The Role of Prior & Actual Situational Context in Routine Comprehension by Chinese Learners of English: The Effect of Proficiency & Study-Abroad Experience

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Abstract

This study explored the role of prior (PC) and actual situational context (ASC) in decontextualized routine comprehension under the effect of proficiency and study-abroad (SA) experience. A pilot study was initially conducted with 41 native English speakers to determine the target responses as the baseline. Definitions and examples were elicited through a 7-item oral, computer-animated comprehension task completed by 143 Chinese learners of English using "Nawmal", an internet-based animated movie site. Elicited definitions were utilized to investigate meanings that learners assigned to routines based on their PC knowledge, and examples were elicited to detect the functional use to which participants put routines in a fictitious conversation in an ASC. Proficiency bore a negligible relation to routine comprehension alongside any required context knowledge, but SA experience played a decisive role at most levels. Participants tended to offer plausible definitions of routines based on their PC knowledge instead of providing made-up examples that fit within an ASC. Plausible definition-example mappings indispensably resided in the interplay between learners' actual situational and prior context knowledge.

Keywords: routine comprehension; prior & actual situational context; Chinese learners of English; proficiency; study-abroad experience

1. Introduction

Routines, as a general term, are predominantly referred to in the L2 pragmatics literature as recurrent expressions whose occurrence is closely bound to specific situations and communicative functions (Bardovi-Harlig 2012). Routines include "situational routines", similar to the situation-bound utterances proposed by Kecskes (2013, etc), which are tied to specific situations ("*For here or to go?*"), and "functional routines", in line with speech formulas ("*That works for me*") that are not (specifically) situation-bound (Roever 2005, 2012). "Pragmatic comprehension", as the focus of "receptive pragmatic competence" (Ren 2015: 20), refers to the ability to comprehend meaning as intended (Schauer 2009), and it is mainly the role and mechanism of learners' prior and situational context knowledge in this "decontextualized comprehension task" that is explored. From the perspective of the socio-cognitive approach (SCA, proposed by Kecskes), prior experience, some degree of familiarity with routines, that becomes

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declarative knowledge in our mind is tied to the meaning values of lexical units constituting utterances produced by interlocutors. In contrast, the current experience is represented in the actual situational context (procedural knowledge, out there in the world) in which communication takes place and which is interpreted (often differently) by interlocutors (Kecskes 2013: 129). The two sources of knowledge are interwoven and inseparable and play a crucial role in routine comprehension. The process of situational meaning construction includes both "unpacking" (stored private contexts expressed in meaning values of lexical units) and "constructing" (interplay of private contexts of interlocutors with the actual situational context) (Kecskes 2013). Particularly when an explicit context is not available, the meaning is constructed from stored knowledge originating in prior experience during the process of routine comprehension. Inferred meaning is the reflection of the interplay between the prior experience of the speaker and prior experience of the hearer in an actual situational context (Kecskes 2013, 2019; Kecskes, et al. 2018). To date, little research has

been devoted to examining L2 learners' receptive pragmatic competence concerning routines in the SA context, let alone its interactions with general proficiency from the socio-cognitive approach (SCA). Additionally, task modalities in previous studies have not focused on interpreting the meaning of a routine and being able to use it. To fill this void, this study investigates the ability to utilize PC and ASC knowledge to comprehend routines by Chinese learners of English under different grouping variables.

2. Literature Review

L2 pragmatics research is skewed toward learners' productive pragmatic competence (Ren 2018: 126), but it has not been actively observed in the scope of routine comprehension, nor has there been an exploration of how meaning affects learners' pragmatic use of an expression (Bardovi-Harlig 2014: 42). Factors such as proficiency, learning environment (at home or abroad), length of residence, and intensity of interaction have all been hypothesized to play a role in the acquisition of pragmatic routines (Bardovi-Harlig 2019: 52). It is clear from a review of previous studies that proficiency is, of course, one crucial factor, but not the only factor, and pragmatic abilities can also fully develop through socialization in the host environment. These factors are often difficult to tease apart.

Prior literature has documented that comprehension of routines is strongly affected by SA experience but may reveal no significant interaction with proficiency. The advantage of the SA context (cf. Taguchi & Roever 2017: 223-225) in routine comprehension makes intuitive sense, considering the ubiquitous nature of routines that are community-wide in use and tied to ordinary speech events. In practice, the appropriate use of language within a speech community depends on conventions, norms, beliefs, expectations, and knowledge of the preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts (Kecskes 2007). Through engagement in situations where routines frequently occur, nonnative speakers are warranted to better understand the function of highly context-dependent, culture-specific routines. Roever (2005) was the first to focus on investigating the comprehension of routines by a 12-routine-item written task that involved inferring the meaning from the context. A remarkable SA effect on routine comprehension was observed, while proficiency was not affected. Furthermore, the advantage of SA expeience was also supported by Taguchi's (2011a) study employing a listening

task. EFL learners who had studied abroad outperformed their no-SA counterparts on routine comprehension.

