

Developing pragmatic competence in students of Spanish FL: A Data-Driven Approach

*El desarrollo de la competencia pragmática en estudiantes
de EL/E: enfoque basado en datos y uso de corpus específicos*

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Abstract

This paper reports on an action research which investigated the use of a purpose-built, teaching-oriented corpus, as described in Timmis (2015), to tackle Spanish FL learners' lack of pragmatic awareness as consistently reported in interlanguage pragmatics studies over the past two decades (García García, 2012, Ruiz Fajardo, 2012, Gironzetti and Koike, 2016). The activities designed to be used with this corpus are based on Consciousness Raising and Data Driven Learning approaches and the results of this research provide empirically validated evidence of the positive impact that such materials may have in developing pragmatic awareness in learners of Spanish as a foreign language.

Keywords: pragmatic awareness, consciousness raising, data-driven learning, pedagogic corpus, action research.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un proyecto de investigación-acción en el que se usó de un corpus especialmente diseñado y orientado a la enseñanza, como se describe en Timmis (2015), para abordar la falta de conciencia pragmática de los estudiantes de ELE. Este es un problema identificado en estudios de pragmática de la interlengua por más de dos décadas (García García, 2012; Ruiz Fajardo, 2012; Gironzetti y Koike, 2016). Las actividades diseñadas para ser utilizadas con este corpus se basan en los principios de la creación de conciencia y del aprendizaje basado en datos y los resultados proporcionan evidencia empírica del impacto positivo que dichos materiales pueden tener en el desarrollo de la conciencia pragmática en los estudiantes de español como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: competencia pragmática, creación de conciencia, aprendizaje basado en datos, corpus pedagógico, investigación-acción.

Background

The lack of pragmatic awareness in their target language (TL) of British students of Spanish as a foreign language (FL) is a recurrent problem faced by teachers even at higher levels of proficiency and identified by researchers, such as García García (2012) and Ruiz Fajardo (2012). In fact, this is also very often the case in the students' own first language (L1). When learning a foreign language, research shows that adult learners can capitalize immensely on their existing pragmatic ability (Kasper, 1997). However, research also indicates that this is not a straightforward process: awareness of pragmatic universals and positive transfer of pragmatic norms between languages does not tend to happen spontaneously – and if it does, it takes much longer – unless they are addressed specifically in the classroom (Taguchi, 2010). This is because learners can easily see how linguistic systems, i.e.: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, are different in different languages, hence this is what they expect to learn when they study a new language. On the other contrary, learners, even as native speakers of their own languages, are often unaware of the pragmatic aspect of communication, such as the implications of choosing a tense over another or a certain form of address, of conversational turns, or of the appropriate words to finish a conversation. As Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) expressed it, pragmatics are “the secret rules” of languages and they are so “secret” that they are usually not taught, in the academic sense of the word, not even in one's own language, relinquishing their value to a cultural or “folkloric” level, or on the best-case scenario to manners, which are expected to be picked up as one grows up in the case of L1 or thanks to immersion time in the TL culture in the case of a FL. This view is clearly failing to realise that pragmatic choices are as important for successful communication as grammatical rules are – or even more.

Raising pragmatic awareness in language learners is, according to Kasper (1997), the first step in the process of achieving pragmatic competence, and, eventually, a full communicative competence in the TL. Hence, Kasper contends that teachers' initial efforts in this respect should go towards enabling students to understand and use the transferable pragmatic knowledge of their first language into the FL contexts. Unfortunately, the teaching of L2/FL pragmatics has continued to be neglected in the classroom because, traditionally, it has been assumed that learners would find out what is – or is not –appropriate to say in the FL through their own experiences with native speakers (Witten, 2002). This assumption has major drawbacks as demonstrated by Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) research. On the one hand, pragmatic competence in the L2/FL – especially in non-immersion contexts - develops more slowly and anecdotally without instruction (Bouton, 1988; Kasper, 1995; Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2010). On the other hand, native speakers seem to be more tolerant of grammatical or lexical errors by non-native speakers than of errors of pragmatic nature (Carroll, 1978; Wolfson, 1984; Canale and

Swain, 1988). Even when teachers realise about the importance of including the pragmatic aspect of language in their classes, the lack of instruction in teacher-training courses and the lack of published materials with a pragmatic focus, result in an overreliance on their own experience and on their native intuition.

