

Teaching Requests to L2 Learners of Spanish

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Abstract—In many language classrooms, the teaching of pragmatic forms is often ignored at all learner levels. This paper – part of a larger study that encompassed four speech acts – examines the benefits of explicit instruction of requests for beginning, intermediate, and advanced L2 learners of Spanish. The participants took a pre-test and post-test to measure the pragmatic gains over the course of an academic quarter, while the experimental groups from each level received specific lessons in pragmatic use of Spanish and the control group received no extra treatment during their courses. While the treatment consisted of provided online lessons on the common uses of four speech acts in Spanish, this paper focuses on the formulation of requests. The results show that the students that received the treatment had higher scores on the Dialogue Completion Test than the control group. Furthermore, the intermediate level showed the most improvement, suggesting that this is the optimal level for pragmatic development because learners at this level are the most receptive to the acquisition of requests. This investigation shows that the explicit teaching of requests is effective and should be addressed in the Spanish language classroom at all levels, especially at the intermediate level.

Index Terms—interlanguage pragmatics, explicit instruction, Spanish, requests, speech acts

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study synthesizes Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) and explicit instruction – areas within SLA that are in need of further research on learner development – for the purpose of teaching pragmatic forms in Spanish. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the usefulness of explicit instruction and to examine the acquisition of interlanguage pragmatic forms. This paper – part of a larger study that studied four speech acts – examines the benefits of explicit instruction of requests for beginning, intermediate, and advanced L2 learners of Spanish. The study of pragmatics and ILP inherently focuses on language use in a social context. This investigation, based in Sociocultural Approach (Kramsch, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; 2002; Swain and Lapkin, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978), combines Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP), explicit instruction and the acquisition of pragmatic forms in Spanish, to determine the benefits of these important factors that influence L2 development of the formulation of requests in Spanish.

Previous studies (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Koike, 1989; Le Pair, 1996; Pinto, 2005) have provided a foundation for documenting what native speakers say in many scenarios in Spanish. This body of research could inform explicit instruction to promote awareness, since this type of study can help L2 learners of Spanish compare Interlanguage and target language forms. By focusing on L2 pragmatic development, I will also attempt to provide curricular guidelines to enhance the learners’ pragmatic competence. A curricular guide can impact traditional classroom teaching as well as study-abroad courses. While I expected explicit instruction to be a useful device to help L2 learners, it is only a part of L2 development, and time on task plays a key role in this development.

Generally speaking, by administering a treatment to the experimental groups I assumed that the explicit instruction in the form of the online guide would be beneficial for the learners (Norris and Ortega, 2000; Schmidt 1993; 1995). By showing that the treatment was beneficial, it provides a good indicator that explicit instruction is useful, at least for teaching pragmatic competence in requests. Furthermore, by examining data from multiple levels of learners, I hope to be able to determine an ideal time to teach request forms to L2 learners of Spanish. Classifying visible stages of development would help fill a gap in the literature of acquisitional pragmatic studies, a key problem previously identified in previous ILP literature (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Rose and Kasper, 2001; Schmidt, 1993, 1995).

The remainder of the article outlines the previous literature, methodology and results of the study, along with a further examination of the results specific to the learner development of requests.

II. BACKGROUND

The present study is situated within the framework of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory, and draws on politeness theory to examine the development of interlanguage pragmatic competence in L2 learners of Spanish. Furthermore, the study draws upon previous literature that deals with interlanguage pragmatics. Despite a great deal of research on interlanguage pragmatics (Schmidt: 1993, Bardovi-Harlig: 2002, Kasper and Rose: 2002, and others), very little of this literature examines the possible effects of receiving explicit instruction and even less directed at learning and teaching Spanish.

A. Sociocultural Theory

A large body of research in Second Language Acquisition examines language learning within a Vygotskian sociocultural framework, which essentially views language learning in social terms (Kramsch, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; 2002; Swain and Lapkin, 1998). This theory is based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), who claims that all knowledge is the result of social interaction. In other words, he claims that humans learn from these social interactions with others, and then proceed to internalize them. Moreover, this approach states that an individual is not an independent being but rather a social being that is situated in a cultural and historical context.

While sociocultural theory claims that all learning is socially mediated and therefore dependent on interaction and shared processes and activities, this is especially true for learning a language. In other words, learning and acquiring the requisite signs used to communicate are also based on social processes. It is also true that although learners are capable of functioning on their own, the learners or unskilled individuals learn by completing tasks with a more skilled individual. This guidance allows the learner to complete more complex tasks, and learn how to do things through this collaboration until the knowledge is *appropriated* into his or her repertoire. In Vygotskian thought, when learners are in this range where they can perform at a higher proficiency level with help, it is known as the *Zone of Proximal Development*, or ZPD. This is most productive domain for learning because the learner is not yet capable of achieving a desired result independently, but can achieve that goal with the guidance of a more skilled individual.

Additionally, neo-Vygotskian researchers have coined the term *scaffolding* (Bruner, 1985; Wood *et al.*, 1976), to help encapsulate the idea of learning and appropriation of new ideas through interaction, specifically an interaction in the ZPD with a more capable individual. Scaffolding is a metaphor for the more skilled individual guiding the learner to reach his or her potential development level; the expert supports the novice to complete a task that the novice could not do on his own.

