METAPRAGMATIC REQUESTING INSTRUCTION IN AN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION-ESL CLASSROOM:
A PILOT STUDY

Emily Suh

ABSTRACT

Pragmatics, or the ability to communicate using language, is increasingly recognized as essential to language competence and production (Thomas, 1983; Bachman, 1990). Much research exists on pragmatic acquisition (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Cenoz, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2001; Wildner-Basset, 1994). Researchers currently advocate metapragmatic instruction which combines explicit instruction, awareness-raising activities, and guided practice (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Kasper, 1997). Such instruction utilizes metalanguage and higher-level thinking with which students from non-academic backgrounds may struggle. Previous research on the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction in request-making examined highly academic participants literate in their first language (L1) as well as the second language (L2). Additional research is needed to determine the effectiveness of metapragmatics for lower-level learners and those in non-university settings.

This pilot study examines the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction to teach request-making to an intermediate Adult Basic Education (ABE)-ESL class of Somalis and Mexicans. The study also examines students' responses to the instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics and Request-making

Bialystok (1993) explains pragmatic acquisition of request-making as using language for different purposes, modifying requests to reflect context, and participating in interactions following usage conventions. Pragmatic requesting requires that the speaker be able to modify a request's level of politeness as appropriate to the given situation. Speakers vary their level of politeness through the use of words or phrases which are conventionally understood to convey respect, such as the word *please.* These words and phrases are referred to as *mitigators*, and speakers employ them to show the hearer respect (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989). In the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) categorize mitigators by their position vis-à-vis the speaker's actual request (i.e., "Can I have a raise?"), referred to as the head act. Mitigation can occur pre-request, within the head act, or post-request (see Appendix A). Speakers can employ several mitigators in a single request: "Could you please walk the dog?" includes *please* and the modal *could* rather than the more direct *can*. In Western culture, politeness and directness are inversely related (Brown & Levinson, 1978); thus, speakers must consider the appropriate level of directness when making requests in English.

Not surprisingly, request-making can be especially difficult because of the complexity of the linguistic elements used to convey sociopragmatic meaning and the subtlety of mitigation devices. When speakers choose dispreferred forms, pragmatic failure can result in socially inappropriate utterances or communication breakdown. For instance, a worker who approaches the boss with the request "Can I have a raise?" may be labeled as overly direct or even insubordinate and subsequently be refused the

request. As in this example, unpragmatic requests may be grammatically correct; thus, pragmatic failure alone does not easily identify a speaker as non-native, and pragmatic failure is often seen as personal failure (Cenoz, 2003; Thomas, 1983).

L2 Pragmatics Instruction

Given the cultural specificity of politeness and the necessity of performing speech acts, pragmatics instruction must discuss socially appropriate (i.e. polite) forms. Researchers advocate a combination of explicit instruction, awareness-raising activities, and guided practice (Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kasper & Rose, 2001; LoCastro, 2006; Rose, 1994; Takahashi, 2001). This combination of activities and instruction involving the use of metalanguage and higher level thinking skills is referred to here as meta-pragmatic instruction.

Explicit instruction provides metalingustic explanations of target-structure forms and functions and explanations of why certain forms are culturally preferred. In their research with Japanese learners of English, Takahashi (2001) and Tateyama (as cited in Pearson, 2006) found explicit instruction successful at teaching requesting.

In awareness-raising activities, learners draw form-function connections though exposure to pragmatic aspects of language (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Awareness-raising equips learners with multiple strategies for completing speech acts in different contexts (Kasper, 1997; Safont-Jorda, 2003).

Guided practice is student-centered. Exercises include role plays, dramas, and simulations (Eslaim-Rasehk, 2005; Kasper, 1997; Li 2000; Rose, 1994).

Research shows positive results for metapragmatic request instruction (Cenoz, 2003; Safont-Jorda, 2003; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001). After discussions about preferred forms, production tasks, and a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT), Safont-Jorda (2003) noted statistically significant increases in the use of request external modifiers by beginning and intermediate English language learners at a Spanish university.

Instruction must also introduce communication tools to increase student agency and avoid learner perceptions of instructor ethnocentricity (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Hanson-Huff, 2005; Ishihara, 2000, 2008, in press; Ishihara & Tarone, in press; Kasper & Rose, 2001; Li, 2000; Thomas, 1983). Ishihara (2008) and Kim (2001) found that many learners do not wish to adopt native speaker (NS) pragmatics. Ishihara discusses pragmatic resistance as a speaker's conscious decision to avoid NS norms which are common in the speech community and which the speaker is capable of producing; such resistance allows non-native speakers (NNSs) to express subjectivity and maintain distance from the target culture.

