Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the development of internal mitigating devices in requests by a group of second language (L2) learners studying abroad in Spain. The method of data collection was a role-play in which the learners interacted with a Spanish native speaker in two service-encounter request scenarios. The same role-plays were repeated at the end of the study abroad period. A group of Spanish native speakers (NSs) also performed the same role-play task once and their data served as a baseline against which to compare the L2 learners' performance. The results of this study show that the L2 learners reduced their use of the politeness marker *por favor* "please" and started using other devices more frequently by the end of their study abroad experience; however, in comparison with the NS group, the range and quantity of their internal devices continued to be much lower.

1. Introduction

Even though in the last two decades the field of interlanguage pragmatics has grown rapidly, as noted by Barron and Warga (2007), there is still much to be learned and many questions to answer about L2 learners' acquisition of pragmatic competence. In particular, there are few studies investigating learners' interlanguage pragmatic development during a study abroad experience, in spite of the fact that this is thought to provide the ideal setting for learners to develop pragmatic linguistic competence. In fact, the results of previous research investigating pragmatic development after an SA experience have produced mixed results (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Some studies have revealed that exposure to second language input in the SA context clearly fosters interlanguage pragmatic development (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Kondo, 1997; Schauer, 2004; Shively, 2008). On the other hand, a number of studies have noted that there are

pragmatic aspects of learners' interlanguage that may not improve much, or at all, following a sojourn abroad (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Rodriguez, 2002; VonCanon, 2006).

We set out to explore this topic with a group of intermediate learners studying abroad in Spain for four months. Specifically, we wished to explore developmental aspects of students' use of lexical and syntactic internal mitigating devices when making requests. To achieve this we devised two service-encounter scenarios, using a role-play as the main method of data collection. As Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) explained, requests can be modified internally by means of syntactic devices (e.g. using the conditional tense "I would like") or by the use of lexical or phrasal mitigating devices (e.g. the politeness marker "please").

Although the speech act of requests has frequently been studied, research to date has tended to focus on the description of participants' use of different types of request strategies. Comparatively few studies have closely analyzed the use and development of internal mitigation on learners' request constructions (Barron, 2003; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009; Hassall, 2001; Schauer, 2004; Trosborg, 1995). By addressing this deficit, this study can contribute to the growing field of interlanguage pragmatic development; this is a field that,as Kasper and Rose (2002) stated, can help us "better understand the different uses to which such (pragmatic) ability is put, or to cultivate L2 pragmatic development as a domain within second language acquisition research" (pp. 1-2).

Before describing our project in detail, we present next a review of previous studies of requests that have analyzed the use and development of internal mitigation by native or nonnative speakers of various languages.

2. Literature review

2.1. Studies of internal mitigating devices used in requests by native speakers

Studies comparing the use of internal mitigation in requests by English and Spanish NSs have noted that each group has a different downgrading style. Márquez-Reiter (2000) analyzed the speech production of 61 British NSs and 64 Uruguayan-Spanish NSs via an open role-play using 12 scenarios. She focused on different elements of learners' request production, including request strategies, perspective, and internal and external mitigating devices. Regarding the use of internal mitigating devices, Marquez-Reiter noted that, in general, the British NSs employed more internal mitigating devices than the Uruguayans. Whereas 90% of the British requests were internally modified, only 27% of the Uruguayan Spanish ones were. In addition, the two groups used different types of mitigating devices. Diminutives (e.g. *un favorcito* "a little favor") were most frequently used by the Uruguayans, while similar expressions did not appear in the British data. As Marquez-Reiter noted, diminutives can express friendliness, in-group language, or solidarity, and as such, they are clear examples of positive politeness. In contrast, British NS requests were often mitigated by downtoners (e.g. "maybe" or "possibly") mitigating devices which were hardly used in the Uruguayan-Spanish requests. Overall, the Uruguayans showed more signs of positive politeness, as represented by their lower use of internal mitigation, and higher use of diminutives (e.g. *por un minutito* "for a little bit"), while the British showed more evidence of negative politeness as demonstrated by a higher use of internal mitigation and use of downtoners, cajolers (e.g. "you know"), and politeness markers (e.g. *por favor* "please"). As Brown and Levinson (1978) stated, overt politeness seeks to establish a positive relationship between parties, emphasizing solidarity and common ground, while negative politeness involves not imposing on other people, and showing respect to the interlocutor.

In a study comparing the request production of a group of British university learners and a group of peninsular Spanish NSs, Ballesteros-Martin (2002) also noted that the British NSs used more lexical and syntactic mitigators than the peninsular Spanish NS participants.

Furthermore, while both groups coincided in the most frequently used syntactic mitigating device, (e.g. the conditional *podrías* "could you?"), they differed in the type of lexical downgraders they used. Spanish NSs favored the use of appealers (e.g. *¿vale?* "okay?") and politeness markers (e.g. *por favor* "please"), whereas the English NSs tended to use downtoners (e.g. *tal vez "* maybe") more frequently. Overall, these two studies concluded that while English NSs appeared to use more downgraders, the Spanish NSs showed a preference for positive politeness strategies, such as diminutives and cajolers.