The notions of ZPD and scaffolding are pertinent to the present study because the L2 learners of Spanish do not consistently produce target language pragmatic forms, but with the help of lessons on pragmatics, the learners were able to produce an acceptable form. This means that the students are in the ZPD with regards to acquiring and producing pragmatic formulas – in this case requests, invitations, refusals and apologies – and can therefore use the target language at a higher level of proficiency while being *scaffolded* by the lessons than they could on their own without any outside assistance. Therefore, the idea of ZPD is relevant to L2 pragmatics, because the learners do not produce the target pragmatic forms on their own, but rather they need assistance from a more knowledgeable participant, or in the case of the present study, help in the form of online pragmatic lessons.

B. Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1978) developed the politeness theory to account for the belief that speakers try to “save face” when performing speech acts, such as making requests or giving orders, which are intrinsically impolite speech acts. Brown and Levinson define “face” as the speaker’s public image, and the politeness model details the options available to a speaker by outlining “positive strategies” and “negative strategies.” A positive strategy tends to be more direct and is often mitigated by some kind of commonality or bond. A negative strategy shows deference to the hearer and provides him or her a way out of performing the desired speech act. For example, “give me your matches, love” is a positive strategy while “could you spare a match?” is a negative strategy. One can imagine the difficulty in fulfilling two opposing goals: getting the hearer to comply with the speaker’s act and saving face at the same time.

Another aspect of the politeness theory is that it assumes the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975). Speech act theory is primarily concerned with language functions and use, and states that performance is separated into three types of acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. A locutionary act can be described as the meaning of the act, the illocutionary act is the how the act is carried out, and a perlocutionary act is the effect on the addressee. In a direct speech act, such as with imperatives, the speaker generally means exactly what he says. However, for indirect speech acts, there is not a direct relationship between the literal meaning of the utterance and the illocutionary force (what is actually meant). For example, directly saying, “pass the salt” is a literal request, whereas asking “can you pass the salt” is not questioning the addressee’s ability to pass the salt, but rather indirectly asking for the salt. These distinctions are of particular importance for requests and politeness strategies. Interlanguage pragmatics, then, deals primarily with illocutionary acts and learner performance.

C. Interlanguage Pragmatics

Other important research that informs this study deals with interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). Despite a great deal of research on ILP (Schmidt: 1993, Bardovi-Harlig: 2002, Kasper and Rose: 2002, and others), very little of this literature examines the possible effects of receiving explicit instruction. Crystal (1997) defines pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.” The work done on ILP aims to examine L2 pragmatic use. Since the study of ILP has predominantly focused on documenting language use, the field has not paid much attention to developmental aspects: how interlanguage pragmatics changes over time. This also means that studies in interlanguage pragmatics are by and large descriptive in nature.

Researchers such as Bardovi-Harlig (2001), Rose and Kasper (2001), Schmidt (1993, 1995), and many others have examined closely the pedagogical applications of pragmatics. One of the main areas of study has been the concepts of

“noticing” and “awareness” and the role of input, such as in the study by Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005), where a group of ESL students performed a series of tasks related to a video in order to analyze the use of requests. This showed that students were fairly adept at identifying pragmatic problems, but still did not match the native speaker norm.

Cohen and Shively (2007) based their study on the fact that students lack “adequate awareness” of the L2 and its culture to fully take advantage of the study-abroad experience. They created an online guide that the students worked through while studying abroad, aimed at raising that awareness and providing clues to help better navigate certain social situations. While the results were not statistically significant, the treatment seemed to be beneficial and this notion influenced the present study, despite the fact that present data does not incorporate the study-abroad context.

D. Interlanguage Pragmatics in Spanish

There is a limited amount of research done within interlanguage pragmatics dealing particularly with L2 learners of Spanish. These studies deal primarily with comparing what English speakers and Spanish speakers do, without much of a focus on L2 learners of Spanish. Much of the literature also centers on cross-cultural examinations between Spanish and another language, usually English (Pinto: 2005).

Koike (1989) tested students at the beginning and end of their first semester of Spanish on the use of direct or indirect requests. These responses were compared to English usage in the same situations, and she found that the beginning students were less polite in Spanish (L2) than English (L1). This was due to the use of simpler forms in the L2 that created less polite requests. Departing from her previous study, Koike (1996) examined how first, second and third-year L2 learners of Spanish were able to identify suggestions in videos. Although the students were successful in identifying cues like *por favor* “please” or *lo siento* “I’m sorry” as a politeness strategy due to the similar meaning in both languages, it is unclear whether the learners fully understood the Spanish use of the request or apology speech act. For example, while *please* is used very similarly in both English and Spanish, the Spanish use of *lo siento* is mainly reserved for grave situations like the death of a loved one.

With regards to politeness strategies, Blum-Kulka (1989) performed a cross-linguistic analysis of politeness strategies of requests in Hebrew, English, Spanish and French. This is useful in pointing out that Argentine Spanish speakers prefer hearer-centered requests, while English speakers generally use speaker-oriented speech. For example, *¿Me puedes pasar la sal?* “Can you pass me the salt?” is a hearer-centered request, while “Can I have the salt?” is speaker-centered. Furthermore, the Spanish speakers in the analysis used more imperatives and were more direct, while the English speakers used more downgraders. Blum-Kulka thus established a baseline outlining some significant differences between the two languages. This difference is an example of a possibly useful strategy that can be taught explicitly in the classroom. With this idea in mind, Le Pair (1996) compared Dutch learners of Spanish to native Spanish speakers, and found similar usage of direct speech by the native speakers.