Since the early 1980s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was considered the one approach focused on providing an integral development of the learners' communicative competence, including linguistic as well as pragmatic aspects. Its pedagogical revolution was based on the claim to focus on "socio-functional aspects of language and on developing acquisition by promoting opportunities to interact meaningfully and purposefully in the target language" (Mishan, 2013: 270). The focus on interaction would provide learners with the opportunity to reflect on and understand "real" language use by engaging in activities where they had to "negotiate for meaning" reproducing what happens in real life, where the need to communicate a certain message in a certain situation makes the interlocutors co-construct their speech. According to Ridge (1992), CLT hoped to focus attention on the more demanding goal of appropriacy, moving beyond the limitations of a focus on correctness towards "making sense in real situations" (1992: 97). Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that this objective of CLT was not met. Ridge states this approach did not, in fact, facilitate the development of the communicative competence and that proof of it is how often learners who have studied under communicative approaches and achieved a certain level of proficiency may still not be able to make full, or even adequate, use of the language to achieve their interactional goals and meet their social needs. Mishan (2012: 270) points out that in "transferring the theory of "meaningful interaction" to practice CLT was in trouble from the outset" because of its misinterpretation of the use of activities such as "information gaps" which, too often, oversimplified interactions, reducing them to clichés, or failed to reproduce real, authentic contexts. Paraphrasing Swain (quoted in Mishan, 2013: 70) generally, these activities have not been "used intelligently" in order to encourage a discussion or much less to provide comprehensible input of the target language use. Instead, they have been applied in a rather reductionist way, replacing traditional, descriptive, and unidirectional grammar explanations with role-plays and other pair work that, because they are often not supported with appropriate input, may become simple repetition activities. Ruiz Fajardo (2012) concurs with this view of CLT and is adamant that it failed in fostering the development of communicative competence in students for its intention to generate language output in the classroom has not appropriately taken into account the pragmatic component of language. She agrees that by overemphasizing the role of spoken interactive activities, CLT has largely relegated explicit instruction of grammar and other specific forms of the target language. Moreover, Ruiz Fajardo advocates that a contextualized discussion of the grammatical elements must take place in the classroom to provide a full insight into the mechanisms of the language

and a real chance for the students to practice the specific characteristics of interaction patterns in the target language, in the classroom and outside. In specific reference to the teaching of Spanish as a second or foreign language, the author points out that only when teachers take into account the various possible dimensions and perspectives of language representations in use will they be able to explain “subtle contrasts of Spanish structures that other views and approaches cannot clarify on a meaningful base, such as the aspectual opposition between preterits or the modal opposition between indicative and subjunctive, both of high importance for the English speaking student” (Ruiz Fajardo, 2012: viii). As Gironzetti and Koike have stated, there is a need for language teaching materials that are research-informed as well as for “teaching-oriented research to test these materials, investigate best practices to teach pragmatics in the Spanish language classroom, and promote teacher training in pragmatics” (Gironzetti and Koike, 2016: 91).

In order to bridge such gaps between research and practice in the teaching of Spanish FL, the action research reported in this paper investigated how materials based on Consciousness Raising (CR) activities, Noticing Hypothesis, and Data Driven Learning (DDL) may tackle such problem. In line with Ruiz Fajardo (2012) and Taguchi (2015) this research provides an example of how teaching materials can promote an integrated view of the language, including not only grammar, vocabulary, syntax, but also communicative functions, speaker intentions, and contextual variables, to enable students to discern the different levels of meaning brought to a given communicative event by all the elements that compose the *mappings* of human communication (Taguchi, 2015).