Conversely, some researchers have provided counter-evidence that SA experience, as a disputable variable, does not always play a predominant role in routine comprehension. In fact, "conceptual socialization" (Kecskes & Papp 2000) is entirely different from "language socialization". During the former process, the L1-dominated conceptual base of a bilingual is being gradually restructured, making space for and engaging with the new knowledge and information coming through the second language channel (Kecskes 2003; Ortactepe 2012). The latter, by contrast, depends on the acquisition of what is expected to be said in particular situations and what kind of language behavior is considered appropriate in the given speech community (Kecskes 2013: 71). Hence, for nonnative speakers, frequent encounters with routines may be considered insufficient to change socio-pragmatic norms and conventions concerning appropriateness developed through L1 (Kecskes 2015: 421). Moreover, individual willingness and motivation can have crucial effects as well. In addition, the length of SA experience is often confounded with proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig 2019: 52) because of insufficient exposure to authentic input or poor engagement in target SA programs (Halenko 2018). Specifically, international visiting students are often unable to successfully formulate typical speech acts, despite achieving an appropriate level of grammatical and linguistic proficiency (Halenko & Jones 2011). To facilitate context-free exploration, Bardovi-Harlig (2008) posited the revised Vocabulary Knowledge Scale. This tool was modified and expanded in her subsequent research (2014), where 113 EFL learners in 4 different class levels participated in a 22-item aural task. The findings indicated that plausible meanings may be gradually associated with a routine and refined rather than acquired at the same time as the form of the expression.

To summarize, the studies on the effect of SA experience on learners' receptive pragmatic competence of routines have yielded mixed findings; however, few studies have responded to this issue by investigating how the various factors interact in determining the decontextualized comprehension of routines. From the research perspective, while the existing studies have shed light on the investigation of routine comprehension in L2 or interlanguage pragmatics, the gaps addressed in the prior section indicate that as a

field, there are only a restricted number of studies that extend their paradigm to the theory of context knowledge. In addition, many questions about the mechanism of PC and ASC knowledge in meaning inference and expression usage have not been fully answered yet. Research should be expanded to embrace a wider range of subjects, such as Chinese learners of English with different levels of proficiency because the vast majority of L2 pragmatics studies involve learners with a European language or Japanese as their first language (Ren 2015: 4). Regarding research instruments, computer-animated testing tools, compared with the previously adopted tools, should be strongly advocated for their authenticity and other benefits. With the above themes in mind, the present section aims to address the following research questions:

1) To what extent do proficiency, SA experience, and their combination influence the holistic decontextualized comprehension of routines?
2) What is the overall trend of PC and ASC in learners' comprehension of routines under different grouping variables?
3) What is the specific effect on learners' routine comprehension of PC and ASC according to groups of various variables?

3. Methodology
3.1 Participants

The participants were 143 Chinese students of English who took part in this experiment and were divided into three groups (Table 1). Fifty-one Group 1 (G1) test takers were all third-year English major undergraduates studying at certain universities in China. They had a relatively low EP because they had only passed the Test for English Majors, Band 4 (TEM-4). The G1 students had never lived or studied in an English-speaking country. A total of 59 Chinese master's degree students in Group 2 (G2) were also English majors and had passed TEM-8, the highest national English test in mainland China. Group 3 (G3) comprised 33 Chinese master's and doctoral degree learners majoring in world history, philosophy, accounting, management, business, educational psychology, etc., who were enrolling in diverse SA programs at the time of data collection and had previously taken either the TOEFL or the IELTS. SA experience was processed in months as their length of stay in the target language environment.

Table 1. **Participant Information**

	Group 1 (n = 51)	Group 2 (n = 59)	Group 3 (n = 33)
Average age (range)	21.08 (20-23)	23.32 (23-25)	27.50 (22-36)
Gender (male: female)	4:47	7:52	9:24
Prior formal study of English (SD)	12.18 years (2.33)	14.00 years (2.59)	15.33 years (6.65)
EP	TEM 4 Average: 65.50 (SD = 5.56; range: 60-80)	TEM 8 Average: 69.00 (SD = 5.30; range: 60-82)	TOEFL (n = 6) Average: 89.33 (SD = 3.77; range: 83-94); IELTS (n = 27) Average: 6.83 (SD = 0.24; range: 6.0-8.0)
Length of SA experience	None	None	Average: 10.60 months (SD = 7.43, range: 2-27 months)

3.2 Instrumentation

The target expressions were extracted from previous studies in L2 pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig 2014; Roever 2005, 2012), including compromised items, such as "*Here you go.*", "*All yours.*", "*That works for me.*", "*For here or to go?*", "*Do you think you can make it?*", "*Excuse the mess.*", and "*Thanks for having me.*", on which learners manifested both low production and recognition. All the expressions featured nontransparent compositional meaning and low recognition and production.

This computer-animated comprehension task (CACT) was administered via an internet-based animated movie site (www.nawmal.com). Various animated scenarios were created, which "eliminates the potential for learners to infer meaning from (actual situational) contexts provided by test stimuli" (Bardovi-Harlig 2014: 43). This CACT and the accompanying audio-visual support can improve the authenticity and realistic effect of the interaction. In addition, this task modality can lower the affective filter, as learners do not feel pressure to produce grammatically accurate language in comparison to written tasks. This study, in contrast to previous studies, adopted this newly modified four-option man-machine oral

test to assess learners' diverse pragmatic comprehension knowledge of routines in various test stages. Figure 1 presents a still image of one of

the testing scenarios, "*All yours*", in the CACT, which was devised using this technology.

Instructions: "Choose ONE answer that best describes your context knowledge. 'All yours.' (.5s) 'All yours.'"

