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## **DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN FIRST YEAR SPANISH STUDENTS: A STUDY ON REQUESTS**

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## **DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN FIRST YEAR SPANISH STUDENTS: A STUDY ON REQUESTS**

**Abstract.** The study of pragmatics attempts to determine what is considered socially appropriate given the context in question. Many studies now suggest that pragmatic errors are perceived as more severe than other types of errors, such as grammatical or vocabulary errors. Additionally, pragmatic competence is key in students communicating effectively in the foreign language. As such, it is more important than ever that foreign language teachers include pragmatic lessons in their classes, especially considering that communicative language textbooks lack pragmatic descriptions. To this end, the present study sought to incorporate pragmatic lessons regarding requested strategies in a first year, second semester L2 Spanish class in the United States. Control and experimental groups were established, and the three requested strategy lessons were only included in the experimental group. Prior to the first lesson, students took two pre-tests (written and an oral), then after the lessons, the tests were taken again (post-tests). It was found that the experimental group experienced greater increases in pragmatic competence (regarding requests); however, the increase was not found to be of statistical significance. The professor of the course was satisfied with the increase and plans to continue implementing pragmatic lessons in future semesters.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic competence, requests, Spanish as a foreign language, pragmatic lessons

## **EL DESARROLLO DE LA COMPETENCIA PRAGMÁTICA EN ESTUDIANTES DE ESPAÑOL NIVEL PRINCIPIANTE: UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LAS PETICIONES**

**Resumen.** El estudio de la pragmática intenta determinar qué se considera socialmente apropiado dado un determinado contexto. Muchos estudios sugieren que los errores pragmáticos se perciben como errores más graves que los errores gramaticales o los de vocabulario. Además, la competencia pragmática es clave para que los estudiantes se comuniquen de manera efectiva en el idioma extranjero. Como tal, es más importante que nunca que los profesores de lenguas extranjeras incluyan lecciones pragmáticas en

sus clases, especialmente si consideramos que los libros de texto de lenguaje comunicativo carecen de descripciones pragmáticas. Con este fin, el presente estudio buscó incorporar lecciones pragmáticas con respecto a las estrategias de peticiones en un curso de primer año de español como lengua extranjera en los Estados Unidos. Se establecieron grupos de control y experimentales, y las tres lecciones de estrategias de peticiones solo fueron implementadas en el grupo experimental. Antes de la primera lección pragmática, los estudiantes hicieron dos exámenes previos (uno escrito y uno oral) y, después de las lecciones, se hicieron los exámenes de nuevo (exámenes posteriores). Se encontró que el grupo experimental desarrolló un mayor aumento en la competencia pragmática (con respecto a las peticiones); sin embargo, el aumento no fue estadísticamente significativo. El profesor del curso se mostró satisfecho con el aumento y planea continuar implementando lecciones pragmáticas en futuros cuatrimestres.

**Palabras clave:** Competencia pragmática, peticiones, español como lengua extranjera, lecciones pragmáticas

## Introduction

Foreign language teachers are beginning to understand the importance of including sociolinguistic content in their classes for beginning students, such as ways of speech acts and pragmatics (Vellenga, 2011). This can largely be attributed to the acceptance by many educators that a grammar-led classroom is not enough to achieve a comprehensive learning. Therefore, an approach that promotes effective communication among students is vital in language acquisition (Bachelor, 2017). It is crucial that students understand the nuances of the language that they are studying, as a number of studies have shown that pragmatic errors are more serious than grammatical errors in order to achieve effective communication (Barros García & Bachelor, 2018; Wolfe, Shanmugaraj & Sipe, 2016). While this has been acknowledged by many teachers, many are simply not trained in how to incorporate these components or they lack evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching strategies (Vellenga, 2011).

For this reason, this study focuses on increasing the strategies of requests among first-year Spanish students. Requests were chosen as they are among the most frequently used Spanish speech acts (Langer, 2011). During the 2017 spring semester at a university in the USA, experimental and control groups were established in several sessions on the following subject: Spanish II for foreigners. Pragmatic lessons about Spanish requests were introduced in the experimental group to determine which of the two groups had a greater pragmatic growth. Pre and post tests were used with in-between interventions to reach such conclusion.

### ***Pragmatic competence, speech acts, requests and their teaching***

This section examines the pragmatic ability from the perspective of non-native speakers. As a field of interdisciplinary research, pragmatics is a linguistic discipline that has been studied for years. However, it is necessary to examine some of these definitions in depth, as well as studies on some pragmatic subfields, in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of this discipline.

