



Length of stay abroad: Effects of time on the speech act of requesting

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ABSTRACT

By means of a discourse completion test (DCT) and a discourse elicitation test (DET) this study investigates the awareness and production of requests and request act modifiers of 104 nonnative speakers of English from 31 nationalities during different lengths of stay in the UK. The paper first of all provides a brief overview of studies that deal with pragmatic development and periods abroad and then, describes the data collection procedure and methodology employed. Results show that the early stages of a stay abroad are decisive in developing an awareness of pragmatic infelicities. With respect to production of requests, our results do not show statistically significant differences, suggesting that length of stay does not affect request act use. There is also evidence that learners in the study abroad context increase their pragmatic repertoire of internal and external modifiers at later stages of their stay in the UK.

KEYWORDS: Length of stay abroad, requests, request modifiers, English nonnative speakers.

RESUMEN

Mediante un cuestionario de producción y otro de evaluación del discurso, este estudio investiga la percepción y la producción de peticiones y de sus elementos de mitigación entre 104 hablantes no nativos de inglés, de 31 nacionalidades durante diferentes períodos de estancia en el Reino Unido. En primer lugar se describen algunos estudios que tratan sobre el desarrollo pragmático y periodos en el extranjero y a continuación, se presenta la metodología empleada. Los resultados muestran que los primeros meses de una estancia en el extranjero son decisivos en el desarrollo de la conciencia pragmática. Con respecto a la producción de las peticiones, los resultados no mostraron diferencias estadísticas significativas, lo que sugiere que la duración de la estancia no afecta el uso de las mismas. Por último, hay evidencia de que los alumnos que han pasado más tiempo en el extranjero, concretamente en contextos como el nuestro, aumentan su repertorio pragmático en cuanto a los elementos de mitigación tanto internos como externos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Duración de estancias en el extranjero, peticiones, modificadores de las peticiones, hablantes no nativos de inglés.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been assumed that the combination of immersion in the native speech community and formal classroom learning creates the best environment for learning a second language. The power of this assumption is such that there is a popular belief shared by students and teachers, parents, administrators and funding bodies, that students who spend a period abroad are those who will ultimately become the most proficient in the use of their language of specialization (Freed, 1998). For this reason, an increasing number of students have taken part in study abroad programs recently. The diversity of study abroad programs these days is representative of the rising number of students (be these undergraduates or postgraduates) and professionals that are experiencing these stays abroad. For instance, students involved in studying modern languages in the UK have to spend some time abroad as a compulsory part of their degree (their third year has to be spent in another country in most cases).

When the European Union was created in 1993 its main objective was to facilitate citizens' mobility between EU member states. Its cooperation in the field of education is represented by the SOCRATES programme, adopted in 1995. SOCRATES incorporates ERASMUS – originally the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (see Coleman, 1998). It is one of the best known exchange programs in Europe, 1.5 million students from 31 different universities have benefited of an ERASMUS study period abroad to date, and the numbers rise every year (*European Union Education Archives, May 2008¹*). These data suggests that the experience of living abroad has become increasingly appealing and more viable, to the European community at least. In addition, many undergraduate and postgraduate students choose to go to university in the UK regardless of whether they have secured institutional funding or not. Furthermore, students from a wide range of nationalities take part in UK university courses every year, providing this country with the largest intake of international students (Coleman, 1998). Still today, there is unequal demand for European languages, English being the most popular. This preference is followed by Spanish, French and then German. There are three main options why students choose to live abroad, these are: to work as a foreign language assistant, on a work placement or as a student (university students being the largest group of non-resident British in the UK). The term generally used to refer to these populations is “residence abroad”.

Residence abroad programs offer the opportunity for their participants to learn another culture, express themselves in another language and experience a different context to their own. Participants in residence abroad contexts are usually exposed to a great amount of L2 input and they are required to utilise L2 in different situations. These practices are generally regarded as beneficial for the development of language learners' proficiency in their second language (Coleman, 1998). Learners in a sojourn abroad or an exchange programme learn about a culture that is different from the learner's own culture, and this difference is an

important part of the learning experience (Regan, 1998). Researchers are also aware that acquisition is a multidimensional phenomenon and entails linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects. Exchange or foreign students are placed in a new social and linguistic environment and they have to communicate with other people even though they may not have all the necessary means at their disposal to do so. The learner thus needs to be able to learn new things and communicate simultaneously. Furthermore, there are many factors that can contribute to the experience of living and studying abroad, for example the culture of the host country, the purpose and motivation of the learner, or the level of proficiency.