Methodology

The methodology applied to develop and test these materials was a mixed-methods action research (Ivankova, 2015). Three iterations of the four-stage action research cycle (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1998) were developed in this longitudinal study, where the action took place over three semesters of 12 teaching weeks each. The first cycle determined and assessed the extent of the problem, concluding that students were indeed lacking pragmatic awareness both in their L1 as well as in their TL. In the second cycle, the first version of the teaching materials was tested, and the interim results informed the final version of the materials, which was implemented in the third cycle. A total of 35 students took part in the study and they all took a pre-test and a post-test. In the eight weeks between tests, students worked on specific topics for blocks of two weeks and these topics were based on the following speech acts: requests, apologies, thanking and complaining. A group of 8 students only attended three sessions or less, and therefore they were used as a control group. The combined use of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a detailed analysis of the different stages of the action research, capturing the impact it had on the different participants as well as the overall results.

As already stated, the situation that triggered this action research is the perceived lack of pragmatic awareness in British students of Spanish FL,

even at advanced levels of language proficiency. Such lack of awareness is believed to hinder the development of the students' pragmatic competence and, consequently, of their communicative competence. Therefore, it is established that "teaching" pragmatic competence is a desirable addition to the Spanish FL curriculum. According to Kasper, however, pragmatic competence, like any other competence, cannot be taught or learnt, but it is rather developed. And this development is best enabled by raising pragmatic awareness in the L1. Paraphrasing Schmidt (1995) and Masny (1997) "pragmatic awareness" can be defined as an interface mechanism which promotes heightened awareness of language forms and their use in relation to elements of context such as social distance, power, and level of imposition between the first language (L1) and the target language (TL) and thereby assists L2/FL pragmatic learning. Therefore, Spanish FL teachers should concern themselves in the first place with making students conscious of the existence:

- of a pragmatic system specific to each language and culture,
- of pragmatic universals, and specifically their relation to how we understand politeness in different cultures,
- and of the similarities between the pragmatics of their L1 and Spanish.

Only then, they can focus on the differences between the pragmatics of the two languages.

According to Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan Taylor as well as raising learners' pragmatic awareness:

the chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is [...] to give them choices about their interactions in the target language. The goal of instruction in pragmatics is not to insist on conformity to a particular target-language norm, but rather to help learners become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language. With such instruction, learners can maintain their own cultural identities, participate more fully in target language communication, and gain control of the force and outcome of their contributions. (2003: 5)

In order to give students "choices" and to help them "become familiar with the range of pragmatic devices and practices in the target language", teachers need to ensure an adequate and sufficient input of authentic language in use. Likewise, guidance to navigate this input and enable awareness and acquisition needs to be provided. This project proposes to do so with a specific instructional approach which uses a custom-built corpus of native speakers' productions in English and in Spanish combined with principles of Data Driven Learning (Johns, 1991).

The materials developed and tested in this action research build on the idea of introducing alternative sources for natural language input in contextualized situations in order to facilitate the development of pragmatic

awareness in the TL. In this case, a corpus supported with CR-type activities. Boulton (2017) argues that the use of language corpora and DDL can compensate for the lack of immersion into real language in use in a classroom context since the basic concept behind it is “to allow massive exposure [to the language] that is still organized and focused” (2017: 182). However, the use of corpora to teach pragmatics is still underexplored. Romero-Trillo (2018) proposes that corpora and DDL can be used to investigate not only the vocabulary and grammar aspects but also the pragmatic features of the language, whenever the data in the corpora is contextualised. He advocates for the use of corpus pragmatics “as an essential tool to compensate for the limited exposure to the target language in non-immersion contexts because it provides genuine, representative, and contextualised discourse for language instruction” (2018: 118). Similarly, Staples and Fernández concur and state that “a corpus is ideal for studying pragmatics in that corpus compilers (when taking a corpus-linguistic approach) are always concerned with the context in which the language is produced” (2019: 242).

