# REQUESTING IN ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA: PROFICIENCY EFFECTS IN STAY ABROAD

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*This article reports on an empirical study designed to assess pragmatic awareness and production of 104 nonnative speakers of English of two different proficiency levels (intermediate and advanced). The paper first frames the study providing information on the users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), a new communicative competence model that takes into account lingua franca users, and studies dealing with ELF topics. This is followed by the description of the methodology employed and a discussion of the results. The findings confirm that proficiency level has effects on the awareness and production of appropriate and correct request acts and request act modifiers. Statistical analyses show that advanced learners produce more appropriate and accurate requests than intermediate participants, which was also the case for most internal request modifiers. Advanced learners also appear to be better at assessing pragmatic and grammatical failure of some types of request strategies.*

***Key words:*** *Pragmatic awareness and production, requests, English nonnative speakers, proficiency*

*En este artículo se describe un estudio empírico diseñado para evaluar la conciencia y la producción pragmática de 104 hablantes no nativos de inglés con dos niveles de competencia lingüística diferentes (intermedio y avanzado). En primer lugar se presenta el contexto, se introduce brevemente un nuevo modelo de competencia comunicativa basado en usuarios de inglés como lengua franca y se señalan algunos de los estudios más relevantes. A continuación se describen la metodología empleada y los resultados. Estos confirman que el nivel de competencia tiene efectos sobre la conciencia y la producción pragmática de peticiones apropiadas y gramaticalmente correctas y también de sus elementos mitigadores. Los análisis estadísticos muestran que los estudiantes de nivel avanzado producen peticiones más apropiadas y correctas que los participantes intermedios, y lo mismo ocurre con los elementos de mitigación. También parecen mostrar que los estudiantes de nivel avanzado evalúan mejor los fallos pragmáticos y gramaticales de algunos tipos de peticiones.*

***Palabras clave:*** *comprensión y producción pragmática, peticiones, hablantes de inglés no nativos, competencia lingüística*

## 1. Introduction

The English language is in a continual state of change, due largely to the fact that it is increasingly used for practical purposes by people with a wide range of cultural norms and levels of proficiency. Thus, English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) is not a language governed by native speaker norms, regardless of how we may define 'native', but is a dynamic language with norms that change, depending on who makes use of it and the circumstances in which that usage takes place. Unlike native / nonnative communication, this discourse type, which has the characteristics of both interlanguage and lingua franca, has up to now received only limited attention (Jenkins 2006). However, scholarly interest in this field is now rapidly growing. For example, the VOICE corpus (Seidlhofer 2004) is an attempt to further understand the nature of ELF and to move beyond the native speaker as a model for English language learning (Alcón 2007). In addition the 40th anniversary of *TESOL Quarterly*, celebrated in 2005-2006, had a slot dedicated to the topic of English as a Lingua Franca. Considering this remarkable evolution of the English language into one that is now widely mastered by nonnative speakers, it is both timely and appropriate to establish a research agenda in an attempt to provide descriptive accounts of this distinctive phenomenon.

In this way, then, new models of Communicative Competence should take into account the broader communicative needs of lingua franca users and thus, address the issue of intercultural competence as one of its central objectives. Our own suggestion of such a model is briefly explained in the next section.

## 2. Towards a New Communicative Competence Model

Taking into account the requirements lingua franca users might encounter, we provide a framework which includes pragmatic, sociocultural and linguistic components taken from previous Communicative Competence models. First of all, the lingua franca speaker, as opposed to

the native speaker, would be regarded as the inspiration for the production of the new model. The lingua franca user will be the centre, notwithstanding the native speaker would also have a role in this framework as we are aiming at reflecting the situation occurring in real life encounters. The five *savoirs* provided by Byram (1997) that constitute what he has named intercultural competence, together with Alcón's (2000) model of Communicative Competence, which gave a central role to discourse competence (formed by linguistic, textual and pragmatic competence), could provide a complete framework for the lingua franca user. These competences would need to interact amongst themselves, which is illustrated in Figure 1.
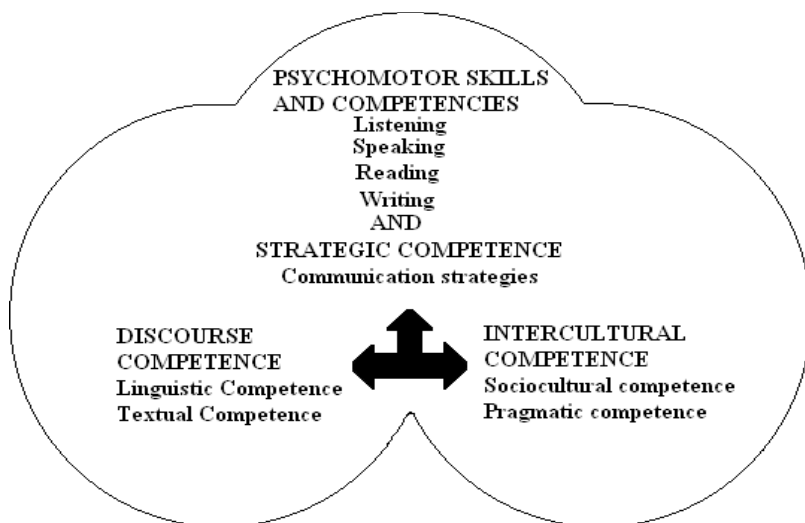