A. I don't remember having heard this expression before.

B. I have heard this expression before, but I don't know what it means;

C. I have heard this expression before, and perhaps it means ____;

D. I know this expression. It means____ and use it to give an example in a specific context.

Figure 1. **A CACT Example Item: "*All yours.*"**

The self-paced task was conducted in the language lab. Each expression was presented both aurally and visually twice with a 0.5-second timed interval to match the modes across the whole task. Following an initial instructional slide, all the respondents (except G3, who performed the task using "www.wjx.cn" online), seated in one-row intervals to avoid the disturbance of overlapping sounds during the transcription process, were required to provide an oral response from four options. All participants were allowed 30 seconds to complete each task and had a 10-second timed interval within which to respond before the next scenario was automatically presented. Prior to the formal test phase, this process was first demonstrated with a practice animated scenario. All their oral responses were recorded by the computer terminal device and then transcribed by 3-4 experienced researchers into textual data for further analysis and assessment at the research location. However, participants sometimes did not strictly comply with the instructions when choosing option (d), in which a definition should be provided with each example, thus making definitions markedly outnumber examples.

3.3 Evaluation & Database of Routine Comprehension

Learners' routines were evaluated based on two

aspects in the same task, namely, meaning and use: explicitly stating the definition of a certain routine expression based on prior knowledge and specifying its usage in a concrete actual situational context. Learners' definitions, derived from their prior knowledge, were assessed and coded as "plausible", "implausible" and "no recognition". Plausible definitions comprised all the meanings listed by 41 native speakers. Implausible definitions included "It's up to you" for "*All yours*" and "To stop here or continue" for "*For here or to go?*". One point was the maximum score for any plausible response to option (c) or (d). The same was true for "examples" produced in a specific actual situational context. The definitions and examples were transcribed respectively, and two points were the maximum score for each item if learners received one point for a plausible definition and another for a plausible example. In addition, the task was piloted with 41 native speakers of English (30 females and 11 males, average age: 23.49, SD = 4.64). Each native speaker provided a definition and an example for each expression (see Table 2), creating an exhaustive response set as the evaluation baseline. The results indicate that native speakers were largely consistent in their interpretation of each expression in each specific situational context.

Table 2. **Summary of 41 Native Speaker Pilot Results**

Routines	Definitions	Examples
Here you go.	1. Well done. /That's it.	"Here you go! Just relax."
	2. Here you are.	The cashier said, "Here you go!" when she handed you food.
All yours.	1. It's your turn and help yourself.	After using the drinking fountain, he/she said, "All yours."
	2. Give it all or you can take it away	"Can I have that last piece of fried chicken?"; "All yours!"
That works for me.	An affirmative response to a proposal that fits your schedule	"Avengers this weekend?"; "That works for me!"
For here or to go?	Asking whether eating at a restaurant or taking away	After ordering, a waiter said, "For here or to go?"
Do you think you can make it?	1. Extending an invitation for a planned engagement later.	"Do you think you can make it to my birthday party?"
	2. Asking whether a difficult task can be completed successfully.	"It's a difficult math problem. Do you think you can make it?"
Excuse the mess.	Apologizing for a messy dwelling to a guest.	"Excuse the mess. I've been busy lately."
Thanks for having me.	Expressing gratitude to the host for inviting you.	"It's a great party. Thanks for having me."

3.4 Data Analysis

This study consecutively explored whether or not proficiency and SA experience affected on the decontextualized comprehension of routines by comparing performance across three learner groups. The independent variables contained three levels: lower/higher proficiency with no SA experience and higher proficiency with SA experience. The dependent variables predominantly were comprised of four categories, that is, no PC or ASC, plausible PC, plausible ASC, and the plausible interplay of PC and ASC. In addition, Table 3 displays the criteria for assessing learners' mastery degree of PC and ASC knowledge. Due to the large variation in the data, Mann-Whitney U and McNemar chi-square tests were adopted to examine group differences for diverse variables.

Table 3. **Criteria for Plausibility of Context Knowledge in Routine Comprehension**

Level	Coding/Score
1. No PC or ASC knowledge	choosing option (a) & (b), total wrong answers or no response of (c) & (d), 0'
2. Plausible PC knowledge	choosing option (c) & (d) with explaining accurate definitions, 1'
3. Plausible ASC knowledge	choosing option (d) with merely raising a proper example, 1'
4. Plausible interplay of PC & ASC knowledge	choosing option (d) combined with a correct definition and a suitable example, 2'

4. Results

With respect to the holistic trend of comprehension competence (Table 4), G3 students scored much higher on all three sections than G1 students, and both G3 and G1 markedly surpassed G2 (G3 > G1> G2), thus substantiating that on the whole, SA experience (combined with high EP) developed hand in hand with learners' pragmatic comprehension of routines. However, the impact of EP alone on routine comprehension revealed an opposite trend, namely, comprehensive competence decreased with the improvement of proficiency.

Table 4. **Descriptive Statistics of the Overall Routine Comprehension**

Group (G)	N	M	SD	Frequency (%)
G1	51	5.24	2.98	37.43
G2	59	4.05	2.76	28.93
G3	33	8.64	3.30	61.71

As to the correlation between different variables and the holistic comprehension (Table 5), SA experience and its combination with high EP level played effective roles at all phases of routine comprehension without exception—both $p < 0.01$— and with large effect sizes: both $d > 0.8$. In contrast, the impact of EP alone revealed a somewhat opposite pattern (a negative correlation), further confirming the stronger role of SA experience but the weaker impact of proficiency alone in the decontextualized process of routine comprehension.