Thomas (1995) explains that pragmatics considers the negotiation of meaning between speaker and listener, the context of the utterance and the potential meaning of the utterance. One definition of pragmatics that has historically been the most quoted is that of Mey (1993), who defines it as "the societally necessary and consciously interactive dimension of the study of language" (p. 315). Crystal (1985, p. 301) offers a compatible vision with that of Mey (1993) when he explains that pragmatics is "the study of language from the user's point of view, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects that their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication."

The field of pragmatics has undergone many transformations throughout history. According to Joseph (2012), pragmatics emerged by the expansion of the philosophical ideas of key thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). However, as the field developed, other leading figures changed its course. For example, in 1905, Bertrand Russell (1919) presented a key study in the formalist approach to pragmatics, an approach that uses logical ideas to suggest that language can only have a literal meaning. As a result of this approach, inaccuracies, evasions and implicatures in interactions are perceived as language deficiencies. However, in 1962, Austin countered Russell's vision with a work fundamental to the non-formalist vision. The on-formalist approach accepts that language is undetermined (it may be vague or ambiguous), but it is interested in understanding how to communicate effectively despite using an imperfect language. In 1975, Paul Grice developed his theory of conversational implicatures and the cooperative principle. The author analyzed the connection between what is said and what is actually meant in a conversation. Grice developed four conversation maxims, which describe what the listener assumes about how the discourse will be. In 1969, John Searle researched the so-called speech acts, including its classification. Lastly, the greatest contribution to the field of pragmatics in modern history was that of Brown and Levinson (1978), who defined the politeness theory, based on the desire of every individual for their self-image to be valued, as well as not having anything imposed on them.

Continuing with the definitions created about pragmatics, other components mentioned by V.G. and Rajan (2012) form a part of them, such as the conversational structure or communication between two or more interlocutors (Brown, 2013); conversational management, or how the participants in a conversation negotiate topics and handle conversational turns (Mizón and Oyanedel, 1999); discourse organization (Loureda Lamas, 2010); sociolinguistic aspects of language use, such as the manners of addressing; and conversational implicature, or indirect or implicit speech acts (Martin Peris et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, a review of some of the most popular contemporary textbooks for Spanish language learning, supposedly based on communicative approach, shows how little attention is placed on pragmatic principles (Barros García & Bachelor, 2018). This lack of information is particularly negative when the language is not learned in an immersion language environment and, therefore, the students depend on the information they receive in the classroom. Due to said reason, it is necessary for teachers nowadays to include pragmatic elements, such as speech acts, in their lessons.

According to the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (2013), a speech act is a statement or expression which plays a role in communication, such as apologies, requests or invitations. Speech acts include real life interactions and do not only require language knowledge, but also the appropriate use of said language in a certain culture.

Langer (2011) explains that speech acts can be divided in three parts: meaning, function and effect on the listener. Likewise, speech acts can be direct or indirect. For instance, "close the window" could be a direct request for someone to close the window, while "it's cold, isn't it?" could work as an indirect request. The relationship between speakers also affects what is said. For instance, social distance between interlocutors (which is determined by factors such as age, gender and socioeconomic level) results in different linguistic options (García, 2004). When a student makes a request to a teacher from whom they are more socially distanced from, a more formal language would most likely be used. However, the same student would speak less formally when requesting something to a colleague. The difference in interpersonal

relationship between speakers is also conveyed in the language and the way the speakers talk.

As mentioned, Brown and Levinson (1978) developed the politeness theory, which explains that speakers try to “save their self-image” when performing speech acts. Brown and Levinson define “self-image” as the speaker’s public face, the facet that every adult shows to others. This self-image must receive attention in the interaction, and the politeness model details the available options for self-image care by the speaker, distinguishing between strategies for positive image care and strategies for negative image care. Positive image is defined by the authors as the desire of being appreciated and liked by others, while negative image refers to the desire of having freedom and not having anything imposed upon. A negative strategy shows deference to the listener and provides them a way of carrying out the desired speech act; for example, “Darling, give me a cigarette”, whereas “Can you give me a cigarette?” is a negative strategy. You can imagine the difficulty in achieving the two objectives which are sometimes opposite: ensuring that the listener meets the speech act while also maintaining their image.

