PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES AND PRAGMATIC CHANGE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF REQUESTS[*]

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Pragmatic competence is considered to be part of a non-native speakers (NNSs) communicative competence and has been included in the models of communicative ability (Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995. This paper examines learners' development of pragmatic competence in a second language context. Fifteen Spanish students who had spent a term at the University of Liverpool as Socrates students and three native English University lecturers participated in the study. A total of 30 sessions (10 upon arrival, 10 mid-study and 10 at the end) were taped and transcribed with the consent of participants. Evidence for the realization of the speech act of requesting is examined within the framework of status congruence (Bardovi-Hartford, 1990), taking into account frequency and form in native and non-native advising sessions. Then, on the basis of the theoretical condition for language learning (Pica, 1994, 1996), we analyze non-native speakers' change towards native speaker's ability of requesting. Results of the study show that, although learners moved towards using more requests, they failed to develop the full range of request strategies and appropriate linguistic forms. Results of the study indicate that native speakers' input and learners' opportunities for

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output are not enough for pragmatic development, and a focus on form (Doughty and Williams, 1998) regarding appropriate forms of the speech act of requesting is suggested.

Key words: pragmatic competence, speech acts, interlanguage pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Learners' pragmatic ability is part of their communicative competence and therefore has been the focus of attention in the proposed models of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia and Dörnyei, 1995). Adopting pragmatic competence as a goal in language teaching may imply that second language pragmatics needs to be taught. However, it could also be argued that pragmatic knowledge does not require any pedagogical intervention, since pragmatic knowledge is universal and may be transferred from the learners' mother tongue. If pragmatic knowledge does not require any pedagogical intervention, being exposed to the language and providing learners with opportunities for language use would be some of the requirements for developing learners' pragmatic competence.

In second and foreign language learning contexts most of the students have opportunities for language use in different institutional encounters where learners are provided with the theoretical conditions for second language acquisition. These could be summarized as: learners' need for input, learners' need for output, and learners' need for feedback (see Pica, 1994, 1996; Long, 1996; and Gass, 1998). With regard to learners' need for comprehensible input, although theories of second language acquisition may differ with respect to how much is needed or how it needs to be organized to facilitate learning, everybody would agree that it is a necessary component for language learning. Research has also shown that language learners can be pushed by their interlocutors' feedback to produce more comprehensible, sociolinguistically more appropriate, and accurate output (Swain, 1995).

In this paper we will focus on the advising session as an institutional encounter learners are familiar with (both in their home institution and abroad learners attend tutorials regularly). Besides, as suggested by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993,1996), the advising sessions allow us to study congruent speech acts, which reflect the established role of participants. As suggested by these authors, within the institutional setting of advising sessions, native speakers (NSs) follow the maxim of congruence, which predicts that participants will employ speech acts congruent with their status. On the contrary, if a noncongruent act is performed participants may mitigate their contributions by employing a status preserving strategy. These authors (1993: 281) illustrate the maxim of congruence as follows:

Maxim of congruence: Make your contribution congruent with your status.

Corollary: If congruence is not possible, mitigate noncongruence by employing a status preserving strategy (SPS).

Status-Preserving Strategies:

Appear congruent. Use the form of a congruent speech act where possible.

Mark your contribution linguistically. Use mitigators.

Timing. Do not begin with a noncongruent contribution.

Frequency. Avoid frequent noncongruent turns.

Be brief.

According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993), speech acts that are congruent with teacher status include advising, suggesting and requesting, while speech acts that are congruent with student status are requesting advice, information and permission. Here we focus on requests as illocutionary acts whereby a speaker wants the hearer to perform an act for the benefit of the speaker, in contrast to suggestions in which the benefit is for both speaker and hearer. From this perspective, we consider the academic advising session as a context for the development of non-native pragmatic competence. Evidence for the realization of the speech act of requesting is

examined within the framework of status congruence (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990). Then, we discuss the theoretical conditions for developing the ability to perform the speech act of requesting and consider some pedagogical implications.

2.Methodology

Fifteen Spanish students, who had spent a term at the University of Liverpool as Socrates students, and three native English university lecturers participated in the study. A total of 30 sessions were taped and transcribed with the consent of the participants at three different points in time: 10 upon arrival of the students, 10 in mid-study, and 10 at the end of their study period. All of the sessions had the aim to determine and supervise the students' academic papers and lasted from 15 to 20 minutes. Requests were coded taking into account frequency and form. As far as frequency, we considered if they were initiated (example i), responses to questions (example ii) or responses to prompts (example iii):

Example i:

T: *What are you going to talk about*?

S: I think... I will talk about functional grammar and methodology

Example ii:

T: Now, what, what do you want to take?