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Overwhelmingly, research on L2 pragmatics instruction focuses on university-educated learners receiving instruction in their L1. The handful of studies involving lower-level learners occurred at universities with highly L1 literate participants (Tateyama, 2001; Tateyama et al., 1997; Wildner-Basset, 1994).[1] Bigelow and

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[1] Hanson-Huff (2005) examined pragmatic differences in the request-making of Somalis and Americans in a descriptive study that did not include pragmatics instruction.

Tarone (2004) note a similar tendency in second language acquisition (SLA) research, arguing that theories based solely in research on educated language learners have "limited applicability and little value in guiding teachers who work with illiterate learners" (p. 690). The same is true for pragmatics instruction; research with highly literate learners cannot fully inform the instruction of others.

Pragmatics is already included in many ABE classes, but instruction occurs incidentally as issues arise in class. I could find no research discussing pragmatics in ABE, perhaps because of the difficulty of implementing meta-level discussions with lower-level learners.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research on metapragmatic instruction with non-university educated students could increase understanding of pragmatic acquisition and instruction, assist teachers in planning relevant lessons, and facilitate students' metalanguage development and higher thinking. These issues lead to the following research questions:

1) How effective is metapragmatic instruction at teaching *how to mitigate requests* for intermediate ABE English learners?
2) Do ABE-ESL students vary request-making in situations of varying social distance and level of imposition? If so, how?
3) How do intermediate ABE English learners respond to metapragmatic instruction?

METHOD

Participants

The participants attended a non-profit ABE center in a large Midwest metropolitan area. The class was considered to be pre-GED level, and all students were advanced-intermediate level as determined by their scaled scores on the Test of Adult Basic Education, M version. The students were Somali and Mexican, and many experienced interrupted schooling which was often delivered in a language other than their L1. Some claimed L1 illiteracy (see Table 1); however, all were literate in English. Thus the students' L2 language ability and past educational experiences differed substantially from those of participants mentioned in the literature review. Students were required to participate in classroom activities but testing was optional. Twelve students attended the class; the seven who completed the post-test were considered in the final analysis.

Table 1. *Students Considered in Data Analysis*

Student	Age	Ethnicity	Languages[i]	Years in US	Self-Reported English Ability	Years of English Instruction	Hours of English/ Day	English Language Use
Ibrahin	42	Somali	Somali (L), Arabic	14	Conversational	1 year or less	2	Talking work watching TV newspaper reading
Hamza	34	Somali	Somali (L), Kiswahili, Amharic	1 1/2	Literate	Since high school	4 or 5	Working, talking, and newspaper
Jafar	26	Somali	Somali, Kiswahili, Arabic (L)	4	no response	no response	no response	Everything I want
Axmed	30	Somali	Somali, Arabic, Ethiopian	2	Literate	3	10	At school
Fadumo	23	Somali	Somali	13	Speaks, reads, writes	5	all ways	at work and school, with her children
Ana	63	Mexican	Spanish (L)	17	no response	2	3	Watching TV, reading newspaper, talking at the school
Juanita	19	Mexican	Spanish (L)	4	Literate 60%	1	5	Talking at work and school

[i] No measures of students' literacy were conducted; self-reports of students' languages are included for a general understanding of their language learning experiences rather than a definitive literacy measure.

Treatment

The treatment included nine lessons occurring in the students' classroom during the regularly scheduled class. The researcher designed and piloted all materials with students of the same level the previous summer.

The unit began with awareness-raising activities about politeness and request-making in students' L1s, which they compared to American culture. Request modification was presented through explicit instruction in three categories: pre-requests, internal request modification, and post-requests. Students used metatalk to make connections between grammar and pragmatics, such as in discussions of linguistic distance, defined in class as the amount of space between the subject of the sentence and the action of the request. Lessons also included guided practice, and students viewed NS requests from the movies *Shrek II* and *A Few Good Men*. Content was informed by Brown and Levinson's (1978) work on situational variance.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), three factors determine the appropriate level of politeness for request-making: the hearer's relative power over the speaker (*dominance*), *social distance* between the speaker and the hearer (how well they know each other), and *imposition* of the act (or the problems the hearer faces resulting from complying with the request). These factors comprise *situational*

variance, and Brown and Levinson argue that speakers consider this variance when determining the level of politeness to address their hearer.[2]

Instruments and Data Collection

Pretest A was a written DCT in which students made three requests of varying imposition as if they were speaking with someone from their culture. Items prompted requests to individuals of higher and equal status, such as below.

> 1. You want to talk to your teacher about a book you did not understand. You know your teacher is busy, but you think she can explain the story to you quickly. When you see her in the hall, you say:

The other situations involved asking for a ride and a raise.

Pretest B was a written DCT with six items of varying imposition. Students were asked to respond as if they were speaking to someone from another culture. Pretest B repeated the Pretest A scenarios, with three additional scenarios. Items prompted students to make requests to individuals of higher and equal status.

