

TEACHING ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS TO MITIGATE REQUESTS: A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of teaching adult English language learners (ELLs) how to mitigate requests in the workplace and elsewhere. The participants represented 12 different countries and 11 languages and were enrolled in a high-intermediate level ELL class in a large-urban Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. Participants' pragmatic ability with regard to making requests was assessed through a discourse completion test (DCT) administered as a pretest, followed by instruction in pragmatics (with a focus on requesting) and then by another DCT similar to the first one serving as a posttest. The pre- and posttest results were compared with the analysis focusing on the relative frequency of explicitly taught lexical phrases and forms. Participants' responses to a course evaluation questionnaire were also collected and analyzed.

Findings indicated that while participants were aware of the use of modal verbs to show politeness prior to instruction, there was a noticeable increase in forms virtually absent in the pretest data, namely, the past continuous tense and understaters such as *just (a minute)*, and *a little (bit)*. Additionally, findings showed high attendance contributed to an increased use of those phrases and forms. Participants responded favorably to the instructional techniques. The results of this instructional pragmatics study contribute to a relatively small body of literature involving the effectiveness of teaching second-language (L2) pragmatics to an ABE English language learner population.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008 Emily Suh conducted a study that evaluated metapragmatic instruction in an ABE ESL class. The study was unique in that it focused on the ABE English language learner population rather than university-level students. This current study sought to broaden Suh's findings by using instructional pragmatic techniques with a larger, more linguistically-diverse group of learners. Both studies focused on teaching ABE English language learners to mitigate requests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics and Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatics, as defined by LoCastro (2003), is "the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and non-linguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities" (p. 15). According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is affected by a number of variables, including the words or phrases a speaker uses, the relationship between the speaker and hearer, the context in which the communication is occurring, and understanding one's intended meaning.

Other authors consider pragmatics in terms of how we maintain relationships with other people. Kasper and Rose (2002) regard pragmatics as "interpersonal rhetoric – the way speakers and writers accomplish goals as social actors who not just need to get things done but must attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time" (p. 2). That is, the communication choices we make vary in accordance in different social situations, and affect how we interact with and are perceived by others.

When ELLs are unaware of certain lexical phrases or politeness markers that convey meaning, others may perceive them as rude or abrupt, in which case, pragmatic failure can occur. According to Garcia (2004), pragmatic failure occurs when one fails to understand a speaker's intended meaning behind an utterance. If a supervisor asks, "Is that report ready?" the implied meaning may be that the supervisor wants the report immediately, rather than an inquiry as to whether or not the report is complete. Additionally, speakers may produce grammatically correct sentences, such as "I need a day off," but the utterance may lack politeness markers so that it may seem rude in a given context. Conversely, one can also produce excessively polite sentences, as in, "Would you be so kind as to possibly grant me a day off from work?", which would most likely be pragmatically inappropriate in most contexts.

The impact of pragmatic failure can be realized in a highly personal manner. Researchers have found that linguistic errors are more socially acceptable or tolerable, but learners' pragmatic errors have higher consequences (Ishihara, 2010). Without pragmatics instruction it is likely that learners will be unaware of how they are perceived by others.

Requests

When making a request, one is always performing a face-threatening act, in that the one making the request wants someone else to do something that will benefit her or him. This can be something innocuous as closing the door to a noisy hallway, or more consequential, such as talking to a supervisor about changing positions within a company. Requests are *impositive speech acts* (Trosborg, 1994), in that there is always a degree of imposition put upon the requestee.

Throughout the request-development process one develops a repertoire of linguistic features, more complex syntax, an increased use of mitigation devices which are used to minimize the imposition of the requests, and an understanding of how to adjust the requestive force as it relates to participants, goals, and contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Speakers at the far end of that developmental process use many syntactical and lexical mitigators to vary their level of directness and to soften their requests. The necessary features to learn in order to make a request in discourse are described by Ishihara and Cohen (2010, p. 248) as:

- the grammatical structures and word choice used to formulate the request;
- the pauses and hedging devices for mitigating the force of the request;
- the pre- and post-request strategies (such as *giving a reason for the request* and *thanking*); and
- adjusting the relative social status of the speaker/writer and the listener/reader, the level of distance/closeness, and the severity of the imposition of the request.

L2 Pragmatics Instruction

The goal of L2 pragmatics instruction, according to Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), is to increase learners' awareness of and ability to use socially appropriate language. Researchers agree that a combination of explicit instruction and awareness-raising tasks are necessary components of pragmatics instruction. Explicit instruction, as described by Frank (2011), includes a thorough explanation of concepts, a model of proficiency, sufficient

guided practice activities, and many opportunities for mastery and transfer. Awareness-raising activities help develop learners' ability to analyze language and culture and are grounded in Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1993) that claims one must pay attention to input in order for learning to occur.