2.2. Studies of internal mitigating devices used in requests by L2 learners

A number of studies have focused on the request production of L2 learners (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Ellis, 1992; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hassall, 1997, 2001, 2006; Koike, 1989; Mir, 1994; Sawyer, 1992; Scarcella, 1979; Schauer, 2004); however, only a few have targeted the development of internal mitigating devices in the construction of requests (Barron, 2003; Cole & Anderson, 2001; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hassall, 1997; Schauer, 2004).

Results from some of these studies indicate that learners at lower proficiency levels, or before a study abroad experience, tend to overuse the politeness marker "please", but as their proficiency develops, they start using other more complex devices (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Faerch & Kasper, 1989). Some studies also note that, with increasing proficiency, learners start using a greater variety of internal devices in their requests (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Schauer, 2004).

Cole and Anderson (2001) analyzed the pragmatic development of a group of Japanese high school L2 learners of English who spent ten months studying in New Zealand or Canada. They observed that at the end of this period the learners had reduced the use of the politeness marker and started using the conditional tense more frequently (e.g. "could" instead of "can").

They also noted that some of the students started using more than two downgraders per request, a feature that did not occur before.

Faerch and Kasper (1989) compared the use of internal and external mitigating devices of two L2 learner groups (intermediate-to-advanced Danish learners of German and of English), to two German NS and English NS groups. They used a discourse completion task (DCT) with five different request scenarios as the main method of data generation. They reported that both L2 learner groups overused the politeness marker "please" and underused downtoners (e.g. "perhaps") as compared to the NS groups.

Scarcella (1979) compared advanced and beginning ESL learners' request production in three role-play scenarios. Results of this study showed that the more advanced learners had acquired more syntactic resources, which allowed them to use a greater variety of request strategies and mitigating devices, while beginners tended to rely on the imperative mood and lexical mitigators, such as the politeness marker, "please".

Schauer (2004) analyzed the request production of a group of German students who spent one year studying at a British university. She reported that, following the SA experience, they had increased their repertoire of internal and external mitigating devices by at least one modifier type which they had not previously used. She also noted that syntactic downgraders (e.g. use of the conditional ("I would like to ask if") appeared later than other lexical consultative devices, (e.g., "would you mind?").

A recurring finding in these linguistic studies is that features of the participants' first language (L1) may influence their pragmatic performance in their second language (L2). Farcher and Kasper (1989), for example, noted in their study that the Danish-German group had a tendency to overuse syntactic mitigators, while this trend did not occur in the Danish-English

data. They attributed this to the fact that Danish is a language in which mitigating devices are more frequent than in German, but less frequent than in English.

Hassall (1997) contrasted the request production of a group of 20 intermediate-level Australian learners of Indonesian with a group of 20 Indonesian NSs via an interactive role-play. He found that the Indonesian NSs used internal modifiers in the majority of their request constructions, while the Australian L2 learners rarely did. Hassall surmised that the L2 group may not have used mitigating devices in Indonesian because these were very different from the request-mitigating devices that they would use in English, their L1.

On the whole, the results of these studies indicate that learners tend at first to rely on the more explicit internal mitigating devices, such as the politeness marker "please". As learners' proficiency develops, they seem to decrease their reliance on this particular device and start using other more complex lexical and syntactic internal mitigators (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Ellis, 1992; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Hassall, 1997, 2001, 2003; Koike, 1989; Sawyer, 1992; Scarcella, 1979; Schauer, 2004). Finally, some studies (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hassall, 1997) also tentatively conclude that differences between the L1 and L2 may play an important role in the development of internal mitigation in the request production mode. Next, we review some studies of the request mode that have focused on the use of internal mitigating devices by L2 learners of Spanish.

2.3. Mitigation devices used in requests by L2 learners of Spanish

Most interlanguage pragmatic studies of Spanish L2 learners regarding the use of internal mitigation in requests have been cross-sectional studies that compared learners' performance at different proficiency levels (e.g. Carduner, 1998; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Pinto, 2002). These studies have reported that English and Spanish NSs have different downgrading styles that may

affect learners' use of mitigation and that, as in other languages, learners tend to move from a reliance on the politeness marker *por favor* "please" to the use of other more complex devices.

Carduner (1998) compared the structure and perceptions of requests and complaints produced by a group of 30 American intermediate-level L2 students of Spanish with a group of Spanish NSs living in several regions of the United States. By having learners complete the same questionnaire in both Spanish and English, she was able to analyze the transfer effects. Carduner observed that the Spanish NSs used more syntactic downgraders than the L2 group when using their native Spanish. However, when the L2 learners completed the questionnaire in English, they also used more of these modifications than when they used Spanish. This result might imply that while the learners were aware of the effects of syntactic modification, they may not have been proficient enough to use them in Spanish. Carduner also noted a difference in the specific type of mitigation each group used: L2 learners used the politeness marker *por favor* "please" more frequently than the Spanish NSs, who used other devices to downgrade their requests, like slang, colloquial expressions, and even code-switching.