The posttest contained nine written DCT items, varying in level of imposition and speaker/hearer relationships. Situations included house sitting, a ride, time off from work, weekend babysitting, apartment information, a shift change, and asking a child and the child's mother to stop kicking a seat (see Appendix B). The tenth was a ranking item, provided below.

> 10. Rank the following sentences from Most Polite (5) to Least Polite (1). If you think that some of the sentences are equally polite, give them the same number. For example, if I thought that sentence A was the most polite, I would write 5 in the space after the sentence. If I thought that sentences A and B were both the most polite, I would write 5 in both spaces.
>
> A) Do you think it would be possible for you to please give me the day off?
> B) Give me the day off.
> C) Could you please give me the day off?
> D) Can you give me the day off?
> E)   I would appreciate it if you would give me the day off.

Students completed a 15-item course evaluation with open-ended questions about which activities they preferred and found most helpful. Eleven ranking items asked students to rate the strength of their (dis)agreement with provided statements about the subject matter, activities, and quality of instruction, such as below.

> 5. Directions and tasks were clearly explained.

0	1	2	3	4	5
(I completely disagree)			(I agree)		(I completely agree)

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[2] Scholars contest the universality of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, correctly arguing that the work is too greatly influenced by Anglo-Saxon individual autonomy (Meier, 1995; Wierzbicka, 1991). However, Brown and Levinson's work is still applicable to Anglo-Saxon norms of politeness.

Three items asked students whether they would change the way they made and viewed request-making in English based on course information.

Students signed informed consent statements approved by the researcher's university before treatment. All data were collected by the researcher; participants were given unlimited time to complete assessments and were allowed to opt out of requests but were asked to explain why they would do so.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first research question examined the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction for teaching requesting. Students' external and internal mitigator use from four pretest items was compared to four posttest items of similar situational variation.[3] Situational variation was measured by (+/-) Social Distance (SD), (+/-) Dominance (x, y), and (+/-) Imposition (IMP), as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978). An explanation of the situational variation coding for Pretest B item 1 follows.

> 1. You want to talk to your teacher about a book you did not understand. You know your teacher is busy, but you think she can explain the story to you quickly.

The hearer is the speaker's teacher so is well-known (-SD). As the teacher, the hearer has more power ($x < y$). Because the hearer can quickly explain the story, there is little imposition involved in complying with the request (-IMP). The item was coded as –SD, $x < y$, -IMP. Appendix B lists each DCT item's situational variation.

The researcher performed frequency counts (means and standard deviations) of students' use of the eight mitigator types in pre and posttest requests: Greetings (i.e., *Hello*), Concern for the Hearer (i.e., *I know you are busy*), Transition (i.e. *Before I forget…)*, Linguistic Distance (i.e., *I was wondering*, *Would you…*), Lexical Downgrader *Please*, Lexical Downgrader *Thanks*, Polite Modals (i.e. *Could*, *Would*), Grounder (i.e., *No one else can do it*). Appendix A includes a further discussion of mitigators.

Inclusion of each of the eight mitigator types (i.e. Greeting, Concern) was counted as +1. Duplications of the same mitigator type, or the use of multiple sub-types of mitigators (i.e., the request "I was wondering if you would take my shift," employs Linguistic Distance through Past tense and Continuous –ING) were counted once; students received +1 for that type. Absent types were counted as 0: "Can you work my shift?" contains no lexical downgrader *please* so receives a 0 count for that type.

The analysis examined descriptive statistics for the DCT results. There was no attempt to identify statistical significance due to the small sample size and because the data set did not meet the assumptions of parametric statistics.
The second research question considered whether intermediate ABE English learners varied request politeness, measured by mitigator use, based on situational variation. It was assumed that students would increase the politeness of requests with greater imposition. Students' mitigator use in Posttest items 5 and 7 (high-imposition

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[3] The items were matched as follows: PreB2-Post3 (-SD, $x = y$, -IMP), PreB3-Post7 (-SD, $x < y$, +IMP), PreB5-Post6 (+SD, $x = y$, -IMP), PreB6-Post1 (-SD, $x = y$, -IMP). Items are marked with an asterisk (*) in Appendix B.

requests for weekend-long baby-sitting and a shift change) was compared to Posttest items 2 and 4 (low-imposition requests for house sitting and time off) to determine whether students varied their use based on imposition.

Because students did not appear to vary requests based on situational variation, Pretest A items 2 and 3 (-SD, -IMP), involving requests for an explanation of a book and house sitting, were compared to Posttest 3 and 7 (+SD, +IMP), requests for a raise and a shift change, to determine whether students' mitigation was influenced by L1 transfer.

