

| Running head: WOULD YOU PLEASE SAY THAT POLITELY?

| *Would you please say that politely?*

Teaching adult basic education English language learners to make polite requests

A DOUBLE PLAN B PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGAUGE

December 2010

Accepted as a Double Plan B Project:

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Project Supervisor

Date

### Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of teaching adult basic education (ABE) English language learners (ELLs) how to make polite requests in the workplace and beyond. The participants represented 12 different countries and 11 languages. They were enrolled in a high-intermediate level English language class in the evening program of a large-urban 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 syntactic and lexical mitigators. 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 treatment, there was a noticeable increase in forms virtually absent in the pretest data, namely, lexical and syntactic mitigators explicitly taught. Additionally, findings showed high attendance contributed to an increase use of those mitigators. Participants responded favorably to the instructional techniques and felt that they had increased their knowledge about requesting, as well as their ability to make polite requests. 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.

In some ways, this study is a replication of a study conducted by Emily Suh (2008) to determine effective strategies for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) learners how to mitigate requests. The Suh study – original in its focus on teaching in adult basic education (ABE) – found explicit teaching techniques and awareness-raising activities to be effective approaches. Earlier pragmatic studies had already demonstrated that awareness-raising activities (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005) and explicit teaching techniques (Ishihara, 2006; Tateyama, 2001; Takahasi, 2001; Yoshimi, 2001) enhance second-language (L2) pragmatic performance. However, unlike Suh’s study, most pragmatic studies on requests have involved university-level learners.

English language learners studying in ABE programs differ from university-level learners in that their education has often been disrupted or incomplete, and their financial and family obligations are often very demanding. Many ABE English language learners study English while working one or more jobs, and while taking care of family members who often are both in the U.S. and in their home countries. While all aspects of language learning are important, speaking in a pragmatically-appropriate manner is often a very immediate need for people having to make a doctor’s appointment, ask for time off from work, or communicate with school officials while possessing limited English language skills. It was this researcher’s assumption that by teaching key lexical phrases such as *Could you please...* or *I was wondering if you could...* ABE English language learners would be better equipped to express themselves politely and navigate within their community.

While Suh’s study found that pragmatic instructional techniques successfully taught learners how to mitigate requests by using expressions such as, *please* or *would you* to soften an imposition (Yule, 1996), it was narrow in that there were seven participants representing two

different cultures. The current study sought to replicate and broaden Suh's findings by using L2 instructional pragmatic techniques to teach polite requests to a broader, more diverse group of ABE English language learners.

Before reporting on this study, it is necessary for the reader to understand the basics of pragmatics and the instructional techniques that informed the design and implementation of this study.

### Literature Review

This review of literature will examine pragmatics, and some challenges regarding the development pragmatic ability in L2 learners. It will explore reasons and consequences of pragmatic failure. It will then discuss the concept of politeness, politeness strategies, and studies dealing with the speech act of requesting. Next, it will look at instruction in L2 pragmatics and introduce the programming goals and initiatives of ABE in the state and school where this study took place. Finally, instructional techniques aimed at adult English language learning (ELL), will be discussed.

#### *An introduction to pragmatics*

Pragmatics is rich, complex field of study, and defining the term itself is not easy. Simply stated, it is the study of what is said and how it is interpreted. Yule (1996) points out that 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. In other words, pragmatics includes understanding more than what has been communicated.

Yule's definition has primarily a linguistic focus, which may neglect some of the non-linguistic aspects of communicating. A recent definition proposed by LoCastro (2003) addresses

this gap by defining pragmatics as “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). In yet another definition, Kasper and Rose (2001) consider pragmatics in terms of how we maintain relationships with other people. They 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.

Pragmatics can be analyzed from a linguistic perspective or a societal perspective and is often subdivided into two components: pragmalinguistic and a sociopragmatic.

Pragmalinguistics refers to the resources a language provides to convey communication acts, intention, and interpersonal meaning (Blum-Kulka, et al, 1989; Kasper, 1997). These resources include pragmatic strategies such as “directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts” (Kasper, 1997, p. 1). For example, a request to a close friend may sound like, “Can I borrow this book?” But in a situation where the speaker and hearer have a more distant, or formal, or professional relationship, the request may be realized as, “If its not too much trouble, could I please borrow that book for a few days?” These examples have different linguistic features based on the different interpersonal relationships.

Alternatively, the sociopragmatic component of pragmatics looks at the perceptions and interpretations of communication from the viewpoint of different social or speech communities (Kasper, 1997; Blum-Kulka, et al, 1989). Kasper (1997) states that “speech communities differ

in their assessment of speaker's and hearer's social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts" (p. 1-2).

The sociopragmatic component is concerned with the social and cultural aspects of pragmatics.

Together these definitions reveal the complexities of effectively interpreting and communicating in a language, and therefore, becoming pragmatically competent. Luckily for native speakers of a language, pragmatic knowledge is acquired more or less naturally. This is not to say that communication does not break down between native speakers, but rather that natives are more likely to be aware of the options. For those learning a new language and culture, on the other hand, acquiring pragmatic abilities can be particularly challenging since they may be unaware of the norms for appropriate pragmatic performance. The language learners' tasks are further complicated because as Ishihara and Cohen (2010) point out, speakers do not always directly communicate what they mean and hearers do not always correctly interpret what is said. The field of pragmatics demonstrates the challenge language learners can face if their goal is to communicate effectively and appropriately in different social situations.

While pragmatic competence is certainly achievable by any learner, the urgency is especially necessary for newly arrived immigrants and refugees. This population of language learners may have a limited grasp of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, and yet may still be called upon early in their language acquisition to perform a variety of *speech acts*. Speech acts as defined by Ishihara and Cohen (2010), are the words or phrases people use in social situations to do things such as, apologize, complain, make requests, refuse things or invitations, compliment, or thank someone.

There are three related components that make up any speech act. There is the locutionary act, which is the basic, meaningful linguistic expression (Yule, 1996). An example would be the

utterance, “The paper is here.” There is also a communicative force behind an utterance, which is known as the illocutionary act (Yule, 1996). Finally, there is a perlocutionary act of an utterance. This is the intended effect of the utterance (Yule, 1996). In the newspaper example, the speaker could make an assumption that the hearer will recognize that he or she should go out to the front porch and get the paper or should sit down and read the paper. These three acts demonstrate how a speech act is made up of a basic linguistic utterance, which is made to communicate something, and the effect that utterance has on the hearer.

If language learners have not yet mastered the components of a speech act, members of the target-language community can perceive them as rude or abrupt. In this case, pragmatic failure can occur.

#### *Consequences of pragmatic failure*

Pragmatic failure occurs when a hearer misunderstands a speaker’s intended meaning behind an utterance. Garcia (2004) defines pragmatic failure as, “the inability to perceive or produce utterances that represent a speaker’s intended illocutionary force” (p. 97). Speakers may produce grammatically correct sentences, such as “Give me the pen,” but the utterance may lack politeness markers that would make it more pragmatically appropriate in a given context. Conversely, one can also produce excessively polite sentences, as in, “Would you be so kind as to possibly accommodate my wishes for several moments by being gracious enough to let me borrow one of your pens?” Again, the grammar is correct, but it is probably pragmatically inappropriate in most contexts.

The perceptions of adult English language learners who have limited speaking abilities, are often based on very brief speech samples (Bailey, 2006). If in these brief interactions, some miscommunication occurs, the interlocutor may dismiss a language learner as being impolite,

when in fact, the specific reason for the misunderstanding has not been fully considered (Kapsler, 1997). When a misunderstanding such as this occurs, pragmatic failure occurs.

The impact of pragmatic failure can be realized in a highly personal manner. When L2 learners produce grammatically correct, but pragmatically inappropriate or awkward utterances, their “behavior can be interpreted as a manifestation of their individual character” (Ishihara, 2010, p. 939). Researchers have found that linguistic errors are more socially acceptable or tolerable, but learners’ pragmatic errors have higher consequences (Ishihara, 2010). An issue of concern is when the perceptions of one individual are used to generalize about an entire population. One way to alleviate the potential of pragmatic failure is by learning the linguistic markers used to express politeness in a given language.

### *Politeness*

Politeness is the idea of speaking or acting appropriately in specific social situations. When being polite people show awareness for someone else’s *face* or public self-image (Yule, 1996). LoCastro (2006) states that people expect others to recognize and acknowledge their face needs, which include the “emotional and social aspects, such as that one is honest, well-behaved, clean, and a member of particular groups and institutions in society” (p. 110). The notion of *face* is universal, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), and consists of two kinds of desires: The desire to be approved of – *positive face* – and the desire to not have one’s actions impeded – *negative face*. While the idea of *face* is universal, how one attends to an individual’s *face needs* can be culturally specific. For example, inquiring about one’s age or income may be considered polite in some cultures and rude in others.

