A Socio-pragmatic Exploration into the Realization of the Prefabricated Expressions *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* by Japanese L2 Users of English

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Abstract

This study explores how Japanese second language (JL2) users of English distinctively realize the prefabricated English expressions *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* in different social scenes. The inappropriate use of those functionally similar expressions has been observed in class by English teachers. However, there have been very few empirical studies which investigated how L2 users of English recognize each of these expressions as distinct by virtue of differences in functions according to various social scenes. 37 JL2 users of English were given two pencil-and-paper tasks. The results showed that the participants had rudimentary socio-pragmatic ideas related to the use of the prefabricated expressions. However, the range of functions they recognized for each of the expressions was very limited. There was also a case where they had difficulty in choosing *I'm sorry* for a fairly serious matter. This means that though JL2 users at the college level have minimum knowledge as to the use of prefabricated expressions, they still lack in understanding the multi-functional nature of them. It was concluded from these results that to overcome this weakness in their socio-pragmatic competence they need to have more language using experience with metapragmatic awareness in real communicative situations.

1. Introduction

The Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has encouraged English teachers at all school levels to emphasize the importance of second language (L2) users' acquiring socio-pragmatic competence which allows them to use the language appropriately according to various social contexts (MEXT, 2017). Along with such an educational context, the importance of prefabricated routines/patterns or lexical phrases, which are understood or produced as an unanalyzed chunk, not by being configurated by grammar from a scratch, has increasingly attracted much attention among applied linguists, cognitive psychologists and language teachers (Murahata, 2018;

Murahata & Murahata, 2017; Perera-Shibata, 2015; Tomasello, 2003). Among those are the expressions for apologizing, greeting, requesting, sympathizing or thanking.

One of the important reasons of why those expressions play an important role in the language acquisition process is in their transparent nature of the relationship between their forms and functions (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992 ; Murahata, 2018; Perera-Shibata, 2015; Takahashi & Murahata, 2018; Tomasello, 2003). In other words, because of their clarity which pertains to when, in what scenes, with what functions they are used, those who learn their either first or second language find the expressions undemanding to retrieve from the memory and therefore easy to acquire.

Having such an important role in language acquisition, some prefabricated expressions have similar communicative functions but do differ from each other in their use in a certain linguistic context. *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* for remedy or dismay/regret/sympathy functions are among such examples (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Kido & Sanderson, 2014; Limberg, 2015). The inappropriate use of each of those functionally similar expressions, for apology alone for example, has been observed by English teachers and applied linguists (Abe, 2017; Berman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Dalilan, 2012; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1995; Kitao & Kitao, 2013; Nakano, Miyasaka & Yamazaki, 2000; Wu & Wang, 2016). Among others, for example, Nakano, Miyasaka and Yamazaki (2000) gave 378 Japanese college students learning English as a foreign language an open-ended DCT for apologies. They found that their participants confused *Excuse me* with *I'm sorry* and vice versa, both of which can be translated into Japanese as すみません (*Sumimasen*).

However, there have been few empirical studies which examined how L2 users of English distinctively use those prefabricated expressions in accordance with appropriate communicative scenes. Though Nakano, Miyasaka and Yamazaki (2000) found in L2 users' open-ended discourse completion data some sort of confusion between *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* as mentioned above, they didn't show whether or not the Japanese participants understood certain gaps in socio-pragmatic features between them. Therefore, this study, from a socio-pragmatic perspective, tries to examine empirically how distinctively JL2 users of English realize those prefabricated expressions of similar functions in particular social scenes by using two tasks, a translation task and a multiple-choice, not open-ended, DCT.

2. Socio-pragmatic features of *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry*

2.1 Inappropriate realization of *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* by L2 users

It has been reported that L2 users of English realize inappropriately *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* in such scenes as below (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978: 58):

(1) *Excuse me. I'd like to go but I don't have time.
(2) *I'm sorry, but it is time to finish.

According to Borkin and Reinhart (1978), *I'm sorry* is more acceptable than *Excuse me* in (1) because of the latter's offensive connotation in the scene. On the other hand, *Excuse me* is more appropriate than *I'm sorry* in (2) when the student lets the teacher know that the class time is over. *I'm sorry* sounds more bumptious in that context of situation, though the simple word *Sorry* would be accepted in (2) to make it a different story (Limberg, 2015).