S: *You mean, another topic?*

Example iii:

T: There are a number of topics which might be appropriate

S*: Is it possible to take just one topic?*

In relation to form, we classified requests into three levels of increasing directness: indirect (example iv), conventionally indirect (example v) and direct (example vi). While indirect requests make use of an

impersonal expression, by conventionally indirect we mean the use of polite language, that is, the use of modals verbs and conditional tense, as well as an optional use of *please*. Finally, direct requests make use of imperative, future tense and present tense:

Example iv:

T: Here there is one possibility, writing

T: There is one course which might be appropriate

Example v:

T: Would you mind writing it again?

T: Could you photocopy it?

Example vi:

T: Will you choose the topic, then?

T: What does your tutor suggest?

Although we focussed on the form and frequency of requests during three different periods of time -arrival sessions, mid-study, and at the end of their study period-, the advising sessions were transcribed and coded in their entirety. Following Cohen's (1960) procedure a minimum agreement of 86% was found.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the distribution of requests across types by teachers and students during the arrival sessions.

Table 1: Frequency of requests by type in arrival sessions

	Teachers	Students
Responses to questions	8%	70%
Responses to prompts	20%	19%
Initiated	72%	11%

The distribution of requests in teacher talk (72% of initiated requests, 20% responses to prompts and only 8% of responses to questions) indicate that teachers are active participants. The percentage of initiated requests provide students with opportunities to be exposed to the speech act of requesting, while the 20% of responses to prompts and 8% of responses to questions could be understood as positive input on requests provided by the teachers. In contrast to teachers, students' conversational behavior illustrates the power relationship in the academic advising setting. In fact, students rarely initiate requests (11%) or respond to prompts (19%). As it is illustrated in the Lörscher's (1986) study of conversation in instructional settings, it is the teacher who is in charge of discourse organization and management.

The analysis of the results in Table 1 also indicates that the academic advising sessions provide learners with input and output opportunities, that is, with opportunities to be exposed to and perform the speech act of requesting. These opportunities, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, are greater in mid-study and at the end of their study visit.

Table 2: Frequency of requests by type in mid-study sessions

	Teachers	Students
Responses to questions	13%	53%
Responses to prompts	27%	23%
Initiated	60%	36%

Table 3: Frequency of requests by type at the end of the study period

	Teachers	Students
Responses to questions	17%	34%
Responses to prompts	35%	30%
Initiated	48%	47%

Comparing the frequency of responses to questions and initiation of requests in arrival, mid-study and end of study-period sessions (Tables 1, 2 and 3), we observe that, as time progresses, the percentage of teacher responses to questions increases whereas the percentage of initiations decreases. The opposite pattern applies to the students' performance. These results may suggest that as students become more familiar with the advising sessions and the teacher, the power relationship diminishes; thus, prompting the students to a higher initiation of requests. Our results show that all the non-native speakers (NNSs) increased their ability in requesting advice, information and permission; in other words, students seem to be informed about the speech act realization in terms of content.

We were also interested in analyzing if the type of input and output opportunities provided in the academic context could help learners to

develop their pragmatic competence, that is to say, to learn how to use language in making requests. Table 4, 5 and 6 illustrates the form of requests in teacher and student talk during the advising sessions.

Table 4: Form of requests in teacher and student talk in arrival sessions

	Teachers	Students
Direct	36%	63%
Indirect	37%	20%
Impersonal	27%	17%

Table 5: Form of requests in teacher and student talk in mid-study sessions

	Teachers	Students
Direct	20%	52%
Indirect	46%	27%
Impersonal	34%	21%

Table 6: Form of requests in teacher and student talk at the end of the study period

	Teachers	Students
Direct	18%	41%
Indirect	49%	30%
Impersonal	33%	29%

The analysis of the data in Tables 4, 5 and 6 illustrates that positive input provided by teachers (use of impersonal and indirect forms) is not enough to help learners to develop their pragmatic competence in the academic setting. Although teachers' use of direct forms are status-bound and students' use of these direct forms are not, students use direct strategies ("Can you do that for me?) in favor of indirect ("If I could attend...") or impersonal strategies ("There is the possibility of..." "Here is a course..."). Besides, in line with the study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), students' percentage of direct forms and absence of pre-requests illustrate students' lack of pragmatic competence. As illustrated in Table 7, NSs generally use a pre-request before making the actual request while students do not.

Table 7: Use of pre-requests by NSs and NNSs

	NS	NNS
Arrival sessions	70%	30%
Mid-study	86%	24%
End of the study period	61%	36%

NSs rarely make a request without checking whether the other interlocutor will be ready to accept the request; however, NSs' use of pre-requests does not function as positive evidence for learners. In our data, neither have we observed any negative feedback on students' linguistic realizations. If NNSs receive any corrective feedback, it focuses on meaning rather than form, which in turn provide learners with few opportunities to modify their output. That observation, illustrated in example viii, is against the research conducted in the field of second language acquisition which

provides evidence of the importance of a dual focus on meaning and form in communicative language learning (Doughty and Williams, 1998).