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) offer a number of awareness-raising tasks that have either a social and cultural (sociopragmatic) focus or a linguistic (pragmalinguistic) focus. Some sociopragmatic tasks include analyzing language and context to identify the goal and intention of the speaker, analyzing and practicing the use of directness/politeness/formality in an interaction, and identifying and using a range of cultural norms in the L2 community (p. 114). Examples of pragmalinguistic tasks include analyzing and practicing the use of vocabulary in the particular context, and identifying and practicing the use of relevant grammatical structures and strategies for a speech act (p. 113).

Instructional Techniques for Adult ELLs

The implementation of this study drew upon recommended techniques for teaching L2 pragmatics, as well as techniques for teaching adult English language learners. The literature recommends creating interactive, communicative classes with a focus on language-awareness in real-world contexts (Bailey, 2006; Moss, 2005; Parrish, 2004; Savignon, 2001).

Language-awareness components can be incorporated into lessons by focusing on language competencies and language functions (Parrish, 2004). She explains how to design integrated and contextualized lessons that focus on meaningful classroom communication, by incorporating interactive speaking activities, such as mingle tasks (learners move around the room and exchanging information), discussions, and role-plays. In her discussion on interactive classroom activities, Moss (2005) suggests ordering and sorting activities (ranking and sequencing), and working in pairs to do problem-solving activities.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

During my experience as a teacher to adult ELLs I observed that, in general, learners made very direct or unmitigated requests. Despite the fact that many learners worked, attended school, and frequently interacted with their speech communities – and therefore received a lot of authentic input – they still seemed unaware of many pragmatic norms. With the goal of increasing learners' pragmatic knowledge and ability in regards to request-making, the following two researched questions emerged:

1. How effective are awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching high-intermediate ABE English language learners to make mitigated requests in the work-place and elsewhere?
2. How do ABE English language learners evaluate efforts to teach them L2 pragmatics?

METHOD

Participants

The participants were enrolled in level 4 ELL class in an ABE program in a large urban, K-12 school district for a five-week summer session. ELL 4 was considered a high-intermediate level class. There were 33 learners enrolled in the class, but only 20 were present for both

the pretest and posttest and therefore included in the study. The participants represented 12 different countries and had been living in the U.S. anywhere from seven months to ten years. There were six males and 14 females, whose ages ranged from 21 to 57. Many reported having studied English for at least a few years prior to coming to the U.S. Additionally, they reported using English at work, at school, while shopping, and at the library.

Instruction

The goal of the instruction was to teach learners how to produce mitigated requests in the workplace and in other comparable situations. The instruction was not presented as an absolute, but rather as a "range of pragmatic devices" with which learners could employ if they choose to do so (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 5). Individual lessons were organized around the unit theme "Work Readiness" and included explicit instruction, awareness-raising activities, and practical communicative activities. Each class session met for 2.5 hours on Monday and Wednesday evenings, with approximately 80% of the time spent on pragmatics instruction.

Awareness-raising activities included group discussions, comparing pragmatic norms of different cultures, and language analysis tasks. Discussion topics included degrees of formality and politeness, and the inappropriateness of being overly polite.

One class activity asked learners to compare in writing and orally how requests are made in their home languages and cultures with English in the U.S. This activity led to an awareness of the absence or presence of modal verbs in other languages. The class also discussed the overall level of informality in school and in some workplaces in the U.S. as compared with other cultures. In another activity, learners were given statements, such as "I was wondering if I could, um, have two weeks of vacation?" and then had to decide where it might have been spoken, who might have said it and to whom (see Appendix A).

Learners watched video clips from two movies, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*, in order to analyze native speaker language use in workplace environments. The learners were given a transcript of a scene to refer to while viewing the scene. This facilitated identifying the implicit meaning behind some requests. The class discussion following the clips involved the following topics:

- status in the workplace,
- degrees of formality when speaking to supervisors,
- rude and polite behavior, and
- formal and informal conversations.

Learners received explicit form and meaning-based instruction on modal verbs used to express politeness, the past continuous tense, and understaters - adverbial modifiers such as, *a little* or *a bit* (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, p. 283). These forms were presented as features that make requests more polite and are used to vary politeness levels depending on the situation and interlocutor.