As described above, there seem to be some socio-pragmatic functional features which distinguish *Excuse me* from *I'm sorry*, and even *I'm sorry* from *Sorry* in certain ways. In the next section that follows, we will briefly review some of the important socio-pragmatic features behind those prefabricated expressions which make a difference in certain communicative scenes.

2.2 Differences in socio-pragmatic functions between *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry*

Both *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* are those prefabricated expressions which basically function as 'remedy' in a social context (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Kido & Sanderson, 2014). In other words, they serve as the speaker's initial step to repair a socially violated conduct, which was or will be a potential offence toward his or her interlocutor. They minimize social infractions by apologizing for a speaker's past conduct or by asking for an interlocutor's permission to do a conduct which will potentially violate the rights of the person (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Kido & Sanderson, 2014).

However, applied linguists have insisted that there are some important differences between *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* from a socio-pragmatic perspective. Firstly, *Excuse me* is more often used as so-called a precursor to a certain social infraction (Aijmer, 1996; Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Kido & Sanderson, 2014). That is why in scene (2) shown in the previous section *Excuse me* is rather preferred to *I'm sorry*. The student's remedial expression precedes a potentially social offensive utterance to the teacher "but it is time to finish". According to Aijmer (1996), the simple adjective *Sorry* as a prefabricated expression, usually with a rising intonation, can function in the scene just like *Excuse me*. Therefore, it can be observed that the expression *Sorry* is not just a contracted form of *I'm sorry* but a separate linguistic form having a different socio-pragmatic function. In contrast, *I'm sorry* is more acceptable than *Excuse me* after a certain social infraction as the sentences below show:

(3) *Excuse me, but I couldn't go shopping with you yesterday.
(4) I'm sorry that I couldn't go shopping with you yesterday.

Secondly, another important difference between *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* is that while the former is restricted to remedy, the latter can also be used as dismay, regret or sympathy. For example, *I'm sorry* in scene (5) (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978: 60) functions not as remedy, but as kind of sympathy expressing pity or sorrow on the speaker's part.

(5) A: I don't know if you've heard or not, but I didn't get my Rackham Grant.
B: Oh, I didn' t know. I'm sorry.

What *I'm sorry* in (5) conveys is not apology for not having known ("Oh, I didn't know") that the speaker B couldn't get the grant, but sympathy for the speaker A's not to able to get the grant ("I didn't get my Rackham Grant"). Consider the following interaction (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978: 60):

(6) A: I'm sorry Al didn't contact Ralph. We need his input on the committee.
B: I'm sorry, too.

Neither *I'm sorry* in this interchange can be interpreted as apology, but dismay that Al didn't contact Ralph. *I'm sorry* in this case can be regarded therefore as "an expression of dismay or regret at an unpleasantness suffered by the speaker and/or the addressee" (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978: 61). I'm deeply sorry in (7) below, from Kido and Sanderson (2014: 93), evidently shows the speaker's deep sympathy, not remedy of any kind, toward the interlocutor:

(7) Cindy, I've heard about your grandmother. I'm deeply sorry.

The first sentence of (7) implies that something serious happened to Cindy's grandmother, like being seriously injured in an accident or passing away.

Those differences described so far can be summarized as in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Socio-pragmatic features of *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* (✔=applicable)

Function		Time	*Excuse me*	*I'm sorry*	Example
Remedy	Apology	APT	✔	✔	Oh, *excuse me*. I didn't know anyone was here. *I'm really sorry*. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.
	Self-correction	APT	✔	✔	Please come to the meeting at ten, *excuse me*, nine. I get to San Antonio at 9:00 AM, *sorry*, 9:00 PM.
	Surprise/ Upset	APT	✔	✔	'You're going to pay, right?' '*Excuse me?* 'I'm hungry.' '*I'm sorry?*
	Asking for Repeat	APT	✔	✔	'What time is it?' '*Excuse me?* 'You're in my seat.' '*I'm sorry?*
	Disagreement	ANT	✔		*Excuse me*, but I don't think that's what he meant at all.
		APT		✔	*I'm sorry*, but I find that very hard to believe, Miss Brannigan.
	Getting Attention†	ANT	✔		*Excuse me*, can you tell me the way to the station?