The third research question examined students' reactions to metapragmatic instruction. Data from all eight students who filled out an evaluation were included in this analysis. Students' ranking item responses were supplemented with written comments.

RESULTS

Research Question #1

The first research question considered the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on intermediate level ABE-ESL learners. Students' use of mitigators in pretest and posttest items (Pretest B 2, 3, 5, and 6 and Posttest 2, 4, 5 and 7), matched for situational variation, were counted. (See Appendix A for discussion of mitigators.) Because of the small sample size, it is impossible to determine whether changes in students' mitigator use were statistically significant; however, as Table 2 shows, every student increased his/her use of mitigators in the posttest by at least four devices. Fadumo and Axmed's usage increased the most, by 12 and 10. This comparison of students' total internal and external mitigators use suggests that instruction produced a marked difference in post-treatment request-making.

Table 2. *Pre and Posttest Student Mitigation Use*

Student	Total (of 32)	External Mitigation					Internal Mitigation	
		Greet	Con	Trans	Ground	LexD[i]	LD	Modals
Ana	Pre: 14	2	1	2	4	2	0	3
	Post: 18	2	1	1	2	6	3	3
Juanita	Pre: 13	4	0	3	4	1	0	1
	Post: 20	4	2	2	4	0	4	4
Hamza	Pre: 9	3	1	0	3	2	0	0
	Post:17	3	2	2	4	4	0	2
Axmed	Pre: 8	3	0	2	0	3	0	0
	Post: 18	4	4	1	4	1	2	2
Fadumo	Pre: 8	3	0	3	2	0	0	0
	Post: 20	4	3	3	4	3	0	3
Ibrahin	Pre: 8	1	1	0	1	5	0	0
	Post: 17	3	1	2	3	1	3	4
Jafar	Pre: 5	2	2	0	1	0	0	0
	Post: 15	4	1	1	1	3	2	3

[i] x/8 (+1 for *please* and +1 for *thank you/thanks*)

Students' mean use of total mitigators further supports claims of the treatment's effectiveness. Table 3 lists mean scores and standard deviations for each mitigator and total mitigator use from Pretest B and the Posttest.

Table 3. *Pre and Post-test Total Mitigator Use*

	Pretest B		Posttest		Pre-Post
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Difference
Greetings	2.57	0.97	3.42	0.78	0.85
Concern	0.71	0.75	2.00	1.15	1.29
Transitions	1.42	1.40	1.71	0.75	0.29
Grounders	2.14	1.57	3.14	1.22	1.00
Lex.Downgraders	1.85	1.77	2.57	2.06	0.72
Total Mitigators	9.28	3.14	17.71	2.42	8.43

To provide a thorough account of students' mitigation, external and internal mitigation as well as request strategy use were analyzed.

Use of External Mitigation

Overall, students' use of each type of external mitigation increased (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Pre- and Posttest External Mitigator Use*
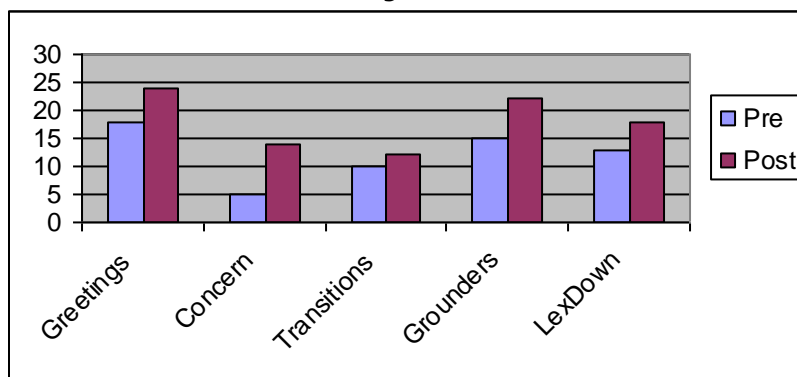
The greatest improvement occurred with *Shows of concern* (most commonly, "How are you?"), which nearly tripled to 14 uses in the posttest.[4] In the posttest, every student used concern at least once, suggesting that the instruction may have increased metapragmatic knowledge of concern as a mitigating device.

Instruction divided concern into three subtypes: references to the hearer's time ("I'm sorry I know busy"), pleasantry statements ("how are you"), and references to the hearer's willingness/ability to perform the request ("if you do[n't] mind," "if you can"). As a whole, the class used an even distribution of all three subtypes in the pretest; however, the posttest showed a strong preference for pleasantry statements. Every student except Jafar used pleasantry statements to mitigate at least one request in the posttest*.* Instead of pleasantry statements, typically occurring pre-request, Jafar used two post-request references to the hearer's time.