Pinto (2002) analyzed the speech production of L2 Spanish learners at three different proficiency levels (beginners, intermediate and advanced). The three groups completed two online written questionnaires, one in English and one in Spanish, with several spoken scenarios. Their responses were compared to those of a group of Spanish NSs who completed the same questionnaire in their native language. In terms of their use of internal mitigating devices in requests, Pinto noticed that English and Spanish NSs used different downgrading styles. While the Spanish NSs made more use of question tags (e.g .*¿de acuerdo?* "all right?"), the English NSs tended to use more mitigating devices overall, and downgraders much more frequently (e.g. "we were wondering if we could possibly sit with you"). Pinto also noted that when the L2

learners answered in Spanish, they used fewer mitigating devices in all request scenarios than the Spanish NS group. Overall, both beginning and advanced L2 learners depended mainly on the politeness marker "please". Furthermore, the conditional tense (e.g. *querría* "I would like"), frequently used by Spanish NSs, barely appeared in the L2 data. When comparing the performance of learners at different proficiency levels, Pinto reported only a slight increase in the use of mitigating devices by the more advanced group. However, he noted that in just one of the scenarios[1] the advanced learner group employed more multiple downgraders than the Spanish NS group (e.g. * *quisiera posible si usted me traiga una limonada?:* "If possible, I would like you to bring me a lemonade"). Pinto believed this result could be due to transfer from English, as in that language it is more common to use a series of downgraders than in Spanish. Overall, even though Pinto observed distinctions between the L2 and the Spanish NS data, the differences between learners at proficiency levels were actually fewer than he had expected.

Felix-Brasdefer (2007) also looked at the request production of learners of Spanish at different levels of proficiency (beginners, intermediate and advanced). Although the main focus of the study was the use of request strategies and external mitigating devices, he also pointed out some trends in to the use of internal mitigation. For example, he noted that beginners tended not to use any internal mitigation, or they relied exclusively on the politeness marker (e.g. *por favor "*please"), decreasing that use as they acquired more proficiency. On the other hand, intermediate and advanced learners used more complex devices, such as the conditional tense and the imperfect aspect (e.g. *podría, querría* "I could, I would like"). Significantly, Felix-Brasdefer

[1]In this situation participants had to request something to drink at a cafeteria

noted that not even the advanced learners approximated the request performance of Spanish NSs in frequency or variety in use of internal mitigating devices.

The results from all these studies suggest that English native speaking L2 learners of Spanish follow a similar pattern as learners from other languages in their use of internal mitigating devices with requests. They seem to move slowly from a reliance on explicit strategies, such as the politeness marker, to the development of other more complex lexical and syntactic mitigating devices. The present study investigated the effects of a SA experience on the development of request mitigating devices with a group of American L2 learners of Spanish with the objective of adding to reports in the literature and providing a novel focus on developmental aspects.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

Subjects in the study comprised two groups: a group of American L2 learners studying in Spain, whose pragmatic ability was measured at the beginning, (L2A), and again towards the end of their stay abroad (L2B), and a group of Spanish NSs. The latter group did the role-play once, and their data served as a baseline against which to compare the L2 learners' performance.

3.1.1 The L2 learner group.

The L2 learner group, (non-native speakers of Spanish) consisted of 31 university students from the United States participating in a study abroad program in Valencia, Spain for four months (September–December, 2004). Most of the 31 participants came from a large university in Virginia; however, five of them came from other areas of the United States (New York, Ohio and Texas). All learners had completed a minimum of three semesters of college Spanish (or the equivalent) prior to their SA experience in Valencia. There were 13 males and 18 females and their ages ranged from 18 to 22, with an average of 20. None of them had ever studied abroad in

the past or was a heritage speaker of Spanish. They all lived with Spanish host families during their stay in Valencia and they took courses specifically targeted for American students. The classes were all taught exclusively in Spanish; however, the learners did not have the opportunity to take courses alongside Spanish NS students.

3.1.2. The Spanish NS group.

The Spanish NS group was composed of 32 participants: 12 males and 20 females. They were all students from the University of Valencia. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 with an average of 21. Their native language was Spanish; however, four were Spanish-Valenciano bilingual speakers. This group provided the baseline data with which to compare L2 learners' pragmatic performance and development.

3.2. Instruments and data collection

An open role-play with two request scenarios was used as the primary instrument of data generation. The scenarios differed in the degree of imposition of the request. In the first scenario, learners had to request something to drink at a cafeteria (low imposition), whereas in the second scenario they had to make a request to exchange a pair of shoes without having the original receipt of purchase (higher imposition). An open role-play was selected as the main instrument because it allows negotiation and interaction with an interlocutor, and it offers the opportunity to observe a variety of pragmatic features that are also found in natural conversations and which are often lost with discourse completion tasks (DCTs) (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Sasaki, 1998). Furthermore, as Cohen (1996) has mentioned, with role-plays one can analyze the organization of the whole sequence of the speech act, including turn-taking, negotiation of meaning, and sequencing of moves. Also, in comparison to natural data, the use of role-play is more practical, permitting the researcher to control contextual variables and gather

data in a more systematic way.