Table 5. **Independent Sample t-test of the Effect of Influencing Factors on Routine Comprehension**[1]

Variable	df	SD	t	Sig.	Cohen's *d*
EP	108.00	1.18	2.16	0.03	0.42
SA	90.00	-4.59	-7.12	0.00	1.50
EP*SA	82.00	-3.40	-4.90	0.00	1.08

To examine the plausibility of the definitions and examples within each group, a McNemar frequency table (Table 6) was constructed featuring the number of responses for no PC or ASC, plausible PC, plausible ASC, and the plausible interplay of PC and ASC. McNemar chi-square tests were then used to process these data. When plausible PC and ASC were compared within each group holistically, it was found that participants within each group were more likely to provide plausible meanings based on PC than to make up examples in an ASC (46.78% vs. 28.01%, 38.74% vs. 19.13%, and 77.49% vs. 45.89%, all $p < 0.05$).

Table 6. **Distribution of No PC or ASC, Plausible PC and ASC, and Mutual mappings**

Level	G1 (Total responses: 357)		G2 (Total responses: 413)		G3 (Total responses: 231)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
NO PC & ASC	182	50.98	251	60.77	51	22.08
Plausible PC	167	46.78	160	38.74	179	77.49
Plausible ASC	100	28.01	79	19.13	106	45.89
Plausible PC & ASC	92	25.77	77	18.64	105	45.45

Table 7 summarizes the results of pairwise comparisons as follows. Mann-Whitney U tests were employed to examine the impact of three factors on the quadripartite levels. No significant differences at any level were detected between Groups 1 and 2 (all $p > 0.05$), signifying that proficiency had no meaningful effect on any level of context knowledge required in routine comprehension. SA experience (G2 vs. G3), by contrast, appeared to be the major influence on each level of context knowledge during the decontextualized comprehension (all $p < 0.05$). EP*SA experience, as an integral variable, affected the first two sections, i.e., no PC & ASC and plausible PC (both $p < 0.05$), exclusive of the other two levels (both $p > 0.05$).

Table 7. **Summary of Pairwise Comparisons: No PC or ASC, Plausible PC, ASC and Plausible interplay of PC & ASC**[2]

Variable	Level			
	NO PC & ASC	Plausible PC	Plausible ASC	Plausible PC & ASC
EP	z = - 0.70	z = - 0.83	z = - 1.73	z = - 1.22
SA	z = - 2.12*	z = - 2.38*	z = - 2.51*	z = - 2.52*
EP*SA	z = - 2.12*	z = - 2.12*	z = - 1.61	z = -1.61

More precisely, in G1 and G2, the percent chi-squared of test-takers providing plausible definitions based on PC was significantly different from that of test-takers providing plausible examples in an ASC for the expressions "*All yours*" (50.98% vs. 17.65% & 40.68% vs. 10.17%, $p < 0.05$) and "*Thanks for having me*" (45.10% vs. 17.65% & 50.85% vs. 22.03%, both $p < 0.05$). Additionally, G2 subjects were far more likely to provide plausible definitions than examples for "*Here you go!*" (27.12% vs. 8.47%, $p < 0.05$). The same was true in G3 for "*Excuse the mess*" (72.73% vs. 27.27%, $p < 0.05$). By comparison, the remaining items did not present a significant difference between plausible PC and ASC within each group (all $p > 0.05$).

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and discussion of the findings concerning the research questions.

5.1 The Impact of Proficiency, SA Experience & the Integration on the Holistic decontextualized Comprehension of Routines

The sharp "V" pattern of the total results in Fig. 2 once more substantiated that the holistic comprehension of routines was almost unaffected by proficiency but significantly correlated with SA experience. As the proficiency of at-home learners increased, their PC knowledge showed a marked downward trend. Namely, high proficiency was not necessarily influential in learners' routine comprehension (Roever 2005) in the absence of actual situational context as an inference basis, largely due to routines' syntactic simplicity, fixedness in terms of construction and intrinsically situation-bound features. Specifically, the