Pinto (2005) sought out to establish a protocol for how L2 Spanish learners differed from their Spanish L1 counterparts. He created several scenarios given to a group of L2 Spanish learners from four different stages of the learning process. They were given a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which is a questionnaire that includes blanks to be filled in or scripts that must be completed according to a given scenario. In addition to the learner data, he administered the DCT to native speakers of Spanish from Spain and Mexico.

As stated above, the research focusing on learner development of pragmatics is limited. It is commonly assumed that L2 learners acquire pragmatic features in stages, and Pinto demonstrated that in this study. Nevertheless, he states, “pragmatic progress is largely accidental,” since the areas with the least amount of problems were those where the L1 and L2 overlap in terms of pragmatic function.

E. Explicit Instruction

In the field of Second Language Acquisition there has been much debate over the effectiveness of explicit instruction and explicit teaching (Alcn Soler, 2005; N. Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1982; 1994; Long, 1983; Norris and Ortega, 2000). More research, however, is still needed to show that explicit instruction can be useful to teach L2. This theoretical debate depends on whether learners use implicit or explicit cognitive processes for L2 acquisition. Researchers either believe that there is an “interface” between implicit and explicit processes or no interface at all (Krashen, 1985; N. Ellis, 1994). There is further discord among researchers about the strength of the so-called interface. There are researchers who believe in a weak interface between explicit and implicit cognitive processes (Doughty & Williams, 1998; de Graaf, 1997; Terrell, 1991), Norris and Ortega (2000). These investigators explain that this research examines:

Certain instructional techniques, which contextualize the new L2 material within meaningful episodes in a manner that is relatively unobtrusive but salient enough for further cognitive processing, may help learners direct their attention to the relevant features in the input and thus expedite the acquisition process.

On the other hand, researchers in favor of a strong interface (Dekeyser, 1997; N. Ellis, 1994; McLaughlin, 1990) are more concerned with how explicit knowledge is transformed into implicit knowledge available for use in the L2.

It appears unlikely that explicit instruction can be harmful assuming that the learners are provided with sufficient amounts of input. As MacWhinney (1997) states, “providing learners with explicit instruction along with standard implicit exposure would seem to be a no-lose proposition.” Moreover, Long (2003), in summarizing various studies dealing with the effects of instruction on L2 learners, found that explicit instruction does make a difference, and that it is especially fruitful for beginning learners. However, he calls for further examinations of the relationship between

instruction type and learner type with explicit instruction and explicit learning. Despite the fact that the connection between explicit instruction and explicit learning is not entirely clear, experiments by DeKeyser (1997) and de Graaff (1997) have shown that explicit instruction facilitated learning. Other studies by Long (1991; 1997) show that by directing learners' attention to linguistic features (i.e. Focus on Form) can be useful in the future.

Norris and Ortega (2000) provided a summary of findings about L2 type-of-instruction research in order to see if previous studies have found explicit instruction effective for L2 learning. They conclude that L2 instruction is durable and state that "[...] instruction that incorporates explicit techniques leads to more substantial effects than implicit instruction." The authors also found that using explicit instruction leads to change for the learners, claiming that "focused L2 instruction results in large gains over the course of an intervention. Specifically, L2 instruction of particular language forms induces substantial target-oriented change..."

The present study applies and compares these findings to the area of interlanguage pragmatics, with the expectation that explicit teaching of pragmatic forms and norms will lead to more target-like speech by the learners. The basis of this current study assumes that explicit instruction will be beneficial for the group of learners that receives a treatment in an attempt to draw their attention to certain pragmatic forms. In other words, the treatment will help explicitly teach the students acceptable forms for a given context in order to examine the accuracy with which they can produce the correct form.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to track learner development, all the participants completed a pre-test and a post-test, while the arbitrarily assigned experimental groups received extra lessons. I gave the learners a questionnaire with Dialogue Completion Tasks (DCT) at the beginning and end of one academic quarter (10 weeks apart). The questionnaire was piloted with both native speakers and intermediate students and resulted in the desired responses. The questionnaire consists of twenty questions, which are situations that require the participant to choose an appropriate request, invitation, refusal, or an apology (Example 3.1). They were given one week to fill in the background information and to respond to each situation on the DCT. Each of the questions has a prompt that describes a situation and that situation is followed by blank line where the students write their response to the prompt. In this manner, the students are required to complete a conversational turn using one of four speech acts.

Example 3.1 Sample test questions for a request

You ask your professor for help with your homework.

You say: _____

As seen in the above example, the questions were written in English to ensure that all the students comprehended exactly what was being asked of them. Since all the participants reported that they grew up speaking English as children, by giving instructions in English, I was able to eliminate misunderstandings as a possible reason for an incorrect answer.