In order to generate and collect role-play data, individual interviews were scheduled with each participant and a Spanish-speaking interlocutor, a 31-year-old Spanish woman from Valencia, who acted out the roles of the bartender and the shop assistant. All role-play interactions with the L2 group took place in an empty classroom at the school where they were based, while the NS role-plays took place in a vacant office at the Universidad de Valencia. One participant at a time entered the room where the interlocutor handed them a card explaining the scenario they were to perform. After they had read the instructions and properly understood their role, the interlocutor turned on the tape recorder and started the interaction. When the participants had completed both scenarios, they left the room and then they completed a short background questionnaire with the researcher. The whole process did not take longer than twenty minutes.

4. Framework

Categories developed in the "Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project" (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) were used as the basis for analyzing the types of internal mitigating devices used by participants in this study. Table 1 presents the main internal mitigating devices classified according to the CCSARP categories.

<Table 1 about here>

Descriptions of categories with examples:

4.1. Syntactic mitigating devices:

1. Tense: conditional: *podrías* "would you?"

(1) *¿podrías ayudarme?* "would you help me?"

2. Aspect: use of the imperfect *quería* "I wanted"

(2) *Quería un café* "I wanted a coffee"

3. Mood:

(3) *Quisiera pedirle un favor* "I would like to ask you a favor".

4. Pronoun choice: Formal verb, person and pronoun *usted* (formal) or *tu* (informal)

(4) *¿me podría ayudar (usted)?* "Could you (formal) help me?"

5. Negation:

(5) *¿no me dejarías tu coche?* "Wouldn't you lend me your car?"

4.2. Lexical or phrasal mitigating devices:

1. Politeness markers: *por favor* "please"

(6) *¿Me pones un café, por favor?;* "Will you serve me a coffee, please?"

2. Consultative device: Expressions to involve the hearer

(7) *¿Sabes que…? ¿piensas que…?* "Do you know?; do you think?"

3. Subjectivizer: Elements in which a speaker explicitly expresses their subjective opinion about the proposition, reducing the assertiveness of the request (Blum-Kulka *et al.,* 1989).

(8) *Creo, pienso, supongo…* "I believe / think /suppose…"

4. Cajoler: Conventionalized speech items which do not commonly enter into syntactic structures, but are used to increase or restore harmony between the interlocutors

(9) *Sabes, me gustaría pedirte un favor* "You know, I'd really like to ask you a favor."

5. Appealers**:** These elicit a hearer's attention, occur in a syntactically final position, and may signal turn-availability. Tags are common (Blum-Kulka *et al*., 1989).

(10) *te doy cambio, ¿vale/eh*? "I'm giving you change, *okay?"*

7. Hedges: Adverbials used to avoid an accurate propositional condition Mulder (1991) noted a hedging device that is used in Spanish very frequently *es que,* "it's just that".

(11) *¿me puedes guardar este suéter, es que no tengo dinero...?* "can you hold this sweater? It's just that I don't have any money…?"

8. Downtoner: Used by the speaker to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer (Blum-Kulka *et al*., 1989).

(12) *¿crees que quizás me podrías dejar tus notas?* "do you think you could maybe lend me your notes?"

5. Data analysis

The role-play data were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Each interaction was subdivided into two main parts: the request and the negotiation phases. The negotiation phase starts after the request for the service has been made, and both interlocutors negotiate the request. The internal mitigating devices detected in each of the phases were classified according to the categories described above. The frequency of the use of internal supporting devices was calculated and compared across groups: Spanish NSs, L2 learners at the beginning of their stay (L2A) and the same group of learners towards the end of their SA experience (L2B). The following section presents results for the use of lexical and syntactic internal mitigating devices by both groups of participants and for each phase of the interaction.

6. Results

6.1. Lexical mitigating devices: request phase: "Ordering Something to Drink"

As Table 2 shows, there were only two types of lexical mitigating devices used in the request phase of the first scenario, the politeness marker (e.g. *por favor* "please") and the appealer e.g. (*¿sí?* "yes?"). As can be observed, the politeness marker (*por favor* "please") was almost the only lexical downgrader and it was used with a similar frequency by all three groups (NS: 13; L2A: 17; L2B: 17). Some examples from the data follow:

(13) NS: *¡buenos días! quería un zumo de de naranja, por favor*

"good morning! I would like an orange juice, please!"

(14) L2A: *¿puedo tener agua, por favor?* "can I have water, please?"

(15) L2B: *¡hola!, gustaría una Coca-cola por favor* "Hello! I would like a Coke, please"

<Table 2 about here>

6.2. Lexical mitigating devices: negotiation phase: "Ordering Something to Drink"

As Table 3 shows, the lexical mitigating devices used in the negotiation phase were politeness markers, (e.g. *por favor;* please); appealers (e.g. *¿vale?;* "okay?") hedges (e.g. *o algo;* "or something") and cajolers (e.g. *bueno; "*well").