constituents of "*Here you go*" and "*All yours*" are relatively invariant and cannot be substituted by other words, leading to the nontransparency of their functional meanings. Moreover, situation-bound routines are commonly exploited in colloquial language use for their lexical succinctness, making acquisition "through (social) participation in recurrent communicative events while abroad" more effective (Taguchi & Roever 2017: 224). Briefly, it was not proficiency but rather daily use or exposure that mattered for situation-bound routine comprehension, especially in the absence of contextual reminders. However, this was not at all true for "*That works for me*" and "*Thanks for having me*", given the "escalating trend" (see red lines in bold), indicating that proficiency still played a strong and decisive role in both no-SA-experience groups. That is, proficiency can still make striking contributions to decontextualized comprehension to some extent, since a certain amount of linguistic parsing is indispensable to nonnative learners.
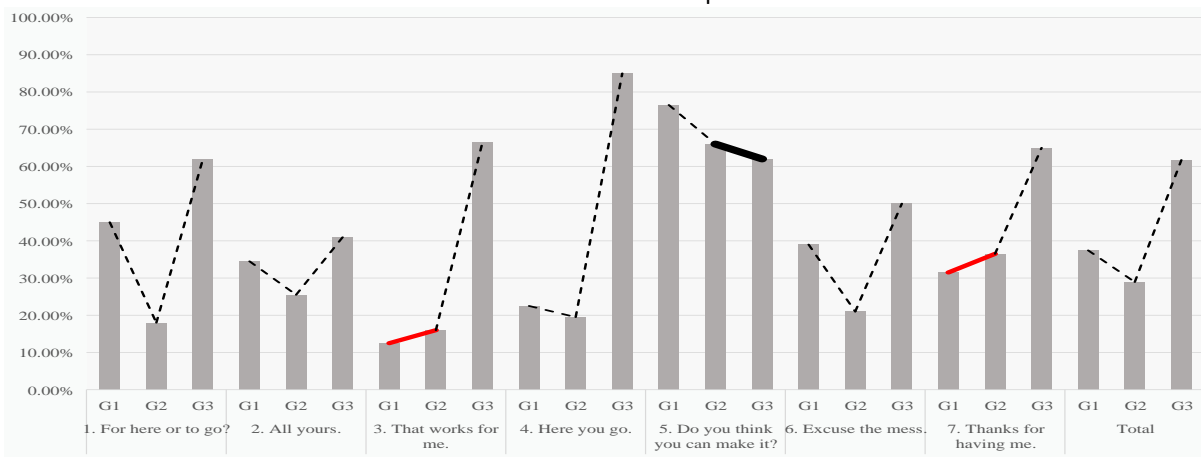

Figure 2. **Overall Frequency of Routine Comprehension for Each Item**

On the other hand, SA experience combined with proficiency, as indicated in Fig. 2, appeared pivotal to learners' PC knowledge without ASC to provide an inference basis, as the highest value for each item except Item 5 was obtained by G3. In fact, this task provided abundant evidence of the facilitating role of SA experience in learners' comprehension of routines. Furthermore, most items were situation-bound utterances and functional speech formulas, the majority of which had strong associations with specific actual situational contexts. Learners in the SA environment would have many opportunities to encounter such situations in which routines might occur. Since routines permeate daily communication and reinforce effective socialization, it can be far easier for learners to

interpret the function of these culturally context-dependent expressions while abroad. In this regard, there is no need to conduct precise parsing of "*For here or to go?*" and "*Here you go*" due to their clear compositional meanings and the particularly strong correlation between their functional meanings and actual situational contexts. The former is often asked by waiters in fast food restaurants, and the latter has several functional meanings, such as "*Well done!*" and "*Here you are!*", that are determined situationally in daily colloquial use. While the meaning values of routines are the result of the sociocultural interplay of prior and actual situational experience (context), the proportion of their contribution to meaning comprehension is continuously changing. PC knowledge, therefore, has a dominant role in routine comprehension,

particularly in the absence of contextual information that can be used as an inference basis. By this token, it seemed difficult for nonnative learners who had never studied abroad to comprehend the functional meanings of such routines. Instead, as the black, bold line in Fig.2 indicates, learners' comprehension of "*Do you think you can make it?*" actually decreased from G2 to G3. This expression has a more complex syntactic structure and is basically utilized by the speaker to determine "whether the hearer can accept an invitation to attend an event later" or "whether s/he can accomplish something difficult successfully". SA experience alone does not exert a comprehensive influence on all aspects of routine comprehension, and it had a negligible impact with respect to this formulaic expression. For nonnative learners, continuous exposure to these routinized expressions may be insufficient to establish "psychological saliency" (Kecskes 2013: 119). It is not certain that they can fully exploit individual or external cues except in the host environment. Language learners may have direct access to the L2 linguistic materials they need but not always to the socio-cultural background knowledge that gives sense to particular linguistic expressions in the L2 (Kecskes 2015: 428). In summary, learners tended to understand situation-bound routines readily and unproblematically under exposure in the host environment, but specific routines might require extensive use or may be difficult to acquire even in the target environment when learners' L1 and L2 cultures do not operate under the same values and norms or when learners do not agree with L2 norms and the linguistic forms that encode target norms are not easily acquired (Taguchi 2011b: 303). Some participants may even be fully aware of preferred linguistic selections but are reluctant to adopt them because they are not consistent with their L1-dominated conceptual system. Exposure (individual-social interplay) is one factor, but the

individual preference and willingness that motivate acquisition in the SA environment also play a pivotal role. Exposure, quality, and quantity of input (or intensity of interaction) can be effective only as much as the individual learner allows them to be (Kecskes 2015: 428).

More importantly, it can be ascertained that the integration of the two factors produced a striking pragmatic advantage (except for Item 5) in routine comprehension, for G3 obtained the highest values for each item. The combination of high proficiency and SA experience is beneficial because these nonnative learners with higher proficiency in linguistic retrieval and parsing have abundant opportunities to observe the linguistic strings preferred by local community members. G3 students can also practice these expressions more through daily participation in social events. In practice, participants usually have more access to pragmalinguistics than to sociopragmatics, especially if they have acquired the target language in the classroom (Kecskes 2013: 64), as G1 & 2 learners did.