	Asking for a Permission of Leaving a Place	ANT	✔		*Excuse me* a moment. I'll be right back.
Dismay/Regret/ Sympathy	Refusal/ Regret	APT		✔	'Are you coming to lunch?' '*Sorry*, no. I've got to finish this work.'
	Sympathy	APT		✔	Cindy, I've heard about your grandmother. *I'm deeply sorry.*

Note: †*(I'm) sorry* is sometimes used for getting an attention of someone who is a very close friend to the speaker (Kido & Sanderson, 2014); APT= a posteriori, ANT= anticipatory.

One important functional feature applicable to *I'm sorry* should be mentioned here. As described above, *I'm sorry* is not necessarily used as remedy but is often used as dismay, regret or sympathy. However, it is not always appropriate to use *I'm sorry* for sympathy as the following interchanges below show:

(8) A: I have so much homework to do!
B: *I'm sorry.
B: That's too bad.
(9) A: My grandfather passed away last week.
B: I'm sorry.
B: *That's too bad.

Applicability or inapplicability of *I'm sorry* to these interchanges illuminates the fact that the prefabricated sympathetic expression is rather restricted to extremely serious matters such as condolences on the death of another person's relative (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Yagi, 2004) or the speaker's deepest sympathy for another person's unfortunate, say, an unexpected dismissal from employment. This restriction of use can be confusing for JL2 users of English because we often say お気の毒です (*O-kinodoku-desu*), お気の毒に (*O-kinodoku-ni*) or 気の毒 (*Kinodoku*) in both (7) and (8) scenes in Japanese. We can find such a Japanese translation equivalent for both *I'm sorry* and *That's too bad* in contemporary English-Japanese dictionaries published in Japan such as *Wisdom English-Japanese Dictionary* (Inoue & Akano, 2019).

Another interesting difference between the two prefabricated expressions arises from what the speaker's main concern is. *Excuse me* seems more appropriate for remedy of a concern "about a rule violation on his or her part, while *I'm sorry* is used in remedial interchanges when the speaker's main concern is about a violation of another person's rights or damage to another person's feelings" (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978: 61). That is to say, as Borkin and Reinhart (1978) mention, the fundamental concern behind *Excuse me* is 'I'm in danger of breaking a social rule' or breaching an etiquette while the fundamental concern behind *I'm sorry* is 'You are or you may be hurt' as described in Table 2.

Table 2 Main concerns of *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* (✔=applicable)

Main concern	*Excuse me*	*I'm sorry*	Example
Breach of etiquette on the speaker's part	✔		*Excuse me*, I didn't see you there.
Violation of another person's rights or damage of another person's feelings		✔	*I'm sorry* I have kept you waiting.

In other words, *Excuse me* has much to do with the speaker's relation to a social convention while *I'm sorry* has much to do with the speaker's relation to another person (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978), being often used in the scene of substantive offenses (House, 1988).

3. The study

3.1 Participants

In order to explore how JL2 users of English realize *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* in particular social scenes, 37 Japanese college first year students majoring elementary or junior high school education at a national university taking a mandatory English class in the same class, participated in this study. Since they are randomly enrolled for the class by the academic affairs office, their levels of English vary widely. For example, some have already passed the pre-first grade of the STEP test or obtained over 180 (max=200) of the University Entrance Center Exam (approximately over 700 of the TOEIC test), others are not good at English at all with less than 90 of the University Entrance Center Exam. The degree of their motivation for learning English also greatly varies. Some of them study English hard in and out of the classroom because of their willingness to study abroad as an exchange student, and others have little motivation to study English, taking the class just because it is one of the courses required for the completion of the bachelor's degree.

3.2 Tasks

They performed two tasks, a translation task and a multiple-choice discourse completion (DCT) task, both of which were specially designed for this study.

3.2.1 The translation task

The participants were required to put the following English expressions into Japanese. The purpose of this task is to see how each of the participants understands (2) (7) (8) as target expressions below.