In relation to the type of corpus used, a custom-built, teaching-oriented corpus, as described in Timmis (2015), was chosen to solve the problem of authentic input and also of excessive reliance on the teachers’ native intuition. This was a small and purpose-built corpus of just under 5,000 words, elicited via DCTs, which allowed for it to be perfectly contextualised and focused on the situations being studied, whilst still providing a wide range of options in the input. The fact that the corpus data was elicited may be seen as detracting from its authenticity. However, in order to control the variables determining the context in which the language is used, including the speakers and their relationship, this is a much quicker and more profitable solution. Larger corpora, such as native speaker and learner corpora have essentially been designed for research purposes, and while these can be *exploited* for pedagogic purposes, they were not *designed* for pedagogic purposes. As argued by Braun (2005) teaching oriented corpora have a number of advantages over research-oriented ones:

- In terms of size, teaching-oriented corpora need to be much smaller so that learners do not drown in data.
- Teaching-oriented corpora should aim to include a more homogenous collection of texts likely to motivate learners or to be used to illustrate specific purposes, that is, they need “intertextual coherence”.
- The annotation of teaching-oriented corpora needs to be pedagogically motivated.
- And finally, a teaching-oriented corpora need to be ‘pedagogically-enriched’, including, for example, guidance notes for teachers, suggested activities and familiarisation tasks for learners.

Braun adds that exploitation of a teaching-oriented corpus should involve both whole-text work as well as corpus analysis work such as concordancing.

The corpus used in this action research was composed of two “mirror” micro-corpora, in Spanish and in English. They both contained native speakers’ productions elicited from identical scenarios and representing two equivalent samples of the chosen speech acts’ realisations. Although these samples are much smaller than a standard native speaker corpus, as already established, pedagogically they are much more relevant and manageable, whilst still providing a quantity and variety of input much greater than what textbooks or individual teachers can offer. The corpus was complemented with a set of activities based on principles of the Data Driven Learning (DDL) approach and following the inductive learning model described as “observe, hypothesize, experiment” (OHE) by Lewis (2000: 177-8). Such activities facilitate the noticing and allow students to experiment with their productions. As pointed out by Mishan (2013: 278), this model, used in the lexical approach and other corpus-based approaches, aims to get the students “talking about language” and it has a clear basis in SLA theory, where the “observe” stage corresponds with Schmidt’s noticing (1990) and the “hypothesize and experiment” stages enable the development of the learner’s interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) by allowing them to interact with the input and produce relevant output. See the mapping of these activities against Lewis’s model in table 1 below.

Throughout these activities, students were guided to analyse the bilingual corpus, which was a compilation of answers provided by Spanish and English native speakers to the same DCT questionnaire that students had answered, in Spanish, in week one. The use of the same DCT to elicit the corpus data and to double-up as the pre-test and post-test that the students took, fostered the noticing of equivalent structures used in the same situations by speakers of English and Spanish and, at the same time, enabled their continuous reflection on their own productions in the target language throughout the entire duration of the project. The steps to guide the comparison and analysis of the speech acts productions in both languages were based on the DDL approach but instead of concordancer lines, as it is the norm when working with corpora, students were given full interlocutors’ turns, often composed of more than one sentence. In the first place, students assessed the context for each situation based on the same parameters: social distance, power and degree of imposition. Next, they identified key words in each utterance and, following those, the word(s) or phrase(s) that made up the head act. Finally, they identified hedges, and linked grammatical and lexical choices with context and register.