5.2 The Overall Trend of Learner's Plausible PC and ASC and Their Plausible Interplay

As shown in Fig. 3, more than 20% of the no PC or ASC responses given by SA learners indicated no recognition of these routines, and even though nearly 40% with high proficiency but no SA experience knew the meaning, this was a lower rate than that observed for their low-proficiency counterparts. The data considered here confirmed that all learners had low pragmatic gains in routine recognition. Proficiency had almost no effect on routine recognition, with small discrepancies existing between these two groups, while the effect of SA experience was indeed remarkable, as revealed by the large gaps between G3 and the other no-SA-experience two groups.
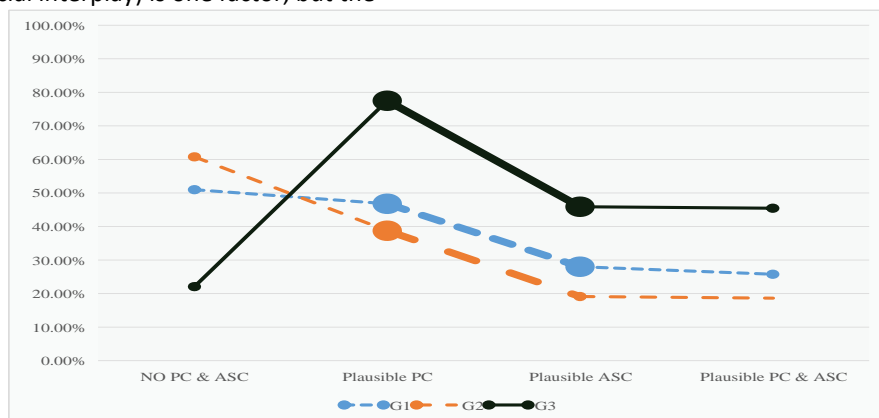

Figure 3. **Overall Trend of Learners' PC and ASC Knowledge Distribution**

In addition, there is a uniform downtrend in all the groups as a whole: there is a peak at plausible PC and a nadir at the plausible interplay PC and ASC, with plausible ASC being located in the middle. A steeper decline (see the bold lines in Fig. 4) is evident between plausible PC and plausible ASC. Learners predominantly manifested high confidence in providing plausible definitions based on their PC knowledge. The functional meanings of some routines (i.e., "*All yours*") are close to their literal meanings, making inference easy even without the help of actual situational context. For certain "short" and simple constituents, linguistic parsing or frequent exposure abroad is not necessary for recognition. By contrast, participants showed less confidence in making up a plausible example in a concrete context, not to mention plausible definition-example mappings, demonstrating that learners still did not know how to map their PC knowledge onto a specific actual situational context.

Furthermore, the overall trend among the groups revealed a consistent mode (G3 > G1 > G2), suggesting that the three levels mentioned above were highly susceptible to SA experience but negligibly influenced by proficiency. For instance, the functional meaning of "*For here or to go?*" failed to be inferred directly from learners' PC knowledge unless they knew its concrete usage in advance. Hence, the SA context can be intuitively advantageous in enhancing the cumulative prior knowledge in learners' conceptual base, given that routines are used community-wide and bound to specific speech events. On the other hand, SA experience is beneficial for increasing actual experience of given speech situations, since learners in the target language environment are often located in diverse social situations where routines are frequently used. In fact, nonnative learners, whether they knew it or not beforehand, constantly heard "*Here you go*" uttered by local community members while abroad—in situations such as "when the supermarket cashier hands you your purchase" or "when your team wins". In this regard, SA participants are likely to have acquired such salient linguistic strings through recurrent socialization and to better understand their functions, which are socio-culturally bound to certain situations. The two-variable combination profoundly affected the influence of prior context alone, considering G1 subjects' relatively limited social participation and relatively low proficiency.

5.3 The Specific Trends of Learners' Plausible PC and ASC and Their Plausible Interplay

Regarding the participants' specific performance, several key trends can be observed. As shown in Fig. 4, a similar change pattern (G3>G1>G2) was also detected across several expressions. It appeared for all four responses for "*Here you go*", "*All yours.*", and "*For here or to go?*"; the no PC or ASC and plausible PC responses for "*Excuse the mess*"; and the plausible ASC responses for "*That works for me*". However, diverse modes appeared for the other routine expressions, i.e., G3>G2>G1 for all the responses of "*Thanks for having me*" and G1 >G2 >G3 for "*Do you think you can make it?*"; G3>G2>G1 for the main responses (except the plausible ASC) of "*That works for me*"; and G1 > G3 > G2 for the PC & ASC and plausible ASC responses of "*Excuse the mess*".
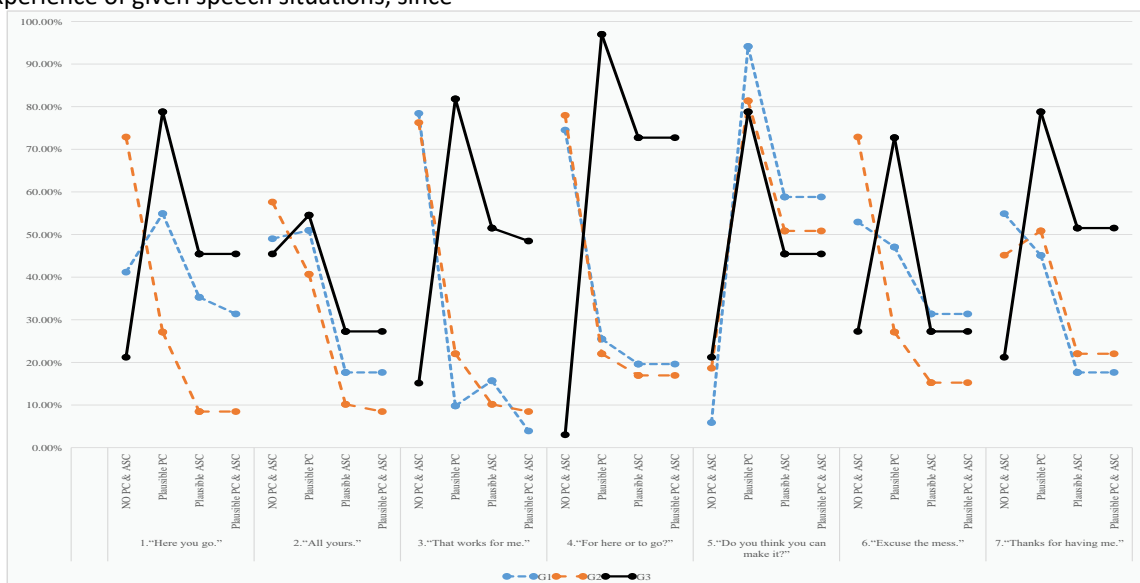