Figure1. Communicative Competence model for lingua franca users

Our model shows that psychomotor skills and competencies such as listening, writing, reading and speaking are essential in order to be communicatively competent and of course, just as in Alcón's (2000) framework, both learning strategies and communication strategies influence discourse competence as well. However, in this suggested model,

intercultural competence plays a role as important as discourse competence and is also influenced by psychomotor skills and strategic competence. Discourse competence interrelates with intercultural competence and the other way round. The first one deals with the linguistic system in general and the textual system for the creation of discourse. However, it is the intercultural competence adopted from Byram (1997) which makes a difference for lingua franca users. Intercultural competence includes sociocultural competence and pragmatic competence. As already stated, Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence as a combination of five *savoirs*, which explain the importance of not only others' culture but also of one's culture. Hence, if we consider this idea within sociocultural competence, as already described by Van Ek's (1986) model and, instead of focusing on the target language culture and linguistic system we focus on the lingua franca user's own culture and language, we would be able to provide a thorough Communicative Competence framework for lingua franca speakers. All these competences (i.e., psychomotor competence, strategic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence) interrelate with each other; a lingua franca user would not be able to be communicatively competent unless these competencies have developed correctly.

Furthermore, if we are faced with teaching English, aspects of its historical and cultural status in the world will also need to be introduced and some of the characteristics of ELF dealt with in the class. Students going abroad will need to be aware of the fact that English is now spoken by more nonnative speakers than native speakers and that they might be involved in these communicative situations very often in the target country.

With regards to contexts of ELF use, there are infinite variables as ELF is used every day by millions of users (nonnative speakers outnumber English native speakers) and in different contexts (emails, phone calls, conferences, meetings, households, student residences, lectures, markets, and so on).

Our research focuses on nonnative speakers' of English realisation of requests in different given contexts. Participants in our study are of varied L1s and cultural backgrounds. The study has been carried out in the UK, an inner-circle country following Kachru's (1996) organisation. At this point, the studies that have been conducted in higher institutions in England with speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are Meierkord's (1996, 1998, 2000) studies in an international students' residence and Ife's (2007) study, also conducted in England but in a different context, namely that of a foreign language acquisition environment. The rest of the studies deal with ELF communication occurring in other English-speaking settings or expanding circle countries or with participants of the same L1. Furthermore, none of them has focused on the speech act of request as such, our aim was to provide written instances of requests produced by different lingua franca users. Although some authors propose that there is a need for a compilation of ELF oral materials (Seidlhofer 2004), we also believe that ELF written materials are needed as they might show revealing differences between Standard English written forms and ELF written forms.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 104 nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English. Although there were initially 112 participants, the data of seven participants were excluded from the analyses due to the fact that their nationalities belonged to what Kachru (1996) refers to as the 'Outer Circle', these being nationalities in which English is an official language in addition to the country's own official language. For the present study, we only considered those participants whose nationalities were included in the so-called 'Expanding Circle', that is, those countries in which English is learnt as a foreign language in an instructional envi-

ronment and that is not normally used outside of this restricted location (Kachru 1996). Another participant was excluded due to poor results in the proficiency test (elementary level), as opposed to the remaining 104 participants, who were either intermediate or advanced students. The final sample contained a total of 31 different nationalities. Apart from the fact that their nationalities were all included in the Expanding Circle and that they could be grouped in those two proficiency levels, a common factor amongst our 104 participants was that they had all been studying in a UK university for a minimum of 4 months.

The mean age of the whole group was 24.27, the youngest of the group being 17 and the oldest, 45. Regarding the participants' proficiency level, we used the Quick Placement Test (Oxford University Press). These tests contain sixty written questions related to lexis and syntax. The students could fall within one of the following two groups depending on their performance: intermediate and advanced. Following the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) performance descriptors, we considered that if a student gave correct answers within the range of 30 to 47, they should be placed at an intermediate level, which is the equivalent to the B1 and B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Those students answered 47 to 60 questions correctly were placed at C1 and C2 of the CEFR. According to our data, 34 participants were intermediate and 70 were advanced.

### 3.2. Data collection method

We used a DCT (Discourse Completion Test) and a DET (Discourse Elicitation Test). The two tests were specifically designed for this study, since they elicited request use and varied according to the three politeness systems that Scollon and Scollon (1995) have identified, namely those of a 'deference politeness system', a 'solidarity politeness system' and a 'hierarchical politeness system'. The production questionnaire consisted of 16 situations.

We devoted approximately two months (September 2005 – November 2005) to create the situations that would be appropriate for the potential participants in our study (i.e. English native speakers for the pilot study and non-native speakers for the present study). We devised situations that could take place in the UK and that the students would consider possible. These situations had to include real contexts for all our potential participants, regardless of gender, age or cultural and linguistic background. Our first version of the DCT included 27 situations, from which 11 were removed after we analysed the data from the English native speakers. 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. These 17 exchanges varied depending on the pragmatic variables of politeness distance and degree of imposition. All the situations included in the tests were everyday situations that were piloted with a group of British native speakers, who rated the real-life authenticity of each. We retained those situations which had elicited the greatest number of request modifiers from the British native speakers in the piloting stage; we also took into account the fact that the situations were not repetitive regarding setting, as well as being representative of everyday encounters. Some of the items in our tests are provided as examples in Section 4 herein.

In order to classify the production data, we categorised the head acts according to Trosborg's (1995) classification of requests' head acts and we followed Alcón et al.'s (2005) taxonomy in order to classify the peripheral elements. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), requests are characterised by their face-threatening nature, which usually need to be mitigated to avoid potential communication problems.