In one writing activity, learners were given direct requests and had to "soften" them. Learners prepared and performed role-plays for the class while other learners listened for specific features and then checked them off on a chart (see Appendix B). Learners were provided steps for making formal and informal requests and completed cloze tasks to review terms and concepts.

Table 1 provides the features, definitions, and examples which were presented to the learners and is based on Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) Cross-cultural Speech Act Research Project Coding Manual for request strategies.

Table 1. Presented Features, Definitions, and Examples

Features	Definitions	Example
Greeting		<i>Hello. Hi.</i>
Concern for the Hearer	Showing respect the listener's needs, wants, and time	<i>I know that you're busy, but ...</i>
Grounders	Reasons and explanations for the request	<i>Do you have a pen? I forgot mine.</i>
Understaters	Words that soften the request	<i>just, a little, a bit, a minute</i>
Polite words		<i>Please. Thank you.</i>
Request Head Act Internal Modification	Core of the request sequence, the request proper	
1. Past + Continuous -ING	Verb tense that can show politeness	<i>I was wondering if... I was hoping that you ...</i>
2. Modals marked for politeness	Auxiliary verbs that can show politeness	<i>Could you help me? Would you scoot over a bit?</i>
Goodbye	Used if the conversation has ended following the request	<i>Goodbye. Bye.</i>

Understaters, as defined by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), are "adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker under-represents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition" (p. 283). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) define a head act as "the minimal unit which can realize a request" (p. 275). In the example, "John get me a beer, please. I'm terribly thirsty" the minimal unit is *get me a beer* (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Instruction on modal verbs focused on their use to perform various social functions, such as expressing politeness. The logical meaning of modal verbs - to make an inference or prediction - was juxtaposed with the social function of modals to illustrate the difference in meaning.

Data Collection

The pre- and posttests were written Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). DCTs are used to elicit data by giving speakers scenarios that describe a situation and having speakers write down or role-play what they would say in that situation (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). The DCTs used for this study consisted of six situations in which learners had to make a request of the interlocutor. The situations varied as to the relative power of the two people, their social distance, and as to the degree of imposition created by the request. The DCT was chosen as the data elicitation tool because it was the most expedient way to collect the relatively large amount of data. There were four weeks between the pre- and posttest.

The prompts for the pre- and posttest asked learners to respond to situations that they might encounter in school or in the workplace or while using public transportation. Table 2 lists the items and the prompts. Brown and Levinson's (1978) sociological factors that determine the level of politeness used by a speaker were considered when the prompts were designed. They include relative power of the hearer over the speaker, the social

distance between the speaker and hearer, and the ranking of the imposition caused by the request.

The DCT prompts were not directly used in the instructional material. While the theme of the unit was “work readiness,” the instruction emphasized the general application of making requests in many common situations that learners encountered.

The course evaluation asked learners to respond to items about class activities, instructional techniques, and what they had learned about politeness and request-making. The Class Evaluation Questionnaire, adapted from Suh (2008), consisted of 16 items. The first ten items were ranking questions which asked learners to respond to the items by circling a number 1 through 5, where 1 meant, “I completely disagree,” 3 meant, “I agree,” and 5 meant, “I completely agree.” An example is as follows:

2) It was helpful when the teacher explained how to use grammar (modal verbs, past continuous, etc.) to make requests more polite.

1	2	3	4	5
(I completely disagree)		(I agree)		(I completely agree)

Following the ranking of items there were six open-ended items, which asked participants to indicate the activities that they found the most/least helpful and the most/least enjoyable.

Six of the items asked learners about their knowledge of and ability at making polite requests, nine items referred to classroom activities, and one item was a general response where learners could express anything not covered in the previous 15 items. The evaluation was anonymous to encourage honest responses (see Appendix C).¹

¹ The term “pragmatics” was not used during instruction. “Politeness,” while not a synonym for pragmatics, was a level-appropriate term and was used to illustrate the differences in language use.