For the treatment given to the experimental groups, I created lessons that spanned 10 weeks and were assigned as part of the assigned coursework to ensure completion (see appendix for examples). The goal of these lessons was to present an overview of pragmatics in general, followed by specific uses of the speech acts in Spanish. Each lesson was also accompanied by comprehension exercises to give the students the opportunities to practice the forms and ideas they just studied in the lessons. Each lesson in the treatment consisted of the following items:

- An explanation of the speech act and context of its use
- Examples of the forms used to create the speech act
- Activities to ensure comprehension of the forms

The students had roughly two weeks to complete each lesson and each was completed online. All the participants that completed all four of lessons showed satisfactory comprehension of each lesson, and once all the lessons were completed, the students were asked to complete the DCT again as the post-test, which were scored and compared with the pre-test scores.

The participants in this study were all students of Spanish at a public university in California. Each participant completed a background questionnaire about their experience with the Spanish language and I only selected those who described themselves as native English speakers. Some students reported speaking other languages as children, but only those who spoke Spanish at home with their family were discarded. Due to an increasingly globalized society, there are more and more multilingual people, making it difficult to employ only monolingual speakers of English in the strict sense. The subjects were divided into groups based on their level of Spanish, and I used their current course level as an approximate level of proficiency since each course is uniform and provides a solid idea of how much experience the learners have in the target language.

The three levels investigated consisted of beginning (1st year; SPA 3), intermediate (2nd year; SPA 22) and advanced (upper-division) L2 Spanish learners at the university level. The subjects can further be divided into a control group and an experimental group, the latter group receiving explicit instruction in the form of online lessons to bring attention to specific pragmatic speech acts. The beginning students are first-year Spanish students, corresponding with the Spanish 3 course at university. This level was selected because the students have a higher proficiency level in terms of basic grammar and vocabulary than in lower course levels and will be less likely to struggle to comprehend meaning. True beginners might know how to respond, but would not have the linguistic competence to respond to the situation. The

intermediate students correspond to second-year Spanish classes (SPA 22), while the advanced students are taking upper-division classes at the university. Despite the fact that the divisions between learner groups are not exact because of individual differences, by having the levels correspond to courses, we have some idea of the experience or “seat time” that the learners have with the L2. Table 3.2 outlines the subjects used in the study with the number of participants in each group.

TABLE 3.2
DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS.

Level	Control	Experimental
Beginner (Spanish 3)	13	13
Intermediate (Spanish 22)	14	12
Advanced (upper-division)	6	8
Total	33	33

Upon completion, the responses were compiled according to their acceptability; that is, whether or not they followed native speaker norms for the situation. In general, an acceptable answer was one that elicited the desired response, which means saving face in the given social situation. The first step in formulating an answer is identifying the correct speech act required and attempting to employ it in the scenario. All the participants were able to recognize when a request was required. This was most likely due to the fact that all the instructions and questions were written in English, thus ensuring comprehension of the instructions and questionnaire.

Since all the participants used the correct speech act – or at least attempted the correct speech act – the difficulties would stem from other factors. There were a wide variety of factors that determine what an acceptable response consists of: the use of the formal or informal verb tense “*tú*” vs. “*usted*,” the use of correct grammar, adequate vocabulary, and also being polite so that the hearer does not think the speaker is rude. The violation of these concepts in the student responses yielded an unacceptable and incorrect response.

An answer was deemed unacceptable if there were grammatical mistakes that altered the meaning of the utterance enough that it either did not communicate or did not convey the desired meaning according to the prompt. There were many instances of grammatical errors in the request prompts, where an acceptable answer was hearer-centered instead of speaker-centered. For example, in the salt scenario (test question #5) a correct answer would be *pásame la sal* “pass me the salt,” or *¿me puedes pasar la sal?* “can you pass me the salt?,” which has the hearer as the subject of the sentence. An unacceptable answer would be *¿puedo usar la sal?* “can I use the salt?” which has the speaker as the subject, and is not used in the formation of requests in Spanish. These examples represent different grammatical structures and so I considered these to be errors in grammar – even though some examples were grammatically correct – because they reflect a development in L2 grammar and not the lexicon.

Another area of difficulty for some students was with vocabulary, where they used the wrong lexical item in their attempt to carry out a speech act. There were unacceptable responses that were grammatically correct, but had an incorrect word or use of a word. This was understandably more frequent at the beginning level, where the students have a more limited vocabulary.

IV. RESULTS

In this section, I analyze the results of the test scores for both the pre-tests and post-tests taken by the participants in both the experimental groups and control groups. Two separate statistical tests were run in order to acquire the most accurate results and to avoid any possible bias. First, the Tukey Honest Significance Test was performed because it is most useful when comparing a number of groups without beginning with a specific hypothesis of how the data results will end up. This type of statistical analysis generally makes it more difficult for the results to be significantly different between the groups, because it compares all the groups against each other. Once these results were acquired, I then ran a comparison between the experimental and control groups of each level. I did this to determine whether the treatment was effective, because the experimental group received additional lessons while the control group did not. Therefore, since my hypothesis at the beginning was that the experimental groups would improve on the post-test more than the control groups, I compared the post-test results of the experimental and control groups for each level.

A. Pre-test Results

In order to begin analyzing the data and in order to determine any effect brought about by the online treatment, it was first necessary to establish the fact that the three learner groups did not differ at the baseline. In other words, the students that were in each of the three learner groups (SPA 3, SPA 22, and Upper-Division) all began at the same level and had the same proficiency level – regardless of belonging to the experimental or control group – within the given group at the time of the pre-test. This is an important place to begin the analysis to show that the participants of the experimental group and control group were not significantly different from the start. This also shows that the students were taking Spanish classes at an appropriate level. By determining that each group began at the same place, it is then possible to see if the experimental group improved and it is possible to compare it to the control group, which shows how significant the treatment was.