### 3.3. Methodological Decisions Taken in the Analysis of the Data

Normality tests were conducted in order to find out whether our data were normal. To that end, we applied the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov procedure to test the null hypothesis. Results showed a probability of $\geq 0.050$, which enabled us to make use of statistical parametric tests. These tests provide stronger assumptions and perceived differences are considered more significant than results deriving from non-parametric measures.

We wanted to find out if our participants' proficiency level would affect the use of pragmatic force modifiers with regards to the speech act of requests. Hence, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1 Participants' proficiency level will affect the awareness of the request acts in terms of accuracy and appropriateness

H2 Participants' proficiency level will affect the production of the request acts in terms of accuracy and appropriateness

H3 Participants' proficiency level will affect the production of request act modifiers

In order to account for statistically significant differences, we chose a T-test for independent measures, as we compared the performance of each proficiency group (i.e. Intermediate and Advanced) in relation to one variable (awareness/production of pragmatic appropriateness and the grammatical accuracy of the request acts and request act modifiers).

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Hypothesis One

The first hypothesis suggested that the proficiency level of our participants would affect their awareness of pragmatic appropriateness and grammatical accuracy of the request head acts. Hence, in order to test

our first hypothesis, we examined the data obtained from the subjects' performance in the discourse evaluation test (henceforth DET), in which the participants were required to evaluate the appropriateness and correctness of particular request formulations for specific situations. Regarding the participants' performance in the DET, we carried out a quantitative analysis on the basis of the appropriateness and accuracy of their evaluation. We distributed our participants into two groups (intermediate and advanced) according to their proficiency level. As already mentioned, there were 34 participants in the intermediate group and 70 in the advanced group.

As we were dealing with the effects of two proficiency levels on one independent variable (i.e. evaluation of global strategic use of request acts: whether they were appropriate or correct) and taking into account that our data were continuous, we applied the t-test for independent sample data as a statistical procedure. Our aim was to find out whether or not 'the null hypothesis' (no differences between groups) was rejected. Results are displayed in terms of global request strategy use and Levene's Test for Equality of Variances which includes the F-value and significance.

Table 1. Effects of proficiency level on awareness of global use of requests

| PROFICIENCY LEVEL | Mean | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** | | | |
| **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **12.00** | | |
| **12.66** | **0.606** | **0.438** | |
| **Intermediate – correct evaluation** | | | |
| **Advanced – correct evaluation** | **11.38** | | |
| **13.74** | **1.467** | **0.229** | |
| **\*p<0.05** | | | |

According to the probability levels shown in the above table, there seem to be no statistically significant differences between our participants' proficiency levels (intermediate and advanced) and their performance in evaluating request strategies. In this sense, we may assume that our first hypothesis, which predicted differences of pragmatic and grammatical awareness depending on proficiency level, is not supported by our findings. In fact, this would contradict Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study in that their ESL learners with a higher level of proficiency exhibited greater pragmatic and grammatical awareness than learners with a lower level of proficiency. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei investigated the recognition and rating of grammatical errors and pragmatic infelicities by ESL and EFL learners as well as teachers of English. Their participants first watched a video comprising 20 scenarios, some of which contained either grammatical or pragmatic errors, and were subsequently asked to evaluate the severity of the perceived linguistic problems in a questionnaire.

Results from Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study indicated that there were clear differences related to proficiency. They found that members of the high-proficiency set in Hungary scored both the pragmatic and the grammatical items higher than the low-proficiency EFL participants. In the United States, the high-proficiency ESL group perceived the pragmatic infelicities to be more severe than the ESL low-proficiency group, but at the same time, they rated the grammatical errors less severely.

Therefore, if we analyse the mean values provided above further, we might state that in our case, the group of advanced participants also evaluated pragmatic failure better than the intermediate group and the same happened with the grammatical evaluation. According to the mean values, advanced learners recognised more pragmatic and grammatical errors included in the DET. Furthermore, we could state that the intermediate group performed better at the pragmatic evaluation than at the grammatical and, on the contrary, the advanced participants, although superior

in both cases, were more aware of grammatical failure. This might imply that grammar and pragmatic awareness are not at the same level and that each might be more developed than the other at different proficiency levels. Other studies carried out in this field (Blum-Kulka 1996) have also ascertained discrepancies between learners' grammatical and pragmatic competence.

We investigated further the types of request strategies analysed in our data in order to pinpoint the differences between intermediate and advanced participants' performance in the DET. Results in both tables are displayed in terms of mean values, F-value and significance.

Table 2. Effects of proficiency level on awareness of appropriate request types

| REQUEST TYPE | PROFICIENCY LEVEL | MEAN | F | SIG. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hint** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** <br> **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.79** <br> **0.83** | **0.691** | **0.408** |
| **Ability** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** <br> **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.85** <br> **0.89** | **0.863** | **0.355** |
| **Willingness** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** <br> **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **2.09** <br> **2.13** | **4.240** | **0.042*** |
| **Permission** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** <br> **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **1.50** <br> **1.27** | **6.145** | **0.015*** |
| **Suggestory formulae** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation** <br> **Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.88** <br> **0.87** | **0.528** | **0.469** |

| REQUEST TYPE | PROFICIENCY LEVEL | Mean | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wishes** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.00**<br>**0.00** | *** | *** |
| **Desires** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **1.38**<br>**1.60** | 0.903 | 0.344 |
| **Obligation** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **1.38**<br>**1.70** | 16.349 | 0.000* |
| **Performatives** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.00**<br>**0.00** | *** | *** |
| **Imperatives** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **3.12**<br>**3.37** | 0.007 | 0.932 |
| **Elliptical phrases** | **Intermediate – appropriate evaluation**<br>**Advanced – appropriate evaluation** | **0.00**<br>**0.00** | *** | *** |
| **\*p<0.05** | | | | |
| **\*\*\*no data** | | | | |