Research on study abroad contexts had not experienced too much interest until the publication of *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (Freed, 1995), the first book devoted to integrating a group of cross-linguistic studies which explored the relationship between the study abroad setting and language learning. That was the starting point of a growing body of research on study abroad matters. Since then, a number of studies concerning the impact of study abroad on learners' L2 proficiency regarding oral fluency, literacy, student perspectives, language contexts, communication strategies, morphosyntactic and lexical issues, among others, have been published (see, for example, Isabelli Garcia, 2003; Kline, 1998; Lafford, 2004; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004, among others). However, even though the study abroad context has attracted the interest of many researchers in recent years (see Coleman, 1998, for a review of studies regarding foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence in residence abroad or Freed, 1998, and Regan et al., 2009, for a review of studies according to various linguistics disciplines), only a reduced number of studies have examined the effect of the sojourn abroad on the development of language learners' pragmatic competence.

2. LENGTH OF STAY ABROAD AND PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT

The following are studies that deal with length of stay abroad and pragmatic development. Matsumura (2001) focuses on Japanese university students taking part in a student exchange programme in Canada. The goal was to investigate the pragmatic development of her learners' competence with regard to sociocultural perceptions of social status when providing advice in the L2 to three different levels of social status (i.e. lower, equal and higher status). Matsumura (2001) compared the development of 97 Japanese exchange students' pragmatic competence with that of 102 peers in Japan who did not undertake a year abroad. In-class questionnaires were administered four times during an academic year, these consisted of questionnaires on personal information and multiple-choice questionnaires to assess perceptions of social status. Japanese students' pragmatic development was examined by comparing the approximation of their preferences for advice type to native speakers' preferences (a group of 82 native speakers who had also completed the questionnaires). Her

findings showed that learners' changes in the perception of social status generally occurred during the three first months. The level of exposure to the L2 was the single factor that determined gains in pragmatic competence, while proficiency only had an indirect effect on pragmatic development when linked with exposure to the L2. Results suggest that living and studying in a target speech community might be effective in developing pragmatic competence. On the other hand, given that no dramatic change was observed in the group that stayed in Japan during the observation period, it might be assumed that living and studying in an EFL environment alone may not be sufficient to become pragmatically competent in the target speech community.

In a similar study, Matsumura (2003) also stresses that exposure to the target culture has greater potential to account for pragmatic development than level of proficiency. Participants in this study consist of 137 university-level Japanese students who spent 8 months in Canada on an academic exchange programme and 71 native speakers of English who studied at the same university. Data were recorded at three times at three month intervals from the Japanese students in order to observe developmental change in their pragmatic competence. The first data collection process was conducted in Japan when the students prepared for the study abroad, and the second and the third data collection processes were conducted in Canada when they had spent approximately one month and four months on the exchange programme. Like Matsumura (2001) data were gathered using multiple-choice and self-report questionnaires. Results show that Japanese students who received a larger amount of exposure to English even in their home country became more pragmatically competent early on in their study abroad. While Matsumura's results indicate that the first three months are particularly significant for learners' pragmatic development in their L2 in the study abroad context, the findings of Félix-Brasdefer (2004) investigation of refusals suggest that considerable progress in learners' pragmatic competence is made in the latter stages of learners' residence in the target context. It also claims that the more the students stay in the foreign country the better for their pragmatic performance. This study investigates the sequential organisation of politeness strategies of 24 L2 Spanish learners at university level and whether the learners' ability to negotiate and mitigate a refusal was influenced by length of residence in the target community. The length of residence abroad ranged from 1.5 months to 30 months. Data were collected by means of role-plays and retrospective verbal reports. Results show that those learners who spent nine months or more in the target community demonstrated greater attempts at negotiation of a refusal and higher degrees of politeness, such as higher frequency of conversational turns and a greater degree of indirectness, than those who spent less than five months abroad. Those participants who stayed abroad longer (i.e. nine months or more) decreased the use of supportive moves and their ability to mitigate a refusal approximated NS level. Although these findings contradict Matsumura's (2001), this might be due to the fact that the students in Félix-Brasdefer's study stayed for longer periods than those in Matsumura's study, which had a limited stay of eight months.

3. THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUESTING

With regards to requests, the speech act under study in this paper, the next studies focus on the pragmatic development of requests in the study abroad context. Barron (2003) investigated learners' pragmatic development with regard to requests, offers and refusals. Barron's participants were Irish university students at a German university. She focused on internal modification in her analysis of requests and found no significant development towards the native speakers' norm in the case of syntactic modifiers. However, the results revealed an increasing frequency of native speaker's lexical/phrasal modifiers. Also investigating requests, Schauer (2004, 2006) examines the pragmatic development of German learners of English at a British university over a period of one academic year. The results suggest that all learners in the study abroad context increase their pragmatic repertoire of internal and external modifiers by at least one not previously used modifier type, thus highlighting the impact of individual learner differences previously noted by Sawyer (1992). In a further investigation with some of the learners of the above mentioned study, Schauer (2006) examines the development of learners' pragmatic and grammatical awareness in the L2 context. Data elicited from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) video-and-questionnaire task and one-to-one interviews with the students shed light on this phenomenon further. The video contained scenarios that were familiar to the students and that they experienced on a regular basis at school. Three groups of university students participated in the study, 16 German learners of English L2 in England, 17 German students of English L2 in Germany and 20 British English native speakers. Data analysis with regards to pragmatic awareness show that German students in England and English native speakers recognized significantly more errors in scenarios containing a pragmatic infelicity than the learner group in Germany. Findings suggest that the learning environment plays a substantial role in priming the language learners' linguistic awareness. ESL German students increased their pragmatic awareness during their stay in England regarding everyday situations in an academic context.

With regards to research on requests during a stay abroad, three studies more need to be mentioned (Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992; Schmidt, 1983), although these do not concern university student as the studies described above. Schmidt (1983) analyses a three-year study of Wes, a Japanese adult learner of English. When the study started Wes' use of directives was very limited, the use of requestive markers such as please was more frequent, and he associated the verb morpheme -ing with requestive form (for example *eating* for the form *let's eat*). When the observation period finished findings showed that some improvements had taken place: Wes used imperatives frequently, the incorrect use of the -ing form had disappeared, routines were used productively and his directives were usually more elaborated. Hence, the stay abroad had proven to have positive results. The second study, Ellis (1992) followed the development of two immigrant boys aged 10 and 11, in a British

educational institution over four and six school terms respectively. In line with Schmidt's (1983), Ellis' subjects also used the internal modifier *please* from a very early stage. Similarly, they did not employ a high number of either Internal or External modifiers in their requests. It is important to state that in this study individual differences were also found since the younger participant used significantly more modifiers than the older one. However, both these individual differences and the similarities they showed in their acquisition of request formulas, such as indirect requests, seem to have influenced the pragmatic development of both learners.

Also dealing with pragmatic development of requests over a period of time in a foreign country is the third study, Achiba (2003). This study involved Achiba's observation of her seven year-old daughter, Yao, during a period of seventeen months spent in Australia. Results show that over that period of time, Yao refined her means of requesting in a second language, i.e. English. At first she used more internal modifiers than external modifiers, which she acquired later in time. This might imply that using internal modifiers is easier at earlier acquisition stages than using external modifiers, a similarity showed by Yao and the participants in the two previous studies. At the end of the observation period Yao was able to vary the forms and strategies employed for requesting as her linguistic knowledge and sociocultural perceptions increased. These results show that the stay abroad helped Yao improve her pragmatic development with regards to requesting.

Other studies concerned with the effect of length of residence in the target community as a factor in pragmatic development are Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986). Olshtain and Blum Kulka (1985) investigated whether NNSs of different L1 backgrounds with lengths of stay in Israel that ranged from two to ten years would assimilate their acceptability perceptions of requests and apologies to NS norms. It was found that after ten years in Israel, learners' perceptions became similar to those of NSs, learners displayed appropriate levels of directness according to the Hebrew politeness system and had developed a greater tolerance for positive politeness strategies. Hence, the NNS of Hebrew were closer to the norm after their sojourn in Israel. In a similar study, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) examined whether the use of external modification of requests and apologies elicited via DCTs influenced the pragmatic production of advanced learners with various lengths of stay in Israel. Consistent results were found with the previous study, in this case after five years of sojourn the amount of external modification decreases to approximate to the native norm.

This brief overview of the relationship between pragmatic development and the study abroad experience suggests that there are indeed differences between the levels of language proficiency of those who have had the opportunity to live abroad and those whose language learning has been limited to the formal language classroom at home (Freed, 1998). Several studies show that there was still a gap between even proficient L2 learners who have studied abroad and native speaker linguistic behaviour (Sawyer, 1992).

4. THE STUDY

4.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 104 nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English. A common factor amongst our 104 participants was that they had all been studying in a UK university for a minimum of 4 months. They were taking various courses (undergraduate degrees, Masters and PhDs) in different higher education institutions within the UK. As some of these participants were in the UK as Erasmus students ($n=21$), they were in the country for one or two semesters only and had come from universities in Spain, France, Germany and Belgium. There was also 1 exchange student from Mexico. Thus, the final number of participants on exchange programmes was ($n=22$). The remaining participants ($n=83$) were all studying in the UK either self-funded or with different sorts of grants from the UK or from their home countries overseas.

Regarding the length of stay, the participant who had spent the shortest period of time in the UK had arrived 4 months prior to completing the questionnaires, whereas the participant who had been the longest in the UK had lived there for a total of 16 years (or 192 months). Figure 1 below shows the distribution of years spent in the UK amongst our participants.