In the pretest Fadumo and Juanita used no concern mitigators, but in the posttest they both used several, including Juanita's use of back-to-back pleasantry devices ("How are you? I haven't seen you in a while"). Before the treatment, students were familiar with statements showing concern and pleasantry devices; however, as Juanita and Fadumo illustrate, after instruction, students seemed to better understand that such statements can mitigate requests.

The use of *Grounders* (such as "My car is not work for some reason it is not ignite") increased by almost half in the posttest. Everyone used a grounder in at least one posttest request, and four students increased their total use of grounders. Axmed, who used no grounders in the pretest, used a grounder in all four posttest requests. Students' increase in the use of grounders suggests that instruction may have influenced their understanding of this aspect in request-making.

Use of Internal Mitigation

Posttest requests included a substantial increase in internal mitigators. Figure 2 illustrates the use of *Linguistic Distance* (LD) and *Polite modals* (Modals) to mitigate the head act of the request; use of both types increased in the posttest.

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[4] Parenthetical examples were taken from students' pre and posttest responses.

Figure 2. *Pre- and Posttest Internal Mitigator Use*
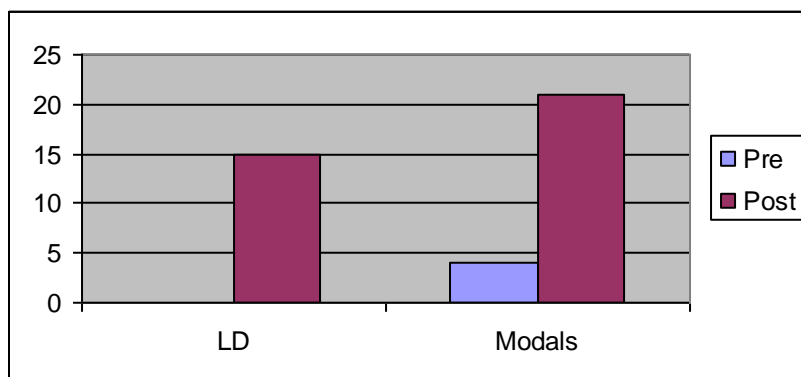
No student used linguistic distance in the pretest. Class-wide posttest use of linguistic distance increased to 15 occurrences; everyone but Fadumo and Hamza used linguistic distance. Students favored two forms: hypothetical modal *would* and Past+Continuous ING. Juanita used Past+Continuous ING to mitigate all four of her posttest requests, using "I *was thinking*" and "I *was hoping*" twice each.

Ana used both types of linguistic distance. When making a low-imposition request of a hearer with equal power, she used hypothetical modal *would*. However, when making a high-imposition request and a request to a +SD hearer, she used Past+Continuous ING. Ana's choices were appropriate based on the treatment which specified that a request was considered more polite if there was greater linguistic distance between the subject of the requesting sentence and the action of the request. Instruction specified Past+Continuous ING as having the most linguistic distance and being the most polite. Because Ana was the only student to apply linguistic distance in a manner consistent with instruction, it is uncertain whether the instruction was effective at teaching the relationship between linguistic distance and situational variation.

Students' use of polite modals increased by five and half times in the posttest; each student modified at least two requests this way. In the posttest, Juanita mitigated all four requests with a modal, using *would* to mitigate a low-imposition request to a stranger. This was consistent with instruction stating that *would* was considered to be the most polite modal and that Americans tend to be most polite to strangers.

Use of Request Strategies

Request strategies, which refer to the level of directness associated with requesting, were not explicitly taught in the treatment.[5] However, students were exposed to a variety of strategies through class activities highlighting mitigators. Pre and posttest comparisons suggest that students may have altered their strategy use as a result of the instruction; however, the effect was minor. The most popular strategy in both the pre and posttest was the *preparatory* strategy, which refers to a precondition for the feasibility of the hearer's compliance with the request (i.e., "Can you give me the

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[5] See the CCSARP manual by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) for strategy explanations and examples.

day off?") (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). The majority of students' preparatory strategies made use of what Wigglesworth and Yates (2004) refer to as the "Canonical can" statement—"Can I...?" "Can I" comprised 12 of the 18 preparatory strategies in the pretest; each student used it at least once, but the strategy went largely unmitigated.

In the posttest, almost every student increased their use of *want statements*, expressing the speaker's desire that the hearer perform the request, ("I would appreciated if you do that for me") and *hedged performatives*, modals that modify requesting verbs ("I was wondering if you could be change my schedule for the morning") (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Left unmitigated, want statements and hedged performatives are more direct, and less polite, than preparatory; however, in the posttest students mitigated these strategies, producing more polite requests. Only two of the 14 posttest preparatory strategies used an unmitigated form of "Can I." The majority of the posttest requests, regardless of strategy, were modified internally through the use of modals *could* or *would.* Students' posttest preference for polite modals suggests that they learned how to mitigate request head acts.