According to the probability levels shown in the above table, we can state that our participants' appropriate evaluation of willingness, permission and obligation realisations was indeed related to their proficiency level, with a probability level of $p<0.05$. These three categories fall within the conventionally indirect hearer-oriented and direct request types, two of the four main groups established by Trosborg (1995). This means that there was a certain connection between proficiency level and pragmatic assessment of some request strategy types (i.e. willingness, permission

and obligation). Advanced students rated better the pragmatic infelicities found within the willingness and the obligation situations. One example of each is illustrated below. Both examples were obtained from answers provided by participants in the advanced group.

### Example 1

Your mother told you to go to the bakery and buy some bread. You tell the baker:

I wonder if you could…if you would be so kind as to give me two loaves of bread.

Correct √        Incorrect        Appropriate        Inappropriate √

SUGGESTION: *Can I have two loaves of bread, please?*

In Example 1, a request for a loaf of bread in a bakery, we observe how an advanced student rated as inappropriate a request that contained too many mitigation devices for a situation with a very low demand on the hearer and provided a request of the permission type with only one mitigator (i.e. please) instead. Example 2 shows how another advanced student rated correctly the following situation and marked as inappropriate the obligation request and provided one of the performative type instead.

### Example 2

You are organising a big party at work, with a lot of people. However, you have to go on a work trip and you don't have time to organise it properly. You need help. You say to a workmate:

It looks as though I won't have time to organise the party. You'll have to do it for me.

Correct √        Incorrect        Appropriate        Inappropriate √

SUGGESTION: *It looks as though I won't have time to organise the party. Could I ask you to help with it?*

Participants in the intermediate groups assessed those situations which included permission requests better than their advanced counterparts. Most of our advanced participants rated it as inappropriate. Example 3 illustrates this finding:

### *Example 3*

You were very sick the night before an important exam and you missed it. You ask your teacher:

May I ask you a favour? I was very ill the night before the exam, may I do it another day?

Correct √        Incorrect         Appropriate √   Inappropriate

SUGGESTION: ---

With regards to the accurate evaluation of specific request types, Table 3 reveals the following findings:

Table 3. Effects of proficiency level on awareness of correct request types

| REQUEST TYPE | PROFICIENCY LEVEL | MEAN | F | SIG. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hint** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation** **Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.62** | **0.80** | **12.098** | **0.001\*** |
| **Ability** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation** **Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.79** | **0.81** | **0.230** | **0.632** |
| **Willing-ness** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation** **Advanced – correct evaluation** | **1.76** | **2.26** | **2.512** | **0.116** |
| **Permission** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation** **Advanced – correct evaluation** | **1.91** | **2.30** | **0.002** | **0.968** |

| REQUEST TYPE | PROFICIENCY LEVEL | Mean | F | Sig. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Suggestory Formulae** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.59** | **0.94** | **103.010** | **0.000*** |
| **Wishes** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.00** | **0.00** | **\*\*\*** | **\*\*\*** |
| **Desires** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **1.38** | **1.73** | **6.102** | **0.015*** |
| **Obligation** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **1.35** | **1.64** | **4.902** | **0.029*** |
| **Performatives** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.00** | **0.00** | **\*\*\*** | **\*\*\*** |
| **Imperatives** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **2.97** | **3.26** | **2.622** | **0.108** |
| **Elliptical phrases** | **Intermediate – correct evaluation Advanced – correct evaluation** | **0.00** | **0.00** | **\*\*\*** | **\*\*\*** |
| **\*p<0.05 \*\*\*no data** | | | | | |

According to the probability levels shown in the above table, we can state that our participants' accurate evaluation of hint, suggestory formulae, desire and obligation realisations was indeed related to their proficiency level, with probability levels of p<0.05. These four categories fall within the indirect, conventionally indirect hearer-oriented, conven-

tionally indirect speaker-oriented and direct request types, the four main groups established by Trosborg (1995). This means that there was a connection between proficiency level and participants' accurate assessment with regards to certain request strategy types. In this case, it was the advanced students who performed better in the assessment of grammatical failure, as can be observed by the mean values, which are higher for the 4 request types. Below we provide one example of each type that shows grammatical errors that the intermediate participants failed to assess and that advanced participants corrected accurately:

### *Example 4*

Two friends are watching TV at one's house. One feels cold and tells his/her friend:

It's getting cold in here, doesn't it?

Correct Incorrect √ Appropriate √ Inappropriate

SUGGESTION: *It's getting cold in here, isn't it?*

The advanced participants noticed that the tag question was wrong and suggested a correct option.

### *Example 5*

At a company, one of the workers needs some money urgently. He/she asks the boss:

How about lend me some money?

Correct Incorrect √ Appropriate Inappropriate √

SUGGESTION: *I am sorry I am asking you such a favour but could you please pay me in advance?*

Example 5 is a hint and presents a grammatical mistake in the verb form, as it should be provided as a gerund instead. The student resorts to a whole new request strategy of the ability type, not only to correct the grammatical error, but also to adapt it appropriately to the situation.