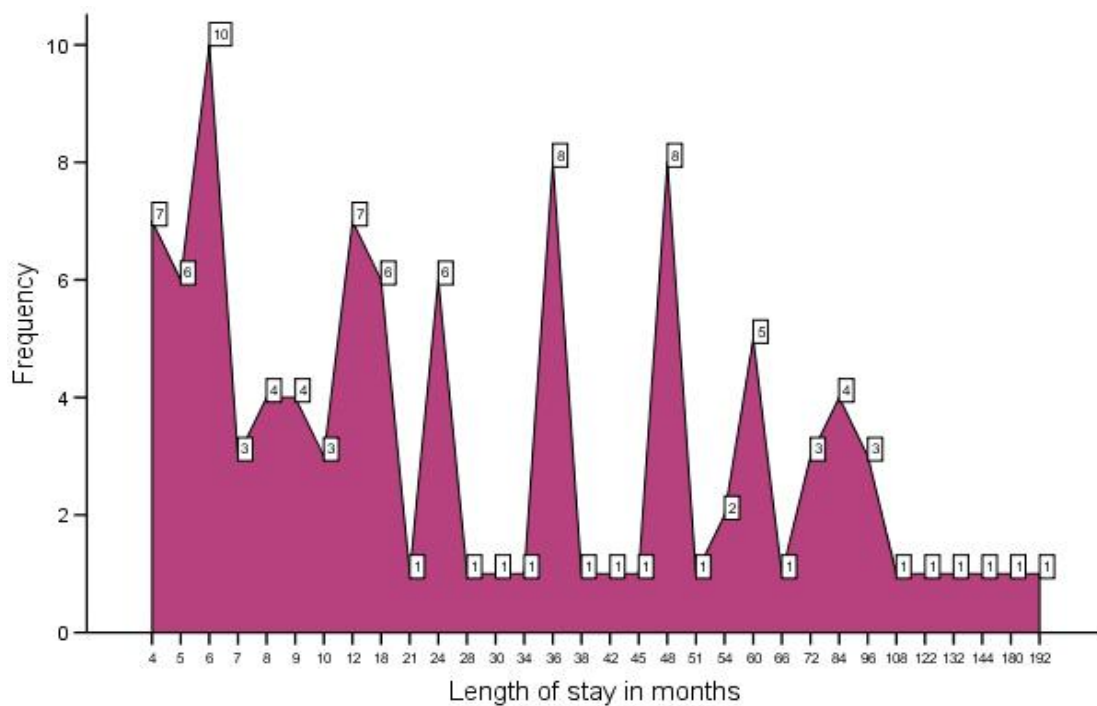


Figure 1. Participants' length of stay in the UK

As Figure 1 shows our 104 participants' time in the UK varied from 4 months to 192 months, we distributed them in three groups for research purposes and grouped those participants who had spent between 4 and 6 months in the UK in the first group (all the exchange students), those who had spent between 7 months and 5 years in the second group and the third group was formed by those participants who had spent from 5 and a half years to 16 years in the UK. Thus, according to this distribution, there were 23 participants in Group 1, 64 in Group 2 and 17 in Group 3.

4.2 Data collection strategies

Many different linguistic forms can convey a request act. Requests are made up of two main parts: the core or head of the request, which is the main utterance and performs the function of requesting, and its peripheral elements, which mitigate or aggravate the force of the request. The core of the request can be used successfully without the adoption of a mitigation device; however, this is not usually the case in English. Request head categories in Trosborg's (1995) suggested classification, the one we followed to code our data, comprise indirect, conventionally indirect and direct request strategies. Most research has focused on forms related to the request head act, while modifiers have received less attention from interlanguage pragmatics scholars (Hassall, 2001). It is for this reason then that request modifiers were analysed in this study. The taxonomy used was Alcón et al.'s (2005) which was adapted from Sifianou's (1999) and identifies two broad groups of modification devices (internal and external).

We used a DCT (Discourse Completion Test) and a DET (Discourse Elicitation Test). The production questionnaire consisted of 16 situations and decided to use the verb 'ask' as opposed to other verbs like 'say' or 'tell' as we considered 'ask' to be a verb semantically more related to requests. The DET included 17 request act exchanges, which subjects had to evaluate on the basis of the appropriateness and correctness of the request formulation for the context in which it was used. Additionally, learners were required to justify their evaluation and to note down suggestions in those cases where they found the request formulation inappropriate, incorrect or both inappropriate and incorrect for the context provided. All the students were asked to imagine themselves in those situations and were told that, if in doubt about any of the content provided in the questionnaires, they could ask the researcher as many questions as they needed in order to fully understand the materials.

4.3 Methodological decisions taken in the analysis of the data

We examined normality tests in order to find out whether our data were normal. Results from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z in all the analyses showed a probability of ≥ 0.050 which enabled us to make use of statistical parametric tests.