Table 4.1 below reports the average scores for each class and shows the values for both the control and experimental groups along with the Tukey-Kramer adjusted p-value. This table compares SPA 3 only to SPA 3, SPA 22 only to SPA 22, and UD only to UD. The classes did not differ at baseline – which means that the SPA 3 students were all at the same level, SPA 22 students were all at the same level, and UD students were all at the same level within each respective group. This establishes the fact that the participants in both the control and experimental groups started at the same level for the pre-test.

TABLE 4.1
PRE-TEST SCORES FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS AS COMPARED WITHIN EACH GROUP

	SPA 3			SPA 22			UD		
	Control	Exp.	p-value	Control	Exp.	p-value	Control	Exp.	p-value
Average Pre-test Score	5.77	5.38	0.76	8.36	7.58	0.40	11.17	11.38	0.90

As can be seen in the table above, the p-values for each learner group is high. This p-value comes from the difference in the average pre-test scores between the control and experimental group for each learner level. Thus, in the SPA 3 group, we see that the control group had an average pre-test score of 5.77 correct answers out of 20, while the experimental group had an average score of 5.38 correct answers out of a possible 20. The associated Tukey-Kramer adjusted p-value for this difference is .076, which is *not* a statistically significant difference. Along the same lines, we can see the results for the other two groups. The SPA 22 control group had an average pre-test score of 8.36 and the experimental group had an average score of 7.58, which yields a p-value of .40. The UD control group scored 11.17 while the experimental group scored 11.38 out of 20, yielding a p-value of .90. Neither of these p-values is statistically significant. These high p-value results prove that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups at each level, which means that the participants at each level started at the same level of proficiency.

Now that it has been established that each group was indeed similar when compared against itself to begin with, I analyzed the results to show that each of the three levels were different from one another at the beginning of the study when the participants took the pre-test. As was expected, there was a significant difference between the three learner levels, and they were significant in the order that one would anticipate; UD scored higher than SPA 22 and SPA 22 scored higher than SPA 3. The classes started at significantly different levels, with SPA 3 being the lowest level and UD being the highest level. Table 4.2 shows the difference in the average pre-test scores for each learner level. This table shows the combined experimental and control groups for each level, so the total number of participants in each group is higher than if it were divided into six groups. Since these scores were from the pre-tests, both the experimental and control groups were combined *within* each level in order to determine the differences *between* each of the three levels.

TABLE 4.2
COMPARISON BETWEEN LEARNER GROUPS BY OVERALL PRE-TEST SCORES

Class level (combined control and experimental)	Average pre-test score
SPA 3 (n = 26)	5.6
SPA 22 (n = 26)	8.0
UD (n = 14)	11.3

Furthermore, Table 4.3 shows the Tukey-Kramer adjusted p-values for each level and how each compares to the other two levels. By running this analysis, the beginning level (SPA 3) scored significantly lower than the intermediate level (SPA 22) and the advanced level (Upper-Division). Additionally, the intermediate level scored significantly higher than the beginning students, and significantly lower than the advanced students.

TABLE 4.3
PRE-TEST SCORES TUKEY-KRAMER ADJUSTED P-VALUES

	SPA 3	SPA 22	UD
SPA 3	-	0.007	<0.0001
SPA 22	-	-	0.002
UD	-	-	-

The conclusions that can be drawn from the pre-test scores on the pragmatic test are that the students within each level – whether part of the experimental or control group – begin at the same level of pragmatic proficiency and also that there were significant differences between each of the three levels, which means that there were clearly three separate groups.

B. Post-test Results

The experiment in the present study calculated the gains of L2 learners of Spanish as measured on a pre-test and a post-test. The main aspect for analysis, then, is the difference between the scores on these two tests. The students’ average post-test scores were higher for the experimental groups in each of the three levels, which suggests that the treatment was indeed beneficial for all levels of learners; the treatment worked and these four speech acts are teachable.

As stated in the previous section, there were three significantly different groups of learners, but both the experimental and control groups within each level began at the same proficiency level.

In order to examine the benefits of the treatment administered to the experimental groups, I calculated the p-value for the difference in the average pre-test and post-test scores for each learner group and then compared the control and experimental groups against each other by using a t-test. Table 4.4 below shows the average scores for the control groups divided by class level:

TABLE 4.4
AVERAGE PRE-TEST VERSUS POST-TEST SCORES BY CLASS LEVEL (CONTROL)

	SPA 3			SPA 22			UD		
	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value
Control Avg. score	5.77	6.31	0.3755	8.36	8.86	0.3141	11.17	9.50	0.0671

As expected, none of the control groups showed statistically significant gains from the pre-test to the post-test. Both the Control SPA 3 and Control SPA 22 had modest gains, while the Control UD actually performed worse on the post-test. It is difficult to say why the Upper Division Control group had lower scores on the post-test, but there is a small sample size and varying degrees of classroom experience for these students. Moreover, the p-value is almost statistically significant which might be due to again to the small number of participants. Table 4.5 illustrates the average test scores for the experimental groups.