### Example 6

A student has to finish an important composition for the following day, but

s/he doesn't have enough time to finish it. S/He asks a classmate:

I hate bother you but I need to copy some sections from your essay.

Correct    Incorrect √        Appropriate      Inappropriate √

SUGGESTION: *Do you think I could have a look at your essay in order to compare it with mine?*

In Example 6 the problem was in the mitigation device, in the disarmer, and the advanced participant solved it by providing a different mitigation type, an opener. The fourth request type that the advanced participants rated more accurately was obligation, for which the two request types provided were grammatically correct and that in some cases, intermediate students rated as incorrect.

Therefore, though the global evaluation of request strategies does not point to statistically significant differences on the part of intermediate and advanced participants, we may state that this is not so for all particular realisations. Findings presented in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that there is a certain connection between proficiency level and specific strategy evaluation, with levels of probability of $p<0.05$. Regarding pragmatic awareness, higher proficiency learners had an advantage in evaluating some conventionally indirect hearer-oriented and direct request types (i.e. willingness and obligation) and intermediate participants had an advantage in assessing permission strategies. With regards to grammatical awareness, higher proficiency learners had an advantage in evaluating some conventionally indirect hearer-oriented, conventionally indirect speaker-oriented and direct request types (i.e. hint, suggestory formulae, desire and obligation), the four types that showed statistically significant differences.

Thus, we might state that there are some connections between a number of aspects: proficiency level and pragmatic awareness to evalu-

ate willingness, permission and obligation realisations; and proficiency level and grammatical awareness to evaluate hint, suggestory formulae, desire and obligation realisations. According to our findings, this means that the higher the proficiency level of our participants, the better they will be able to evaluate request failure regarding accuracy and appropriateness of some strategy types. Intermediate participants only scored higher in the case of pragmatic evaluation of permission requests; in the remaining strategic types mentioned above, advanced participants performed better. This fact may partly confirm Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) findings about the advantage of higher level ESL learners in terms of greater pragmatic and grammatical awareness. Furthermore, our results also corroborate those obtained by Niezgoda and Rover (2001) who replicated Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study with EFL learners in the Czech Republic and ESL learners in Hawaii. They employed the same video and questionnaire that had been used in the original research design. In an analysis within both high and low proficiency groups they found that low proficiency learners recognised significantly more the pragmatic errors than the grammatical errors (60% versus 46%), which coincides with our findings (70.59% versus 66.94%). In addition, high proficiency learners showed the opposite tendency, which is also in line with our findings (74.47% versus 81.05%). Bearing this explanation in mind, we might state that our first hypothesis is partly confirmed, as there were statistically significant differences in relation to the appropriate and accurate assessment of some strategic types, which was affected by proficiency level.

It might be the case that more attention needs to be devoted to the learning of each one of the types included in Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, providing also contexts in which their use might be considered both appropriate and accurate. Future research on pragmatic and grammatical awareness might need to consider more prompts of each type in elaborating the DET, as the fact that there were only a few examples of each type might have affected our overall results.

As already mentioned, we were also interested in the relationship between proficiency level and production of request acts and request modifiers. For this reason, we shall present the hypotheses regarding pragmatic production in the next two sections.

## 4.2. Hypothesis Two

Our second hypothesis suggested that the proficiency level of our participants would affect their production of pragmatically appropriate and grammatically accurate request acts. Hence, in order to test our second hypothesis, we examined the data obtained from the subjects' performance in the discourse completion test (henceforth DCT), in which the participants were required to provide appropriate and accurate requests for specific situations. Regarding the participants' performance in the DCT, we carried out a quantitative analysis, on the basis of appropriate and accurate production of request acts. In total, 1431 pragmatically appropriate requests and 1301 grammatically correct requests were coded for the DCT. The distributions for each request category according to Trosborg's (1995) classification can be seen in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Nonnative speakers: distribution of requests

| TYPE | STRATEGY | QUANTITY | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Pragmatically appropriate** | **Grammatically correct** |
| **Indirect Request** | **1. Hints (mild or strong)** | **0** | **0** |
| **Conventionally Indirect** | | | |
| **Hearer-Oriented** | **2. Ability** | **793** | **730** |
| | **2. Willingness** | **287** | **243** |
| | **2. Permission** | **237** | **219** |
| | **3. Suggestory formulae** | **2** | **0** |
| **Speaker-Oriented** | **4. Wishes** | **5** | **5** |
| | **5. Desires** | **39** | **42** |
| | **6. Obligation** | **11** | **8** |

| TYPE | STRATEGY | QUANTITY | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **7. Performatives** | **20** | **17** |
| **Direct Request** | | | |
| | **8. Imperatives** | **37** | **36** |
| | **8. Elliptical phrase** | **0** | **1** |
| **TOTAL** | | **1431** | **1301** |

Hence, as observed in Table 4, the request type most often used in the DCT was the *ability* type, both in terms of appropriateness ($n=793$) and accuracy ($n=730$), while the least used were *hints*, as no occurrences were found. Furthermore, there was only 1 request of the *elliptical phrase* type, which was not appropriate for the given context, and 2 of the *suggestory formulae* type, which had some sort of linguistic hitch.

In order to find out whether there was any difference between the production of global request strategy by the two subgroups (i.e. intermediate and advanced), we applied the t-test for independent sample data as a statistical procedure. Our aim was to find out whether or not the null hypothesis was rejected. Results are displayed in terms of means in global request strategy use and Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, which includes the F-value and significance.