(1) Thank you. _____
(2) I'm sorry. _____
(3) What's the matter? _____

(4) You're welcome. _____
(5) Congratulations! _____
(6) Don't worry. _____
(7) Excuse me. _____
(8) That's too bad. _____
(9) Is that right? _____
(10) See you. _____

Other expressions were given as distractors. As described in the previous section, we can expect (2) *I'm sorry* to be translated as 'remedy' basically for a posteriori-infraction apology (ごめんなさい (*Gomen-nasai*), すみません (*Sumimasen*), 何ですって (*Nandesutte*), いや (*Iya*)) or 'dismay/regret/sympathy' (お気の毒です (*O-kinodoku-desu*)); (7) *Excuse me* as 'remedy' for a posteriori- or anticipatory-infraction apology (すみません (*Sumimasen*), ちょっと、失礼 (*Chotto-Shitsurei*), 失礼します (*Shitsurei-shimasu*), もう一度いってくれませんか (*Mouichido-itte-kuremasenka*), 何ですって (*Nandesutte*), いや (*Iya*)); *That's too bad* as それは残念 (困った、気の毒) だ (*Sore wa zan'en (komatta, kinodoku) da*).

3.2.2 The multiple-choice DCT

A multiple-choice DCT was given to the participants. One of the advantages of the multiple-choice DCT over the open-ended DCT is that the former can elicit language users' distinctive knowledge as to the socio-pragmatic competence by selecting one expression out of some options in a particular scene while the latter can elicit naturalistic performance of language users in a particular communicative scene. In the latter type DCT it is rather difficult to decide whether they wrote a particular expression only by chance or they knew the expression was more appropriate than other options having similar communicative functions.

Below are four different scenes of the multiple-choice DCT used in this study.

Scene (1): Student A deeply sighs saying "I have so much homework to do" and then Student B responds:

A: I have so much homework to do!
B: _____ (I'm sorry/Excuse me/That's too bad).

Scene (2): Office worker A tries to invite Co-worker B to dinner saying "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?" and Co-worker B responds with some words precedent to "I' d like to go but I don't have time":

A: Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?
B: _____ (I'm sorry/Excuse me/That's too bad).
I'd like to go but I don't have time.

Scene (3): When Teacher A doesn't know class time is over and tries to keep the class going, Student B says to Teacher A with some words precedent to "but it is time to finish":

A: OK, I have one more thing to talk about.
B: _____ (I'm sorry/Excuse me/That's too bad),
but it is time to finish.

Scene (4): Student A says to Student B "My grandfather passed away last week" and Student B responds:

A: My grandfather passed away last week.
B: _____ (I'm sorry/Excuse me/That's too bad).

In Scene (1) *That's too bad* is more appropriate than the other two, based on Barkin and Reinhart's (1978) view and the review of the features in Table 1, because *Excuse me* is hardly used as dismay or sympathy and *I'm sorry* sounds too serious. In Scene (2) *I'm sorry* is more acceptable because the response should be the one which immediately follows the (a posteriori) invitation. In Scene (3) *Excuse me* is more appropriate because the utterance anticipates a light social infraction that follows. Finally, in Scene (4) *I'm sorry* is the best option because fairly serious Student A's disclosure, the death of Student A's grandfather, precedes the Student B' utterance.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The translation task

Table 3 shows the results of the translation task. As you can see, the majority of the translations for *Excuse me*, 33 out of 37 (89.2%), was すみません (*Sumimasen*) which can be used as Apology or Disagreement. On the other hand, the token of anticipatory-breaching-etiquettes was 2 out of 37 (5.4%), that is, すみません（尋ねる）(*Sumimasen (Tazuneru)*) and ちょっと、すみませんが (*Chotto, sumimasen ga*), which can be used as Getting Attention or Asking for a Permission of Leaving a Place. All of these translations fall into the remedy category. However, there were no translations found for Asking for Repeat, Surprise/Upset and Self-Correction, which are also categorized as remedy in Table 1. This means that the Japanese participants recognized the function of *Excuse me* to be solely Apology or Disagreement, not the other functions described in Table 1.