<Table 3 about here>

It is noteworthy that L2A learners used only politeness markers to mitigate their request strategies in the negotiation phase of the first role-play scenario (21 participants or 100%). The NS group, on the other hand, hardly used politeness markers (1 or 11%), preferring to use other devices as cajolers (5 or 56%) and appealers (2 or 22%). By the end of their SA experience, the L2B learners had reduced their use of politeness markers (L2A: 21 to L2B: 8) and had begun using cajolers (L2B: 1 or 1%) and appealers (L2B: 2 or 20%) slightly. This change can be considered a movement towards the NS norm as represented by the NS data in this study.

An example from the L2B group:

(16) L2B: *vale, y::: a::: o:::, por favor ¿puedes poner más hielo en el vaso?*

"okay, and a::: o::: please, can you put more ice in the glass" (modality marker, politeness marker)

6.3. Lexical mitigating devices: request phase: "Exchanging a Pair of Shoes"

As Table 4 shows, the lexical devices used in the request phase of the second scenario where the politeness marker (e.g. *por favor* "please"), cajoler (e.g. *pues* "then"), appealer (e.g. *¿vale?* "okay?", hedge *(e.g. quizás* "maybe"), consultative device (e.g. *quería saber* "I would like to know"), downtoners (e.g. *al menos* "at least"), and subjectivizers (e.g. *pienso que*, "I think that").

<Table 4 about here>

Throughout the request phase the NS group used notably more lexical downgraders than the L2A learner group (NS: 23; L2A: 9). The two groups also differed regarding the type of lexical mitigating devices they favored. L2As relied mainly on politeness markers (6 or 67%) while NSs used consultative devices (9 or 39%) and cajolers (6 or 23%) more frequently.

At the end of the SA experience, the L2 learners were using almost the same number of lexical downgraders as before (L2A: 9; L2B: 11); however, they had reduced their use of politeness markers (L2A: 6 or 67% to L2B: 1 or 9%) and had begun using other devices more often, namely cajolers (4 or 36%) and hedges and appealers (2 or 18% respectively). This can also be seen as a movement towards the NS usage norm as represented by the data in this study. However, there was no use of internal lexical mitigating devices in the request phase of the second scenario.

6.4. Lexical mitigating devices: negotiation phase: "Exchanging a Pair of Shoes"

Table 5 shows the lexical downgraders used by the three groups of participants in the negotiation phase of the second role-play scenario. These included politeness markers (e.g. *por favor* "please"), appealers (e.g. *¿vale?* "okay?"), cajolers (e.g. *pues* "so"), hedges (e.g. *o algo* "or something") , consultative devices (e.g. *¿crees que?* "do you think that?"), downtoners (e.g. *quizás* "maybe") and subjectivizers (e.g. *pienso que* "I think that").

<Table 5 about here>

As shown in Table 5, the NS group used more internal lexical mitigating devices than the L2 learners, both at the beginning and towards the end of their stay abroad (NS: 96; L2A: 13; L2B: 37). Regarding the type of internal lexical devices used by each group of participants, the NSs used mainly cajolers (73%), which were also frequently used by the L2 learners but at a lower rate: L2As (46%) and L2Bs (59%). However, L2 learners used some devices more frequently than NSs. For example, they used subjectivizers whereas NSs did not use these at all (NS: 0; L2A: 15%; L2B: 9%). Appealers were also more often used by L2As (23%); followed by the NSs (14%) and L2Bs (7%).

It is clear that the L2 learner group had increased their use of lexical internal devices by the end of their four-month SA experience. While they used only 13 devices overall at the start of their SA experience, by the end of it they were using a total of 37. They also increased their use of cajolers (L2A: 6; L2B: 22). The more frequent use of internal lexical devices by the L2B group can be tentatively considered as a movement towards the NS norm as reflected in the NS data in this study. The following section analyzes the syntactic mitigating devices used by the three groups of participants in the two role-play scenarios.

6.5. Syntactic mitigating devices: request phase "Ordering Something to Drink"

Table 6 shows the syntactic devices used in the request phase of the first scenario by the three groups of participants. The syntactic devices used include aspect (e.g. *quería* "I wanted"), conditional tense (e.g. *me gustaría* "I would like"), mood (e.g. *quisiera* "I would like") and the formal pronoun "*usted*"'.

<Table 6 about here>

Clearly, NSs used more syntactic mitigating devices overall than either of the L2 learner groups in the request phase of the first service encounter (NS: 20; L2A: 8; L2B: 15).