Table 1. DDL-based design to support the exploration of pragmatic phenomena in a teaching-oriented corpus

Sequence of explicit FoF + DDL activities	Correspondence with Lewis's OHE model
(1a) Consciousness-raising activities to introduce the varied nature of pragmatic phenomena in sessions two and three.	OBSERVE
(1b) DDL-based Consciousness-raising activities aimed at noticing characteristics of one specific speech act at a time in sessions 4, 6, 8, and 10.	OBSERVE
(2) Meta-pragmatic explanation following consciousness-raising activities in same sessions as above: lecturer slides.	
(3) Contrastive activities, in pairs or small groups, on sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects differing in L1 and L2 for each speech act. Followed-up by class discussion: completing the summary boxes at the end of each CR/DDL session.	OBSERVE AND HYPOTHESISE
(4) Productive activities in sessions 5, 7, 9, and 11 with a focus on each of the speech acts: requests, apologising, thanking, and complaining.	HYPOTHESISE
(5)+(6) Following productive activities, reflection on output (peer feedback) of both pragmatic and grammatical errors and working to improve output. For this type of activities, learners worked in pairs or small groups and had teacher's support in groups as well as an all-class discussion closing activity to summarise conclusions and provide explicit correction when needed.	EXPERIMENT
	EXPERIMENT

These activities sought to enable a comparison of lexical and grammatical forms frequently used to perform the same speech act in each language in the light of the contextual information available. Furthermore, production activities preceded and followed the DLL-type activities, enabling students to reflect on their existing knowledge and to apply the new knowledge they were acquiring. According to Boulton (2009: 37) DDL has many advantages, including fostering learner autonomy, increasing language awareness, and improving the students' ability to deal with authentic language. It is important to highlight that these characteristic of DDL activities, make them especially suitable for pragmatic instruction. Especially in terms of students' autonomy, DDL places responsibility on learners to discover patterns in the data presented. Thus, training students to understand and look for strategic examples of language in use, rather than for models to replicate.

Results and conclusions

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered via a variety of instruments. Qualitative data were collected via narratives in the form of a teacher's journal and students' interviews. Further qualitative and quantitative data was collected via pre-tests and post-tests. These tests consisted of a DCT comprising a total of twenty items divided in four sets of

five different scenarios eliciting a different speech act each. The analysis of the responses to pre and post-tests provided information in relation to the most common strategies used by the students to perform each speech act and the most common issues with their performances. A distinctive feature of this cohort was that 40% of the students had already spent an extended period of time living and studying in a Spanish speaking country at the time of participating in this project. This variable was used to compare the rate of improvement in students' pragmatic awareness.

A set of criteria, or matrix, was developed to assess the responses elicited via the DCTs, in order to codify the data in a way that it could be used for statistical analysis. The criteria measure 5 aspects of the answers: performance of the head act, use (or lack) of hedges, grammar, vocabulary, and register, in all cases taking into account both the accuracy and the range of the answers. Each response could score between 0 and 5 points, with 1 point given per criterion met, and the average of the twenty the responses was the overall score given to the test. Each criterion assessed the following information:

- **Head act:** if the actual speech act elicited was performed (i.e.: if students understood that they needed to apologise or make a request, for example) and if the structure chosen to perform the head act was appropriate for the context in terms of indirectness or the use of illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs).
- **Hedges:** upgraders, downgraders or other modifiers, as well as secondary speech acts, used as complementary strategies to support the main speech act, as appropriate for the context and the degree of imposition/seriousness of the offense.
- **Grammar:** the correct choice of grammatical structure and linguistic accuracy, including tenses, pronouns and articles, verbal and nominal agreements.
- **Vocabulary:** the correct choice of vocabulary, paying special attention to calques or direct translations of colloquialisms, fixed expressions, and idioms.
- **Register:** the appropriate choice of register, paying special attention to the coherent use of *tú* and/or *usted* throughout the answer, including verbal and nominal agreement, and the correct use of other formal and informal terms of address.