Table 3 Japanese Translations for *Excuse me*, *I'm sorry* and *That's too bad* (N=37)

	Japanese Translation	Token
Excuse me	すみません (*Sumimasen*)	33
	すみません（尋ねる）(*Sumimasen (Tazuneru)*)	1
	失礼 (*Shitsurei*)	1
	ちょっと、すみませんが (*Chotto, suminasen ga*)	1
	失礼します (*Shitsurei shimasu*)	1
	ちょっと、失礼 (*Chotto shitsurei*)	0
	もう一度いってくれませんか (*Mouichido itte kuremasen ka*)	0
	何ですって　(*Nandesutte*)	0
	いや (*Iya*)	0
I'm sorry	ごめんなさい (*Gomen nasai*)	34
	すみません (*Sumimasen*)	2
	申し訳ありません (*Moushiwake arimasen*)	1
	何ですって (*Nandesutte*)	0
	お気の毒です (*O kinodoku desu*)	0
	いや (*Iya*)	0
That's too bad	それは残念だ (*Sore wa zan'en da*)	8
	それは気の毒だ (*Sore wa kinodoku da*)	6
	それはよくないね (Sore wa yokunai ne)	4
	それはあまりにもひどい (*Sore wa amarinimo hidoi*)	3
	あーあ (*Ah-a*)	1
	おもしろくない (*Omoshirokunai*)	1
	かわいそうに (*Kawaisouni*)	1
	最悪だ (*Saiakuda*)	1
	すごく悪い (*Sugoku warui*)	1
	それは災難だ (*Sore wa sainan da*)	1
	それはだめです (*Sore wa dame desu*)	1
	それは悪いことをしました (*Sore wa waruikoto wo shimashita*)	1
	それは悪すぎる (*Sore wa warusugiru*)	1
	それは嫌ですね (*Sore wa iya desu*)	1
	どんまい (*Don mai*)	1
	なんてことだ (*Nante koto da*)	1
	もうしわけない (*Moushiwakenai*)	1
	悪くない (*Warukunai*)	1
	悪すぎる (*Warusugiru*)	1
	それは困った (*Sore wa komatta*)	0

Note: One participant didn't write any Japanese translation for *That's too bad*, which makes the token for the expression 36 in total.

As for the Japanese translation for *I'm sorry*, ごめんなさい (*Gomen nasai*) was the most frequent one, 34 out of 37 (91.9%), used as Apology or Disagreement for remedy and Refusal/Regret for dismay/regret/sympathy. However, no translations were found as to Self-Correction, Surprise/Upset and Asking for Repeat for remedy, and Sympathy for dismay/regret/sympathy. These results imply either of the potential possibilities that none of the Japanese participants couldn't retrieve from their memories translation equivalents

adequate for Self-Correction (いや (*Iya*)), Surprise/Upset (何ですって (*Nandesutte*)), Asking for Repeat (もう一度言ってくれませんか (*Mouichido itte kuremasen ka*)) and Sympathy (お気の毒です (*O kinodoku desu*)) functions or they just had no ideas about those socio-pragmatic functions which the expression *I'm sorry* realizes in particular social scenes.

Concerning the translation in Japanese for *That's too bad*, as Table 3 shows, the participants' translations varied widely compared with the other two prefabricated expressions. Nevertheless, Japanese translations to express sympathy for something bad or unhappy which happens to the interlocutor accounted for more than half of the total token (21 out of 36, 58.3%): それは残念だ (Sore wa zan'en da) (8), それは気の毒だ (*Sore wa kinodoku da*) (6), それはよくないね (*Sore wa yokunai ne*) (4) and それはあまりにもひどい (*Sore wa amarinimo hidoi*) (3). Considering no sympathetic translations found in the case of *I'm sorry*, we can expect that on taking the DCT the participants will choose *That's too bad*, instead of *I'm sorry*, even in a particular scene where a fairly serious matter happened to the interlocutor.

4.2 The multiple-choice DCT

The results of the multiple-choice DCT are shown in Figure 1. As for the results of the first three scenes, our Japanese participants chose the adequate expression for each of the scenes: That's too bad, 37 out of 37 (100%) in Scene (1); *I'm sorry*, 36 out of 37 (97.3%) in Scene (2); *Excuse me*, 34 out of 37 (91.9%) in Scene (3). These results clearly show that the participants have basic ideas as to the core function each of the prefabricated expressions performs in a social scene.