Table 2. Pretest and Posttest Prompts

Item	Prompt
Pretest	
Pre1: Groceries on bus	You are riding a bus home after shopping for groceries at Rainbow Foods. The person sitting next to you does not see your bags of food. Ask the person if he or she could move over so you have more room for your grocery bags.
Pre2: Day off	You need a day off from work to attend a meeting at your child's school. Ask your boss for a day off.
Pre3: Forgotten pen	You are in English class and forgot your pen. Ask the person who is sitting next to you for a pen.
Pre4: Shift change	You have been working the third shift (night shift) for the past two years. But now that all of your children are in school, you would like to work during the day so you can be home when your children get home from school. Ask your supervisor if you can change your work schedule from the night shift to the day shift.
Pre5: Change in class schedule	You are at school. You want to change your class schedule from morning classes to evening classes. Ask the counselor to change your schedule.
Pre6: Grammar question	You are in English class. The class has just finished. You have a question about grammar. Ask your teacher if she can help you.
Posttest	
Post1: Help from co-worker	You are at work. You need help moving some heavy boxes to a different room. Ask your co-worker to help you move the boxes.
Post2: Help from teacher	You are applying for a new job. You have filled out an application, but you have some questions about it. You have the application with you during your English class. After class you see that your teacher is very busy, but you want her to help you with the application. Ask your busy teacher for help with the application.
Post3: Forgotten papers	You are in English class. The teacher just asked you to take out your papers, but you forgot your papers at home. Ask the student next to you if you can look at his/her papers.
Post4: Higher position at work	You are at work. There is an open position in the same company, and that position pays \$4 more an hour than you currently make. You want the new job. You see your supervisor. Ask your supervisor if you can talk to her/him about maybe getting the higher paying position.
Post5: Leaving work early	You are work. You don't feel well. Ask your manager if you can go home early.
Post6: Announce ment at work	You are at work. There is an announcement in the employee workroom about changes in shift hours. You don't really understand the information. Ask your co-worker to explain the announcement to you.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first research question focused on the effectiveness of awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching adult ELLs how to mitigate requests. In order to answer this question, participants' handwritten responses to the pre- and posttest DCTs were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. Then I listed the features that emerged from their responses and counted each feature for each learner. Table 3 lists the codes, features, and examples from participants' responses (not edited). Not all of the features from the pre- and posttests were explicitly taught; neither the use of a title nor the use of an apology were included in the instructional material, yet were counted for analysis purposes. The shading indicates features explicitly taught during the instruction.

Table 3. Features Counted in Analysis

Number and code	Features	Examples of participants' responses (unedited)
1. WS	I want statements	<i>I want to change my schedule pleas to day shift.</i>
2. NS	I need statements	<i>I need change my schedule for of day</i>
3. AT	Greeting Attention getter	<i>Hi. Excuse me. Hey.</i>
4. T	Title	<i>boss, sir, ma'am, my friend, teacher</i>
5. TI	Concern for the hearer Reference to time	<i>Exuss me I know you are biss but could you help me jast a mint with the application.</i>
6. G	Grounder Reason for the request	<i>Sear pleas I need a day off I want to take my son a shopping</i>
7. US	Understaters Minimizing the imposition	<i>Please could you help me just a minute?</i>
8. PW	Polite words	<i>Please. Thanks. Thank you.</i>
9. ING	Past continuous -ING	<i>I was wondering if you teacher can help me with this application. Please I was hoping I could talk to you about my paying position.</i>
10. HM	Hypothetical Modal	<i>I would like to change my schedule in the evening. I don't like in the morning</i>
11. O	Other	<i>You have pen? Are you want to change schedule from mornig classes to evening school</i>
12. PM	Modals marked for politeness	<i>Could I ..., May I ..., Might I ..., Would you ...</i>
13. AP	Apologies	<i>I'm sorry, would you like show me your paper, because I forgot main at home, please?</i>

Each feature was only counted once in each response. For example, Eman's response to Pre4-Schedule Change was, *Plese I change my schedule because I take care from my children during the day please again.* I counted +1 for the grounder (reason) – *because I take care from my children during the day*, and +1 for the first *please*. A few responses were very simple, as in "You have pen?" or did not fit into another category because of the syntactical or grammatical errors, as in "Are you want to change schedule ...?" They were

counted as “other” which indicated that an attempt at a request had been made. There were six in the pretest and one in the posttest.

The second research question focused on participants’ reaction to L2 pragmatic instruction. I tallied the number of responses to each ranking question and transcribed all responses to the open-ended questions into a Microsoft Word document.

FINDINGS

Research Question #1: How effective are awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching high-intermediate ABE English language learners to make mitigated requests in the workplace and elsewhere?

The posttests showed that participants produced fewer *I want* and *I need* statements, and produced understaters and the past continuous –ING form which were virtually absent from the pretests. The results also indicated that participants were aware that modal verbs are used to show politeness before the treatment, but they also produced more of them in the posttests. A summary of the features is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. All Participants’ Pretest and Posttest Results by Features

	WS	NS	AT	T	TI	G	US	PW	ING	HM	O	PM	AP
Pretest	8	18	36	27	1	27	2	57	--	1	6	78	2
Posttest	3	8	32	15	8	30	19	61	17	3	1	101	5

The *want statements* (WS) and *need statements* (NS), which were considered to be direct requests, decreased. The use of a title (T) also decreased. There was not a substantial difference in attention getters (AT), grounders (G), polite words (PW), hypothetical modals (HM), or apologies (AP). The responses that included a reference to time (TI), understaters (US), the past continuous form (ING), and polite modals (PM) all increased. The following are examples of unedited responses including features that decreased and increased².