Central to research on politeness is Brown and Levinson’s (1987) explanation of the three sociological factors that determine levels of politeness that speakers bestow upon their

interlocutors. These include the relative power (status) of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance (relationship) between the speaker and hearer, and the ranking (degree) of the imposition involved in doing the *face-threatening act*. If an infraction upon one's face occurs, it is called a *face-threatening act*, and when one says or does something that reduces the possible threat of a face-threatening act, a *face saving act* has occurred (Yule, 1996). Although Brown and Levinson's work on politeness has been criticized for its claim to be universal (Trosborg, 1994), their concepts of face and politeness strategies still serve as a useful framework for understanding politeness.

Included in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory framework are a number of *positive* and *negative politeness* strategies. When attempts are made to "save face," as it is commonly expressed, *positive* and *negative politeness* strategies are employed. Positive politeness strategies are used to create a sense of closeness between people. Negative politeness strategies attempt to reduce the imposition leveled upon the interlocutor.

Positive-politeness utterances, as explained by Brown and Levinson (1987), "are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy, to imply common ground or sharing of wants to a limited extent even between strangers who perceive themselves, for the purposes of the interaction, as somehow similar" (p. 103). Some strategies as introduced by Brown and Levinson include seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement, as in, "Yeah, the test was difficult, wasn't it?" and being optimistic, such as in, "I'm sure it won't bother you if I..." Another positive politeness strategy includes the idea of "giving gifts," as in goods, sympathy, understanding, or cooperation to the hearer (p. 102). An example of this strategy would be the common utterance, "I'm sorry for your loss." Lastly, the strategy of using "in-group identity markers," as described by Brown and Levinson or in Yule's (1996) words, "showing solidarity,"

is employed to express positive politeness. This is when one uses a first name or the informal *you* form is used as in *du* in German or *tu* in Spanish, and indicates a sense of wanting to be accepted or liked. Positive politeness strategies create a sense of closeness between people by being informal and attempting to create equal situations or by being very sympathetic. The structures used to show positive politeness give a sense that the speaker intimately knows exactly how the interlocutors is feeling at a given time.

Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, imply a more distant and formal relationship between people. These strategies focus on reducing the imposition that the *face-threatening act* imposes. Some negative politeness strategies, as presented by Brown and Levinson, include being conventionally indirect as in, “Could you please loan me a pen?” or minimizing the imposition as in, “I just stopped by for a second to ask you...” as well as through apologizing – for example, “I am sorry for the trouble, but...” (p. 131). Yule also includes emphasizing the importance of another person’s time or concern as a negative politeness strategy. An example of this would be, “I know you’re busy, but could I...?”, indicating a desire to not impose on a person. Negative politeness strategies often precede an utterance that contains an exact request and serve to persuade the hearer to do something (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989).

Negative politeness strategies have been used to characterize Western politeness behaviors because of their emphasis on individualism as opposed to collectivism found in other cultures (Kasper, 1990). Kasper (1990) argues that negative politeness “addresses the interactants’ territorial concerns for autonomy and privacy” (p. 195). Speakers from cultures who have a different sense of identity will express politeness differently than through negative politeness strategies. It is essential for an instructor in L2 pragmatics to consider how politeness

strategies can differ throughout cultures and to raise learners' awareness to those differences.

Requests are often realized through negative politeness strategies. A discussion on requests follows.

### *Requests*

The act of requesting has captured the attention of many researchers (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Trosborg, 1994;), due to its complex nature and potentially high-stakes consequences. 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 such 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.

Similar to pragmatic development in general, the acquisition of L2 requests can be described as a gradual “move from reliance on routine formulas in the earliest stages of development to a gradual introduction of analyzed, productive language use” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 135). 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.

Throughout the request-development process one develops a repertoire of linguistic features, more complex syntax, an increased use of mitigation devices, used to minimize the imposition of

the requests, and an understanding of how to “fine-tune” the requestive force as it relates to participants, goals, and contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 140). Speakers at the far end of that developmental scale use many syntactical and lexical mitigators to vary their level of directness and to soften their requests.

Avoiding pragmatic failure among learners is a particularly compelling reason for L2 instructors to teach pragmatics. Requests are a logical starting point. They constitute a frequently-occurring speech act, and are formed differently according to different contexts. If L2 learners are unaware of, or do not have the ability to express politeness beyond *please* or *thank you*, their requests can be viewed negatively. Consequently, knowing how to execute a pragmatically-appropriate request ought to be a priority for L2 learners. This is not to say that language learners should be instructed to be polite at all times. There will, of course, be occasions where target-language use calls for purposely being rude or offensive (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). But it is through L2 pragmatics instruction that teachers can help learners identify what the perception or production of offensive behavior would entail.

#### *Instruction in L2 pragmatics*

The literature (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Schmidt, 1993; Yates, 2004) on instruction in L2 pragmatics largely focuses on raising learners’ attention to linguistic forms and noticing language features and practices in specific social contexts in a given speech community. Researchers (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Yates, 2004; Yoshimi, 2001) have found explicit instruction on linguistic forms and meaning to be more beneficial to learners than implicit instruction. Implicit instruction includes input with practice-only conditions (Kasper, 2001). There is agreement among researchers that learners need to be exposed to authentic input in contextually relevant settings. Additionally,

learners need to be able to practice these forms in an accepting environment, where mistakes, questions, and conversation about the language and pragmatics are encouraged. A discussion on awareness-raising techniques and explicit instruction follows.

*Awareness-raising.* Researchers have found that when learners observe, analyze, and practice how specific speech acts are performed in a particular context, they become more pragmatically competent. Awareness-raising tasks are grounded in Schmidt's noticing hypothesis with regard to language learning (Schmidt, 1993), which claims that, "attention to input is a necessary condition for any learning at all" (p. 35). The noticing hypothesis does not guarantee the learning of L2 pragmatics, but as Ishihara (2006) states, it very well may help. Essentially, once learners begin to pay attention to certain elements in language, they then begin to internalize and possibly produce language as they have observed it.

Eslami-Rasekh (2005) states that the aim of awareness-raising activities is to "expose learners to the pragmatic aspects of language (L1 and L2) and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use" (p. 200). Awareness-raising activities encourage the use of a learners' first language as well as the target language to make learners aware of differences in speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Either the L1 or the L2 can be used to facilitate "reflection, comparison and sensitive discussion of sociopragmatic values and pragmalinguistic resources" in languages and cultures (Yates, 2004, p. 15). Awareness-raising activities help learners become more cognizant of the language practices in their current speech communities, and of their first languages and cultures. Some classroom tasks that facilitate consciousness-raising through noticing and reflection are described next.

In their book on teaching and learning pragmatics, 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). In her discussion on noticing sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features, Yates (2004) adds that learners need the “space to reflect upon and experiment with new ways of interacting in a safe and non-threatening environment” (p. 15). Speaking outside of the classroom can be a risky endeavor for language learners. Tasks and activities inside the classroom should be designed to give learners the confidence to try new forms and phrases, and to ask questions and discuss language features. As will be discussed next, awareness-raising activities are often presented in conjunction with explicit instructional techniques.

*Explicit instruction.* In this approach, target-like forms and meaning are explicitly taught and analyzed (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Yates, 2004). A number of studies have found explicit instruction, as opposed to implicit instruction or mere exposure to pragmatic input, to be an effective approach for teaching some aspects of pragmatics to university-level students. In a study with beginning learners of Japanese, Tateyama (2001) found explicit to be more effective than implicit teaching L2 pragmatic routines that express gratitude. In her study with Japanese college students studying English, Takahashi (2001) suggests that L2 pragmatic competence is developed through explicit information on target features and high levels of input enhancement,

rather than through implicit input enhancement conditions. Input enhancement, as defined by Lightbown & Spada (2006), refers to things that may help raise learners' awareness to features in the L2, therefore increasing the chances that the features may be learned. Examples of input enhancement include using bold face, underlining, or italics, using exaggerated speech, or explicitly discussing how to define words or features or to sound out words. Yoshimi (2001) also reports on the effectiveness of explicit instruction, in combination with communicative practice and feedback, to develop L2 pragmatic competence. Explicit instruction makes use of direct instruction on form and meaning and on noticing those forms, and input enhancement.

So far, the scholarship has shown that awareness-raising activities and explicit instruction to be effective techniques in teaching L2 pragmatics. The studies reviewed here have focused primarily on students whose L2 was at a level where they could engage in university-level study. However, researchers have pointed out the benefits of instruction in L2 pragmatics for students at the very beginning stages of language learning as well (Yates, 2004). Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) recommend integrating pragmatics into English-language curriculum at the earliest level, as a way to reduce the gap between grammatical and pragmatic learning. They state that, "the imbalance between grammatical and pragmatic development may be ameliorated by early attention to pragmatics in instruction" (p. 7). The current study attempted to integrate pragmatics instruction into an ABE ELL classroom, where pragmatics is not traditionally taught. The implementation of this study drew on recommended techniques for teaching L2 pragmatics, as well as techniques for teaching adult English language learners. Yet before discussing those techniques, it is necessary to understand the mission of ABE and the demographics of the ABE population in the state and the school where this study occurred.

