Title of Project:
Mental Effort in Pragmatic Competence:
The Role of Working Memory in L2 Pragmatic Production

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Project Summary:
The abstract notion of pragmatic competence, referring to the ability to use linguistic forms to fulfil a desired function and in a manner that is appropriate in a given context, is included in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Yet, there is a shortage of guidance for foreign language teaching and testing practitioners on how exactly to operationalise this ability (Sickinger & Schneider, 2014). Adding to this shortcoming is the fact that many studies investigating learners' development render an incomplete picture of it by focusing on final linguistic products rather than the cognitive processes underlying production (Timpe-Laughlin, 2017). According to Bialystok (1993), the cognitive effort involved in the production process is vital in shaping its targeted outcome, i.e. language use that is appropriate for the context in which it occurs.

Investigating two components of pragmatic competence, speech acts and routine formulae, this study seeks to determine the relative level of cognitive control required to produce these phenomena. The general cognitive mechanism of working memory, claimed to play a key role in L2 acquisition (Linck, Osthus, Koeth, & Bunting, 2014), serves as a measure of cognitive control. Investigating the performance of participants at two levels of proficiency provides insights about proficiency effects.

Following Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), determining relative task difficulty in cognitive terms can validate the order of pragmatic abilities along the developmental path, thus aiding practitioners and ensuring maximal effectiveness of foreign language teaching and testing.