TABLE 4.5
AVERAGE PRE-TEST VERSUS POST-TEST SCORES BY CLASS LEVEL (EXPERIMENTAL)

	SPA 3			SPA 22			UD		
	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value
Experimental Avg. score	5.38	9.23	<0.0001	7.58	12.75	0.0021	11.38	14.75	0.0099

The experimental groups improved their test scores across the board, and all three levels showed statistically significant improvement. This suggests that the treatment was beneficial for the students, and in a statistically significant manner when comparing the pre-test and post-test scores.

The next step is to compare the groups within each level to determine if the treatment was beneficial. For this comparison, I took the average post-test scores for the experimental and control group for each of the three learner levels. This analysis only compares the experimental and control groups for each level, which means that Experimental SPA 3 is compared only to Control SPA 3, Experimental SPA 22 to Control SPA 22, and Experimental UD to Control UD. Table 4.6 includes an overview of the post-test scores for the entire participant population as compared within each level, along with the improvements of the experimental groups over the control groups as measured by p-value:

TABLE 4.6
RESULTS FOR POST-TEST SCORES BY LEVEL (CONTROL VS. EXPERIMENTAL)

	SPA 3			SPA 22			UD		
	Control	Exp.	p-value	Control	Exp.	p-value	Control	Exp.	p-value
Post-test	6.31	9.23	0.054	8.86	12.75	0.01	9.50	14.75	0.01

As we can see from the results in Table 4.6, the post-test scores for the experimental groups at each of the three levels were significantly higher than the control group counterparts. At the SPA 3 level, the average post-test score for the experimental group was 9.23 correct answers out of 20, compared to only 6.31 out of 20 for the control group. This yielded a p-value of 0.054, which is very close to – but not quite – a significant gain. For the SPA 22 students, the control group averaged 8.86 acceptable answers while the experimental students averaged 12.75 acceptable answers, yielding a p-value of 0.01. The Upper Division group showed that the control group scored 9.50 out of 20, while the experimental group averaged 14.75 correct answers. This also yields a p-value of 0.01, and shows that both the SPA 22 and UD experimental groups had average scores that were statistically significantly higher than the respective control groups.

Next, I examined the distribution of the three learner groups as seen between the learner levels. Since I established that there were three distinct levels at the beginning of the study, I wanted to determine if there were three levels after the treatment was administered or if the distribution was different. This examination would show if two of the groups became more similar or if the levels were more different after the study. Table 4.7 shows the results for this test, which is a Tukey-Kramer p-value test, and outlines the distribution of average post-test scores for the experimental groups.

TABLE 4.7
AVERAGE POST-TEST SCORES - TUKEY-KRAMER P-VALUES (EXPERIMENTAL)

	Experimental SPA 3	Experimental SPA 22	Experimental UD
Experimental SPA 3	-	0.12	0.02
Experimental SPA 22	-	-	0.57
Experimental UD	-	-	-

After the treatment, the distribution is slightly different as Table 4.7 illustrates. SPA 3 and UD are significantly different, shown by the p-value of 0.02, but the SPA 22 and UD groups are not significantly different given the p-value of 0.57. Also, SPA 3 and SPA 22 are not significant, but with a p-value of 0.12 suggests that with a larger sample size, the two groups would be significantly different. So this means that SPA 22 is more like UD, and SPA 3 is still not like the other two groups. These results suggest that while the Experimental SPA 3 learners did in fact improve, and did so significantly over the Control SPA 3, SPA 3 is still not at the same level as SPA 22 or UD students with regards to pragmatic competence. Additionally, the SPA 22 group became more like the UD group, suggesting that this is a fruitful time in the pragmatic development of students. In sum, after the treatment the distribution shifted so that SPA 3 is at one level and SPA 22 and UD are at another. This shows two learner levels at the end instead of three levels at the beginning.

The test scores for questions on requests proved to be fairly straightforward for the learners. This is probably due to the fact that the forms are similar in English and in Spanish. However, in the formulation of requests, the SPA 22 level showed the most improvement, where the experimental group showed statistically significant improvement on 2 of the 6 questions. It appears that this is a transition period where the students begin to formulate utterances in a more complete manner. The students had the most trouble with Question #2, in which many responses used the speaker-centered *¿Puedo tener la sal?* “Can I have the salt?” instead of the hearer-centered *¿Me pasas la sal?* “You pass me the salt?”

Table 4.8 List of Request Questions

- 1) You ask your professor for help with your homework.
You say: _____
- 2) You miss class one day because you are sick. The next day you ask a classmate for the notes from the class you missed.
You say: _____
- 3) Your roommate is playing music very loudly, but you have to study and it is very distracting.
You say: _____
- 4) When you are at the store with your friend, you realize you forgot your wallet. You ask your friend for 5 dollars.
You say: _____
- 5) You go to a restaurant and there is no salt at your table. When you ask the man at the table next to you for the salt,
You say: _____
- 6) It is your turn to clean the apartment, but you have a lot of homework to do. You approach your roommate to see if she can do it.
You say: _____

The SPA 3 level did not show a great deal of improvement for requests, but this could be because of their lack of control of the grammar and vocabulary. This is also perhaps due in part to the fact that students at lower levels tend to focus on the first-person and therefore speaker-centered forms. Table 4.9 illustrates the results for requests:

TABLE 4.9
RESULTS FOR REQUEST QUESTIONS
REQUESTS - SPA 3

Question #	Experimental (13 participants)				Control (13 participants)				Tukey p-value for post-test
	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-test		Post-test		
	n correct	% correct (out of 13)	n correct	% correct (out of 13)	n correct	% correct (out of 13)	n correct	% correct (out of 13)	
1	4	30.8	8	61.5	3	23.1	5	38.5	0.26
2	2	15.4	1	7.7	2	15.4	2	15.4	0.56
3	1	7.7	2	15.4	5	38.5	4	30.8	0.37
4	3	23.1	2	15.4	2	15.4	1	7.7	0.56
5	2	15.4	6	46.2	4	30.8	4	30.8	0.44
7	4	30.8	4	30.8	2	15.4	6	46.2	0.44

REQUESTS - SPA 22

Question #	Experimental (12 participants)				Control (14 participants)				Tukey p-value for post-test
	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-test		Post-test		
	n correct	% correct (out of 12)	n correct	% correct (out of 12)	n correct	% correct (out of 14)	n correct	% correct (out of 14)	
1	4	33.3	7	58.3	6	42.9	10	71.4	0.50
2	2	16.7	6	50.0	1	7.1	3	21.4	0.14
3	4	33.3	4	33.3	8	57.1	5	35.7	0.90
4	6	50.0	7	58.3	4	28.6	2	14.3	0.02
5	6	50.0	9	75.0	2	14.3	3	21.4	0.005
7	10	83.3	3	25.0	8	57.1	5	35.7	0.57

REQUESTS – UPPER DIVISION

Question #	Experimental (8 participants)				Control (6 participants)				Tukey p-value for post-test
	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-test		Post-test		
	n correct	% correct (out of 8)	n correct	% correct (out of 8)	n correct	% correct (out of 6)	n correct	% correct (out of 6)	
1	6	75.0	5	62.5	4	66.7	3	50.0	0.67
2	1	12.5	4	50.0	1	16.7	1	16.7	0.23
3	3	37.5	6	75.0	6	100	3	50.0	0.37
4	4	50.0	5	62.5	4	66.7	3	50.0	0.67
5	3	37.5	5	62.5	2	33.3	2	33.3	0.32
7	4	50.0	3	37.5	4	66.7	4	66.7	0.32

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this study has been to determine if explicit teaching of pragmatic forms, namely requests, in an L2 would be beneficial for students’ pragmatic competence. Given the significant improvement by the experimental groups at all levels that received the treatment, L2 pragmatics can indeed be taught. Additionally, before the treatment, there were three levels of learners, consisting of beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. However, after the treatment there were two levels, due to the fact that the intermediate level became more similar to the advanced level, thus leaving a beginning level and a combined intermediate/advanced level. The intermediate level improved the most of the three learner levels. This improvement suggests that the intermediate level might be the best time to teach requests.

As shown above, the experimental groups improved significantly vis-à-vis their respective control groups for all three of the learner levels in terms of pragmatic competence. This improvement was measured by the number of correct responses on a written questionnaire for both a pre-test and post-test. At the start of the study, the two groups were indistinguishable with no statistically significant differences between them. The experimental group received an additional treatment in the form of online lessons on pragmatics.

The results from the statistical analyses showed that the online treatment given to the experimental groups at all three learner levels seem to be beneficial for students at any proficiency level. Moreover, the experimental group outperformed the control group within each developmental level. This improvement shows that the treatment administered to the students was beneficial for the formulation of requests.

The differences between English and Spanish in terms of the formulation of requests are primarily grammatical or syntactical. For example, requests in Spanish are usually hearer-centered, with the hearer being the subject of the sentence. For the salt scenario on the questionnaire (#5), an appropriate request would be *¿me puedes pasar la sal?* “can you pass me the salt?” However, English has the option of using speaker-centered requests with these modal verbs such as “can,” as in the example “can I have the salt.” The results of the DCT showed that the students transferred this latter form into Spanish, thus resulting in an awkward formulation in Spanish, *¿puedo tener la sal?* “can I have the salt?” To learn this new form, the students need to be able to grasp the syntax in Spanish and not translate directly from English. This is a bit more complicated than memorizing new lexical items, so it stands to reason that there was not a great deal of improvement for requests, especially at the lower levels.

In sum, the treatment was beneficial and therefore explicit instruction is useful for teaching requests in Spanish. The data in this investigation suggests that not only was the treatment beneficial, but that the SPA 22 students benefitted most from the treatment. Highlighting the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 pragmatic forms seemed to aid the students’ pragmatic development.

In conclusion, time on task is a fairly accurate indicator of general L2 competence as well as pragmatic competence. However, with explicit instruction of requests, it is possible to accelerate learners’ pragmatic development, at least at the intermediate level. The test scores in this study suggest that students studying Spanish in a traditional classroom setting will have a level of pragmatic competence more or less in accordance with time on task, but with the treatment intermediate students become more like advanced learners.

APPENDIX A. ONLINE PRAGMATIC LESSONS

Introduction

What is pragmatics?

Pragmatics examines how context contributes to meaning. It includes things like pauses, unsaid implications, voice intonation, body and facial posture, irony, sarcasm, humor, point in time or space.

What are speech acts?