Our research question (Does length of stay abroad affect the knowledge of pragmatic force modifiers?) concerned the effect of length of stay abroad on knowledge of request force modifiers. To address this we formulated three hypotheses.

- H 1 Length of stay will affect the awareness of the request acts, in terms of accuracy and appropriateness.
- H 2 Length of stay will affect the production of the request acts in terms of accuracy and appropriateness.
- H 3 Length of stay will affect the production of request modifiers.

In order to account for statistically significant differences we made use of the ‘One-way ANOVA’ to test for differences among two or more independent groups. In our case we compared three different subgroups of participants that had stayed abroad for different periods of time (i.e. from 4 months to 6 months; from 7 months to 5 years; from 5 and a half years to 16 years). The reason why we chose this statistical procedure was due to the fact that the data were continuous; we dealt with three different periods and contrasted participants’ performance on the same task. Some of the results in the next section were considered significant at a value of $p < 0.1$, only in the marked cases was this taken as the bare minimum for statistical significance, $p < 0.05$ was the cutoff value everywhere else.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our first hypothesis predicted that length of stay would have an effect on our participants’ awareness of request acts. We divided the 104 participants into three groups according to the time they had spent in the UK (4 to 6 months; 7 months to 5 years and 5 and a half and 16 years). Our aim was to find out whether or not the null hypothesis (no differences between groups) was rejected. Results are displayed in terms of means in strategy evaluation, t-value and significance.

LENGTH OF STAY ABROAD	Mean	F	Sig.
Group 1 (4 months – 6 months) – appropriate evaluation	13.35	2.765	0.068**
Group 2 (7 months – 5 years) – appropriate evaluation	12.30		
Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years) – appropriate evaluation	11.76		
Group 1 (4 months – 6 months) – correct evaluation	13.52	0.468	0.628
Group 2 (7 months – 5 years) – correct evaluation	12.78		
Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years) – correct evaluation	12.94		

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.1$

Table 1. Effects of length of stay abroad on awareness of global use of requests

As may be observed from Table 1, the results point to a statistically significant difference (sig. = 0.068, $p < 0.1$) between the three groups' assessments of pragmatic failure. The overall differences in mean scores reveal that subjects who had stayed in the UK for a maximum of 6 months (Group 1) were more aware of pragmatic failure than the other two groups (Group 2 and 3). These findings would reject the null hypothesis, and thus account for differences between the three groups of participants. We may assume then, that a better rating of pragmatic failure might take place during the first six months of a stay abroad. Given this finding, it may be inferred that this is the period when language users are more conscious of their learning of the L2. These results partially confirm our first hypothesis, in that they show the effects of stay abroad on the assessment of pragmatic failure. The following is an example from a participant in Group 1:

Example 1

In a hotel a client tells the receptionist:

- My heating don't work. Go and repair it, ok?

Correct Incorrect Appropriate Inappropriate

SUGGESTION: My heating doesn't work. Could someone please fix it as soon as possible?

Although the mean scores regarding accuracy in Table 1 continue to show differences between the groups, the results are not statistically significant. This suggests that length of stay does not have an effect on accuracy and thus, the second half of our first hypothesis, which stated that length of stay would have an effect on the grammatical assessment of request acts, is not confirmed.

Our findings might suggest that length of stay has an effect on the appropriate evaluation of request acts and that the significant period of time for this effect to take place is the first 6 months (78.53%). After periods of between 7 months and 5 years in the country of the target language, there is still a good deal of awareness (72.35%). However, staying for more than 5 and a half years in the country where the target language is used does not mean that competence in assessing appropriateness (69.18%) of request acts will improve.

Furthermore, Table 1 also shows that the three groups performed better at linguistic evaluation (Group 1: 79.53% correct answers; Group 3: 76.12% correct answers; and Group 2: 75.18% correct answers) than at pragmatic evaluation (Group 1: 78.53% accurate answers; Group 2: 72.35% accurate answers; and Group 3: 69.18% accurate answers), with higher mean values within the three groups. This might imply that length of stay has different effects on grammatical and pragmatic awareness.

