Explicit instruction of spoken requests: An examination of pre-departure instruction and the study abroad environment

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of explicit interventional treatment on developing pragmatic awareness and production of spoken requests in a study abroad context (taken here to mean those studying/using English for academic purposes in the UK) with Chinese learners of English at a British higher education institution. The study employed an experimental design over a 6 month period with 34 students assigned to either an explicitly instructed group or a control group receiving no instruction. Instruction took place prior to departure for the UK and performance was measured based on a pre-, immediate and delayed post-test design using an oral computer-animated production test (CAPT). The findings revealed that explicit instruction facilitated development of pragmatically appropriate request language in the short term and, to some extent, this was sustained over time. The CAPT data was also analysed in order to examine the use of internal and external modification of requests by each group. Results demonstrate that the explicit instruction group used significantly more modification at the immediate post-test stage but that the control group used significantly more at the delayed test stage.

1. Introduction

Whilst the interest in the development of pragmatic competence during study abroad (SA) sojourns continues to grow, this is not matched by empirical investigations with a pre-departure focus, despite consensus of the benefits SA preparation programmes can offer (e.g., Cohen & Shively, 2007; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004). Learners engaging in SA sojourns are challenged to function in a linguistically and socially appropriate way in an unfamiliar environment within which the expected pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic conventions may vary considerably from their home countries. These challenges have been shown to be successfully facilitated through pedagogical intervention, within the at-home or SA contexts (see Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Taguchi, 2014, 2015 for reviews on instructional effects). Studies situating interventions during pre-departure programmes are still greatly underexplored.

When examining sustainability of instruction once learners are active in the SA period, Bardovi-Harlig (2013) considers there to be a complex interplay of influential factors at play including learner proficiency, individual differences and interaction with the environment. Indeed, in the current body of interlanguage pragmatics literature, each of these factors has been shown to play a decisive, but not exclusive, role when examining pragmatic development; learner proficiency (Félix-

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Brasdefer, 2007; Schauer, 2009); individual learner differences (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013; Taguchi, 2008) and L2 interaction (Bella, 2011; Shively, 2013). The present study examines the effects of an explicit instructional treatment of request language, with a focus on tracking learners' performance at the pre-departure and study abroad stages.

2. Literature review

2.1. Developing requests in a study abroad context

The teaching of foreign languages often embed SA experiences which include the presence or absence of formal pragmatic instruction in order for language learners to enhance their language skills and raise cross-cultural awareness. SA investigations which specifically incorporate pragmatic instruction rarely appear in research, whilst SA investigations which do not feature structured pragmatic input dominate the literature. SA programmes may be beneficial for learners due to frequent exposure to local norms, target language input, and the associated opportunities to integrate this knowledge into their own communicative practices. This has been tested within a range of pragmatic features: awareness of address terms and colloquial expressions (Kinginger, 2008); humour (Shardakova, 2013); informal/formal pronouns (Kinginger & Farrell, 2004); polite and plain forms (Iwasaki, 2010); speech acts (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Schauer, 2009; Shively, 2011; Taguchi, 2008); formulaic language (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011) and listener responses (Shively, 2015). Contradicting expectations, the majority of results suggest that a positive link between the SA experience and improved pragmatic performance cannot always be made.

Reviewing the literature on the acquisition of request language in the SA context reveals a number of developmental trends towards the L2 norm. First, there is evidence of positive shifts to more target-like selection of request strategies over time. This evidence includes studies which show the use of more indirect requests in English-speaking host environments (Code & Anderson, 2001; Schauer, 2007; Woodfield, 2012, pp. 9–50) and more direct requests in Spanish and Chinese contexts (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Li, 2014; Shively, 2011). Second, greater use of formulaic language in requests has been observed over time (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Barron, 2003; Schauer, 2007; Shively, 2011). Finally, several studies (e.g. Barron, 2003; Code & Anderson, 2001; Li, 2014; Schauer, 2004; Woodfield, 2012, pp. 9–50) report increased mitigation through internal modification (mitigation devices within the head act such as downtoners e.g. '*possibly*', or downgraders e.g. '*could*') and external modification devices (surrounding the head act, serving to further absorb the impact of the impending imposition such as alerters e.g. '*Excuse me*', or apologies e.g. '*sorry*'). Beginning with internal modification, this is generally shown to be more challenging for learners with a number of studies reporting an underuse of internal request modifiers or little developmental change in use (Schauer, 2007, 2009; Li, 2014; Woodfield, 2008, 2012, pp. 9–50; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) which may be due to processing complexity, particularly in the early stages of L2 development (Ellis, 1992; Rose, 2000; Trosborg, 1995). Concerning external modification, Li (2014); Schauer (2009), and Woodfield (2012, pp. 9–50) observed more target-like patterns of development, though overuse has also been reported (Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). These empirically-reported features broadly align to the developmental stages of request production, as outlined by Kasper and Rose (2002), though this improved performance still falls short of target-like levels in most cases.

2.2. Influential factors on request performance

A closer examination of these developmental trends reveals the degree of change across request components may vary (Schauer, 2007, 2009; Woodfield, 2008, 2012, pp. 9–50; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). However, changes attributable to individual differences (Kinginger, 2013) including proficiency and length of stay, have been the most frequently examined variables, in addition to first language transfer. For instance, target-like levels of internal modification of requests have been reported to increase in line with proficiency levels with both at-home and study abroad learners (Barron, 2007; Hill, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Octu & Zeyrek, 2008). Al-Gahtani and Roever (2013) found low proficiency ESL learners were more likely to produce shorter requests with little evidence of delaying the core request due to processing load, limited vocabulary, and grammatical resources available at this level.

Length of stay in the target language has also been reported in several studies as indicative of failure to appropriately modify request language to L2 norms. Both Bataller (2010) and Li (2014) reported that restricted four and five month respective sojourns were contributory factors for the learners' inability to achieve target-like levels of strategy selection and request modification. These results support Schauer's (2009) earlier conclusion that stays of nine months or more yield more positive results when examining the development of request production. Partially contradicting the above findings, Beltr (2014) examined the awareness and production of request language with 104 non-native, long-term UK residents. Results showed length of stay had no effect when assessing the grammatical accuracy of requests, and longer-term residents of between five and sixteen years evidenced poorer pragmatic awareness than those resident for less than six months. Length of stay was, however, influential in producing a wider range and variety of mitigators, in particular external modification, but this was not found to be statistically significant. Considering the recognition and production of conventional expressions in an L2 context, Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) also report length of stay has no significant influence on the recognition and production of high frequency expressions, such as those used for making a request. In fact, intensity of interaction (for recognition) and proficiency (for both recognition and production) were shown to be the key variables.