemporal dynamics behind such orientations.

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