Our results to some extent support Schauer's (2006) findings, which suggest that the learning environment plays a significant role in priming the language learners' linguistic awareness. Participants in her study increased their pragmatic awareness during their stay in England. One of the aims of Schauer's (2006) study was to examine whether students of

mixed proficiency levels who had spent 1 year in an English-speaking context had a higher degree of pragmatic awareness at the end of their stay than professional language learners who studied English on an intensive course in a foreign language context. This study replicated and extended Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) investigation of pragmatic awareness. Schauer's (2006) results for the grammatical items confirmed Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) findings, whose ESL learners detected only 54.5% of the grammatical errors, whereas their EFL participants noticed 82.4%. In Schauer's (2006) study, the data for the scenarios containing a grammatical violation reveal that the learner group in England detected significantly fewer errors in these items at the beginning of their stay in Great Britain, than the learners in Germany and the native speakers. At the end of their year in the target environment, however, the score of the Germans in England had increased, which meant that there was no longer a statistically significant difference among the three groups. We could draw some parallel findings from the present study, in that the two groups who stayed longer in the UK (Groups 2 and 3) identified fewer grammatical errors than Group 1, who had stayed for only 6 months, thus showing that this specific length of stay might affect grammatical assessment.

The results of the investigation into pragmatic awareness conducted by Schauer (2006) showed that the German EFL participants were less aware of the pragmatic infelicities than the ESL group and that the ESL learners significantly increased their pragmatic awareness during their stay in the L2 context, since they detected more pragmatic infelicities at the end of their sojourn in England than at the beginning. These findings are similar to Matsumura's (2003) in that length of stay seems to affect pragmatic awareness and we have found that there were statistically significant differences in our data with regards to this point. In our case, however, the fact that the participants stayed for longer periods in the target language country did not mean that their pragmatic awareness improved. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case. Participants who had stayed in the UK for periods ranging from 5 and a half years up to 16 years, showed a poorer performance than those who had stayed for less time. Lengths of stay in Matsumura's (2003) and Schauer's (2006) studies only relate to what happens during the first months of stay and do not exceed one year in the country of the target language. For that reason, our results might shed some light on the effects of length of stay on pragmatic and grammatical awareness, providing an insight that, to our knowledge, has not been considered so far. More research needs to be carried out in this sense in the earlier stages of the stay. Furthermore, longitudinal studies controlling the development of the same groups of participants during longer periods of time abroad are also needed.

Our second hypothesis suggested that length of stay abroad would affect the production of request acts. Table 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences between our three groups' production of request acts with regards to appropriateness or accuracy and thus, our second hypothesis is not confirmed. Within this category, the type of request realisation that the students used most was the *conventionally indirect, hearer-oriented*

request type, mainly of *ability* (eg. *I was wondering, if you could give me some advice on this.*), *willingness* (eg. *Would you mind lending me some money to pay for the hotel?*) and *permission* (eg. *Could I borrow your apartment?*). In the data we did not find *Indirect requests (hints)* and we only found 1 *Direct requests* of the *elliptical phrase* type (eg. *London?*) - as per Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy with examples from our data.

LENGTH OF STAY ABROAD	Mean	F	Sig.
Group 1 (4 months – 6 months) – appropriate production	13.74	0.350	0.705
Group 2 (7 months – 5 years) – appropriate production	13.48		
Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years) – appropriate production	13.82		
Group 1 (4 months – 6 months) – correct production	12.09	0.536	0.587
Group 2 (7 months – 5 years) – correct production	12.56		
Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years) – correct production	12.76		

*p<0.05

Table 2. Effects of length of stay abroad on production of global use of requests

Regarding overall production, the mean scores show that participants who had stayed in the UK for more than 5 and a half years produced more pragmatically appropriate request acts than those who had lived in the UK for shorter periods of time. They also produced more correct request acts than the other two groups. However, given that our results did not show any statistically significant differences our findings contradict previous studies which had shown that length of stay in the target language country had an effect on pragmatic development. In the case of Matsumura's (2001) study the first three months were of utmost importance for pragmatic development while Félix-Brasdefer's (2004) investigation, showed that considerable progress in learners' pragmatic performance was made in the latter stages of the sojourn abroad. His study shows that those learners who spent nine months or more in the target community demonstrated greater attempts at negotiation of a refusal, as well as higher degrees of politeness, than those who spent less than five months abroad. Both studies analysed shorter periods of time abroad and collected data at very early stages, whereas we only considered data from participants who had already been in the UK for 4 months. This might be a possible reason for discrepancies in our findings. Also, in the case of Matsumura's (2001) study, the fact that his students knew that they only had a limited time in the target language country might have affected their willingness in learning the language, which resulted in a clear effect on the first months of study abroad.

Future research into the development of pragmatic competence during the first few weeks of the participants' stay in the target country could provide some interesting insights into whether the first months are as salient as Matsumura's (2001) results showed, or whether these stages are as relevant when compared to longer periods of time, such as the ones in Félix-Brasdefer's (2004) study or those considered in the present study. Aspects such as intensity of interaction or motivation during the stay abroad should also be taken into account in future research investigating the effects of stays abroad. Furthermore, our participants

seem to prefer using limited types of requests (ability (Group 1= 8.30; Group 2= 7.19; Group 3= 7.53), willingness (Group 1= 2.00; Group 2= 2.88; Group 3= 3.35) and permission (Group 1= 2.13; Group 2= 2.42; Group 3= 1.88)) as very few instances of other types were found in our data. This might have pedagogical implications in that there is a need for more instruction in the use of request act strategies in the early stages of the stay abroad in order to provide sufficient practice using them. Nonetheless, comparing the length of stay with request act production, we might suggest that longer lengths of stay abroad do have an effect on the production of more accurate and appropriate request acts.