The criteria “head act”, “hedges”, and “register” were more directly related to the range of the answer whilst grammar and vocabulary focus on the accuracy, although, as already stated, both dimensions were taken into account in each criterion. “Register” and “vocabulary” were also clearly related to contextual variables which would determine the (in)formality of the response. The examples of the two mini corpora used throughout the ten weeks of instruction and the tables completed by the students in each block dedicated to a speech act, with conclusions on the preferred

structures for the performance of the said speech act, were the benchmark against which the choice of head acts, hedges, grammatical structures, and vocabulary were marked. That is, the examples in the materials provided the expected range of the answers. However, as already stated, this instruction aimed at not being prescriptive, but it rather encouraged students to use their own words as they made informed decisions about their linguistic choices and their pragmatic implications. Thus, the markers could also use their own knowledge and proficient speaker criteria to accept examples of correct answers which may not have appeared in the materials, as the example below:

(1) *¡Muchas gracias! Tengo mucho hambre. Te daré el dinero en nuestra próxima clase.*

In line with the non-prescriptive spirit of the instruction, students were also given the possibility to decide not to say anything in a given situation. In this case, they were given all 5 points, as their personal choice not to engage in a conversation in a certain scenario was regarded as valid. As one student wrote in response to a certain scenario:

(2) *No diría nada porque cinco minutos no es mucho en mi opinión.*

On the contrary, answers which did not contain a relevant speech act scored 0 points, as they were not considered valid, even if the grammar and vocabulary were correct, such as in this example, where the student speaking is the person waiting, not the one arriving late, which has clearly not been understood:

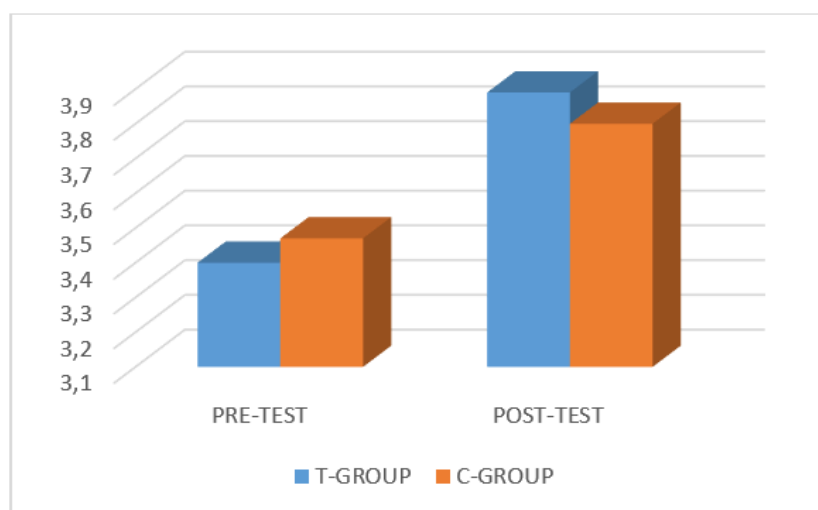
(3) *¡Lo siento por llegar tarde! Espero que no me hayas esperado por mucho tiempo.*

In order to establish a relationship between the results and the instruction, the full cohort of participants was divided in two groups, a treatment group, and a control group. This division was based on their attendance record, assuming that those with lower attendance rates would also have a lower engagement with the materials, and therefore the impact of the treatment would be less evident in this group. The cut-off point was set at 75%, meaning that students in the treatment group attended at least 8 of the 12 weeks. Students in the control group attended only 6 sessions or less, two of them being the pre-test and post-test sessions. The fact that the control group was a self-selected subgroup of the full cohort participating in this investigation imposed some limitations: as the sample was not randomly selected, it could not be said to be representative of the population. However, this is a very common case for classroom-based research whenever participation is voluntary, but the treatment has to be provided

to the whole group, in order to ensure that there would not be ethical implications for the participants.