Table 5. Effects of proficiency level on production of global use of requests

| PROFICIEN- CY LEVEL | MEAN | F | SIG. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Intermediate – appropriate production** | **Advanced – appropriate production** | **12.82 13.96** | **13.201** | **0.000*** |
| **Intermedia- te – correct production** | **Advanced – correct production** | **10.82 13.30** | **5.518** | **0.021*** |
| **\*p<0.05** | | | | |

As may be observed in Table 5, results point to a statistically significant difference between intermediate and advanced participants' use

of request realisations in terms of appropriateness (sig. 0.000, p<0.05) and accuracy (sig. 0.021, p<0.05). The overall differences in mean scores reveal that subjects at an advanced proficiency level produced more request formulations than those at an intermediate level. Regarding appropriateness, advanced participants produced more appropriate requests than intermediate participants (87.25 % versus 80.12%) for the given situations in the DCT, which, as has been already explained, contained varied scenarios with different interlocutors and degrees of imposition. Regarding accuracy, advanced participants also produced more accurate request acts than intermediate participants (83.13% versus 67.63%).

Findings provided in Table 5 would reject the null hypothesis, and thus account for differences between the two groups of participants. We may assume, then, that a better command of the target language enables a more frequent use of appropriate and accurate request formulations. In this sense, we may suggest that our second hypothesis, which predicted differences of pragmatic and grammatical production in request acts depending on proficiency level, is supported by our findings. According to Trosborg (1995), as proficiency increased, an approximation of native-like request strategies began to occur.

Our results show that advanced learners, those participants that scored from 48 to 60 correct questions in the English proficiency test, performed better with regards to pragmatic appropriateness (advanced participants' mean score = 13.96 out of the 16 prompts provided in the DCT, and intermediate participants' mean score = 12.82) and also, with regards to grammatical correctness (advanced participants' mean score = 13.30 and intermediate participants' mean score = 10.82). This might imply that proficiency level does have an effect on appropriate and accurate production of speech acts and thus confirm our second hypothesis. These results also show that appropriate production of request acts obtained higher mean scores than accurate production, both for advanced and intermediate participants, which might imply that our participants' pragmatic performance was better than their grammatical production for

the 16 given situations in the DCT. We consider this to be an interesting finding in that it might imply that participants, as results from our first hypothesis also show, are conscious of the importance of pragmatics for successful communication, which could be a direct consequence of having spent time in the target language country. According to Díez Prados (1998: 54), "pragmatic errors can be far more embarrassing than grammatical ones and are less excusable on the part of native speakers; the learners' personality or attitude could be misjudged as these errors do not apparently denote lack of linguistic knowledge."

### 4.3. Hypothesis Three

Our third hypothesis suggested that there would be proficiency level effects on the use of request modifiers. In order to proceed with the statistical analysis, we first quantified the instances of request modifiers found in our data. To this end, we used Alcón et al.'s (2005) classification of request modifiers and grouped our data according to their categories. Below we provide a table with all the types of mitigators found in our data.

Table 6. Nonnative speakers: distribution of mitigators

| TYPE | SUB-TYPE | QUANTITY | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Openers** | | **278** |
| | **Softeners** | **Understatement** | **53** |
| | | **Downtoner** | **91** |
| | | **Hedge** | **1** |
| **Internal Modification** | **Intensifiers** | | **75** |
| | **Fillers** | **Hesitators** | **11** |
| | | **Cajolers** | **0** |
| | | **Appealers** | **1** |
| | | **Attention-getters** | **285** |
| | | | **795** |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **External Modification** | **Preparators** | | **98** |
| | **Grounders** | | **465** |
| | **Disarmers** | | **95** |
| | **Expanders** | | **51** |
| | **Promise of reward** | | **68** |
| | **Please** | | **738** |
| | | | **1515** |

In Table 6 it can be observed that the mitigator most widely used in the DCT was "*please*" (48.71% of the total of external modifiers found in our data), while the least used were *cajolers,* which were not found at all. There was only 1 instance of a *hedge* and 1 of an *appealer* in our data. It also shows that our participants resorted to external modification devices more than internal ones (65.58% versus 34.42%). Previous studies such as the one by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), in which the authors made use of a written task in order to elicit request modifiers, found that external modifiers, particularly those of the grounder type, were more frequent in their learners' group, and that they also produced longer sentences than native speakers. This last aspect has been connected to the overproduction or 'verbosity' that is frequent in some learners as part of their communicative problems. The use of too many words may illustrate a lack of knowledge regarding mitigating devices, and sometimes, as was the case of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1986) study, it is considered inappropriate, resulting in pragmatic failure.

However, it has to be pointed out that the number of mitigators found in our data for the external request modifier type "*please*" was almost as high as that found in the overall result obtained for the internal modification devices (738 occurrences of *'please'* versus 795 of the total of internal modification devices), which is the main reason why the number of external modification devices almost doubles the quantity of internal devices. Faerch and Kasper's (1989) results, obtained from a discourse completion test in order to elicit request act modifiers, pointed

to the subjects' preference for internal over external modifiers. Such a trend was common to both the learner and the native speaker group. The authors attribute this finding to the idea that the internal modifiers may be regarded as obligatory, whilst that would not be the case with external ones. Focusing on internal modifiers' use, learners employed fewer downtoners (e.g. *likely*) than their counterparts, and frequently resorted to the use of '*please'*. As reported in other studies (Bardovi-Harlig 1996), internal modifiers, like the downtoner group, may involve particular syntactic knowledge, while the use of '*please'* does not necessarily imply knowledge of subordination or of complex syntactic structures. Results regarding the use of internal and external modification devices seem to be influenced by the type of elicitation technique and the participants taking part in the study.