*An introduction to Adult Basic Education.* The mission of ABE in the state where this study took place was “to provide adults with educational opportunities to acquire and improve their literacy skills necessary to become self-sufficient and to participate effectively as productive workers, family members, and citizens” (Retrieved on 10/9/10 from <http://mnable.themlc.org>). There were six programs available to learners that included:

- General Education Diploma (GED). The national high school equivalency program that includes a set of five tests: Math, Reading, Writing, Social Studies, and Science.
- Adult Diploma – Programs for adults leading to a high school diploma from a local school district.
- ESL – For learners whose native language is not English.
- Basic Skills Enhancement – For learners who need goal-specific elementary or secondary level basic skills such as work-related math, functional literacy (e.g.- banking skills), reading or writing assistance. Classes do not lead to a diploma or GED.
- Family Literacy – Programs for adults and their pre-school children.
- Citizenship/Civics Education – Programs that prepare Minnesota non-citizens for US citizenship.

In this state there were also three ABE initiatives and priority program areas that included (Retrieved on 10/9/10 from <http://mnable.themlc.org>):

- Transition to employment and workforce education: Pre-employment programs to provide basic skills necessary for work are provided at the local ABE site, MN WorkForce Centers, or at local employment sites.
- Transition to post-secondary education and training: Career pathways programming, basic skills instruction, counseling, and college prep skills to better prepare students for post-secondary success in credit bearing or credentialed programs at post-secondary institutions.
- Distance learning: People statewide can access free GED preparation classes on-line, as well as many other basic skills learning opportunities offered by local ABE programs.

These programs and initiatives served the needs of over 78,000 students from in

the fiscal year 2010. The ESL and Basic Skills programs had the highest enrollment, comprising of 42% and 37% respectively. The ESL programs in this state grew significantly in the past 30 years to meet the demands of a growing immigrant population. In 1980 the population of foreign-born persons was 3% and in 2008 it was 7% (Retrieved on 10/9/10 from <http://www.mncompass.org/immigration.index.php>). Additionally, one out of five of the state's new immigrants have been a refugee or asylee fleeing persecution in their homeland (Retrieved on 10/9/10 from [http://www.mncompass.org/pdfs/Immigration\\_Report\\_Summary\\_web.pdf](http://www.mncompass.org/pdfs/Immigration_Report_Summary_web.pdf)). The 15 largest groups of foreign-born residents in the state were (in descending order): Mexico, Laos (including Hmong), India, Somalia, Vietnam, Canada, Ethiopia, Korea, Liberia, China, Thailand (including Hmong), German, former USSR/Russia, Kenya, and the Philippines.

In the school where this study was conducted, approximately 1100 learners attended classes each day, with additional learners attending classes in outreach sites (approximately 150 each day). 55% of those learners were enrolled in ELL classes, with the other 45% enrolled in the other programs mentioned above. 53% of the learners were African American/Black, 26% Asian, 14% Hispanic or Latino, 6% white, and Native American and Pacific Islander totaling less than 1%. The top ten languages spoken were: English (31%), Somali (17%), Spanish (11%), Hmong (9%), Amharic (7%), Oromo (5%), Karen (4%), Vietnamese (2%), Tigrinya (2%), Khmer (1%), and almost 70 more languages spoken. (Information from personal communication with a school administrator December 14, 2010; statistics were from the FY 2010).

*Instructional techniques for adult English language learners.* The goal for most language learners is to accomplish real-life tasks outside of the classroom, and this is especially true for adult ELLs. In order to facilitate meeting that goal, 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). Bailey (2006) points out that communicative language teaching has traditionally emphasized fluency, but that accuracy can also be developed if there is a language-awareness component built in to lessons.

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 (walking around the room and exchanging information with other learners), discussion, and role-play (Parris, 2004). 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. Designing lessons with language-awareness components can help learners communicate more effectively.

When attempting to build a pragmatics instructional component into an ABE ELL classroom, the following themes emerged as instructional techniques for this study: raising learners' awareness of language meaning and use; explicit teaching of form, meaning and use; and practical communicative activities. This study sought to evaluate the instructional techniques implemented when teaching adult ELLs how to make polite requests in the workplace and beyond. The effectiveness of the instructional techniques was evaluated by comparing participants' responses to prompts on a pretest and a posttest. Mitigating a request was considered to be more polite in the speech community where this study took place. Additionally, this study sought learners' feedback about the treatment.

The following are the two research questions that were posed:

1. How effective are awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching high-intermediate ABE English language learners to mitigate requests?
2. How do ABE English language learners evaluate efforts to teach them L2 pragmatics?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were all enrolled in ELL classes in an ABE program in a large urban, K-12 school district in the Midwest. The ABE program, along with 10 community-based organizations, made up a literacy consortium that provided college preparatory, occupational skills, General Educational Development (GED) skills preparation, citizenship, family literacy, and English language classes. The ABE program served the needs of approximately 1,100 adult learners in daytime and evening programs each day.

The participants were enrolled in a level 4 ELL class during a five-week summer session. This was considered a high-intermediate level and was based on the reading and listening portions of Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS). This researcher was also the instructor for the class. Before the learners participated in the study all Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols were followed. See Appendix A for a copy of the consent form signed by participants.

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 11 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. See Appendix B for more participant information.

*Study context.* The program in which the participants were enrolled operated in a managed enrollment system (ME) as opposed to a commonly used open enrollment (OE) system. In OE systems learners are allowed to enroll in classes at any time and attendance policies tend to be flexible. The classes are structured in a way that accommodates new learners who may show up on any given day. In the ME system learners were tested and began classes on the first day of each month when a new session began. Instructors designed month-long units that outlined specific learning objectives, and learners were assessed at the end of each session. Learners needed to attend 60% of their classes in a month or they could be dropped from the class, which would require re-registering with the intake staff. The ME system encouraged more regular attendance, reduced classroom turbulence, and better prepared learners for the reality of work and post-secondary education (Retrieved from [http://hubbs.spps.org/uploads/Hubbs\\_Center\\_101\\_v3.0.doc](http://hubbs.spps.org/uploads/Hubbs_Center_101_v3.0.doc)).

As it was the policy that learners attend at least 60% of their classes, attendance was tracked very accurately in the ME system. Instructors were responsible for entering daily attendance into a database, along with recording late arrivals or those who left early within 15-minute increments. Learners were expected to call the school if they were unable to attend and instructors were expected to call learners who were missing class on a weekly basis.

The pretest and posttest were the data elicitation measures used for this study and will be discussed in the data collection procedures section below. The participants who attended

regularly had a relatively high attendance patterns as indicated in Table 1. There were a total of nine meeting days in the session, with eight being devoted to the study. Approximately 75% of those eight sessions was devoted to pragmatics instruction. The first lesson was a general introductory lesson and was not included as data for the study.

Table 1  
*Attendance*

Student	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5	Lesson 6	Lesson 7	Lesson 8	Total days attended
1. Hirut	X	X	X	X	X	X	--	X	7
2. Tsege	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
3. Demissie	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
4. Abebe	X	X	X	X	X	--	X	X	7
5. Gabra	X	--	X	X	X	X	X	X	7
6. Geteye	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
7. Ayana	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
8. Girma	X	X	--	--	X	X	X	X	6
9. Nadifa	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
10. Abdi	X	X	--	--	X	--	--	X	4
11. Eman	X	X	X	--	X	X	X	X	7
12. Leila	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
13. Larissa	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
14. Natia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
15. Boureg	X	--	X	--	X	--	--	X	4
16. Chu hua	X	--	--	X	--	X	X	X	5
17. Kyi	X	X	X	X	X	--	X	X	7
18. Sonia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
19. Silvia	--	X	--	X	--	--	--	X	3
20. Juan	X	--	X	X	--	--	--	X	4

Of the 20 learners who were present for the pretest and posttest, nine were present for 100% of the lessons and seven only missed one day. Four learners were present for 50% or less of the time.

In general, the participants in the study were very dedicated to their studies and appreciated the managed enrollment policies at the school. The ME system was relatively new to the school (within the preceding 12 months) and had made a positive impact in attendance,

learner retention, and learner level gains. There was a stronger sense of personal responsibility and formality about the school as compared to when the school operated under the OE system.

### *Treatment*

The goal of the treatment was to teach learners how to make polite requests in the context of the workplace. The rationale for focusing on requests was because it is a frequently used speech act (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005) and “[B]ecause requests can be potentially risky even in one’s native language, learners in the workplace need support and instruction at both the linguistic and cultural level” (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010). Requests were a practical speech act to introduce to beginning learners of L2 pragmatics. Additionally, making requests in the workplace were learning objectives stated by the ELL department at the school.

The treatment was not presented as an absolute, but rather as a “range of pragmatic devices” with which learners could practice if they choose to do so (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 5). The treatment was delivered through three main approaches: integrated and contextualized lessons, awareness-raising activities, and explicit instruction. The class met for two and a half hours, two evenings a week for five weeks. I designed all of the lesson materials and piloted the pretest, posttest, and three of the six lessons with a different Level-4 class at the school.