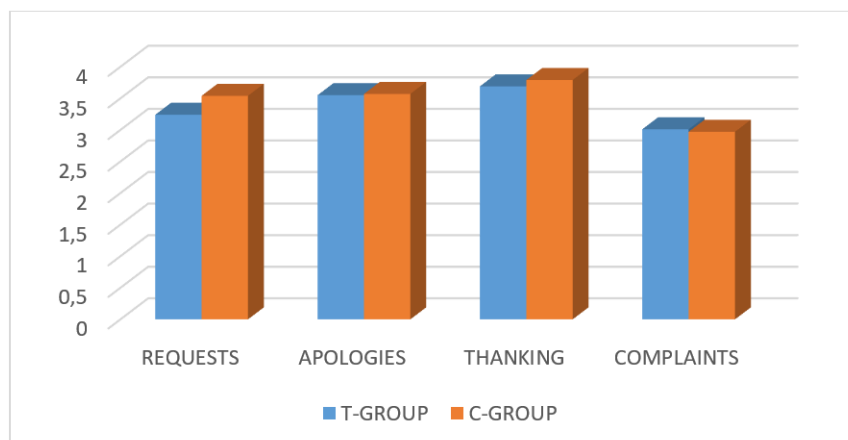
Despite the fact that almost the same rate of improvement can be seen in both the treatment (T) and the control (C) group, the results from the T group indicate a slightly higher improvement of +0.49 points, or 14.4%, whilst the C group shows a lower improvement of +0.33 points, or 9.5%. These first results can be interpreted with moderate optimism in relation to establishing the positive impact of the treatment in the students' pragmatic awareness and competence. A qualitative analysis of the data reinforces the positive outlook on the results. In the post-test, students in the T group generally used fewer words, but these were more appropriate to achieve their communicative purposes. They showed improvement in the use of polite forms of address (i.e.: *usted*), in the use of hearer-oriented questions for requests and appropriate hedges and lexical strategies for the other SAs, such as terms of endearment and diminutives.

Figure 1. T group and C group comparison in Pre- and Post-tests



When looking at the performance of students by speech act, results were also very similar across the treatment and the control group. Speech acts that scored above the average (3.40 and 3.47 respectively) were “thanking” (S.11 to S.15) with 3.69 for the T group and 3.79 for the C group, and “apologising” (S.6 to S.10) with 3.55 for the T group and 3.57 for the C group. “Requests” (S.1 to S.5) and “complaining” (S.16 to S.20) scored below the average, with 3.24 for the T group and 3.54 for the C group for requests; and with the lowest score, complaints obtained 3.01 for the T group and 2.97 for the C group. A first remarkable issue with the scores of the pre-tests when comparing the T group and the C group is that the latter has a higher average score, overall and also by speech act, except for complaints where the T group has a higher pre-test score, see figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Results for pre-test compared across speech acts



There can be several reasons to explain this situation, the most obvious one being the general level of linguistic ability of the participants in each group. However, when comparing the end-of-semester module mark for both groups, the averages are again very similar: 66% for the T group and 64% for the C group. A look at individual scores in the pre-test combined with demographic data for both groups may be more revealing. In the T group, 51% scored below average for the pre-test, whilst in the C group, only 25% scored the below the average, meaning that the T group is more homogeneous in terms of their results, and the average is less likely to be skewed. In terms of demographic data, two pieces of information were considered here: if the students had spent an extended period of residence in a Spanish-speaking country previous to the treatment, and if there were any bilingual or heritage speakers in the groups. In the T group, there were no bilingual or heritage speakers and 33% had been abroad for 4 weeks or more consecutively. In comparison, in the C group there were one heritage and one bilingual speakers of Spanish and 50% of them had been a significant period of time abroad before undertaking the treatment. The demographic profiles of the C group, combined with its small size, may offer an explanation to the higher average scores of this group in both the pre- and the post-test, and also to the lower rate of improvement of the group between the pre-test and the post-test.