Speech acts, such as apologies, requests, compliments and complaints, can be divided into 3 parts:

- 1) Meaning
- 2) Function
- 3) Effect on the hearer

Speech acts can be either direct or indirect:

- Direct – *Cierra la ventana. "Close the window"*
- Indirect – *Hace frío, ¿verdad? "It's cold, right?" (in other words, shut the door!)*

Formal and Informal conversations

The relationship between the conversations between participants also affects what is said. You speak differently to a professor than you would to a friend. When talking to a friend, it would be an informal conversation (in Spanish *tú*), while a conversation with a professor would be formal (in Spanish *usted*).

Why is it important to learn how to use speech acts?

- To avoid miscommunication (e.g. to convey the meaning you want).
- To avoid saying socioculturally inappropriate topics or actions (e.g. to avoid offending the hearer).
- To avoid being too formal or informal.
- To avoid uncomfortable situations (e.g. seeming insincere or rude).

Lesson 1 – Requests

What is a request?

Requests are common forms of communication in both English and Spanish. However, there are slight differences in how each language realizes these actions. A request is when the speaker asks something of the hearer. Therefore, the goal of a request is to get the hearer to perform some task.

Use of requests

In Spanish, speakers make requests with different levels of politeness. The speaker chooses an appropriate level of politeness based on the context in order to get to the hearer to perform a given action. The greater the imposition of the request, the more politeness is required. In other words, if the request requires a great deal of effort or inconvenience, then the speaker will be more polite in order to increase the chance that the task be completed.

Level of Politeness		Form	Level of Inconvenience
Less polite	Low	pásame la sal	Low
	Low	me pasas la sal	Low
	Low	me puedes pasar la sal	Low
	High	me quieres pasar la sal	High
	Higher	me podrías pasar la sal	Higher
More polite	Highest	sería tan amable pasarme la sal	Highest

For example, one way of asking for salt would be to use the command form, "pásame la sal." However, "me pasas la sal" is often the preferred form in Spanish since it is slightly more polite than the command form, which is extremely blunt and direct.

Notice how the verb form will change to express formal or informal requests according to social distance. For example, with your boss or professor, you would use the *usted* form, and therefore would conjugate the verb as "(usted) me ayuda con la tarea", but with a classmate or friend you would use the *tú* form, "(tú) me ayudas con la tarea."

Let's say you are a student, and you miss a day of class. The following day you ask a classmate for their notes. In English, it is common to ask for the notes by saying, "Can I see your notes?", with the requester functioning as the subject of the sentence. However, in Spanish, the form, "me das tus apuntes" where the person being asked to do something (*tú*) is the subject of the sentence. Therefore, in this context "puedo ver tus apuntes" is not a preferred form but rather a transfer from English grammar.

Another common expression in Spanish is *te/le/les importa + infinitive* or *me + verb in present tense* to ask something of another person. The conditional is used to express politeness for a formal situation, for example in the very formal form, "le importaría cerrar la ventana."

Level of Politeness	Form (Tú - informal)	Form (Usted - formal)
Less Polite	¿Te importa cerrar la ventana?	¿Le importa cerrar la ventana?
More Polite	Te importaría cerrar la ventana?	¿Le importaría cerrar la ventana?

Exercise 1 – Structures

Translate the following requests from English to Spanish, using the informal *tú* form and the structures seen above.

Example: *May I see your notes?* -->

¿Me das tus apuntes?

- A) *May I borrow your book?* --> _____
- B) *Can you loan me five dollars?* --> _____
- C) *Could you help me with the homework?* --> _____
- D) *Can you pass me the salt?* --> _____

Exercise 2 – Practice

Complete the following with an appropriate form of these formulas to make a request.

- 1) You want your roommate to help you take out the trash. (Low inconvenience)
 ¿Me ayudas _____?
- 2) You ask your friend for a ride home. (Low inconvenience)
 ¿Te importa _____ a casa?
- 3) You ask to meet with your professor. (High inconvenience)

¿Le importa _____?

4) You ask your boss to go over a business report with you. (Higher inconvenience)

¿Me ayudar á _____?

5) You go to a cafe and there is an open seat next someone you don't know. You ask to sit down. (High inconvenience)

¿_____?

Exercise 3 - In context

Read the following conversation and answer the questions below.

Jorge y Roberto son estudiantes en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Jorge estaba enfermo y no asistió a la clase de historia el día anterior. Jorge quiere ver los apuntes de Roberto para no perder la materia de la clase.

Jorge: Hola Roberto, ¿Cómo estás?

Roberto: Estoy bien, ¿y tú? Estabas enfermo, ¿no?

Jorge: Sí pero hoy estoy mucho mejor. Oye, ¿me das tus apuntes de la clase de historia?

Roberto: Sí aquí están los apuntes de ayer.

Jorge: Gracias Roberto, me has ayudado mucho.

Roberto: De nada. hay un examen en dos días así que voy a la biblioteca a estudiar.

Jorge: ¡Hay un examen! Bueno, voy a la biblioteca también.

Roberto: Vale, nos vemos en la biblioteca.

Jorge: Gracias de nuevo, nos vemos pronto.

Roberto: Venga, hasta luego.

Jorge: Hasta luego.

Comprehension

1) What purpose does Jorge have in this conversation?

2) What key words led you to categorize the conversation as you did? What level of politeness was used?

3) What roles did each of the speakers have? Who is making the request? Who was asked to do something?

4) Was this a formal or informal conversation?

5) Was the conversation successful? Was the goal reached?

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