Examples of a WS and a NS present in the pretest but not in the posttest:

- (1) Gabra, Pre5-Change in Class Schedule:
*Excuse me mam **I want to change** a schedule morning class. So you have morning class.*
- (2) Gabra, Pre2-Day Off:
*Excuse me my boss **I need permission** today. I want pick my child at school.*
- (3) Gabra, Post5-Leaving Work Early:
***Could** I go early to home because I don't feel well.*
- (4) Gabra, Post2-Help from Teacher:
***Can** you help me please if you have time for a new job information*

The increased use of understaters, the past continuous tense, and polite modal verbs are major findings in this study. These three features were explicitly taught during the treatment and are presented below.

² Names of participants have been changed for privacy.

First, the use of understaters, lexical phrases such as *just (a minute)*, and *a little (bit)*, increased from two in the pretest to 19 in the posttest. For example, Natia did not produce any understaters in the pretest, but produced three in the posttest.

(5) Natia, Post2-Help from Teacher:

*Excuse me teacher, I know you are very busy, could you help me **just a minut**, I have some questions about my job application?*

(6) Natia, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

*I was wondering, if you have **just a minut** to talk about maybe getting the higher paying position for me, please, I'm working here so long time?*

Like Natia, Hirut did not produce any understaters in the pretest, but produced two in the posttest.

(7) Hirut, Post1-Help from Co-worker:

*Exussme could you help me **just for a mint** [just for a minute].*

(8) Hirut, Post2-Help from Teacher:

*Exuss me I know you are biss but could you help me **just a mint** [just a minute] with the application.*

Second, the past continuous form was counted in 17 of the posttest responses, but not in any of the pretest responses. Examples:

(9) Hirut, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

***I was wondring** if I could gat a new position.*

(10) Girma, Post2-Help from Teacher:

***I am wondering** I forgot me paper at home Teacher can you give to me the other one.*

(11) Boureg, Post6-Announcement at Work:

***I was just wondering** if you would switch shifts with me?*

Third, while polite modals were counted in 78 pretest responses, that number increased to 101 in the posttest responses. Participants used a modal verb in nearly every posttest response. One learner, Abdi, increased from two polite modals in the pretest to five on the posttest. His responses are as follows:

(12) Abdi, Pre1-Groceries on Bus:

*Scosme [Excuse] me madam please **may can** set with you*

(13) Abdi, Pre6-Grammar Question:

*Teacher pleas **can** you tell me this words off grammar.*

(14) Abdi, Post1-Help from teacher:

***Can** you help me to move thes boxes to the different rom please*

(15) Abdi, Post2-Help from Teacher:

*Hey taeju [man's name] **can** I see your papers? I forgat main [mine] at Home.*

- (16) Abdi, Post4-Higher Position at Work:
***My** [May] I **can** talk to you a minet if you don't maen [mind] please*
- (17) Abdi, Post5-Leaving Work Early:
*Please I am not OK **May Can** go Home? Please*
- (18) Abdi, Post6-Annoucement at Work:
***Can** you sho me were I am workin today and what I am dawing [doing] please*

Eman also increased her use of polite modals from two to five.

- (19) Eman, Pre1-Groceries on Bus:
*Please **can** you move over because I need more spases for the bags please?*
- (20) Eman, Pre5-Change in Class Schedule:
*please I need change my class schedule from morning to evening I **can**?*
- (21) Eman, Post1-Help from Co-worker:
***Could** you helpe me for cary the boxes please?*
- (22) Eman, Post2-Help from Teacher:
*I was hoping I **could** talk to you for a minute pleae?*
- (23) Eman, Post3-Forgotten Papers:
***Can** you look at her papers please?*
- (24) Eman, Post5-Leaving Work Early:
*I was hoping I **could** leave early today because I am sick please?*
- (25) Eman, Post6-Annoucement:
***May** I ask my co-worker to explain the annoucement to me please?*

This pretest and posttest comparison of features indicates that participants' produced more analyzed and complex requests after instruction. Pretest responses were very direct, while posttest responses showed an increased use of mitigating devices and contained more complex syntax.