Table 2 provides a description of the L2 pragmatics instruction portions of the lessons, and includes the topics, learning objectives, and class activities. Many objectives and activities were based on Ishihara and Cohen’s (2010) recommendations for classroom tasks. Each lesson began with a review activity and many lessons recycled concepts introduced in previous lessons. See Appendices C-I for handouts used in lessons.

Table 3

*Lesson Plans*

Lesson	Topics	Objectives	Activities
1	*Explain research project, IRB, and testing	* Gather learner information	* Discussed and signed IRB consent forms *Completed pretest *Ls interviewed one another and filled out information forms
2	*Requests: directness, politeness, and formality	*Analyze and practice vocabulary in context; *identify and practice modal verbs and past continuous tense in context; *analyze language and content to identify speakers' goals and intentions; *identify cultural norms.	*Requests matching activity *Group and pair discussions *Handout #1
3	Review of directness, politeness, and formality	*Analyze and practice vocabulary in context; *practice modal verbs and past continuous tense; *practice the use of directness, politeness, and formality in interactions.	*Ls matched requests with location and identified most polite/formal. *Ls read role-play situations, wrote dialogs, and practiced orally. *Ls completed a review cloze activity. *Handout #2
4	Softening requests	*Identify and practice using modal verbs, past continuous, and understaters; *analyze language and context to identify the goals and intentions of the speakers *analyze the use of directness, politeness, and formality in interactions *identify cultural norms.	*Ls wrote understaters into sentences and practiced orally. *Ls identified polite request in a recorded conversation. *Ls made direct request more polite and unscrambled polite requests.
5	Politeness in the workplace	*Identify directness, politeness, and formality in authentic speech samples; *identify and practice the use of modal verbs and the past continuous tense.	*Ls watched a clip from <i>The Devil Wears Prada</i> *Transcript
6	Grammar and politeness review	*Review grammar structures; *compare past continuous to show past action and to show politeness; *compare direct questions and polite requests.	*Ls added understaters to make requests more polite
7	Steps of a formal request and comparing	*Analyze and practice using modal verbs, past continuous, and understaters in context; *analyze and practice the use	*Ls read a conversation and identified steps in making a formal request. *Ls discussed politeness and

	politeness in different cultures	of discourse markers and fillers; *identify and compare possible cultural reasonings behind pragmatic norms	politeness devices in native languages and cultures. *Ls reviewed modal verbs and politeness on webpage. *Ls orally practiced responding to workplace scenarios. *Handout #4
8	Review parts of requests	*Review grammar structures; *analyze language and content to identify the intention of the speaker and to access the speakers attainment of that goal; *analyze and practice the use of directness, politeness, and formality.	*Ls performed role plays while other Ls identified parts of the requests *Ls completed cloze review activity *Handout #5
9	Roles and status in the workplace	*Identify directness, politeness, and formality in authentic speech samples	*Ls watched a clip from <i>The Pursuit of Happiness</i> *Ls completed posttest and evaluation

*Integrated and contextualized lessons.* The unit theme for the summer session was “Work Readiness” and the lessons were designed with objectives such as “Ask for help with on-the-job problems” and “Ask about benefits in an interview.” Table 3 provides a partial list of the speaking and listening benchmarks (competencies), as designated by ELL department at the school. (Originally retrieved on July 22, 2010 from [http://hubbs.spps.org/Work\\_Readiness4.html](http://hubbs.spps.org/Work_Readiness4.html))

Table 3  
*Work Readiness Benchmarks*

Sub-strand	Speaking and Listening
Workplace Needs	· Ask for help with on-the-job problems. · Ask for work-related information (such as benefits or a raise).
Instructions	· Ask and respond to questions about work memos and announcements that outline changes in policies, programs, and procedures.
Compensation	· Ask about benefits in an interview.
Job Search	· Request a variety of information to find employment (What shift are you hiring for? Is it full or part-time? What is the starting salary?). · Call to request additional information about a job listed in the classifieds.
Job Applications and	· Respond to and ask questions referring to a resume or one’s

Forms	education and work experience.
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These “work readiness benchmarks” were the learning objectives in the lessons. While most of the lessons and materials were designed to show learners how to make polite requests in the workplace, requests in other situations – such as when talking to a friend, teacher, or counselor – were also practiced and discussed. These language competencies attempted to replicate real-life speaking tasks. Many interactive speaking activities were conducted to meet these objectives.

*Awareness-raising activities.* I led many group discussions and designed tasks to foster awareness of politeness in the workplace and beyond, and within different cultures. Lesson two began with an activity that asked learners to match up requests with where they might be spoken. For example, the following were used as a matching activity, which was followed by a class discussion:

I was wondering if I could have, um, 3 days off.	In an office
Would it be OK if I handed in my assignment next Monday?	In a school
Do you wanna move over?	On a bus

This activity was modified from Lynda Yates’ *Softening Short Request* lesson plan (accessed from <http://exchanges.state.gov/media/oelp/teaching-pragmatics/shot.pdf> on 7/5/10). This led to a discussion on degrees of formality and politeness, and the inappropriateness of being overly polite. The word “scoot” as a synonym for “move” came up, which led to some demonstrations and laughter in the classroom.

During lessons three and nine learners watched video clips from two movies, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The objective in watching these clips was to analyze native speaker language use in workplace environments. 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.

In lesson seven, learners filled out a T-chart (a graphic organizer where one lists and examines two facets of a topic). The T-chart asked learners to compare the level of directness in requests in their home languages and cultures with English in the U.S. This activity led to a conversation about the similarities in how polite requests are formulated (using *please* and honorifics such as *sir* or *ma'am*) and an awareness of the absence and 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.

During a lesson discussing modal verbs, learners noticed the word *appreciate* and its frequency of use in requests, especially at a more formal level, such as when speaking to a supervisor or work manager. Learners practiced requests such as, “I would appreciate it if I could take next Thursday off to go to a doctor’s appointment.” During lesson eight my own supervisor unexpectedly came into the classroom to thank the learners for their unsolicited responses to my instruction and told the learners, “I really appreciate hearing from you.” Coincidentally the word *appreciate* was on the board and as she said it, I noticed a handful of learners’ eyes light up and look at the board again. A conversation immediately following her departure reinforced how the word was used and in what contexts.

*Explicit instruction.* In addition to the discussions and tasks on how to show politeness, learners received explicit 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 et al, 1989, p. 283). These forms were presented as features that made requests more polite and are

used to vary politeness levels depending on the situation and interlocutor. In addition, participants received exposure to authentic speech samples, and were provided steps for making formal and informal requests. Learners had many opportunities to practice making different types of requests in a variety of situations.

Instruction was limited to *conventionally indirect strategies*, where the utterances contained forms that indicated a willingness or ability that the act would be performed (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). I did not provide explicit instruction regarding direct requests, hints, nor non-verbal requesting strategies. However, a discussion about hints did arise during lesson two when the following text message was presented to the learners: “Want to do something for Heather? Her baby is probably due soon!” A strong hint, as defined by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), is an utterance that contains “partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act” (p. 18). This was an actual text message I received on the day of the lesson. The implicit nature of this suggestion was not immediately obvious to learners, but became more apparent after a group discussion.

During lessons two and three I informed the learners that the modal verbs *could*, *would*, and *can* is used to make requests polite. Some examples were, “Would it be OK if I give you my homework tomorrow?” and “Could you please scoot over? I need room for my groceries.” I also informed the learners that the past continuous is used in request making. Examples such as, *I was wondering if ...* and *I was hoping you could ...* were presented to learners and they were given opportunities to practice such forms.

As a summary for the last lesson I presented the following steps for making a formal request to learners: (1) Greet the person, (2) Ask your question: use modal verbs and/or the past

conditional tense, recognize if the person is busy, or try to not be too much trouble, give the reason (if there is one), (3) Thank the person, and (4) Say goodbye (if appropriate).

Table 4 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 4  
*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 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 briefly discussed to illustrate the different meanings of modal verbs.

While all of these features were presented to the learners, I stressed that different situations called for different types of requests. I emphasized that learners should be aware of their choices and vary their request making based on specific situations. Learners practiced using the above-mentioned features in a variety of situations.

To summarize, the treatment was designed primarily to raise learners’ awareness about how polite requests are made in the workplace and beyond, and also how different cultures use language to show politeness.

#### *Instrumentation*

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, rather than a role-play or elicited conversation, which may have yielded more naturalistic speech, because of the large number of learners registered for the class. Although only 20 learners completed both the pre- and posttest, 33 learners were enrolled and

participated in the class on any given day. The DCT was the most convenient and expedient way to collect the relatively large amount of data. See Appendices I and J for copies of the DCTs.