A threatening act towards the image is an act which may or may not deliberately place at risk other people’s image needs (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Courtesy is defined as the use of communication strategies to create and keep social harmony (Culpeper, 2009). This can be achieved in several ways: being contextually appropriate, following social and cultural rules, and being socially positive when dealing with image needs. The other person has the option of using courtesy super strategies with threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978) with the aim of maintaining their image. When interacting, the speaker may in particular find the following options: carry out the act without attenuations (*bald-on record*), use positive courtesy, use negative courtesy, use indirect or mitigated courtesy (*off-record*) or retention (*withholding*) (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Acting without mitigations consists of not trying to minimize the threat to the image. Positive courtesy involves expression of affection towards the other person, thus minimizing threats towards positive image. Negative courtesy consists of not impeding the other person’s action, minimizing the threat to negative image in this way. Indirect or mitigated courtesy consists of avoiding the responsibility of a threatening act through the use of indirection. And, lastly, retention consists of refusing to carry out a threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Courtesy super strategies are determined by contextual factors, such as power relations between the speaker and the listener, social distance between the speaker and the listener, and how big the threat of the threatening act is (Brown and Levinson, 1978). When deciding the strategy to use, the speaker analyzes the individual advantages of each strategy.

Regarding discourtesy, it is defined as the involvement in aggressive image activities, with the aim of causing social trouble (Adelward, 1988). This can be carried out in several ways, and it can be that the speaker intentionally attacks the listener’s image or that the listener perceives an intentional or unintentional attack on their image, by the speaker. There are also discourtesy super strategies which might be used. These super strategies are the same as courtesy super strategies, unless they are carried out rudely (Adelward, 1988).

Austin (1962) adds other aspects to the courtesy theory. The author explains that, when a speaker formulates a sentence, they are carrying out three acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act. According to this author, a locutionary act consists of formulating a sentence with some sense and reference which

is more or less equivalent to its literal meaning. An illocutionary act consists of carrying out an action when saying something (i.e., answering a question, giving information, warning, expressing a purpose). Finally, a perlocutionary act is what speakers achieve when saying something, such as convincing, persuading or dissuading someone.

In the field of language teaching, it is important to understand speech acts from the student's point of view with the aim of avoiding lack of communication, the use of issues and carrying out social-culturally unsuitable actions, the fact that the speaker is too formal or informal regarding the context, and the ultimate aim of avoiding uncomfortable situations for interlocutors (Langer, 2011).

Early pragmatic research focused on the study of intercultural and interlanguage pragmatics. In the process of acquiring a foreign language, there is a system known as *interlanguage* (Schulz, 2011) which is a type of linguistic system used by foreign language students to store newly acquired knowledge. During a certain stage of interlanguage, the student comes to recognize the nuances in the use of language, which are related to pragmatic competence; hence the name interlanguage pragmatics.

Selinker (1972) explains that interlanguage pragmatics refers to the learner's understanding and use of linguistic forms in different contexts other than the target language. The study of interlanguage pragmatics is based on pragmatics and the acquisition of foreign languages. According to Selinker (1972), what researchers are trying to understand is how the use of pragmatics by foreign language learners is different from the use of native speakers. This is important because failures that occur due to a lack of pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge can lead to a student being perceived as rude.

Interlanguage pragmatics also tries to understand how the pragmatics of the target language is acquired. For this aim, the learning stages of pragmatics in different students are investigated in order to check if these stages are common among all students and if they occur in a specific order. Research on interlanguage pragmatics has important implications for the foreign language classroom because it supports direct and explicit instruction of pragmatic knowledge in language teaching.

Much of the research on interlanguage pragmatics focuses on studying the student's ability to produce different speech acts. Among the most commonly investigated speech acts are: requests, apologies, invitations, complaints, and rejections (Barron, 2003; Cohen and Shively, 2007; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Matsumura, 2001). Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) were the first authors to analyze intercultural differences in the realization and conception of speech acts. These authors focused on apologies and requests, addressing three different factors: the relative power of the interlocutors, the degree of social distance, and the degree of imposition.

Some of the most common forms of data collection for interlanguage research includes the *Discourse Completion Task* (DCT), free role-playing and multiple-choice tests (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010). Furthermore, interlanguage pragmatics research has mainly focused on the study of isolated aspects of the pragmatic competence of language learners. Some researchers such as Bardovi-Härlig (2001), Rose and Kasper (2001) and Schmidt (1993, 1995) have closely examined the pedagogical applications of pragmatics. In this regard, some of the main areas of study have been the *noticing* hypothesis, the concept of consciousness and the adult's role or *input* (Bardovi-Härlig and Griffin, 2005). However, some authors (Bardovi-Härlig, 1999; Kasper, 1992) point out that interlanguage pragmatics studies especially focus on the description or use of language, rather than on its acquisition.