Example viii:

S: I see. Write it for me.

T: Ok. Here you are.

In example viii, the NNS in making her request uses an order instead of using more polite and formal language. In this sense, the NNS does not take into account the higher position of the interlocutor. However, the NS does not signal the inappropriate realization of the speech act of requesting. The NS does not give any negative feedback, responding with direct correction, "*you cannot use an imperative, unless you are talking to a close friend*." Neither does the NS use an indirect correction, "*you mean if I could write it here?"* In so doing, the NS might have offered the NNS an opportunity to notice the mismatch between her language and the target language use (the noticing function) and, by using an indirect focus on form, the NS might have also pushed the NNS to produce more accurate output (hypothesis testing function). It should be emphasized that the lecturers are aware that the session is being taped, and their reaction (feedback) may, therefore, be different.

The results of our study show that input directed to the learners and opportunities to perform the speech act of requesting, although it may help learners move towards using more request strategies, does not direct the learners' attention to how conversation works or appropriate linguistic forms in making requests. In this sense, further empirical research is needed to examine the effect of direct and indirect feedback on learners' pragmatic development. Another issue which deserves further study is whether pragmatic competence is independent of grammatical competence. As suggested by Bardovi-Harlig (1999), while grammatical competence may not be sufficient for pragmatic development, it may be a necessary condition. Results of the study also suggest some pedagogical implications. As we will refer to in the next section, we claim that a focus on form regarding

appropriate forms of the speech act of requesting is necessary in second and foreign language learning.

4. Pedagogical implications

Results of our study support a growing body of research showing that foreign language learners lack appropriate language behavior (Cenoz, 1999; and Kasper and DuFon, 2000). Furthermore, the foreign language classroom has been reported to be an impoverished environment for the acquisition of pragmatic competence (Alcón, 2001) and language teaching materials do not represent features of everyday conversation (Alcón and Tricker, 2000). Taking into account these studies, we suggest, in line with Kasper (1997) and Safont and Alcón (2000), that it is possible to arrange language learning opportunities to benefit the development of pragmatic competence in a foreign language. These opportunities should take everyday language as the starting point for language learning and teaching activities should be designed to help the learner develop an understanding of what is going on in language use. In our opinion, pragmatic competence should be presented in more teachable and explicit terms. That is to say, teachers should provide learners with opportunities to develop their awareness of appropriate language use, and then propose structural practice to transform pragmatic awareness into pragmatic performance.

Taking the following text and focusing on the use of requests, we present some of the teaching activities we have used with foreign language learners to help them go beyond formulaic expressions and to use language appropriately to the communicative situation.

Susan: hi Peter

Peter: hi. how 's it going?

Susan: oh not bad. Um

Peter: what's the matter?

Susan: look I have to be at the meeting at 12.00

Peter: lucky you (laughter)

Susan: lucky me? Well, can you.. are you busy?

Peter: well not now. What can I do for you?

Susan: Can you photocopy?

Peter: depends. Can you offer anything else?

Susan: not now. Photocopy this page. Twenty

Peter: okay done

Susan: thanks see you later

(Author's data from oral discourse)

As a first step, learners should be directed to consider the different speaker related factors and content related factors necessary for making appropriate linguistic choices. Questions such as: *where are the participants?*, *what's the participants relationship?*, *what's the topic of conversation?*, *Why are the participants having this conversation?*, *What kind of conversation is it?*, *How does the conversation open and close?* prepare learners to understand the influence of speaker-related factors on language use.

As a second step, students are directed towards awareness on type of language use and the use of pre-requests before making the actual request with questions such as: *Why is Susan asking Peter if he is busy?*, *Does Peter accept the request?*, *What would he have said if he had refused the request?* As suggested by Sook Lee and Beverly (2000), the use of discourse completion tasks, discourse evaluation tasks and discourse rating tasks are also useful to raise learners' awareness of language use in requests.

Finally, role play can be used to develop learners' pragmatic performance. For instance, learners can be asked to play the roles of Susan and Peter, but this time Peter plays the boss. After preparing the role play,

students act it out and the teacher, if necessary, explains the importance of the type of language used to indicate degree of politeness, taking into account speaker-related factors and type of tasks you want someone do for you. Here it is also an ideal opportunity to focus on preferred and dispreferred responses, revise adjancency pairs in requests and provide further opportunities to combine form and meaning in the communicative language classroom.

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