Juanita's posttest suggests that her understanding of request strategies increased. She used hedged performatives (a direct strategy) to realize low-imposition requests to hearers with equal power and want statements (less direct) to realize a high-imposition request and in a request to a +SD interlocutor. Juanita's choice may suggest that post-instruction she understood the increased need for politeness in the two situations.

Overall, the data seem to indicate that metapragmatic instruction was effective at teaching these learners how to use mitigators to increase request politeness. Although some students' strategies increased in directness, this potential movement towards impoliteness was reversed by large increases in external and internal mitigation. Students' increased use of greetings and concern (external mitigation) and their use of linguistic distance and polite modals (internal mitigation) were particularly noteworthy. In addition, students' posttest use of requests that varied in their directness suggests that students increased their ability to control the directness of their requests. Instead of relying upon a common lexical chunk ("Can I…"), students demonstrated their ability to compose requests of varying directness, modified by mitigators.

Research Question #2

Posttest requests were examined for evidence of mitigation based on level of imposition, social distance, and speaker/hearer relationship. Students did not appear to consider situational variation in their mitigation decisions. If situational variation had influenced students' mitigation, one would expect to see the total mitigators decreasing from left to right in Table 4. This is not the case. Table 4 illustrates that situational variation did not influence students' total mitigator use. Nor was it related to the decision to use individual mitigators. Some students favored the use of a single mitigator, employing it to increase the politeness of all four requests considered in this question.

Table 4. *Student's Total Posttest Mitigator Use by Situational Variation*

	Post7: x < y, +SD, +IMP	Post4: x < y, +SD, -IMP	Post5: x = y, -SD, +IMP	Post2: x = y, -SD, -IMP
Ana	2	3	3	5
Juanita	4	3	5	5
Hamza	2	3	2	3
Axmed	2	2	2	2
Fadumo	5	3	4	5
Ibrahin	3	3	3	3
Jafar	3	2	3	3

Students' mitigation decisions appeared unrelated to situational variation. To examine whether students' mitigation choices resulted from transfer, requests from two items in Pretest A were compared to the posttest. However, few mitigation devices were used in Pretest A, and there was no evidence of transfer.

Post-instruction, learners did not appear to consider situational variation in requesting.

Research Question #3

Eight students completed the *Course Assessment*. Reactions were extremely positive, and students felt they learned a considerable amount about request-making and culture. All students completely agreed with the statement "The teacher was respectful of my culture and the cultures of my classmates." Students also agreed that "The teacher made me interested in the cultures of my classmates." Responses suggest that the instruction facilitated understanding of other cultures, particularly American culture.

Students also indicated that the instruction increased their understanding of request-making and politeness. Students agreed that "Now that I have taken this course, I know how to make my requests more polite and the situations when I should make polite requests." Responses to the statement "Now that I have taken this course, I understand why American people make requests the way that they do" expressed similar sentiments. Students' favorable responses suggest that they felt instruction provided useful information about request-making and American culture and that they could apply this knowledge outside of class.

Additionally, individuals' comments suggested that they benefited from the use of meta-talk in pragmatic instruction. One student wrote:

> I am learen a lot of Things For exemple prequst, Liungts destence [linguistic distance] and How deal whit Them people or How to ask peope what ever you want How to you Ask Boss Friendd or you Family and people do you now and different request.

This specific reference to linguistic distance suggests that the student found the class' challenging language and concepts accessible and subsequently felt that he could better navigate the world around him.[6] Another wrote, "This class is very good class and I like very mach because I learn more English words and sentences….I am anderstadning [understanding] ever think easy that is why I Like This class." This student's comment suggests that he benefited from the use of meta-talk. The fact that each student increased mitigator use in the posttest suggests the accuracy of these students' assessments. Perhaps more important was how they felt this knowledge would influence their communication styles.

Seven students completely agreed with the statement "Now that I have taken this course, I will change the way I make requests to American people." The eighth completely disagreed. This response may be an example of pragmatic resistance, which occurs when speakers intentionally avoid a community norm of which they are aware and capable of producing (Ishihara, 2008). Although he rejected American request-making norms, the student indicated in previous questions that he learned a considerable amount about request-making and why Americans request the way they do. Even with this knowledge, he felt certain that he would not modify his style when speaking with an American. Personal convictions aside, the student did modify his request-making style in the posttest, as he increased his mitigator use.

Students generally responded positively to class activities, and all completely agreed with the statement "Tasks were interesting and made me think about the differences between how people from different cultures make requests." Students listed several preferences for which activities were most helpful. Overall, students preferred reading, "because like learn things when I reading," and "I practice more the words." Two other students stated that teacher explanations were the most helpful. However, another student completely disagreed with the statement "The teacher was helpful and explained things I did not understand." The student may have felt that the learning was too student-centered or that his questions were not adequately addressed.