Bardovi-Härilig and Griffin (2005) described four differences between the pragmatic production of native speakers and non-native speakers. First, differences in the production of speech acts; second, the use of different semantic formulas; third, the use of different content; and fourth, the use of a different form, such as the simplification of a formal application to an informal one. The results showed that, for example, some of the non-native speeches lacked an apology in a context where the student was late for a meeting, while native speakers did apologize. This example shows that in some cases, the students were able to recognize the required speech act (an apology) but did not execute it correctly with consistency. Additionally, the authors classified the good or bad use in many ways, which included expressions that were too elaborate or formal in a relatively informal situation, or not sufficiently formal for a given situation. Another difficulty encountered was the excessive use of pre-request, such as “if you don’t mind”. Native speakers use this technique to initiate the request (Bardovi-Härilig and Griffin, 2005), but once they receive a positive response to the pre-request, they usually do not repeat it again. However, in the learner’s speech, the authors found that many students repeated these pre-requests in many instances.

There is a limited amount of research in the explicit relation to the interlanguage pragmatics of the students of Spanish as a foreign language. These mainly refer to the comparison of what English speakers and Spanish speakers do, without much focus on students of Spanish as a foreign language. According to Langer (2011), a large part of the literature also focuses on intercultural tests between Spanish and another language, usually English (Pinto, 2005).

According to Tatsuki, Kite and Maeda (2007), scholars and language teachers agree that teaching and acquiring the pragmatics of foreign languages have undergone a series of transformations in response to both sociological development and technological advances. These transformations include the introduction of films and videos to exemplify acts of speaking in native speakers, and video recording the results in foreign language learning sessions, since technology did not have a prominent role in previous years.

The evolution and impulse of research on the acquisition of foreign language pragmatics is based on the need to acquire a high pragmatic competence in the target language. Researchers and language teachers focus on studies aimed at transforming the pragmatics of foreign languages so that learning it is much easier for students. This need to acquire a high pragmatic competence in the language that is being learned is due to the fact that inculcating students with effective communication is now the main objective of language teachers. As previously explained, speaking in an inappropriate way according to the context can have a negative impact on communication. Pragmatics takes into account the context, so that their attention in the classroom is being valued little by little among the L2 educators of L2 (Vellenga, 2011; V. G. and Rajan, 2012).

Kasper (2006) has shown that the evolution of foreign language pragmatics is in line with the framework proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), which consists of three components: sociolinguistic competence (that is, adequacy), grammatical competence (lexicon and grammar rules) and strategic competence (appropriate use of communication strategies).

The following is the description of the speech act researched in the present study: the requests. These were selected because, according to Langer (2011), they tend to be the most used and possibly threatening for one’s image. Avoiding threatening acts is important for students of foreign languages, since they not only risk communication, but likewise make the speaker run the risk of offending the listener or seeming rude.

Students of foreign languages can be expected to trust the strategies they use in their mother language to perform speech acts in the target language (Langer, 2011). This influence of the mother language in the use of the target language is known as pragmatic transfer, which can be positive when the rules and patterns of both languages coincide, and negative when they differ (Díaz Pérez, 2003). A successful student will be able to use the correct form pragmatically and grammatically in their production of the speech acts within the target language, according to the appropriate social norms in that speech community, which may differ from their own.

A request is a directive speech act whose illocutionary purpose is to get the listener to do something. When making a request, the speaker is understood as not being sure that the person being addressed would perform the requested action in the normal course of events (Searle, 1969). Because requests have the potential of being intrusive and demanding, the sender may be afraid of looking bad to the addressee and may want to “save their image” (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989), both their own and the addressee’s. Due to this reason, the sender sees the need to minimize the imposition involved from their request, for which they can use different resources, such as mitigation.

In literature on speech acts, requests have received more attention than any other speech act. Ellis (1994) explains that requests have been studied a lot because they are “face-threatening and, therefore, call for considerable linguistic expertise on the part of the learner, they differ cross-linguistically in interesting ways and they are often realized by means of clearly identifiable formulas” (p.167).

Requests have been mostly studied from the point of view of their production by foreign language students (Rodríguez, 2001). Most of these studies (Blum-Kulka 1991; Cenoz and Valencia, 1996; Garton, 2000) have shown that requests can be direct or indirect, and that they can be classified into different types according to the levels of the speaker’s openness and the need to save their image (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989). This classification is important because direct requests such as “I need food” are easier for language learners than indirect requests such as “I am hungry”, expressed with the intention of requesting food.