Table 5 shows the number of features participants produced in the pretest (top) and in the posttest (bottom-shaded). The number of days each learner attended class (out of 8) is included in the right-hand column. The features are *want statements* (WS), *need statements* (NS), attention getters (AG), use of title (T), reference to time (TI), grounders or reasons (G), understaters (US), polite words (PW), past continuous (ING), hypothetical modal (HM), other request head act mitigation (O), polite modals (PM), and apologies (AP).

Table 5. Individual Participants' Pretest and Posttest Results by Features

	WS	NS	AT	T	TI	G	US	PW	ING	HM	O	PM	AP	Attendance
Hirut	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	7/8
	--	--	2	--	1	--	2	2	2	--	--	6	--	
Tsege	2	2	4	--	--	2	1	4	--	--	1	2	--	8/8
	--	4	5	1	--	4	2	6	--	--	--	5		
Demissie	--	3	6	3	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	3	--	8/8
	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	
Abebe	--	--	--	1	--	2	--	--	--	--	--	6	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	--	1	3	3	--	--	--	6	--	
Gabra	1	1	4	4	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	3	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	1	2	--	4	--	--	--	6	--	
Geteye	--	--	--	1	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	1	--	8/8
	--	--	1	--	1	2	--	2	--	--	1	4	--	
Ayan	1	--	1	1	--	3	--	1	--	--	1	3	1	8/8
	--	1	2	--	1	2	1	2	--	1	--	4	1	
Girma	--	--	1	--	--	2	--	1	--	1	--	3	--	6/8
	--	--	1	1	1	3	--	4	1	1	--	5	--	
Nadifa	--	--	1	--	--	4	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	--	--	1	--	1	5	--	--	--	6	--	
Abdi	2	1	2	3	--	1	--	6	--	--	1	2	11	4/8
	--	1	1	2	1	1	1	4	--	--	--	5	1	
Eman	--	3	--	2	1	4	--	4	--	--	1	1	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	6	3	--	--	5	--	
Leila	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	1	--	--	--	1	2	1	--	--	5	--	
Larissa	--	1	1	4	--	2	--	3	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	--	--	6	--	8/8
Natia	1	--	1	1	--	2	--	5	--	--	--	5	--	8/8
	--	--	2	1	1	4	2	4	2	--	--	4	2	
Boureg	2	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	3	--	4/8
	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	5	--	
Chu hua	1	1	1	2	--	1	--	3	--	--	--	3	--	3/8
	--	--	1	--	1	1	--	4	--	--	--	5	1	
Kyi	--	2	4	--	--	1	--	2	--	--	--	5	0	7/8
	1	--	4	3	2	3	2	--	3	1	--	6		
Sonia	--	1	4	1	--	1	--	4	--	--	--	5	--	8/8
	--	--	2	1	--	2	--	4	2	--	--	6		
Silvia	--	1	5	2	--	4	--	6	--	--	--	6	1	3/8
	1	1	6	2	--	3	--	3	--	--	--	4	--	
Juan	--	2	2	2	--	--	1	1	--	--	1	2	--	4/8
	--	1	3	2	--	--	1	1	--	--	--	2	--	

The information in Table 5 shows the relevance of attendance, and therefore the pragmatics instruction, in measuring participants' ability to produce mitigated requests in the posttest. The table indicates that the learners who were absent for four of the class days or more did not produce the explicitly taught features at the same level as participants present for five or more days. As previously mentioned, when taken as a whole, participants produced understaters (US) and the past continuous form (ING) in the posttest, but those features were virtually absent from

the pretest. Participants Abdi, Boureg, Chu hua, Silvia, and Juan were present for four days or less. From this group, only Abdi and Juan produced understaters, as in the following:

(26) Abdi, Post4-Higher Position at Work:
*My [May] I can talk to you **a minet** [minute] if you don't maen [mind] please*

(27) Juan, Post2-Help from Teacher:
*Excuseme teacher can you help me **1 min** please*

In contrast, the six learners who were present for all eight days of the instruction produced eight understaters (out of 19 total) and four past continuous forms (out of 17) total. Those learners were Tsege, Ayan, Nadifa, Leila, Larissa, and Natia. Some examples are provided below:

(28) Larrisa, Post2-Help from Teacher:
*Excuse me teacher, I know you are very busy, but I would you help me with the application, **just a little bit.***

(29) Natia, Post4-Higher Position at Work:
*I was wondering, if you have **just a minut** to talk about maybe getting the higher paying position for me, please, I'm working here so long time?*

The findings indicate that the L2 pragmatics instruction had some impact on the ABE learners' ability to soften their requests by using specific lexical phrases and forms. While these results in no way show that learners mastered the use of explicitly taught forms, they are an indication that their awareness of them and willingness to use them increased. The findings also showed that learners who were present for more of the pragmatics instruction used more of the explicitly taught forms.