Even though individuals had specific preferences about which activities were most helpful, the variety of activities made students feel like they were able to take something from the instruction. Students responded favorably to metapragmatic instruction and felt that they could apply this knowledge outside of class, if they so chose.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Results

While students increased their use of mitigators and request-making strategies, their posttests indicated that they did not yet understand the influence of situational variation on politeness in request-making. Research on pragmatic acquisition supports this assumption; learners who have acquired pragmatic knowledge also need to learn how to use and automatize it (Bialystok, 1993; Safont-Jorda, 2003).

It is also possible that students learned how and when to use mitigators in accordance with American norms, but that they chose not to do so for personal reasons. However, only one student displayed evidence of pragmatic resistance,

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[6] Students' names are excluded here for purposes of confidentiality.

stating that he would not change his request-making. Other students indicated that they would use the mitigators they practiced in class. Thus, resistance to acculturation cannot fully explain why the rest of the class failed to exhibit an awareness of situational variation.

A second possible explanation for the results is that students' requesting was influenced by L1 transfer. Throughout the treatment, Fadumo repeatedly emphasized that English and Somali requesting were exactly the same—only the language differed. Fadumo's insistence could be related to her level of acculturation; at the time of the study, she had spent 13 years—over half of her life—in the United States. However, the data generally do not support the theory of L1 transfer for these students. For example, Hanson-Huff (2005) identified the Somali tendency to appeal to the relationship with the hearer in order to emphasize resulting obligations. Several of the Somali students in this study used endearment terms, but they did little else to refer to a reciprocal relationship or show concern for the hearer.

Another factor influencing students' request-making choices was attendance. Fadumo's total mitigator use increased by 12 in the posttest, and she increased her use of all mitigators except linguistic distance, introduced during the one lesson she missed. Classes began with a review, which may explain how some students produced types of mitigation introduced when they were absent. For example, Hamza missed both classes on external mitigation but increased his use of external mitigators by a total of four in the posttest.

There are two final points to consider. The first is that even without a firm understanding of situational variation, after the treatment, all of the students' requests could have successfully accomplished their goals outside of the classroom.

Second, use of each of the mitigating devices analyzed in this research would most likely not occur in a single request in the real world. Such a request would be too long and non-native like and would reduce speaker individuality.

The instruction provided students with a small way to control their world by controlling their language use. Post-instruction, students demonstrated that they knew how to vary request politeness. This knowledge contributes directly to their communicative competence, which is essential for acquiring personal and social control (Li, 2000). Even if an individual chooses not to adapt to target norms, as was the case with one student, understanding that such a choice is theirs to make is part of that control. Speaker empowerment is closely related to speaker choice, and it was encouraging to see that at least one student chose to problematize the norms presented in class and decide that they were not an accurate reflection of his identity or the messages he was trying to convey.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample size was too small for a control group and made statistical analysis impossible. Students' sporadic attendance may have limited the treatment's effectiveness.

Data collection decisions further limited the analysis. No information was collected allowing students to explain their mitigation choices. It was assumed that mitigation was based on situational variation; however, this incorrect assumption may have erroneously influenced the data analysis.

The use of DCTs also limited the study. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) criticize written DCTs, stating that respondents may write what they feel should be said rather than what they would actually say, and Varahese and Billmeyer (as cited in Cohen, 2004) argue that traditional DCT prompts cannot provide enough meaningful information about speaker-hearer relationships. A final problem with the DCT was that it was a written assessment of oral communication. Several students indicated that they had limited L1 literacy, so they may have performed differently had they been asked to speak their requests.

Because of researcher oversight, the pre and posttests did not include identical request-making situations. Slight speaker-hearer relationship variations between corresponding pre and post-test items may have affected students' requests in unpredicted ways, decreasing the strength of claims made about changes in students' post-instruction request-making.

A final limitation involved the amount of data analysis. Additional data were collected but excluded from analysis because of time constraints. These data included surveys about students' learning styles and strategies, and pre and posttest measures in which students ranked a series of requests and modals according to politeness. A more thorough understanding of the students' request-making might have been had if these data had been included in the analysis.

Pedagogical Implications

Because of its cultural specificity, pragmatics is an important topic for NNSs and requires thorough attention in language classrooms. ABE-ESL classes offer an environment conducive for pragmatics instruction because they contain diverse student-bodies and are often the site of target-culture exploration. Guy (1999) advocates learning based on racially, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized learners' sociocultural experiences, suggesting that adult educators can minimize the potential for further exclusion of minority groups. One way to do this may be through open discussions about the beliefs behind majority values and norms and how they influence choices, such as the use of mitigators, within a language. Analysis of what certain cultural practices mean could facilitate language development and encourage further pragmatic exploration.