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 6 lists the items and the prompts. When the prompts were written, Brown and Levinson's (1978) sociological factors that determine the level of politeness used by a speaker were considered. They are relative power (P) of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance (SD) between the speaker and hearer, and the ranking of the imposition (IMP) caused by the request:

- Power:** speaker (x) and hearer (y) in which  $x < y$  or  $x = y$
- Social Distance:** (+) indicated a greater social distance between the speaker and hearer (as in the items with supervisors, a school counselor, and a stranger)
- (-) indicated less social distance (as in the items with classmates, co-workers, and teachers)
- Imposition:** (+) indicated a greater imposition and (-) less of an imposition

I originally planned to compare pre- and posttest situations that had similar values (based on my analysis) for the contextual variables. Yet since it was decided to provide somewhat different situations for the posttest from those in the pretest, it was not possible to find pre- and posttest situations that matched each other perfectly in terms of their contextual variables. (See Limitations for further discussion.) Table 5 includes the DCT item prompts and my intended values for the contextual variables for each DCT item.

Table 5  
*DCT Item Prompts and Intended Values for the Contextual Variables*

Item	Prompt	Power	Social Distance	Imposition
<b>Pretest</b>				
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. <b>Ask</b> the person if he or she could move over so you have more room for your grocery bags.	$x=y$	+SD	-IMP

Pre2: Day off	You need a day off from work to attend a meeting at your child's school. <b>Ask</b> your boss for a day off.	$x < y$	-SD	-/+IMP
Pre3: Forgotten pen	You are in English class and forgot your pen. <b>Ask</b> the person who is sitting next to you for a pen.	$x = y$	-SD	-IMP
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. <b>Ask</b> your supervisor if you can change your work schedule from the night shift to the day shift.	$x < y$	+SD	-/+IMP
Pre5: Change in class schedule	You are at school. You want to change your class schedule from morning classes to evening classes. <b>Ask</b> the counselor to change your schedule.	$x < y$	+SD	-IMP
Pre6: Grammar question	You are in English class. The class has just finished. You have a question about grammar. <b>Ask</b> your teacher if she can help you.	$x < y$	-SD	-IMP
<b>Posttest</b>				
Post1: Help from co-worker	You are at work. You need help moving some heavy boxes to a different room. <b>Ask</b> your co-worker to help you move the boxes.	$x = y$	-SD	-IMP
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. <b>Ask</b> your busy teacher for help with the application.	$x < y$	-SD	+IMP
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. <b>Ask</b> the student next to you if you can look at his/her papers.	$x = y$	-SD	-IMP
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. <b>Ask</b> your supervisor if you can talk to her/him about maybe getting the higher paying position.	$x < y$	+SD	-/+IMP
Post5: Leaving work early	You are work. You don't feel well. <b>Ask</b> your manager if you can go home early.	$x < y$	+SD	-/+IMP
Post6: Announce	You are at work. There is an announcement in the employee workroom about changes in shift	$x = y$	-SD	-IMP



those speech samples in the development of the course materials. The NS responded to an earlier, pilot version of the pretest, which included five of the six prompts. The prompts and responses are listed in Table 6 (below).

Table 6  
*Native Speaker Responses to Pretest Prompts*

Item	Prompt
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. <b>Ask</b> the person if he or she could move over so you have more room for your grocery bags.
NS Responses:	<p>“Could you please scoot over, I need room for my groceries.”</p> <p>“Excuse me - I have several bags of groceries with me. Would you mind scooting over, so I have room to set down my bags? Thank you.”</p> <p>“Would you mind moving down just a bit so I can have more space for me and my groceries? Thanks so much.”</p> <p>“Excuse me. Could I have some room for my bags. I don’t want my bread to get crushed.”</p>
Day off	You need a day off from work to attend a meeting at your child’s school. <b>Ask</b> your boss for a day off.
NS Responses:	<p>“I have to go to a meeting for school. Can I please have the day off?”</p> <p>“I need to attend an all-day meeting at my daughter's school on Thursday. Is it OK for me to use a vacation day to take the day off?”</p> <p>“Is this a good time to talk about my schedule? Great. I learned of a meeting I need to attend and my child's school and it is on one of my workdays. I need _____ date off from work. Perhaps, I can help find someone to cover my shift with your permission.”</p> <p>“I was wondering if I could possibly attend my son’s parent-teacher conferences at his school on Tuesday?”</p>
Forgotten pen	You are in English class and forgot your pen. <b>Ask</b> the person who is sitting next to you for a pen.
NS Responses:	<p>“Do you have a pen?”</p> <p>“Excuse me, but do you have an extra pen that I could borrow? I forgot mine at home. Thank you.”</p> <p>“Do you have an extra pen I could borrow? I forgot mine. Thanks.”</p>

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Item	Prompt
	"Excuse me, do you have a pen I could borrow?"
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. <b>Ask</b> your supervisor if you can change your work schedule from the night shift to the day shift.
NS Responses:	<p>"Is there any way I would be able to switch from the night to the day shift now that my children are in school?"</p> <p>"Now that my children are in school, I'd like to start working the day shift so I can be home when the kids get home from school. Are there procedures I need to follow to request this change to my work schedule? Please let me know how to begin the process."</p> <p>"Do you have a minute to talk with me about my work schedule? Great. I'd like to let you know that I am interested in switching from nights to days. My kids are all in school now. Are there any opportunities at this time to get on a day schedule? If not, can you please consider my request when a day shift opens up? Thanks."</p> <p>"Hello Tom! Ho are you doing? You know I have been working the third shift for the past two years. I was wondering if there was a chance I could change to the day shift instead of the night shift. I would really appreciate it if I could be there for my kids when they get home from school."</p>
Change in schedule	You are at school. You want to change your class schedule from morning classes to evening classes. <b>Ask</b> the counselor to change your schedule.
NS Responses:	<p>"What is the counselors phone number, I need to change classes?"</p> <p>"I'd like to attend classes in the afternoons instead of mornings. Could you help me determine whether my classes are available in the afternoon and help me reschedule them?"</p> <p>"Can you help me change my class schedule? I need to change my schedule so that I have evening classes instead of morning classes."</p> <p>"Could I possibly talk to you about getting my schedule changed?"</p>

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The NS responses shaped the lessons in a few ways. I explicitly taught learners to use understaters: *just, just a bit, and a minute*; the past continuous phrase: *I was wondering*; the modal verb phrases: *Could you (please), Can you help me, Would you (mind), and Can I (please)*. We also had a group discussion about the phrase *scoot over* in relation to *move over*.

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 (see Appendix K). 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.

#### *Data collection procedures*

I administered the pretest and posttest at the regularly scheduled class meeting time, in the classroom where the class met each session. Prior to administering the pretest and posttest, participants signed the IRB consent forms (see Appendix A). The participants completed the pretest on the second meeting day of the session. Those who were absent for the pretest went to the adjacent media center and completed the test independently during the following class. I checked on them once. The posttest was given on the last day of the session. There was no time limit for the pretest and the posttest, but participants finished both in 15-20 minutes. Before each test I stressed that I was not concerned with spelling, but that they should write down what they

would say in each situation. During the pretest and posttest a few participants asked clarifying questions, to which I answered without suggesting how to respond to the item. Following the posttest, 21 participants filled out the anonymous Course Evaluation Questionnaire (see Appendix E). Most participants finished it in 10-15 minutes.

As previously indicated, there were a total of 33 learners enrolled in the class. Some began the class, but did not finish, and a few began in the second week of class. That meant that 13 pre- and posttests were not considered for analysis because the learner only completed one of the tests. Twenty-one learners were present on the last day of the class, so 21 completed the posttest and the Course Evaluation Questionnaire. This meant that one of those learners was not present on either of the two days when the DCT pretest was administered. The Course Evaluation Questionnaire was anonymous, so there was no way to know which student completed the Course Evaluation Questionnaire but not the DCT. Therefore, all 21 Course Evaluation Questionnaires were included in the data analysis along with the 20 DCT pre- and posttests.

#### *Data analysis procedures*

The first research question focused on the effectiveness of awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching how to soften or mitigate requests. In order to answer this question, I transcribed the participants' handwritten responses into a Microsoft Word document. Then I listed the features that emerged from their responses. That list included *I want ...* and *I need ...* statements, apologies, and the nine features that I explicitly taught (see Table 4 above). Next, I counted the features just described, plus "O" for other request head act, such as, "You have pen?" Table 7 (below) lists the codes, the features, and examples from participants' responses (not edited). The shading indicates features explicitly taught during the treatment.

Table 7  
*Features Counted in Analysis*

Number and code	Features	Examples of participants' responses*
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 <b>I know you are biss</b> but could you help me just a mint with the application.</i>
6. G	Grounder Reason for the request	<i>Sear pleas I need a day off <b>I want to take my son a shopping</b></i>
7. US	Understaters Minimizing the imposition	<i>Please could you help me <b>just a minute?</b></i>
8. PW	Polite words	<i>Please. Thanks. Thank you.</i>
9. ING	Past continuous –ING	<i>I <b>was wondering</b> if you teacher can help me with this application. Please I <b>was hoping</b> I could talk to you about my paying position.</i>
10. HM	Hypothetical Modal	<i>I <b>would like to</b> change my schedule in the evening. I don't like in the morning</i>
11. O	Other request head act	<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><b>I'm sorry</b>, 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, Emam'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*. Four participants did respond to one or more items, which was counted as +0.