In addition, according to Langer (2011), speakers make requests with different levels of formality. The speaker chooses an appropriate level of formality depending on the context, in order to lead the listener to perform a given action. The more the request is imposed, the more attenuation is required. In other words, if the request requires a great deal of effort or inconvenience, the speaker will look for tools to be more courteous in order to increase the likelihood that the goal will be achieved (Langer, 2011). The following table (Table 1) from Langer (2011, p.89) demonstrates the different levels of courtesy when ordering salt in Spanish.

Table 1  
*Courtesy level when making requests*

Courtesy level	Formula	Level of inconvenience
Low	Pass the salt	Low
Low	Can you pass the salt	Low
Low	Can you pass me the salt	Low
High	Can you please pass me the salt	High
Higher	Would you please pass me the salt	Higher
Highest	Would you be so kind as to pass me the salt	Highest

*Note:* Source: Langer (2011)

In addition, the performance of a speech act varies depending on the relationship between the interlocutors and the degree of imposition that the request has on the listener. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, p. 202) described the different strategies used by speakers when making requests, as shown below (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Strategies used to carry out the requests*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Example</b>
<i>Frankness level</i>	
<i>Direct</i>	
Derivable of the mode	Close the door
Performative	I'm telling you to close the door
Modified performative	Do I have to ask you to close the door
<i>Conventionally indirect</i>	
Derivable of locution	I want you to close the door
Suggestive formula	What if we close the door?
Preparatory	Would you mind closing the door?
<i>Non-conventionally indirect</i>	
Strong insinuation	The door is open
Slight insinuation	It's cold here

*Note:* Source: Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989)

The above examples are very useful for students who are learning a foreign language. Many studies on the acquisition of requests by foreign language students analyzed the ways in which students make requests in the target language. According to CARLA (2013), understanding how students make requests can help teachers teach students the correct request functions. For example, students of English as a foreign language sometimes believe that the longer the request is, the politer and more courteous it is. This may be due to prior education offered to them in their home country. Although this belief may capture the general trend of petitions in English, it is not true on a formal request such as "May I ...?" where, despite brevity, there is a high degree of deference. In turn, students could mistakenly use "May I...?" in an informal situation, believing that this is an informal request because of its brevity, as was the case in Matsumura's (2001) research on Japanese students learning English.

On the other hand, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) discovered that students of English as a foreign language may be more elaborate than native English speakers when making a request given the number of support movements encountered. For example, when asking someone to take them somewhere, English learners might say: "Would it be possible for you to give me a lift to the restaurant since you live near there and have to drive that way if you take?" [¿Sería posible que me llevaras en tu coche al restaurante porque vives cerca y tienes que conducir hacia allí aunque me lleves o no?]. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) explain that this elaboration is due to the student's effort to minimize imposition upon the listener, trying to explain the depth of the situation that leads the speaker to ask them for something.

Questions relating to learning to produce requests are not only limited to students of English as a foreign language. According to a study by Mizuno (1996),

Chinese students studying Japanese do not use as many support movement strategies as native speakers do. Native speakers tend to spend more time using various support movements and more linguistically complex structures than learners. Native Chinese speakers generally use more direct requests and transfer their own native norm when speaking Japanese. Therefore, Chinese students have to be highly competent and linguistically sophisticated in order to build more complex structures in Japanese.

Studies by Kashiwazaki (1993) and Sameshima (1998) on early and intermediate levels of Japanese by Chinese students found that they generally use phrases made to order, such as "...te kudasai masenka? [Could you...?] or "...te itadake masenka?" Could I...?], possibly due to the frequent use of these structures in Japanese language textbooks. Intermediate and advanced students tend to make more requests as a native would, by using incomplete phrases, omitting "iidesuka" [would that be okay?].

Lastly, Kashiwazaki (1993) found that, before producing the central act of a request, native Japanese speakers often use the phrase "...no nandesukedo koto" [regarding...], to announce the topic and prepare the listener for the impending request. Japanese speakers also leave their request sentences unfinished, reaching the end of the sentence by prolonging the syllables. This helps to minimize imposition and shows consideration for the listener. When students of Japanese lack these strategies, they may appear abrupt or imposing. If the sender does not announce the subject from the beginning, the listener may need to guess or assume something and therefore the expression may be confusing.

All the above studies indicate the need for foreign language learners to learn pragmatic characteristics specific to the target language, such as performing and responding to speech acts. Although not all of the cited study examples were related to students of Spanish as a foreign language, the same rule would apply to any language learner who cannot always come to understand the intrinsic nuances of the language they are learning.

## **Method**

To address the previous objectives, the following research question was selected:

- Do pragmatic classroom interventions positively influence the ability of students of Spanish as a foreign language to use requests in an appropriate manner (in accordance with the notions of pragmatic appropriateness as established by previous research)?