The conditional tense was frequently used by all three groups (NS: 5 or 25%; L2A: 3 or 38%; L2B: 6 or 40%). Aspect was more common in the NS data (9 or 45%) and L2B (8 or 53%), but it was only used once by L2A (1 or 13%). Finally, NSs used the formal pronoun '*usted*' on 6 occasions, amounting to 24% of their use of syntactic mitigating devices, while this device to express formality was rarely used by L2A or L2B groups. Overall, L2B's use of devices was more similar to the NS group than L2As. Some examples from each group follow:

(16) NS: *perdone, ¿me pone una coca-cola por favor?*

"Excuse me (formal), will you (formal) bring me a coke please?"

(17) L2A: *Me gustaría una bebida* "I would like a drink*"* (conditional tense)

1. L2B: ¡*Quería un coca-cola lait por favor* "I would like a diet coke, please!"

6.6. Syntactic mitigating devices: negotiation phase: "Ordering Something to Drink"

Table 7 shows the syntactic downgraders used by the three groups of participants in the negotiation phase of the first service encounter. Only three devices were used: the conditional mood (*si tienes limón, quiero* "if you have lemon, I want some"); the negative question (*¿no tienes vino blanco?* "don't you have any white wine?") and the formal pronoun *usted*.

<Table 7 about here>

The total number of syntactic internal devices used by all the groups was very low in the negotiation phase of the first service encounter (NS: 5; L2A:2; L2B:1). However, NSs used them significantly more frequently than the L2 learners.

6.6. Syntactic mitigating devices: request phase: "Exchanging a Pair of Shoes"

Table 8 presents the syntactic mitigating devices used in the request phase of the second service encounter. The syntactic downgraders used were aspect (*quería* "I wanted"), conditional clause (*me gustaría* "I would like"), mood (*quisiera* "I would like") and the formal pronoun *usted*.

<Table 8 about here>

As Table 8 shows, the peninsular Spanish NSs used syntactic mitigating devices more frequently than did the L2 learners (NS: 47; L2A: 5; L2B: 11). NSs also used a more varied range of syntactic downgraders than did the L2A group. While NSs used six different syntactic mitigating devices (aspect, conditional tense and clause, formal pronoun and mood), L2As used just three: conditional tense, formal pronoun and conditional mood. By the end of the SA experience, the learners had increased their use of internal syntactic mitigating devices (L2A: 5, L2B: 11) and added one more syntactic downgrader — aspect. This increase in the use of syntactic downgraders can be regarded as a movement towards the NS norm as reflected in the NS data in this study. In conclusion, peninsular Spanish NSs used more internal syntactic devices to request a shoe exchange than either L2A or L2B groups. However, it should be noted that while syntactic mitigation was initially barely existent in L2A's request strategies, by the end of the SA experience, the L2B participants had notably increased their use of this. Two examples illustrate this trend:

(19) L2A: *¿puedo com, puedo cambiarlos a otros zapatos?*

"can I… er…can I exchange them for another pair of shoes?

(20) L2B: *pues me gustaría a devolverlos*

then, I would like to exchange them" (conditional tense)

In example (19) an L2A student uses the unmitigated request form in a typical example of requests from the L2A group. Example (20) shows a L2B mitigated request construction.

6.7. Syntactic mitigating devices: negotiation phase "Exchanging a Pair of Shoes"

Table 9 presents the syntactic mitigating devices used by the three groups of participants in the negotiation phase of the second service encounter. There were several syntactic devices used here: the conditional tense (e.g. *¿podría..?* "would I be able to..?"); aspect (*¿podía..?* "could I?"); conditional clause (e.g. *si puedo…,* "If I am able to …"); mood (e.g. *quisiera cambiarlos*, "I would like to exchange them"), and negative question (e.g. *¿no puedo hablar con él?* "can't I talk to him?")

<Table 9 about here>

Overall, the peninsular Spanish NSs used syntactic mitigating devices with a higher frequency than the other learners (NS: 39; L2A: 14; L2B: 14). The most frequently used devices by NSs were conditional tense (14 instances or 36%), conditional clause (9 instances or 23%) and negative question (10 or 26%), while the L2A group overwhelmingly used negative question (9 or 64%) followed by the formal pronoun (3 or 21%). The most frequent devices used by the L2B group were negative questions (7 or 50%), conditional mood (4 or 29%). Here are some examples from the data:

(21) NS: *¿<u>no se podría</u> arreglar de alguna forma?*

"<u>Couldn't it</u> be fixed in some way?" (negative question plus conditional mood)

(22) L2A: *¿<u>no puedo</u> hacer nada?*

"<u>isn't there</u> anything I can do?" (negative question)

(23) L2B: *<u>Si puedes hacer</u> una excepción será muy bien*

"If you could make an exception, that would be great" (conditional mood)