One participant, Abebe, wrote multiple responses for nearly every item. For example, for Pre1-Groceries on Bus her response was, *Would you give me one more bags? Please can I take my bags? May can I passe hir?* I only considered the first complete question or statement in her response. So for *Would you give me one more bag?* I counted +1 for *would you* as the polite modal.

Examples of the counting procedures are as follows. The responses are from learner Demissie and have not been edited:

Pre1-Groceries on Bus: *Eskusme* [Excuse me] *kenu* [Can] *i put my bag here.*  
+ 1 for an attention getter – *Eskusme*, +1 for a polite modal – *kenu*.

Post1-Help from co-worker: *Could you help me please to move boxes different room.*  
+ 1 for a polite word – *please*, +1 for a modal verb – *could*.

After each feature was counted for each response, I counted the number of features each learner produced on the pre- and posttest. Then I calculated all of the pretest features and all of the posttest features and put that information into a comparative table, in order to see the development of request features from pre- to posttesting across participants.

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

The results of this study showed that participants produced more mitigated requests after explicit instruction and awareness-raising activities. It also suggested that participants' attendance contributed to their ability to make more mitigated requests. Additionally, learners responded favorably to the instructional techniques as indicated in their responses to the Course Evaluation Questionnaire.

*Research Question #1: How effective are awareness-raising tasks and explicit instruction at teaching high-intermediate ABE English language learners to mitigate requests?*

The posttests showed that participants produced fewer *I want* and *I need* statements, and used 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 8.

Table 8  
*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	77	2
Posttest	3	8	32	15	8	30	19	61	17	3	1	102	5

The *want statements* (WS) and *need statements* (NS), which were considered to be unmitigated 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 increased. Examples of a WS and a NS present in the pretest but not in the posttest:

Example 1. Gabra, Pre5-Change in Class Schedule:

*Excuse me mam **I want to change** a schedule morning class. So you have morning class.*

Example 2. Gabra, Pre2-Day Off:

*Excuse me my boss **I need permission** today. I want pick my child at school.*

Example 3. Gabra, Post5-Leaving Work Early:

***Could** I go early to home because I don't feel well.*

Example 4. Gabra, Post2-Help from Teacher:

***Can** you help me please if you have time for a new job information*

The use of titles decreased from 27 in the pretests to 15 in the posttests. For example:

Example 5. Larissa, Pre4-Shift Change:

*Would I change my work schedule, **sir?** My children are in school now, and I could work at day.*

Example 6. Larissa, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

*I was hoping I could talk to you about my paying position.*

In the pretests, there was only one reference to time. In the posttest there were twelve.

However, Post2-Help from Teacher explicitly mentioned time. The prompt stated, "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." An example response from Kyi is provided.

Example 7. Kyi, Post2-Help from Teacher:

*Hi teacher, I was wonder, **I know you are very busy** but I need you help so could you help me just minute?*

This is not considered a finding of the study because of the explicit reference to time that was not present in a similar pretest prompt. However, during the treatment there were class discussions

about the importance of recognizing another person's time as a way to minimize the imposition of the request, and 12 of 20 participants did so when prompted.

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

First, the use of understaters, lexical phrases such as, *just (a minute)*, and *a little (bit)*, increased from two in the pretest to 18 in the posttest. For example, Natia did not produce any understaters in the pretest, but produced three in the posttest.

Example 8. 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?*

Example 9. 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.

Example 10. Hirut, Post1-Help from Co-worker:

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

Example 11. 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. Here are some examples:

Example 12. Hirut, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

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

Example 13. Girma, Post2-Help from Teacher:

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

Example 14. Emam, Post5-Leaving Work Early:

***I was hoping** I could leave early today because I am sick please?*

Example 15. Boureg, Post6-Announcement at Work:

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

The forms *I was wondering* and *I was hoping* were presented in the treatment. Girma's response of *I am hoping* was not explicitly taught.

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:

Example 16. Abdi, Pre1-Groceries on Bus:

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

Example 17. Abdi, Pre6-Grammar Question:

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

Example 18. Abdi, Post1-Help from teacher:

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

Example 19. Abdi, Post2-Help from Teacher:

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

Example 20. Abdi, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

***My** [May] I **can** talk to you a minet if you don't maen [mind] please*

Example 21. Abdi, Post5-Leaving Work Early:

*Plese I am not OK **May Can** go Home? Please*

Example 22. Abdi, Post6-Announcement at Work:

***Can** you sho me were I am workin today and what I am dawing [doing] please*

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

Example 23. Emam, Pre1-Groceries on Bus:

*Please **can** you move over because I need more spases for the bags please?*

Example 24. Emam, Pre5-Change in Class Schedule:

*please I need change my class schedule from morning to evening I **can**?*

Example 25. Emam, Post1-Help from Co-worker:

***Could** you helpe me for cary the boxes please?*

Example 26. Emam, Post2-Help from Teacher:

*I was hoping I **could** talk to you for a minute pleae?*

Example 27. Emam, Post3-Forgotten Papers:

***Can** you look at her papers please?*

Example 28. Emam, Post5-Leaving Work Early:

*I was hoping I **could** leave early today because I am sick please?*

Example 28. Emam, Post6-Announcement:

***May** I ask my co-worker to explain the announcement to me please?*

This pretest and posttest comparison of features indicates that participants' produced more analyzed and complex requests after the treatment. Pretest responses were largely unmitigated, while posttest responses were more conventionally indirect, showed an increased use of mitigation, and contained more complex syntax. The results are not meant to indicate that learners had mastered the forms, but rather that their responses at the time of post-testing were more analyzed and complex than at the time of pre-testing.

Next, we look at each participant's pretest and posttest results. Table 9 (below) shows the number of features the participant produced in the pretest (top) and the number of features the participant produced 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 9  
*Individual Participants' Pretest and Posttest Results by Features*

	WS	NS	AT	T	TI	G	US	PW	ING	HM	O	PM	AP	Attendance
1. Hirut	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	7/8
	--	--	2	--	1	--	2	2	2	--	--	6	--	
2. Tsege	2	2	4	--	--	2	1	4	--	--	1	2	--	8/8
	--	4	5	1	--	4	2	6	--	--	--	5		
3. Demissie	--	3	6	3	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	3	--	8/8
	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	
4. Abebe	--	--	--	1	--	2	--	--	--	--	--	6	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	--	1	3	3	--	--	--	6	--	
5. Gabra	1	1	4	4	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	3	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	1	2	--	4	--	--	--	6	--	
6. Geteye	--	--	--	1	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	1	--	8/8
	--	--	1	--	1	2	--	2	--	--	1	4	--	
7. Ayan	1	--	1	1	--	3	--	1	--	--	1	3	1	8/8
	--	1	2	--	1	2	1	2	--	1	--	4	1	
8. Girma	--	--	1	--	--	2	--	1	--	1	--	3	--	6/8
	--	--	1	1	1	3	--	4	1	1	--	5	--	
9. Nadifa	--	--	1	--	--	4	--	5	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	--	--	1	--	1	5	--	--	--	6	--	
10. Abdi	2	1	2	3	--	1	--	6	--	--	1	2	11	4/8
	--	1	1	2	1	1	1	4	--	--	--	5	1	
11. Eman	--	3	--	2	1	4	--	4	--	--	1	1	--	7/8
	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	6	3	--	--	5	--	
12. Leila	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	1	--	--	--	1	2	1	--	--	5	--	
13. Larissa	--	1	1	4	--	2	--	3	--	--	--	6	--	8/8
	--	--	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	--	--	6	--	8/8
14. Natia	1	--	1	1	--	2	--	5	--	--	--	5	--	8/8
	--	--	2	1	1	4	2	4	2	--	--	4	2	
15. Boureg	2	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	3	--	4/8
	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	5	--	

16. Chu hua	1	1	1	2	--	1	--	3	--	--	--	3	--	3/8
	--	--	1	--	1	1	--	4	--	--	--	5	1	
17. Kyi	--	2	4	--	--	1	--	2	--	--	--	5	0	7/8
	1	--	4	3	2	3	2	--	3	1	--	6		
18. Sonia	--	1	4	1	--	1	--	4	--	--	--	5	--	8/8
	--	--	2	1	--	2	--	4	2	--	--	6		
19. Silvia	--	1	5	2	--	4	--	6	--	--	--	6	1	3/8
	1	1	6	2	--	3	--	3	--	--	--	4	--	
20. Juan	--	2	2	2	--	--	1	1	--	--	1	2	--	4/8
	--	1	3	2	--	--	1	1	--	--	--	2	--	

The information in Table 9 (above) shows the relevancy of attendance, and therefore the pragmatics instruction, in measuring participants' ability to make mitigated responses 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 (10), Boureg (15), Chu hua (16), Silvia (19), and Juan (20) were present for four days or less. From this group, only Abdi (10) and Juan (20) produced understaters, as in the following:

Example 29. Abdi, Post4-Higher Position at Work:

*My [May] I can talk to you **a minet** [minute] if you don't maen [mind] please*

Example 30. 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 treatment produced eight understaters (out of 19 total) and four past continuous forms (out of 17) total.