To answer this research question, two groups of students were selected from one higher education institution from the Midwestern region of the United States. These groups participated in the study for the entire spring quarter of 2017. Group one will be called the L2 experimental group and group two the L2 control group. The aim of the L2 control group was to determine whether pragmatic growth in request strategies could be attributed to other variables, such as grammar and vocabulary lessons.

Among all the groups, 16 students decided to participate, aged between 17-35 years, with an average of 22 years. These 16 participants were divided equally into two groups of 8. All of these students successfully completed the Spanish I course and enrolled in their second semester at the university level of Spanish (meaning four months of language study; with the students studying Spanish for four additional months during Spanish II, with a total of eight months of language study in the first

year). The grammatical approach of Spanish I is based on the conjugations in the present, including all the irregular ones, those that have root and reflexive changes, and the present continuous. And also the most basic differences between the uses of *por* and *para* and *saber* and *conocer*. In Spanish II, students learn the differences between the preterite indicative and preterite tense, including their conjugations (regular, irregular and those with root change), the direct and indirect object pronouns and the future tense in Spanish. Students from these groups were born and raised in the United States, with the exception of one student from Australia, so all participants in the two groups are native English speakers.

Prior to the spring of 2017, the Institutional Review Board authorized the completion of this research project. The previous biographical information was obtained directly from the participants who signed a consent form and completed a background questionnaire.

During the first week of the semester, the students in all the groups underwent a written test of the end of the speech (DCT) and an oral DCT. Both DCTs (see appendices) consisted of 10 scenarios in which students had to respond to an equal number of formal and informal situations with different levels of imposition. These oral and written DCTs served as preliminary tests for the purpose of this study. The purpose of the preliminary tests was to evaluate the participants' pragmatic competence before class instruction. Throughout the semester, three pragmatic lessons (interventions) were given on the request strategies in group 1 (experimental). All departmental and course learning outcomes remained intact, and no other classroom elements were modified so as not to create additional variables between the control and experimental groups. The pragmatic lessons on the requests were based on the activities designed by Langer (2013), the Advanced Research Center on Language Acquisition [CARLA] (2013) and Martín Ruiz (2011) and were modified to meet the students' needs. The lessons consisted of three 20-minute sessions, with a total of approximately 60 minutes, and dealt with the differences between formal and informal situations, ranging from minor to highest impositions and situations that exposed the students to the indirect nature and oriented to the Spanish listener (Langer, 2013). The first intervention began with an explicit lesson that showed typical request strategies in Spanish by level of imposition and explained the listener-oriented nature of these requests. The second half of this first lesson and the remaining two lessons followed a more implicit approach. In the last lesson, students had the opportunity to see clips from popular Spanish films that contained a variety of requests and which they had to categorize according to the instructions found in Martín Ruiz (2011).

At the end of the semester, after the students in group one (experimental) had been exposed to the three pragmatic interventions, the participants in the two groups did the same written and oral DCTs that they did at the beginning of the semester, in order to measure potential growth in their pragmatic competence. These oral and written DCTs served as further tests for the purpose of this study.

At the end of the four-month period, the data was analyzed using criteria based on CARLA's (2006) and Langer's (2013) research to determine what is considered a pragmatically appropriate request in Spanish (see Appendix). Based on the knowledge from these studies, the researcher searched for listener-oriented strategies, conventional indirect strategies, the student offering a reason and the use of "tú" (informal 'you') or "usted" (formal 'you') conjugation depending on the situation. Other L2 features, such as spelling or grammatical errors, were not included in the data analysis. The researcher listened to and read each response from the pre- and post-tests and marked them as "adheres" or "does not adhere" to the pragmatic norms according to the previously

mentioned criteria (Appendix). When an item was marked as “does not adhere”, a comment was left explaining why it was considered inappropriate.

## **Results**

To analyze the results of the study, it is important to review the research question. The research question attempted to discover whether pragmatic interventions in the classroom had a positive impact on the pragmatic request of L2 students. As such, a paired t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant growth between pre- and post-test (written and oral DTCs) within group one (experimental). The average scores on pre-tests for group 1 were 30% for written DCT and 36.25% for oral DCT. Post-test scores were 37.5% for written DCT and 38.75% for oral DCT.

Table 3  
*The results of the t-test paired in group 1 (experimental)*

	Pre-test Results	Post-test Result
Mean	33.125	38.125
DS ( $\sigma$ )	4.4194	0.8839
SEM	3.125	0.625
N	8	8

The *P* value of the two lists for group 1 equals 0.2952; as such, the difference between the pre- and post-test is not considered statistically significant. However, post-test results in group 1 increased by 7.5% between pre and post written DCTs and by 2.5% between pre and post oral DCTs.