The overall number of mitigators found in our data, regardless of their type, is a total of 2310 peripheral devices. In order to test whether there was any connection between proficiency level and the use of peripheral modification devices, we made use of a t-test for independent samples to ascertain differences between our two groups (intermediate vs advanced). These results are illustrated in Table 7:

Table 7. Effects of proficiency level on production request act modifiers

| PROFICIENCY LEVEL | MEAN | F | SIG. |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Intermediate Group – request modifiers production**<br>**Advanced Group – request modifiers production** | **20.91**<br>**22.87** | **1.421** | **0.236** |
| **\*p<0.05** | | | |

According to the mean values in Table 7, it seems that advanced participants produced more peripheral modification devices than those participants belonging to the intermediate group (22.87 vs 20.91 respectively). However, the statistical analysis also illustrates that there is no significant difference between the two groups (intermediate vs advanced).

Our findings imply that proficiency level has no effects on the use of peripheral modification devices and that our hypothesis is not confirmed. Yet, we shall now look into the difference found between the mean values in order to provide a more accurate answer to our third hypothesis.

We investigated further whether this difference was statistically significant with regards to specific request modifiers and applied a t-test to our data. Our aim was to find out whether there was any sort of relationship between proficiency level and specific request type. The coding of the request act modifiers obtained from the DCT was done following Alcón et al.'s (2005) taxonomy. Results are displayed in Table 8 below, by means of the Mean, F-value and significance.

Table 8. Effects of proficiency level on production of specific request act modifiers

**REQUEST MODIFICATOR**

| TYPE | PROFI-CIENCY LEVEL | MEAN | F | SIG. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Opener** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **2.59 2.71** | **0.104** | **0.748** |
| **Understa-tement** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.35 0.60** | **3.111** | **0.081\*\*** |
| **Downtoner** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.50 1.10** | **8.376** | **0.005\*** |
| **Hedge** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.00 0.01** | **1.990** | **0.161** |
| **Intensifier** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.44 0.86** | **5.374** | **0.022\*** |
| **Hesitator** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.00 0.16** | **21.829** | **0.000\*** |
| **Cajoler** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.00 0.00** | **\*\*\*** | **\*\*\*** |
| **Appealer** | Interme-diate | Advanced | **0.03 0.00** | **8.850** | **0.004\*** |

| Attention Getter | Interme-diate | Advanced | 3.68 2.29 | 4.726 | 0.032* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preparator | Interme-diate | Advanced | 0.74 1.06 | 0.395 | 0.531 |
| Grounder | Interme-diate | Advanced | 3.97 4.71 | 0.015 | 0.903 |
| Disarmer | Interme-diate | Advanced | 0.82 0.94 | 0.429 | 0.514 |
| Expander | Interme-diate | Advanced | 0.41 0.53 | 0.251 | 0.618 |
| Promise of Reward | Interme-diate | Advanced | 0.68 0.64 | 0.591 | 0.444 |
| Please | Interme-diate | Advanced | 6.71 7.26 | 1.554 | 0.215 |
| *p<0.05 **p<0.1 ***no data | | | | | |

According to the statistical results provided in Table 8, we may state that there are some statistical differences that point to a connection between specific request modifier use and the proficiency level of the user. Specifically, this is so with regards to internal modification devices of the type of softeners: understatements (0.081 - this is not significant at the 0.05 level, although it is significant at the 0.1 level considered as the minimum significance level for this specific case) and downtoners (0.005); intensifiers (0.022); fillers: hesitators (0.000), appealers (0.004) and attention-getters (0.032). No statistically significant difference was found in the case of external modification devices. In four out of those 6 types, advanced participants produced more mitigators than intermediate participants. These findings corroborate Hassal's (2001) suggestion that internal modification might involve a more complex pragmalinguistic structure. However, the mean value in the case of appealers and atten-tion getters points to a higher use on the part of intermediate participants (mean value: 0.03 and 3.68, respectively), than on the part of the ad-vanced participants (mean value: 0.00 and 2.29, respectively). Regarding

the use of appealers, there were limited instances used by our intermediate participants (only 1 appealer was found in our data) and no instances produced by the advanced participants. Examples of these mitigators would include the use of "*OK?*", " *Right?*" and "*Yeah*", which might be more common in oral production than in written form. In our data, we found only 1 instance of "Ok?" provided by one of our intermediate participants (see Example 7):

### Example 7

You are going to a party. You've broken the heel on your favourite shoes. Your sister wears the same size. You ask her:

*Hey! I broke my heel. Can I borrow your shoes please? I'll do something for you later. OK?*

Example 7 shows a request act provided for a situation of the solidarity type (between two sisters) and it includes various modifiers according to the classification followed in the present study. There are attention-getters ("*Hey!*"), grounders ("*I broke my heel*"), please, promise of reward ("*I'll do something for you later*") and the only appealer in our data ("*Ok?*"). The reason why we found so few appealers in our data might be due to the fact that, as suggested by Sifianou (1999), modifiers such as appealers are more used in other languages, such as Greek, rather than in English.