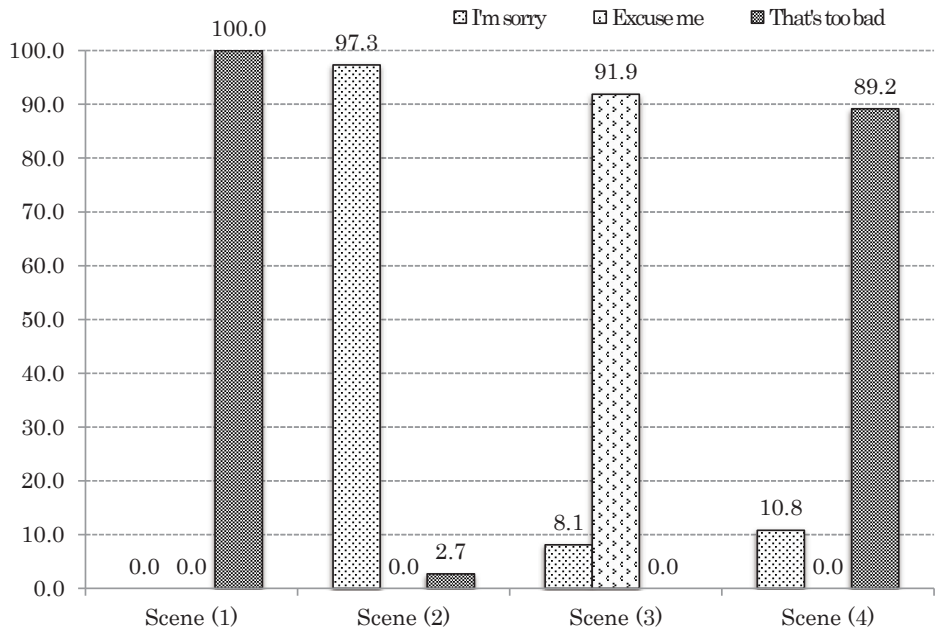

Figure 1 Choice rate for each of the prefabricated expressions in four scenes (N=37)

On the other hand, as you can see in Figure 1, Scene (4) depicts a completely different picture. That is, only four participants out of the 37 (10.8%) chose the adequate expression *I'm sorry* and 33 out of 37 (89.2%) chose *That's too bad*, which can be used as sympathy, but not as deep sympathy for fairly serious matters such as someone's death. We can speculate from these results that the Japanese participants haven't acquired a functional difference in socio-pragmatic usage between *I'm sorry* and That's too bad, which will be realized according to how serious, light or deep, the matter is.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to examine how JL2 users of English realize the functionally similar prefabricated English expressions *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* in particular social scenes. Though those two prefabricated expressions share similar functions, they do have some distinctive socio-pragmatic features of their own which make them adequate or inadequate according to certain social scenes.

To sum up, the results of the translation task indicate that the JL2 participants have rudimentary knowledge as to the meanings of those expressions, but the range of functions they recognize for each of the expressions is narrow. For example, they mentioned in the task only two out of seven functions for *Excuse me*, as described in Table 1, only three out of seven for *I'm sorry* respectively. Furthermore, the results of the multiple-choice DCT show that the majority of the participants have difficulty in making clear socio-pragmatic distinctions which lie between the two prefabricated expressions. That is, most of them chose *That's too bad* even for a mentally very serious social scene, the death of the speaker's grandfather, which is usually unacceptable from a socio-pragmatic perspective. If this is the case, on using the expression in such a social scene, the JL2 users of English, if not all, will socio-pragmatically give their interlocutor the impression that they take the very serious matter as not a deep but small or trivial concern. This might lead to a communication breakdown which may cause a serious destruction of personal relationship between them.

As mentioned at the onset of this paper, prefabricated expressions play an important role in the language acquisition process. However, in order for JL2 users of English to be able to use them appropriately in various social scenes, they have to get used to in what condition each of the expressions is used in a particular social situation. Based on the results of this study summarized above, it is safe to say that the JL2 users lack in understanding the multiple functional nature of the expressions and therefore they have difficulty in choosing an adequate expression, say, *I'm sorry* instead of *That's too bad* for a fairly serious social matter.

What seems to be the problem behind this weakness in their socio-pragmatic competence is definitely insufficiency of pragmatic experience of using those prefabricated expressions in various socio-pragmatic scenes. More language using experience with

metapragmatic awareness such as input enhancement (Takahashi, 2001) or explicit teaching (Tateyama, 2001) in real communicative situations will help L2 users develop their pragmatic competence as to when, to whom, for what purpose (meaning to convey), which prefabricated expression to use and with what concern each of the prefabricated expressions is used appropriately in a particular social scene.

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