Although not statistically significant, the growth between the pre- and post-test in group 1 questioned the possibility of other factors or variables that might have influenced the competence of student requests in this group, such as grammar lessons, as some research indicated, suggesting that grammar may contribute positively to pragmatic competence (Bachelor, 2015; Bachelor, 2016). Therefore, the difference between the pre- and post-test in control group L2 (group 2) was also briefly analyzed. There was a growth of 3.75% in this group between pre and post written DCTs. and 0% between pre and post oral DCTs. With this in mind, we can suggest that other variables did not probably play an important role in the growth of group 1 between pre- and post-tests.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

When analyzing the findings, it appears that the pragmatic interventions did not help the students in a statistically significant way; however, the experimental group developed slight improvements after the lessons. This suggests that lessons on pragmatics may be especially useful for L2 students.

The subject teacher was satisfied with the 7.5% increase in written DCT and the 2.5% increase in oral DCT. As such, he plans to use these lessons again in the future. It is important to note that the written tests experienced a greater increase. This may be due to the facts that students had more time to think about their responses as they write and that their ability to implement what they learned in the classroom in their speech may take longer in seeing greater success with additional interventions.

However, as we saw, there is no increase in the control group. Therefore, the class teacher could determine that the pragmatic lessons (and not other variables) were the ones that caused the increase in the experimental group.

As explained at the beginning of the article, there is a tendency to teach languages with communication as the main objective (Poehner and van Compernelle, 2011; Sidek, 2012; Tamjid and Birjandi, 2011) and, therefore, social understanding and cultural signals are more important than ever (Bachman and Palmer, 2010; Roever, 2011). This research attempts to encourage teachers to include pragmatic elements in the classroom, as these errors are more serious than errors of other kinds.

The pedagogical implications of this research should have an impact on teachers who did not value the teaching of pragmatics, since the results of the research question show that pragmatic instruction helps pragmatic correction, as they better justify explaining the importance of pragmatics in the Spanish language classroom (ELE).

Through the results of this study, it is expected that teachers of Spanish as a foreign language and of other languages, as well as instructors of teachers in training, develop educational standards for pragmatic instruction in all of their programs. This way, L2 educators will come to value pragmatic instruction.

Applied linguistics scholars are also expected to continue analyzing the pragmatics of foreign language students in order to progress in the knowledge of what is explained in this section.

Teachers will continue to design curricula to meet their programs and learning outcomes. We also hope that they include pragmatic elements, since the learning outcomes should pay attention to real world application, which is precisely what pragmatic lessons do. It is the primary responsibility as a foreign language teacher to find and develop effective lessons for students. Therefore, pragmatic instruction must be highly regarded.

As mentioned before, some authors (Bardovi-Härlig, 1999; Kasper, 1992) pointed out that interlanguage pragmatic studies focus specifically on the description or use of language, rather than on its acquisition. For this reason, the following study sought to make a comparison of the speech acts of students before and after the interventions, so as to be added to the corpus of studies focused on the acquisition of speech acts.

Regarding the author's recommendations for teachers of Spanish as a Foreign Language, the students seemed to better understand the use of the requests in Spanish with the explicit lessons, since in a subject of only about four months, an implicit acquisition of pragmatics could even take years (Bachelor, 2016). However, we had an implicit lesson between the three of them, but it was necessary to raise the student's awareness through questions related to the act of speaking in order not to teach the functions in an explicit way, but rather to facilitate the student's understanding. For these reasons, the study instructor recommends a mixture of explicit and implicit teachings, provided that the implicit teachings are well structured in helping the student process the information.

Lastly, the researcher acknowledges that the data collection period (one four-month period), the number of participants, and the evaluation criteria (there is no consensus on what is considered pragmatically appropriate) pose certain limitations for this study. Therefore, future research addressing these limitations should definitely be carried out in the near future.

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## Anexos

### *Anexo 1*

#### *Written Discourse Completion Task (DCT)*

Respond in writing to each scenario in Spanish in a culturally appropriate way. This does not count towards your grade and is for research-purposes only, so please do not use handouts, the textbook, dictionaries, friends, translators, etc.

1) You forgot your Spanish textbook at home and ask a classmate if you can borrow his/her book for the day.

You say:

2) You run into the college president on your way to the cafeteria and ask him to lower (*rebajar*) tuition (*matrícula*) costs.