7. Discussion

7.1. Development of lexical and syntactic mitigating devices

Data from this study show that learners' use of lexical mitigating devices in requests significantly changed during the course of their SA experience. First, learners reduced the frequency of their use of the politeness marker *por favor* "please" and began to expand their range of internal lexical mitigating devices. They started using other strategies, such as cajolers, hedges and subjectivizers. This appears to be a movement towards the NS norm, as reflected by the NS data. This finding also confirms results of other developmental studies of requests which have shown that learners tend to reduce their reliance on the politeness marker and to increase their use and range of internal devices as their proficiency develops (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Ellis, 1992; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hill, 1997; Hassall, 1997; Koike, 1989; Scarcella, 1979; Schauer, 2004). However, compared to the Spanish NS group, L2 learners used a narrower range of lexical mitigating devices. Although they did reduce their use of politeness markers in the negotiation phase of the first scenario (L2A: 100%; L2B: 50%), and in the request phase of the second scenario (L2A: 67%; L2B: 9%), they still overused these in comparison with the NSs. One of the most notable changes towards the NS norm in learners' use of lexical mitigating devices was their increased use of cajolers (e.g. *vale* "okay"). Cajolers are speech devices that are used to increase, or restore harmony between interlocutors; they include modality markers, such as as *vale* "okay", *bueno* "well", *pues* "then". In summary, learners expanded their range of lexical mitigating devices during their SA experience. They reduced the use of the politeness marker *por favor* "please" and started using other devices more frequently.

In terms of their use of syntactic mitigating devices, the L2 learner group, both at the beginning and towards the end of their SA experience, used considerably fewer downgraders than the peninsular Spanish NS group. Even though they increased their use slightly over time, the increase was much lower than for lexical mitigating devices. This finding confirms results of other studies noting that learners tend to rely on external and/or lexical mitigating devices, while syntactic mitigation seems to appear rather late (Barron, 2003; Carduner, 1998; Hassall, 1997; Schauer, 2004; Trosborg, 1995).

Aspect, conditional tense and mood, followed by the use of the formal pronoun *usted*, were the most frequent syntactic devices employed by the Spanish NSs in this study. L2As and L2Bs used the same devices, but much less frequently. Towards the end of their experience abroad, the L2B group had begun to use the conditional tense, mood and aspect more often in the request phases of both scenarios; however, they still used them much less frequently than the Spanish NS group. This coincides with previous research results that native speakers (of any language) use internal mitigating devices in requests at a higher rate than L2 learners (Pinto, 2002; Carduner, 1998; Hassall, 1997). This may be so, as Hassall stated, because "it seems to be inherently difficult for learners to add internal modifiers" (Hassall, p. 271).

8. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to observe the interlanguage pragmatic development of a group of learners studying abroad in Spain for four months. The specific pragmatic aspect analyzed was their use of internal mitigation when making service-encounter requests. Results of our four-month study indicate that over time learners began using more internal lexical and syntactic mitigating devices. However, while they broadened the range of lexical downgraders, using more cajolers, hedges, subjectivizers and appealers, the growth in their use of syntactic devices was

not as noticeable. By the end of the SA experience, learners had started using the conditional tense somewhat more often. This confirms to some degree results from other developmental studies, which noted that lexical mitigating devices appear prior to syntactic ones, as the latter seem to be more difficult for learners to acquire (Anderson & Cole, 2001; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hassall, 2001; Schauer, 2004).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, although we could see a slight improvement (towards the NS norm) in L2 learners' use of mitigating devices, our results also suggest that there are still important differences between L2 learners' and NSs' use of internal mitigation. The Spanish NS group not only used a much higher rate of internal mitigating devices, both lexical and syntactical, but they also differed in the specific strategies they chose. Internal mitigating devices as a consultative device (i.e. *crees que?* "do you think?") were frequently used by the NSs, but never appeared in the L2 learner data, and others, such as conditional mood, negative questions, and the formal pronoun, were much more frequent in the NS data than in the L2 learner data.

There are several reasons that may account for the slight development towards the NS norm in L2 learners' use of internal mitigating devices. It may be argued, for example, that some of the mitigating devices used by the Spanish NSs (e.g. the negative question, the formal pronoun *usted* and the subjunctive mood), are not normally used as mitigating devices in English. Hence, the English NS learners may not have been aware of how to use these as downgraders, thus explaining their non-use of these particular devices. Furthermore, even if they knew that these devices could be employed as request mitigators, it may still be difficult for them to apply these in their speech if they are not commonly used in their L1. Another possible reason for learners' difficulty in acquiring internal mitigation devices is their structural complexity. As

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) has mentioned, "The restricted use of internal modifiers by the learners was associated with the structural complexity of the pragmalinguistic structure achieved with internal modifiers and the extra processing effort required on the part of the learners"(p. 105). Hassall (2001) also mentioned the difficulty learners have when applying internal mitigating devices that are different from the ones they would use in their own language. Other studies have shown that as learners' proficiency develops they start using more complex devices (e.g. Felix-Brasdefer, 2007). Therefore, learners' restricted usage of internal mitigation may also be associated with their level of proficiency in the L2.