Research Question #2: How do ABE English language learners evaluate efforts to teach them L2 pragmatics?

Learners were very positive about the L2 pragmatics instruction, giving positive ratings to both the instructional techniques and to the instructor. Their responses indicated that they felt more knowledgeable about how to form polite requests in English and that they perceived the instructional techniques as being effective. Nineteen learners (out of 21) completely agreed with the statement, "I learned new information about how to make polite requests in English." In response to the statement, "Now I understand better how to make requests to different people in different situations," 17 completely agreed. Sixteen participants completely agreed with the statements, "It was helpful when I practiced speaking with other students," "It was helpful to use the computer for practice using modal verbs to make polite requests," and "I learned new vocabulary."

In their written responses to the open-ended questions many learners used the same meta-talk that was used during class. Learners used the words *polite*, *appreciate*, and *request* and referred to *modal verbs*. In responding to the question, "What activities helped you learn the most? Why?" learners wrote:

The grammar helped mostly because the modal verbs tell us how to resquest somethings.

I am helpful to learn different situation on this time because I am understanding to used more polite English grammar.

In comments regarding activities that were not very helpful or enjoyable, learners responded with:

Mayby [Maybe] speaking with other students because I did'n always understand their [them].

The movie clips. It's a little fast for me.

In the open-ended question that asked, "Anything else?" learners wrote:

She teached us how to commecated [communicate] the job.

In conclusion, the results indicated that the L2 pragmatic instructional techniques were effective at teaching high-intermediate level ABE ELLs how to soften requests using a limited number of lexical phrases and syntactic mitigating devices. The participants also responded favorably when they evaluated instructional techniques, classroom activities, and the instructor.

DISCUSSION

The original hypothesis behind conducting this study was that if ABE ELLs were explicitly taught how to use specific lexical phrases, they would be able to make more pragmatically-appropriate requests. It was also assumed that noticing forms and meanings, based on Schmidt's (1993) Noticing Hypothesis, was an important condition for learning.

The findings presented here showed that participants did broaden their repertoire of request-making abilities in very controlled environments, and could discuss and write about requests with some ease. After instruction, participants produced fewer direct requests, and more requests that included the explicitly taught features. Participants' responses to the posttest DCT items did not deviate very much from the explicitly taught features. This may indicate that the instruction might have been too narrow and too repetitious.

The findings and anecdotal evidence also suggest that the learners were enthusiastic about the instructional techniques and the instructor. This may speak to the intensity in lesson planning and material development, and the relatively narrow focus of the class instruction. This may also speak to the issue of position, in that the researcher was also the instructor. The learners may have responded in the way they did, in order to be pleasing to the instructor. Likewise, as the instructor, I wanted learners to acquire the material taught.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this study. First, the DCT was an imperfect data elicitation measure. It contained different pre- and posttest prompts, which made analyzing the data less straightforward than had the same prompts been used. At the time of design, it seemed that different prompts would have resulted in more naturalistic data given the short amount of time between the pre- and the posttest. However, different prompts made analyzing the data more difficult.

While the results of this study showed an increase of explicitly taught features after four weeks, it cannot make any claims about the learners' long-term retention of those features. A longer study or assessing learners after longer periods of time would provide more valuable information about learners' awareness of and ability to mitigate requests.

The DCT was limited to a single-turn response, rather than an interactive, multiple-rejoinder format. A multiple-rejoinder DCT "most likely prompts speakers to engage in more extended dialogue" (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010, p. 40). The single-turn response was thought to be the least-complicated way to elicit data. The multiple-rejoinder format provides more data and may be appropriate with more advanced learners.

Additionally, the DCT prompts were limited to requests. This limitation may have resulted in participants overusing certain explicitly taught phrases and mitigating devices. In fact, Cohen and Olshtain (1993) recommend including other, distractor speech act situations on DCTs to help avoid this problem. DCTs can include prompts eliciting responses other than the target speech act, so participants are not overwhelmingly focused on one particular form.

Finally, data from the DCT were only based on written responses, where participants were asked to write what they thought they would say in each situation. While some class activities asked learners to respond in writing, written requests were not part of the instructional goals. The data can only be considered an indirect measure of speech, not equivalent to a naturally-occurring oral response.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies would benefit from oral data collection procedures that would gather more naturally-occurring speech samples. It would also be helpful to know to what degree pragmatics is already being taught in the ABE ELL field. This would require an analysis of materials and curriculum and interviews with instructors.