Our third hypothesis aimed to determine whether length of stay had an effect on the participants' ability to produce request act mitigators when formulating a request. Results show that those participants who had stayed in the UK for a longer period of time (between 5 and a half years and 16 years) produced more request mitigators than the other participants and indeed, they also show that those participants who had stayed in the UK for a maximum of 6 months, produced more request mitigators than those in Group 2 who had spent between 7 months and 5 years in the UK.

LENGTH OF STAY ABROAD	Mean	F	Sig.
Group 1 (4 months – 6 months) – request modifiers production	22.70	1.022	0.364
Group 2 (7 months – 5 years) – request modifiers production	21.39		
Group 3 (5 ½ years – 16 years) – request modifiers production	24.76		

*p<0.05

Table 3. Effects of length of stay abroad on production of request mitigators

We found no statistically significant differences between the three groups' production of overall request mitigators. With regards to the production of specific types of request modifiers we found that there were some statistically significant differences between our groups' use of two types of mitigators (disarmers and promise of rewards) within the category of external modifiers, partially confirming our last hypothesis.

REQUEST MODIFICATOR TYPE	PROFICIENCY LEVEL	Mean	F	Sig.
Disarmer	Group 1 (4 months – 6 months)	0.74	2.609	0.079**
	Group 2 (7 months – 5 years)	0.80		
	Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years)	1.53		
Promise of Reward	Group 1 (4 months – 6 months)	1.09	3.366	0.038*
	Group 2 (7 months – 5 years)	0.56		
	Group 3 (5 and ½ years – 16 years)	0.41		

*p<0.05

**p>0.1

Table 4. Effects of length of stay abroad on production of specific request mitigators

According to Table 4 there were significant differences between the groups' production of disarmers (sig. 0.079, $p < 0.1$) and promise of reward (sig. 0.038, $p < 0.05$), both within the category of external modifiers. These findings partially confirm our third hypothesis with regards to effects of stay and use of request mitigators. We provide examples of the two types of mitigators that showed statistically significant differences between the three groups. Example 2 shows a request act from our data that contains the first type of request modifier showing statistically significant differences, that of disarmers. This request type was also more frequently produced by the participants in Group 3.

Example 2

You work as a shop assistant. You need two days off because your mother is ill, but you have no holidays left. You ask your boss:

I am out of holidays but my mom is ill and I would really appreciate it if you could kindly let me take two days off.

This example illustrates a request act with a large number of mitigation devices. It starts with a grounder providing the reason for the subsequent request (*'I am out of holidays but my mom is ill'*), then a disarmer with an embedded intensifier (*'I would really appreciate it'*) and also a downtoner (*'kindly'*). Example 3 illustrates the use of the request modifier "promise of reward", which also revealed statistically significant differences between the three groups. The request was found in the data of one of our Group 1 participants, who tended to produce more modifiers of this type. This example is a request of the ability type with two modifiers: please and promise of reward (*'I'll give you cash as soon as I get cash'*).

Example 3

You and a friend arrive in Dublin and go to your hotel. You left your credit card at home and you don't have enough money to pay for the hotel. You ask your friend:

Could you please pay for me tonight and I'll give you cash as soon as I get cash?

We also should point out that only participants who had stayed in the UK for more than 5 and a half years (Group 3) used hedges as a type of modification device. Example 4 below shows the only example of hedging found in our data:

Example 4

A couple is having dinner in a restaurant. The waiter is speaking very quickly and they cannot understand the menu. The woman asks the waiter:

Would you mind at all not to smoke here, please?

We classified (*'at all'*) as the only hedge in our data. The request act provided above also contains an opener (*'would you mind'*) and *'please'*.

The mean scores further reveal that the mitigators most frequently used by the three groups were *'please'* (Group 1= 7.00; Group 2= 6.88; Group 3= 7.94), grounders (Group 1= 5.17; Group 2= 4.05; Group 3= 5.12), attention getters (Group 1= 2.70; Group 2= 2.84; Group 3= 2.41) and openers (Group 1= 2.22; Group 2= 2.78; Group 3= 2.88). With regards to the production of openers and *'please'*, it was the participants who had stayed the longest in the UK that showed the highest frequency of use. Group 2 resorted to more attention getters than the other two groups. In the case of grounders, or providing reasons for the request, it was Group 1 that resorted to this modifier the most frequently. Subjects in Group 1 also showed a preference for appealers, which were not present in the data produced by the other two groups. In fact, there was only one appealers in our data (*'Ok?'*). Furthermore, Group 1 used fewer mitigators than the other two groups; 11 instances of hesitators were found in our data distributed mainly amongst Groups 2 and 3. An example of the use of a hesitator is provided in Example 5:

Example 5

Your friend is coming to visit. You need a place to stay and you want to borrow your uncle's apartment. You ask him:

I was thinking...Do you think my friend could stay in your apartment?