In terms of developmental aspects, previous research has shown that studying abroad may have a beneficial effect on L2 learners' pragmatic development. Schauer (2004) pointed out that after a year abroad the advanced German learners in her study started using more syntactic (e.g. conditional clauses) and lexical (e.g. politeness markers, understaters) mitigating devices. Furthermore, as Felix-Brasdefer (2007) noted, lexical internal mitigating devices are acquired earlier than syntactic mitigators. The results from the present study seem to confirm both these earlier findings. Studies comparing English and Spanish NSs have reported that English NSs tend to use more internal mitigation in their request production than Spanish NSs (e.g. Ballesteros-Martin, 2001; Pinto, 2002). Therefore, the infrequent use of syntactic mitigating devices by our L2 learners (whose L1 is English), might be related either to the inherent difficulty their use presents to L2 learners, or to a lack of awareness about the pragmatic function of aspect. In other words, L2 learners may be able to produce the linguistic forms, but they may lack awareness that those forms are appropriate as a means to soften requests and have difficulty in transferring from their mother tongue (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009).

Further longitudinal research studies into the developmental aspects of interlanguage pragmatics are needed to investigate the processes that learners go through to acquire mastery of the target language. Also, more studies investigating the teaching of pragmatics in study abroad and foreign language settings would be beneficial to explore the kind of interventions that might be useful to learners.

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TABLES

Table 1. Internal mitigating devices.

Syntactic mitigating devices	1. Tense: Conditional 2. Aspect 3. Mood: subjunctive 4. Negation 5. Formal pronoun/formal verb person
Lexical/ phrasal mitigating devices	1. Politeness marker 2. Consultative device 3. Subjectivizer 4. Cajoler 5. Appealer 6. Hedges 7. Downtowner

Table 2. Request phase: lexical downgraders: ordering something to drink.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2(N=31)	
Lexical downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Politeness markers	13	100%	17	94%	17	94%
Appealers	0	0	1	6%	0	0
Total Lexical downgraders	13	100%	18	100%	17	100%

Table 3. Negotiation phase: Lexical internal devices: ordering something to drink.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1 (N=31)		NNS2 (N=31)	
Lexical downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Politeness markers	1	11%	21	100%	8	80%
Appealers	2	22%	0	0	2	20%
Hedges	1	11%	0	0	0	0
Cajolers	5	56%	0	0	1	10%
Total Lexical downgraders	9	100%	21	100%	11	100%

Table 4. Lexical mitigating devices: request phase: exchanging a pair of shoes.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2 (N=31)	
Lexical Downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Politeness Markers	0	0	6	67%	1	9%
Appealers	2	9%	2	22%	2	18%
Cajolers	6	23%	1	11%	4	36%
Hedges	4	17%	0	0	2	18%
Consultative devices	9	39%	0	0	0	0
Downtoners	2	9%	0	0	1	9%
Subjectivizers	0	0	0	0	1	9%
Total Lexical downgraders	23	100%	9	97%	11	99%

Table 5. Negotiation phase: lexical mitigating devices: exchanging a pair of shoes.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2(N=31)	
Lexical Downgraders	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Politeness Markers	0	0	1	8%	1	3%
Appealers	13	14%	3	23%	3	8%
Cajolers	70	73%	6	46%	22	59%
Hedges	10	10%	1	8%	4	10%

Consultative devices	2	2%	0	0	0	0
Downtoners	1	1%	0	0	3	8%
Subjectivizers	0	0	2	15%	4	10%
Total lexical downgraders	96	100%	13	100%	37	98%

Table 6: Request phase: syntactic mitigating devices: ordering something to drink.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2(N=31)	
Syntactic downgraders	Freq.	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Aspect	9	45%	1	13%	8	53%
Conditional tense	5	25%	3	38%	6	40%
Mood	0	0	3	38%	1	7%
Formal pronoun	6	30%	1	13%	0	0
Total syntactic downgraders	20	100%	8	102%	15	100%

Table 7: Syntactic mitigating devices: negotiation phase: ordering something to drink.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2 (N=31)	
Syntactic downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Conditional clause	2	40%	0	0	0	0
Formal pronoun (usted)	2	40%	1	50%	1	100%
Negative question	1	20%	1	50%	0	0
Total syntactic downgraders	5	100%	2	100%	1	100%

Table 8. Request phase: syntactic mitigating devices: exchanging a pair of shoes.

	NS (N=32)		NNS1 (N=31)		NNS2 (N=31)	
Syntactic downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Conditional tense	6	13%	1	20%	3	27%
Aspect	21	45%	0	0	3	27%
Conditional Clause	15	32%	2	40%	4	36%

Mood	1	2%	0	0	0	0
Formal pronoun	4	9%	2	40%	1	9%
Total syntactic downgraders	47	101%	5	100%	11	99%

Table 9. Negotiation phase: syntactic mitigating devices: exchanging a pair of shoes

	NS (N=32)		NNS1(N=31)		NNS2(N=31)	
Syntactic downgraders	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Conditional tense	14	36%	1	7%	1	7%
Aspect	1	3%	0	0	0	0
Conditional Clause	9	23%	1	7%	4	29%
Mood	1	3%	0	0	1	7%
Negative question	10	26%	9	64%	7	50%
Formal pronoun	4	10%	3	21%	1	7%
Total syntactic downgraders	39	101%	14	99%	14	100%