It would be interesting to design a series of lessons that worked toward a culminating activity that simulated a real-life speaking situation, such as a job interview or disputing a traffic violation. Learners' pragmatic abilities could be assessed through role-plays or their ability to negotiate successfully for themselves or to gather necessary information. A culminating activity would be one way to gather data on speech acts, but it also provides an option for classroom instruction.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that explicit instruction and awareness-raising activities to be effective L2 pragmatic instructional techniques in ABE ELL classes. L2 pragmatics instruction could be incorporated into core ABE ELL classes, or perhaps more efficiently, in conversation classes. If pragmatics was the focus of a conversation class, speech acts could be systematically and routinely taught in theme-based units. Additionally, pragmatic norms and behaviors could be analyzed and compared with learners' first languages and home cultures.

Conclusion

Linda Yates (2004) and others have described pragmatics as the "secret rules of language", the 'rules' that help us know how formal or informal to be, how long to wait before you ask or answer a question, how to apologize to someone for bumping into them or how to give a

compliment. So many adult English language learners are working, studying, shopping, and interacting with their speech communities, it seems unfair to them and the field of pragmatics that they be absent from the research. Learners and ABE ELL instructors alike would benefit from more instruction in L2 pragmatics.

AUTHOR

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APPENDIX A

Awareness-raising activity
Explicit instruction

Question (request)	Place it was spoken	Who said it (speaker)	Who heard it (hearer)
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"I was wondering if I could have, um, 2 weeks of vacation?"

"Would it be OK if I give you my homework tomorrow? "

"Could you please scoot over? I need room for my groceries."

"Do you wanna move over?"

"Want to do something for Heather? Her baby is probably due soon!"

Phrases that "soften" a request (make a question more polite):

"I was wondering if"

"Would it be OK if"

"Could you please ... ?"

Homework: Pay attention to how people ask questions – people you work with, your friends, people on TV, your teachers, etc. Write down what they say.

APPENDIX B

Role-playing
Identifying parts of a request

A) Role-play situations: Work with a partner. Choose one situation and write a short dialog.

(1) Stranger to stranger – possible job

Person A: You are calling a hotel about a housekeeping position. Ask if the job is still available.

Person B: Tell the person the job is not available. The hotel has already hired someone for it.

(2) Friend to friend

Person A: Ask your friend if there are any job openings at the restaurant where she/he works.

Person B: Tell your friend there is a cook position open. Your friend should go to the restaurant and fill out an application.

(3) Worker to supervisor

Person A: Ask your boss if you could change your work schedule from evenings to days. Tell your boss you'd like to go to English classes in the evening.

Person B: Tell the worker you think that would be okay.

(4) Student to teacher

Person A: You see your teacher is busy, but you need help filling out an important form. Ask her if she could help you.

Person B: You are very busy, but because your student is so polite, you want to help him/her.

A) Listen to each group. Put a check ✓ when you hear the parts of the request.

Group	Greetings	Modal verbs	Past continuous	Reason	Thanks	Goodbye

APPENDIX C

Course Evaluation Questionnaire

I hoped that you learned a lot about how to make polite requests during summer school. Now I would like you to **evaluate** my lessons. Please think back to all of our lessons and answer the questions below. Please be honest – tell me what helped you learn and what did not. I will use this information to improve this unit and my teaching.

Directions: Circle the number below the statement. If you were not in class the day we did an activity please write **not here** next to the number.

1. I learned new information about how to make polite requests in English.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

2. It was helpful when the teacher explained how to use grammar (modal verbs, past continuous, etc.) to make requests more polite.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

3. It was helpful when I practiced **speaking** with other students.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

4. It was helpful when we **listened** to the conversation about getting a job.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

5. It was helpful to **read** the conversations and dialogs.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

6. It was helpful to watch the **movies clips** about making requests.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

7. It was helpful to use the **computer** for practice using modal verbs to make polite requests.

1 2 3 4 5
(I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

6. I learned **new vocabulary**.

1 2 3 4 5
 (I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

7. The **spelling quizzes** were helpful.

1 2 3 4 5
 (I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

7. Now I understand better how to make requests to **different people** in **different situations**.

1 2 3 4 5
 (I completely disagree) (I agree) (I completely agree)

B) Please write your answers to the questions. Don't worry about spelling or grammar – just do your best. I am interested in your opinions.

1. What activities helped you learn the most? Why?
2. What activities were not very helpful in your learning? Why?
3. What parts of the class did you enjoy the most? Why?
4. What parts of the class did you **not** enjoy? Why?
5. What could the teacher do differently to help you learn more?
6. Anything else?