With regards to the other type of modifiers which were more frequently used by our intermediate participants, that is, attention-getters, which are used to attract the recipient of the request before an actual request is made, we found the three main categories that Sifianou (1999) identified, formulaic entreaties (i.e. " *excuse me*"), formulaic greetings (i.e. " *hello*"), and imperative constructions (i.e. " *look*", " *listen*", " *wait*"), and also what Hassall (2001) calls the kinship term of address (e.g. "*Tom …*", "*Mr. Edwards …*"). The four categories are included in Alcón et al.'s (2005) classification, which has been used to codify our data. One of the attention-getters that our participants used more fre-

quently was the type described by Hassall (2001) as a kinship term of address. In our case, it was the term "*Uncle*", as shown in the following example, obtained from the data of one of our intermediate participants:

### Example 8

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

*Hey, uncle, will you be kind enough to lend me your apartment while my friend comes? I'll make sure everything's neat and tidy!*

It could be argued that the prompt itself called for the attention-getter to be used; however, it was mostly intermediate participants who resorted to the use of attention-getters and to the specific use of *'uncle'* in this case. Hassall (2001: 265) claims that the speaker's use of this kinship term of address (e.g., "*father*", "*mother*") can have either a positive politeness function, by showing some degree of intimacy when metaphorically including the addressee within the family of the speaker, or a negative politeness function, by showing respect for the addressee by virtue of his/her position or age (Brown and Levinson 1987). The second definition would be applicable to our data.

In relation to the remaining 4 types of request act mitigators that pointed to a connection between specific request modifier use and proficiency level, it was the advanced participants who had produced more of these types. These were: understatements, downtoners, intensifiers and hesitators. In the case of understatements, downtoners and intensifiers, the advanced participants used them twice as many times as the intermediate participants. As already stated, research has pointed out that internal modification requires more linguistic skills and this seems to have proved to be the case in our study. In the case of hesitators, for example, only advanced students used them and on very limited occasions, there were only 11 instances (see Table 6 above, for the number of instances found in each category). An example of a hesitator frequently produced by advanced learners is provided below:

*Example 9*

Your neighbour always walks his/her dog inside the building. You are not happy about this. You ask him/her:

*I was wondering…if you could walk your dog somewhere else?*

As observed in Example 9, there is a hint of hesitation at the beginning of the request (*I was wondering*). The use of hesitators can be regarded as an important form of modification which usually takes place in interactive situations that elicit a speaker's request. The frequent use of this type of filler was reported by Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006a, 2006b), who claimed that such a level of frequency might be attributed to the interactive oral performance of learners in spontaneous role-plays or any other sort of oral exchanges.

From the probability levels shown in Table 8, we can also state that our participants' use of openers, hedges and external modification in general (preparators, grounders, disarmers, expanders, promise of reward and *'please'*) was not related to their proficiency level, as no significant differences were found between these two groups. Therefore, though the global use of peripheral modification devices does not point to statistically significant differences between our intermediate and advanced groups of participants, our results regarding specific use of these devices indicate that there seems to be a connection between proficiency level and internal production of modification devices, which might partially confirm our third hypothesis. Our results are in line with Safont's (2005) study of English language learners, in that our participants' use of peripheral modification devices was related to their proficiency level. She also tackled the effects of proficiency level on the use of request act modifiers. Safont's study dealt with two proficiency levels different to our own, that is, beginners and intermediate. Findings reported in Safont (2005) show that higher-proficiency learners made use of more peripheral modification devices than lower-proficiency ones, which has also been the case in our study with both the overall performance (mean value=22.87, in the

case of advanced students and mean value=20.91, in the case of interme-diate students) and the use of 4 of the internal modifiers' strategy types that showed statistically significant differences (understatements, down-toners, intensifiers and hesitators).

According to our data, our advanced participants produced more request modification types and these were more varied than those of our intermediate participants, which might imply that the higher the proficien-cy level, the better the command of modification strategies of language learners. Furthermore, the use of the external request mitigator *'please'* was very high, which might undermine the use of other also possible modification devices. This might have some pedagogical implications for the teaching of the English language, in that practice of the use of more varied request types and the importance of their use in given situations might need to receive further attention in language curricula.

## 5. Conclusion

It seems that higher proficiency (in our case, advanced) partici-pants performed better at assessing pragmatic and grammatical failure than those at a lower (intermediate) level of proficiency. Regarding ap-propriateness, proficiency level seemed to affect the evaluation of three types of request acts (willingness, permission and obligation) and with regards to accuracy, proficiency level showed effects in the assessment of four request types (hints, suggestory formulae, desires and obligation). The analysis of the production data pointed to effects of proficiency level on the overall production of request acts with regards to appropriateness and accuracy. It showed that higher proficiency participants performed better, which was also the case for the production of most internal request modifiers. These results point to a superiority of advanced participants in awareness and production in terms of appropriateness and accuracy of request acts and use of request acts modifiers. It would be interesting for

future studies to consider beginner proficiency levels as well as intermediate and advanced.

These findings seem to suggest that there is a need for more practice regarding the use of pragmatic force modifiers in the language learning environment, be it a traditional classroom or an on-line English course. Materials related to this topic should encourage learners to produce various types of request mitigators, whilst discouraging the recurrent use of only one or two types, as happened with both the mitigators and the request head acts illustrated in our previous hypotheses. Furthermore, opportunities to improve learners' use of modifiers should also be provided. Finally, the data collected could be part of a bank of materials of how speech acts, requests in our case, are performed by lingua franca users of English in different contexts.

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