Figure 4. **Specific Trends of Learners' PC and ASC Knowledge Distribution**

A markedly similar trend (G3> G1> G2) emerged across all the responses for "*For here or to go?*" and "*Here you go*". These two expressions pertain to the category of situational routines, whose functional meaning is completely different from their compositional meaning, and will be considered as examples for the purposes of this discussion. On the one hand, literal inference predominated in nonnative speakers without SA experience, and they were likely to assume that "for here" meant "stay/live here" or even "stop here" and to erroneously interpret "to go" as "go to another place" or "continue". The decontextualized comprehension of such situation-bound utterances depends on high-quality input/exposure when studying abroad or frequent use in daily communication rather than high proficiency in linguistic parsing or syntactic analysis. Hence, high-proficiency learners with SA experience tend to outperform their no-SA-experience counterparts. On the other hand, there are several functional meanings of "*Here you go*", such as, "Well done!", "Here you are!" and "That's it", etc, which cannot be directly inferred from the literal meaning at all. Exposure, as a distinguishing feature of SA experience, appears to be salient to the interpretation of situational-bound routines and their specific usage in the actual situational context across all stages. For example, participants who have encountered such expressions are able to both define them and propose an example in a situational context. The no-SA-experience participants can provide an example but may not know the accurate definition, i.e., they may misinterpret "Here you go" as "let's get it started", "getting permission to leave", or "you can deal with something" because of "insufficient exposure through productive and receptive classroom practice which fails to consider the importance of a pragmatic focus for improving communicative competence" (Halenko 2018:156). In contrast, routine comprehension does not seem to develop hand in hand with higher proficiency (Roever 2005) due to a certain degree of language attrition. Furthermore, formulaicity is always considered one of the main indexes of pragmatic competence. G2 postgraduate students seemed to focus more on the cultivation of academic ability and paid less attention to routine use, leading to a certain degree of attrition both in pragmatic awareness and competence of routines. For example, certain participants even believed that "here" meant going "in this direction", a complete deviation from the original meaning. By comparison, G1 subjects reported that they had frequent exposure to such expressions both in and out of class, although they had lower proficiency. They likely at least knew some of the basic functional meanings, such as "It's your turn".

Though most of the aforementioned data indicate that routine comprehension bears no relation to English proficiency but is highly susceptible to SA experience and the combination of high proficiency and SA experience, some exceptions are noteworthy. Proficiency was significantly associated with comprehension of "*Thanks for having me*" and "*That works for me*". The lexical core of "having" refers here to "inviting" and not to the literal meaning "possessing", and the latter is more strongly bound to the actual situational context ("extending gratitude for others' invitation"). Similarly, for the phrasal verb "*works for...*", the functional meaning, "the suitability to you of some suggestion, proposal, or idea", makes more sense than the literal meaning, "doing a job for an employer". In other words, higher proficiency is indeed conducive to inferring an obscure definition from a specific example in a situational context. In reality, the higher the learner's fluency in the L2, the less the learner has to rely on L1 word association because an increase in L2 proficiency brings about changes in the conceptual system, which starts to accommodate socio-cultural knowledge and concepts gained through L2 use and experience (Kecskes 2013: 140). For example, students tended to believe the functional meaning of "having" was "choosing and letting you be a member or accompanying you when you have difficulties". Likewise, some students could provide only partial appropriate responses, that is, an implausible definition ("It's very good and all right") with a plausible example ("How about the movie?"; "That works for me") or vice versa (a plausible definition, "something is suitable for me" with an implausible example, "The clothing is beautiful. That works for me"). Sometimes, both of the parts provided were problematic (an implausible definition, "Something has an effect on me" with an inappropriate example, "The medicine works for me"). As a matter of fact, most G1 students knew the distinction between the functional and compositional meanings of "works for" but erroneously interpreted it as "effective, helpful, functional or solvable" nonetheless. The same was true for their interplay in "*Do you think you can make it?*". Participants in the high-proficiency group outperformed their low-proficiency counterparts because "*make it*" here also did not denote its literal meaning and embodied two functional meanings, as mentioned above. Both no-

SA-experience groups were aware of the former meaning, but the latter was less known to some extent.