Those learners were Tsege (2), Ayan (7), Nadifa (9), Leila (12), Larissa (13), and Natia

(14). Some examples are provided below:

Example 31. 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**.*

Example 32. 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?*

To summarize the findings for the first research question, it would appear that the L2 pragmatics instruction had some impact on the ABE learners' ability to make mitigated responses through lexical phrases and syntactical mitigation. 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. Next, the effectiveness of the instruction from the participants' perspectives will be discussed.

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

Learners were very positive about the L2 pragmatics intervention, giving positive ratings to both the instructional techniques employed 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:

*It's teacher explains. I understood all of you explains. If all my teachers were like you I think I would speak in English better.*

*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 Eenglish grammar.*

*I learn a lot of Grammar and polite word verb.*

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.*

*Yes, Thank you teacher. For your spen [spend] a time and teach me many thing and give me helpful to use polite words, so, I would like to tell you thank you again May God bless you allway with you Family.*

*OK for me ever [every] things so good, even our pronunce [pronunciation] is pure, than your plane [plan] is finished appriciate it, I wish my fiture [future] teache may be one day I go to college maybe you my teacher. I miss you to much!*

In conclusion, the results showed that the L2 pragmatic instructional techniques were effective at teaching high-intermediate level ABE ELLs how to mitigate 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 topic of requests with some ease. After the treatment, participants produced fewer unmitigated requests, and more conventionally indirect 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 treatment 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 length of time was limited to less than five weeks. A more in-depth study, conducted over a longer period of time, must be undertaken to further evaluate the effectiveness of L2 pragmatic instruction in an ABE ELL capacity.

Second, only native speaker responses were used for material development and instructional purposes. The intention behind using native speaker speech samples was to avoid relying on my own intuition for material development, as suggested by Ishihara and Cohen (2010). This was not an intentional attempt to avoid L2 speech samples. Including L2 speech samples in the instructional materials may have exposed the learners to speech samples that they were likely to encounter in the speech community. Additionally, it would have “recognized L2 users are speakers in their own right” and therefore presenting a “positive image of L2 users rather than seeing them as failed native speakers” (Cook, 1999, p. 185). But when I only looked for native speaker speech samples I missed an opportunity to incorporate L2 speech into the materials.

Furthermore, 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.

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

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, but is more challenging to complete. Such an approach could be taken with more advanced ABE learners in the future.

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. The data can only be considered an indirect measure of speech, not equivalent to a naturally-occurring oral response.

Despite its limitations, this study would suggest that the participants became more aware of how to make mitigated requests. In addition, the instructional techniques employed were favorably received. These limitations could be overcome in future research.

#### *Suggestions for further research*

As noted in the review of literature, instructional L2 pragmatics studies involving ABE ELLs have been limited, therefore creating opportunity for future research. More studies that track pragmatic development over a substantial period of time are needed to better understand effective instructional techniques. Future studies would benefit from oral-data collection procedures that would gather more naturally-occurring speech samples. 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 successfully negotiate 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 as will be discussed next.

#### *Pedagogical implications*

The findings of this study suggest that explicit instruction and awareness-raising activities to be effective L2 pragmatic instructional techniques. L2 pragmatics instruction could be incorporated into regular English language classes, or perhaps more effectively, in conversation classes. If interactional pragmatics was the focus of a conversation class, speech acts and 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*

During class a number of years ago, while teaching at the same school where this study was conducted, a learner asked me to explain to her when to use *would*, *could*, and *should*. She was enrolled in a level-three class at the school, but had very high oral skills and had a job at the airport where she used English frequently. She told me that she had heard her co-workers use the modal verbs and she herself had used them, but she did not have clear understanding as to their appropriate use or meaning. I explained how to use the modal verbs by giving her some examples and by comparing sentences without them. As this learner was observing the naturally occurring input, even interacting with it, she still questioned how to use a particular verb tense correctly. For her, the input was not enough. She sought out explicit instruction on how to use the verb forms.

This brief experience long ago was the impetus for this study. Through this experience and others, it was obvious that adult English language learners had a variety of informal learning opportunities through work, in their neighborhoods, and in places of worship. Yet, without a professional instructional component, many aspects of the language could be a source of confusion for the learners.

In recent years, I have become cognizant of how an awareness of pragmatics, or lack thereof, can impact the lives of adult English language learners. As this study suggests, pragmatic awareness can be fostered early in a language learner's experience. For beginning learners, simple techniques such as categorizing statements, questions, phrases, or words as either "rude" or "polite" and "positive" or "negative" can help them to establish a system for thinking about language use in terms of their own personal communication goals. As learners progress in the language acquisition process, their metapragmatic awareness usually improves, which in turn leads them to be more confident users of the L2 and more productive community members.

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Appendix A

**Consent Form**  
Requests and adult English language learners

You are invited to be in a research study of how adult English language learners make requests for help or assistance. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in an English Language Learning level 4 class at the Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning in St. Paul, MN. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Rhonda Petree, a graduate student in the Second Language Studies department at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities.

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to learn how adult English language learners respond to explicit instruction about how to make request.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) take a pre-test
- (2) participate in six lessons
- (3) take a post-test

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has no risks.

The benefit in participating is learning how to make requests for help or assistance similar to native-English-speakers.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your

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<sup>1</sup> There were amendments to this consent form. 1) The study included eight lessons, rather than six, and 2) participants also responded to a Course Evaluation Questionnaire. The consent form was amended through the IRB December 2010.

current or future relations with the Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Rhonda Petree. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at 715-781-6109 or [petre021@umn.edu](mailto:petre021@umn.edu). If you prefer to contact the researcher's advisor you may do so by contacting Professor Andrew D. Cohen at 612-624-3806 or [adcohen@umn.edu](mailto:adcohen@umn.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

## Participant Information (pseudonyms)

Learner	Gender	Home country	Languages	Years living in U.S.	Total years studied English	Age	English use	# Hours a day using English
1. Hirut	Female	Ethiopia	Amharic, Oromo	5 years	11 years 1 yr – US 10 yrs – Ethiopia	27	Job	6
2. Tsege	Female	Ethiopia	Amharic, Oromo, English	5 years	8 years 2 years – US 6 years – Ethiopia	27	Everywhere	Most hours
3. Demissie		Ethiopia	Amharic, Oromo, English	4 years	1 year – US	27	Work, school	4
4. Abebe		Ethiopia	English, Amharic, Arabic	3 years	9 years 3 years – US 6 years – Ethiopia	32	Job, home	Often
5. Gabra		Ethiopia	English, Amharic	2 years	2 years – US and when she was younger	NR	School	2
6. Geteye		Ethiopia	Amharic, Oromo	1 year + 5 months	3 years 1 year – US 2 years – Ethiopia	NR	Library	All day
7. Ayara		Ethiopia	Amharic, Oromo, English	1 year	5-6 months – US	25	Work, school	4
8. Girma		Ethiopia	Amharic	NR	NR	38	NR	NR
9. Nadifa	Female	Somalia	Somali	9 years	4 years 1 year – US 4 years – Somalia	45	Work	8
10. Abdi	Male	Somalia	Somali	5 years	0	28	At school	8
11. Eman	Female	Palestine	Arabic	7 years	7 years 1 year – US 6 years –	45	Home, shopping	1/2
12. Leila	Female	Jordan	Arabic	7 months	10 years 3 months – US 9 years – Jordan	30	Home, shopping	6
13. Larissa	Female	Russia	Russian, English	2 years	5-6 months – US	48	Work, school	4-5

Learner	Gender	Home country	Languages	Years living in U.S.	Total years studied English	Age	English use	# Hours a day using English
14. Natia	Female	Georgia	Georgian, Russian, English, and "a little" German	1 year + 8 months	1 year – US	47	Work, school	3-6
15. Boureg	Male	Cambodia	Khmer (Cambodian)	4 years	4 years 4 yrs – US "a little" in home country	45	Work, read	1
16. Chuhua	Female	China	Chinese	3 years	3 years 2 years – US 1 years – China	57	Work	8
17. Kyi	Male	Myanmar ("Burma") and Thailand Refugee camp	Karen	3 years	3 years 2 years – US 1 year – home	30	School	2
18. Sonia	Female	El Salvador	Spanish	10 years	2 years	26	Home	Any-time
19. Sivia	Female	Mexico	Spanish	7 years	1 year	31	Yes	8
20. Juan	Male	Mexico	Spanish	NR	NR	21	NR	NR

This information was self-reported by learners through an interview task, and a writing assignment. The quotes indicate exact phrases written by the participant and NR indicates participant did not respond on that variable.

Appendix C

Handout #1

Requests – Handout #1  
Rhonda Petree  
7/12/10

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<u>Question (request)</u>	<u>Place it was spoken</u>	<u>Who said it (speaker)</u>	<u>Who heard it (hearer)</u>
---------------------------	----------------------------	------------------------------	------------------------------

“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 D

Handout #2

Requests – Handout #2  
Rhonda Petree  
7/14/10

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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.