You say:

3) You and a Spanish classmate are working on a cultural presentation together but s/he is sending text messages instead of helping you.

You say:

4) You are at a restaurant and there isn't salt at your table. You see that an older lady at the table next to you has salt and isn't using it. You decide to ask her for it.

You say:

5) You are at the college cafeteria and realize that you forgot your money at home. You ask a friend for a few dollars.

You say:

6) You forgot your homework and need to ask your professor if it's okay to turn it in tomorrow.

You say:

7) You were sick last class period and need to ask your roommate (who is also in your class) to see his/her notes.

You say:

8) You are struggling in an introduction to statistics course and ask the TA (teacher's assistant) to tutor you.

You say:

9) You are studying for finals and your roommate has the TV volume turned up all the way.

You say:

10) You are at the grocery store and need to buy eggs but there are none on the shelf. You decide to ask a worker to bring out more.

You say:

## **Anexo 2**

### **Oral Discourse Completion Task (DCT)**

Respond orally in Spanish to each scenario in a culturally appropriate way. This does not count towards your grade and is for research-purposes only, so please do not use handouts, the textbook, dictionaries, friends, translators, etc.

1) You are finding one of your courses very challenging. At the end of class, you ask one of your classmates for help with this course.

You say:

2) You realize that your final exam for one of your courses is on a very inconvenient date for you. You go to your professor's office to ask about taking the final on a different date.

You say:

3) You are invited to a potluck with friends and want to cook a family recipe. You call your mother to ask for the recipe.

You say:

4) You work at a local restaurant and need to take the day off. You go talk to your manager to ask for the day off.

You say:

5) Your car is at the repair shop and you need to go pick it up. You ask your sibling for a ride to the repair shop.

You say:

6) You are at a job interview for a position at a school. At the end of the interview, you ask the interviewer to let you know when you will have an answer about their decision for the position.

You say:

7) You live in a college dorm. You are having a party this weekend and ask your roommate to borrow some of his/her clothes.

You say:

8) You are walking down the sidewalk and need some help with directions. You see a couple of policemen and decide to ask them for help.

You say:

9) You are at home. Your dad is watching a soccer game on TV and the volume is really loud. You are trying to work on your homework but cannot focus with the game. You ask your dad to turn down the volume.

You say:

10) You are in a packed grocery store and need to get home as soon as possible. You only have two items in your basket but all the cashier lines are really long. You ask the people in one of the lines to go first.

You say:

### Anexo 3

#### *Grading criteria for oral and written DCTs*

General instructions: *Go through each response and mark it as either “adheres” or “does not adhere” to pragmatic norms based on the following criteria. Provide a comment explaining what did not adhere, when applicable.*

Formal situations (numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, 10). Students should use one or more of the following strategies, as interpreted by the grader, per Langer (2013, p. 1157) and CARLA (2006):

- The person being asked to do something is the subject of the sentence (hearer-oriented)
- Conventionally indirect
- Offers a reason
- Use of “usted/ustedes” conjugations
- Use of “le/s importaría\*” + infinitive

\* If the grader sees as more appropriate due to the level of imposition, use of the present tense of “usted/ustedes” may be deemed appropriate

Informal situations (numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, 9). Students should use one or more of the following strategies, as determined by the grader, per Langer (2013, p. 1157) and CARLA (2006):

- The person being asked to do something is the subject of the sentence (hearer-oriented)
- Conventionally indirect, though commands may be deemed acceptable\*

\* This is based on the relationship involved and the level of imposition, as determined by the grader

Offers a reason

Use of “tú” conjugations

- Use of “te importa\*” + infinitive

\* If the grader sees as more appropriate due to the level of imposition, use of the conditional tense of “tú” may be deemed appropriate

#### Sample of how to grade student responses:

1. “You forgot your Spanish textbook at home and ask a classmate if you can borrow his/her book for the day.”

Student response: ¿Me puedes prestar tu libro?

Grader: Adheres

2. “You forgot your Spanish textbook at home and ask a classmate if you can borrow his/her book for the day.”

Student response: ¿Te importa prestarme tu libro? Tengo que estudiar y mi libro está en casa.

Grader: Adheres

3. “You forgot your Spanish textbook at home and ask a classmate if you can borrow his/her book for the day.”

Student response: ¿Puedo tener tu libro?

Grader: Does not adhere, the response is not hearer-oriented

4. “You forgot your Spanish textbook at home and ask a classmate if you can borrow his/her book for the day.”

Student response: ¿Le importaría prestarme su libro?

Grader: Does not adhere, the response is too formal, the strategy does not match the level of imposition

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