The different results at speech act level may also indicate which situations students found more challenging or less familiar. As evidenced in the literature review, thanking and apologising are expressive speech acts which do not threaten the interlocutors' face and therefore are performed directly in both languages. This may explain why these were the groups of speech acts with higher scores, whilst requests and complaints, which are more complex functions, usually accompanied by support moves and additional hedging, scored lower in both tests, across the two groups. The responses of both tests were also assessed by a team of Spanish teachers in terms of appropriacy, using a Likert scale and free text boxes to provide further information when needed. In the overall results of the

appropriacy assessment the average of all 35 participants was 2,81 out of 4 points and 19 students had a score below 3 (quite appropriate). The results of the post-test indicate an improvement in 94% of the students. The average score went up to 3,03 points but still 14 students remained below 3 points.

It is most interesting to be compare these results with the pragmalinguistic assessment of the tests, in order to look for a correlation between the two aspects of the participants' performance. The improvement rate of the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatic aspects of the participants' performances was calculated based on their scores for the two assessments of the pre-test and the post-tests. In the T Group, all students (100%) displayed some improvement between the pre- and the post-tests when assessed against the pragmalinguistic criteria. Likewise, when assessed for appropriacy most of them (77.7%) show improvement. Although the trend is for participants to improve after the treatment in both cases, appropriacy seems to improve at a lower rate in almost all the occasions. Furthermore, there are four cases where students show 0% improvement in relation to their appropriacy and even two cases where the score for appropriacy decreases. 66% of the students in the T group improve in the pragmalinguistic aspect more than in the sociopragmatic, and 33% improve more in appropriacy than in language.

The trend is similar for the control group: 62.5% of the participants in this group improve more in the pragmalinguistic aspect whereas 37.5% improve more in their sociopragmatic score. In the C group, 100% of the students improve in appropriacy as opposed to the T group. This may seem like a contradictory result, speaking against the impact of the treatment. However, it is necessary to take into account the profile of the students in the C group to understand the whole picture: 50% of the students in this group had already spent a prolonged period of time in immersion before taking part in this research and 25% of them were in fact bilingual. These results reinforce the importance of immersion in the TL culture as already established by research in acquisitional pragmatics (Alcón Soler and Martínez Flor, 2005). Given their longer and/or more frequent exposure to the L2, these students would have been expected to have an advantage in the process of integrating a new pragmatic system over those with no or less previous immersion experience, as they would have had, on average, more input and more time to process it, even if we assumed no previous instruction and that the acquisition process had been triggered by the noticing activities embedded in this treatment. A tentative conclusion which could be drawn here is that a longer period of immersion in the L2 is conducive to a faster development of the pragmatic competence when exposed to an explicit classroom instruction, even if the immersion took place before the instruction. A potential question for further research arising here would be how long in advance would the immersion in the L2 still be effective in such as situation.

Finally, in the students' feedback and interviews, there is recurrent mention to an improvement in their confidence when facing similar situations to those explored via the materials. They also demonstrate an improved understanding of politeness strategies both in English and in Spanish. Students did exhibit good understanding of the dynamic nature of context and of the different variables that shape it during the instruction. Some of them admitted in the interviews to have found confusing the concepts of social distance and power when they were introduced, and it seems from their accounts that perhaps only a superficial recollection of these concepts remained with them after the instruction. Similarly to what happens in relation to register, the Spanish honorifics (*tú* and *usted*) and the concepts of formal and informal seem to actually dominate the students' understanding of context and contextual variables.

The overall conclusion is that students seem to have indeed gained a heightened awareness of pragmatic issues, especially in relation to politeness. Even those who were already using effective pragmatic strategies, have gained a better understanding of these and their use in context in the two languages. The methodology and activities presented here can be easily adapted to include a wider sample of pragmatic variation across the Spanish speaking world and it can be used by teachers, teacher trainers and material developers to inform future materials aimed at developing pragmatic competence in students of Spanish FL.

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