The request in Example 5 starts with a hesitator (*'I was thinking'*), followed by a preparator (*'Do you think'*) before the request for permission is used.

Instances of all the modification types were found in our data, with the sole exception of cajolers. Group 3 produced more modifiers in 8 out of the 15 categories of request modifiers provided by Alcón et al.'s (2005) taxonomy, thus showing some superiority in the range of mitigation used. Following a similar sort of consistency between the findings in request act production presented in Hypothesis 2 above, Group 3, formed of participants who had stayed longer in the UK, produced more modifiers. Thus, it might be the case that length of stay enables target language users to produce a wider range and variety of mitigators.

To sum up the findings of our third hypothesis, in terms of overall frequency of mitigators produced by our participants, there seems to be differences between the three groups. Group 3 (mean=24.76), participants who had stayed in the UK for between 5 years and a half and 16 years, outperformed both Groups 1 (mean=22.7) and 2 (mean=21.39). However, the one way ANOVA applied to our data showed that this difference was not statistically significant.

By examining the different types of modification devices used by participants in the three groups, we found some statistically significant differences within the use of two types of external modifiers (disarmers (sig. 0.079, $p < 0.1$) and promise of reward (sig. 0.038, $p < 0.05$)). These findings partially confirm our third hypothesis, suggesting that length of stay affects the use of some external request mitigators. We also obtained relevant data as to

preferences of use by our participants, “*please*” being the mitigator most frequently used by our three groups. The results suggest that all learners in the study abroad context increase their pragmatic repertoire of internal and external modifiers at later stages of their stay in the UK, with the only exception being one modification type (appealers), produced only by those participants who had stayed in the UK for a maximum of 6 months. These results are in line with Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), who examined whether the use of external modification of requests and apologies elicited via DCTs influenced the pragmatic production of advanced learners with various lengths of stay in Israel. The results were consistent with those of their previous study (Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985) and showed that after a stay of 5 years in the community where the target language is spoken, the use of external modification devices decreased until it approximated to native speaker level.

Although we are not comparing our data to that produced by native users, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain’s (1986) findings match our own, in that after spending a relatively long period of time in the country of the target language, our participants mitigated their requests in order to make them suitable for the given situations in our DCT. Our results are also in line with more recent studies, Barron’s (2003) and Schauer’s (2004) results, for example, revealed an increasing frequency of target-like production of pragmatic force modifiers over periods of stay abroad. Both Barron (2003) and Schauer (2004) have stated that learners’ pragmatic competence increases during their sustained exposure to authentic language use in the target environment and our results seem to suggest the same.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Results from the previous section point towards the following conclusions. Where length of stay abroad is concerned, it seems that the early stages (the first 6 months) of a stay abroad are decisive in developing an awareness of pragmatic infelicities, compared to longer periods of time abroad (up to 16 years in the case of the present study). The results also suggest that learners in the study abroad context increase their pragmatic repertoire of internal and external modifiers at later stages of their stay in the UK. In the light of these findings, we believe that the teaching of varied ways of request realisations and internal and external forms of mitigation should be a focus of, not only potential study abroad participants, but language students in general. By so doing, English language users could be trained in order to enhance and enlarge the variety of structures at their disposal. Furthermore, training courses designed to raise awareness of pragmatic and grammatical failure, should be offered before the stay abroad and/or shortly after arrival in the country of the target language. This might also lead to an earlier improvement in productive skills.

It is also important to provide an account of some of the limitations of our investigation. Firstly, the design of the data collection instruments employed in the present

study, did not allow for respondents to engage in multiple-turn exchanges and to opt out, thereby making the data obtained less representative of real communication. Although our study analysed lengths of stay that, to our knowledge, had not been dealt with before, the use of isolated tests did not allow us to carry out any follow-ups. Thus, we have been unable to analyse the acquisition process of the speech act of requesting and pragmatic force modifiers during these lengths of time. A further limitation of the present study is the fact that the context in studies abroad is difficult to control, we believe our participants involvement with the local culture, their degree of integration and so on, might also play a crucial role in how their pragmatic knowledge develops but we have been unable to consider such variables in here.

NOTES

- ¹ Data obtained from the European Commission Education and Training website using November 11, 2007 updates.

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