High proficiency combined with SA experience had a decisive and considerable impact overall, but there still existed some discrepancies in the effect of the integrated factor on routine comprehension. This combined factor loses its efficacy when students have frequent exposure to prefabricated expressions at home or there is a close approximation between their literal and functional meanings. G1 students retrospectively mentioned that they grasp the usage of "*Do you think you can make it?*", particularly because it has appeared so many times on oral English tests. However, certain learners may misinterpret it as "whether someone has confidence in doing something" (i.e., "*Are you confident?*"). The illocutionary force of "invitation" was rarely assimilated by subjects with no SA experience because they were incapable of acquiring their socio-cultural connotations in the classroom. Their SA-experience counterparts had a better knowledge of the meaning (i.e., "Can you come to someplace on time?") because of their authentic engagement with local community members. However, even subjects with low proficiency could infer the use of "*Excuse the mess*" in a specific context based on its transparent compositional meaning. Both G1 and G3 participants could guess the exact definition "sorry for the untidiness of my place" based on their PC knowledge; however, their low-proficiency counterparts often failed to come up with an example simultaneously and might sometimes misinterpret its definition, such as "forgive my mistakes/the matter" or "somebody makes someplace dirty". Likewise, high-proficiency learners with SA experience could also experience a complete inability to infer meanings and formulate examples at the same time. SA experience sometimes failed to be beneficial due to insufficient exposure to authentic input (poor engagement) in the host environment or learners' L1 socio-cultural mindset and "L2 norms and patterns need conscious acts by the language learner to accept and/or acquire them" (Kecskes 2015: 421-422). Hence, it is not only authentic language socialization that matters but also conceptual socialization, which can fully restructure learners' L1 conceptual system to adapt to a new language that encodes specific socio-cultural loads. Moreover, even if an individual with a certain amount of SA experience has good English proficiency and excellent interaction abilities on par with those of native speakers, they also tend to be strongly hindered by the constraints imposed by L1 cultural norms. L1 and L2 cultures are sometimes mutually contradictory, and prefabricated strings that encode pragmatic norms and conventions are not easily acquired even during an SA program. Nonnative speakers may be fully aware of them but tend to ignore them or be unwilling to perform accordingly, underscoring the crucial and powerful role of individual motivation and willingness in the modification of L1-based pragmatic conventionality.

Regarding the significant difference in plausible definitions and examples within each group, the students' performance followed the pattern of G2, mainly embodied in the consistency of "*All yours*", "*Do you think you can make it?*" and "*Thanks for having me*". Moreover, G2 students gave far more plausible definitions of "*Here you go*" than plausible examples. This pattern applied equally to G3 participants with regard to *Excuse the mess*". Beyond these expressions, all learners tended to give definitions based on their PC knowledge but uniformly failed to specify its actual usage in a situational context. Some test-takers indicated that much more time was spent inferring definitions than inventing examples due to the order in which they answered the questions and the approach they used to do so. Most used a "literal translation" method to infer the meanings of routines they were totally ignorant of or not familiar with. For instance, the functional meaning of "*All yours*" is relatively easy to determine from compositional constituents; however, it is difficult to formulate a specific example. Hence, there was not enough time to provide its definition, let alone give examples. Based on their performance and the calculation above, it is clear that PC knowledge is not only significantly higher than ASC knowledge but also determines it to a large extent. More importantly, for situational routines, the two types of knowledge are closely related to each other. As long as the meaning can be accurately inferred, corresponding examples can be generated. By contrast, it is difficult to form PC-ASC mappings for functional routines.

6. Conclusion

Plausible definition-example mappings, as an indicator of routine comprehension, are the result of the interplay of learners' prior (PC) and actual situational context (ASC) knowledge. Plausible definitions or examples were overwhelmingly derived from learners' PC knowledge, whereas the made-up examples raised in a specific ASC played a crucial and decisive role in the ultimate formation

of plausible mappings. As a whole, learners were more inclined to utilize their PC knowledge to infer the meanings of routines than to elucidate their functional usage, particularly in an actual situation context.

From a variable perspective, this exploration contributed to addressing the effect of SA experience and proficiency by employing a simulated, low-risk task modality, revealing that routine comprehension including the required context knowledge was basically influenced less by proficiency but was highly susceptible to SA experience overall. The cross-sectional evidence indicates that the combination of SA experience and proficiency was especially associated with the responses to the plausible definition section of the test due to insufficient exposure in the target environment or poor engagement in the SA program. From a testing tool perspective, the modified oral CACT could be a useful tool in conjunction with other pragmatic task modalities. Evidence from the CACT corroborates that the use of a routine (plausible examples) can serve as an indication that a target speech act will be interpreted in the intended and preferred way, but plausible PC-ASC mappings may be more difficult to formulate for functional routines than for situational routines.

As regards the limitations of this study and suggestions for future design, this investigation suffers from certain limitations. To begin with, only seven routinized items are encompassed to detect Chinese learners' pragmatic competence of decontextualized formulaic comprehension. For this reason, one direction for future research should be to include a wide variety of test items to validate the generalizability of the findings of this study. Another limitation relates to the research on variables and perspectives. This study merely cross-sectionally examined the effect of proficiency and study-abroad experience on formulaic comprehension from the perspective of context knowledge. More research is also needed in this area to ascertain the effectiveness of predominantly multifold factors, such as intensity of interaction, conceptual socialization, or individual willingness and motivation, on multidimensional pragmatic modalities and development from a longitudinal perspective. Finally, this study also offers practitioners several specific ways in which the internet-based animation tool could be maximized in and contribute substantially to diversified pragmatic learning and testing in the future experiment.

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