B) Cloze Activity: Read the paragraph. Fill in the missing words.

There are many ways to ask \_\_\_\_\_ questions in English. You can use

\_\_\_\_\_ verbs such as *would* or *could*. You can use the \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ tense, such as "*I was wondering if ...*" or "*I was hoping you could ...*".

When you use these grammar forms you \_\_\_\_\_ your request. You make your

question polite and you try to not make a big \_\_\_\_\_ for the person to whom you are

talking. You \_\_\_\_\_ need to be overly polite in every situation. You get to

\_\_\_\_\_ how you want to speak.

Appendix E

Handout #3

Requests – Handout #3  
Rhonda Petree  
7/19/10

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**1) Grammar review - politeness**

Modal verbs that helps you be polite:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Past continuous (past progressive) tense that helps you be polite:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**2) More phrases to soften your requests**

Ex. Could you move just a little please?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

**3) Look at the top picture on page 117. Listen to the phone conversation between two people.**

A: Hello, may I speak to Katie Ruuz?

B: Yes, this is Katie Ruiz.

A: This is Carl Vang in the Human Resources department at WBVC. We received your application for the writer position, and I wanted to schedule you for an interview.

B: That's great. When would it be?

A: Well, we're looking at Thursday and Friday of next week. What time would be good for you?

B: How about 10 o'clock on Friday?

A: Okay, I've got you down for 10 on Friday. Please bring some writing samples.

B: Of course. May I ask you a question?

A: Sure.

B: Are you hiring for just one writer position?

A: We're actually interviewing for two writers at this time.

B: Okay. And when is the start date?

A: We'd like both writers to start on April 1, but there's flexibility.

B: Sounds great. I'll see you on Friday at 10.

A: Very good. We'll see you then. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, L., & Sherman, K. (2005) *All-Star 3 Teacher's Edition* (p. 140). New York: McGraw-Hill.

**4) Communication strategy: Asking Polite Questions**

Asking questions directly can sometimes be impolite. Using phrases with modal verbs such as, **could, can, would,** and **may** to get information is more polite. Use each modal verb to make the questions more polite.<sup>3</sup>

Direct questions

Tell me the start date.

Tell me the starting salary.

Are you hiring?

I want to speak to the supervisor.

Polite questions

**5) Unscramble the words to write questions about a job position.<sup>4</sup>**

1. the name/could/me/of the open position/you/tell

Example: Could you tell me the name of the open position?

2. you/the duties/can/me/tell

---

3. the qualifications/tell/you/me/could

---

4. salary/ would/ the/you/starting/know

---

5. the supervisor's/ I / ask/ may/ name

---

<sup>3</sup> Lee, L., & Sherman, K., (2005). *All-Star 3 Student Book* (p. 116). New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, L., & Sherman, K., (2005). *All-Star 3 Workbook* (p. 127). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Appendix F  
*The Devil Wears Prada* transcript

7/20/10

Characters:

**Andrea:** Young woman with long dark brown hair. She is an assistant to Miranda.

**Emily:** Young woman with red hair. She is also an assistant to Miranda.

**Miranda:** Older woman with silvery-white hair. She is a boss who wants everything to be perfect. If her employees make any mistakes, she fires them.

Scene:

Andy made a big mistake the night before and is worried that she will be fired. Emily is mad at her and is yelling at her. Miranda is also mad at her, but rather than yell at her, she gives Andy a very difficult task as punishment.

Andrea: Um .... Okay, Okay. I made a mistake. I know it.

Emily: Andrea, You don't understand. If you get fired ....

Andrea: She's gonna fire me?

Emily: I don't know. She's not happy!

Miranda Andrea ...

Andrea: Miranda about last night, I'm –

Miranda: I need the new Harry Potter book for the twins.

Andrea: Okay. Okay. I'll go down to Barnes and Noble right now.

Miranda: Did you fall down and smack your little head on the pavement?

Andrea: Not that I can recall.

Miranda: We have all the published Harry Potter books. The twins want to know what happens next.

Andrea: You want the unpublished manuscript?

Miranda: Well we know everyone in publishing. It shouldn't be a problem. Should it? And besides, you can do anything right?

*Andrea leaves. The phone rings. Miranda answers it. It is her daughter whom she calls "Bubsie".*

- Miranda: Yes, Bubsie. I know Baby. Mommy's working very hard to get it for you.
- Andrea: Ya know, I could call J.K. Rawling ... I'm not going to get a copy of that book.
- Miranda: Look, my girls are leaving on the train for their grandmother's at 4. So the book better be here – no later than 3.
- Andrea: Of course.
- Miranda: And I would like my steak here in 15 minutes.
- Andrea: No problem.

Appendix G

Handout #4

Requests – Handout #4

Rhonda Petree

7/28/10

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**A) Read and discuss.**

Worker: Hi Jeff. How are you?

Supervisor: Fine, thanks. How about you?

Worker: Pretty good. Say, I was wondering if I could talk to you about taking a day off next week. Ah ... there is a meeting at my daughter's school in the afternoon and I have an appointment in the morning.

Supervisor: What day do ya need?

Worker: Tuesday.

Supervisor: Tuesday ... yeah – that should be okay. Will you remind me again on Monday?

Worker: Yeah, I sure will. Thanks so much. I appreciate it.

Supervisor: Ya, you're welcome. Bye.

Worker: Bye.

Steps to making a **formal** request:

1. Greet the person.
2. Ask your question:
  - use modal verbs and/or past conditional tense
  - recognize if the person is busy, or try to not be too much trouble
  - give the reason (if there is one)
3. Thank the person
4. Goodbye (if appropriate).

**B) Role Play:** Now you practice! Ask the school counselor if you can change your schedule because you want to have a different teacher.

Group	Greetings	Modal verbs	Past continuous	Reason	Thanks	Goodbye

**C) Now** you should feel pretty comfortable making formal and informal requests to strangers, friends and supervisors in English in the United States. Is it different than in your cultures? Are you more or less direct in your cultures and languages? Talk with your classmates and make a list to compare how you make requests in English and how you make requests in your cultures.

<u>In English in the US (Minnesota)</u>	<u>In your native culture</u>

**D) Writing:** Please read the questions and write your answers.

- Do you have a job now? If yes, where do you work and what do you do?
- If you don't have a job are you looking for a job or not?
- What kind of work would you like to do in the future?
- Do you have questions about how to communicate to people at work?

Appendix H

Handout #5

Requests Handout #6  
Rhonda Petree  
8/2/10

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**A) Fill in the blanks with the words in the box.**

Informal	reason	thank	request	
Past	busy	sick	ask	modal

When you need to make a request in English you can be formal or \_\_\_\_\_ . When you make a formal \_\_\_\_\_ you should: Say hello and ask the person how they are doing. Then \_\_\_\_\_ your question. You can use \_\_\_\_\_ verbs and the \_\_\_\_\_ continuous tense. If the person is \_\_\_\_\_, you should acknowledge that. Say something like, "I know you're busy, but .... ." You should also give a \_\_\_\_\_ for your request. For example, explain that you are \_\_\_\_\_ or you have an appointment. At the end of your request you should \_\_\_\_\_ the person and say goodbye.

**B) 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 I

Pretest DCT

Pretest Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Read the situations below. Write what you would say.

**Example:**

You are at a bank. You want to open a savings account. **Ask** the bank teller (the bank worker) if you can open a savings account.

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1. 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.

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2. You need a day off from work to attend a meeting at your child's school. **Ask** your boss for a day off.

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3. You are in English class and you forgot your pen. **Ask** the student, who is sitting next to you, for a pen.

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4. 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 at 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.

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5. You are at school. You want to change your class schedule from morning classes to evening classes. **Ask** the counselor to change your schedule.

---

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6. You are in English class. The class has just finished. You have a question about grammar. **Ask** your teacher if she can help you.

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Appendix J

Posttest DCT

Posttest                      Name \_\_\_\_\_                      Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Read the situations. Write what you would say.

1. 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.

---

---

2. 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.

---

---

3. 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.

---

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4. 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.

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5. You are at work. You don't feel well. **Ask** your manager if you can go home early.

---

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6. 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.

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Appendix K

Course Evaluation Questionnaire

Evaluation  
Rhonda Petree  
August 2010

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  
(I completely disagree)

2

3  
(I agree)

4

5  
(I completely agree)

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

1  
(I completely disagree)

2

3  
(I agree)

4

5  
(I completely agree)

6. I learned **new vocabulary**.

1  
(I completely disagree)

2

3  
(I agree)

4

5  
(I completely agree)

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

1  
(I completely disagree)

2

3  
(I agree)

4

5  
(I completely agree)

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

1  
(I completely disagree)

2

3  
(I agree)

4

5  
(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?

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2. What activities were not very helpful in your learning? Why?

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3. What parts of the class did you enjoy the most? Why?

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4. What parts of the class did you **not** enjoy? Why?

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5. What could the teacher do differently to help you learn more?

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6. Anything else?

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