Students in this study successfully accessed the material and seemed to benefit from the use of metapragmatic instruction. Even though metalanguage was ineffective for explaining the importance of situational variation, its continued presence in the classroom seems warranted and perhaps even necessary to encourage pragmatic and language development. Metapragmatic instruction also exposes students to a new way of thinking about language.

Before using metapragmatic instruction, teachers must clearly identify their goals and determine the level of understanding they want their students to demonstrate. In addition, instruction must be presented as a series of choices for empowerment rather than a checklist for acculturation.

Further Research

Further research should include a larger sample size and control group. Retrospective interviews could offer valuable information about the factors affecting

participants' mitigation choices, possibly highlighting examples of pragmatic resistance or helping to identify pragmatic knowledge which has been acquired but not yet automatized.

Additional research should also examine students' oral requesting, perhaps in the performance of requests when students are unaware that they are being assessed. Such an assessment could offer insight into the treatment's impact on students' real-world requesting. It could also highlight changes not captured by the students' written assessments as a result of their limited literacy skills. This is especially important for students, like the participants in this pilot study, whose English fluency cannot be captured in written assessments.

Future studies should also examine the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on lower-level learners to determine what basic organizational knowledge, if any, is required in order for metapragmatic instruction to be effective.

Finally, this study examined only request-making instruction; further research is needed to develop effective metapragmatic instruction for additional speech acts.

AUTHOR

Emily Suh received her MA in ESL from the University of Minnesota, where she worked in the Center for Writing and the Commanding English program. Her interests include immigrant/refugee education and literacy. She worked as a volunteer teacher at the Minnesota Literacy Council and currently teaches EFL in South Korea.

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APPENDIX A

Mitigation Devices (Modified from CCSARP)
I. Pre-requests (a part of conversation that happens before requests)
      A. Greetings (a way to begin a conversation)
            Hello.
            Maria (instruction highlighted the American preference for use of first names to emphasize perceptions of speaker-hearer equality)
      B. Concern for the Hearer (showing the hearer that the speaker cares about hearer wants and needs)
            I know you're busy, but…
            Do you have a minute to talk?
      C. Transition (moves a conversation that has already begun into the request head act; used when the speaker makes a request in the middle of a conversation)
            That reminds me, I was wondering…
            Before I forget…
II. Request Head Act Internal Modification (words/phrases speakers use to increase a request's politeness)
      A. Linguistic Distance (the amount of space between important words in a sentence, where increased linguistic distance makes a request more polite, because there is more space between the subject of the sentence and the action of the request)
            1. Past + Continuous –ING (past tense verb+ING, used to increase the linguistic distance between the subject of a sentence and the action of the request; the following lexical chunks were included in instruction)
                  I was wondering if…
                  I was thinking that…
                  I was hoping that…
            2. Hypothetical Modal *would* (a modal verb that increases a request's linguistic distance)
            *I was wondering if you **would** be willing to…*
      B. Polite Modals (modals were discussed as verbs that are used to explain the degree of certainty that something will happen. When used in a request, a modal is a helping word that shows the willingness or ability of the subject to do the action of the verb) [7]
            ***Would** you please be quiet?*
            ***Could** you please be quiet?*
III. Post-request (speaker's last chance to convince hearer to agree to the request) [8]
      A. Grounder (provides background information, often including reasons why the hearer should comply with the request)
            1. Recognition of request's imposition (speaker's recognition of the difficulties hearer encounters resulting from performing the request action)
                  I know you are busy right now, so I appreciate your help.

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[7] Modals appear both independently as internal modification and as a form under the sub-type of linguistic distance. Polite modals include *could* and *would* and occur within the statement of the request. These modals can be replaced with the less polite form *can* without sacrificing grammaticality or conventionality. The modal *would* which occurs within linguistic distance cannot be replaced with *can* and maintain its conventionality (such as in the question, "*Would* you mind if I left early," or in the statement "I *would* appreciate it if I could leave early.")
[8] If an external modifier appeared in a request it was counted in the data analysis, regardless of whether it appeared in the pre or post-request.

         2. Justification of the request (describes compliance of the request as necessary for the speaker)

         I need a ride, **since my car is broken***.*

         3. Promise to return the favor (explains compliance with the request as beneficial to the hearer)

         If you buy my dinner tonight, **I will pay for you next time***.*

APPENDIX B

Situational Variation of DCT Items

Request Situation	Social Distance	Dominance	Imposition
Pre-test A			
PreA1: Explain book	- SD	x < y	- IMP
PreA2: Ride to doctor	- SD	x = y	- IMP
PreA3: Raise	- SD	x < y	+ IMP
Pre-test B			
PreB1: Explain book	- SD	x < y	- IMP
PreB2: Ride to doctor*	- SD	x = y	- IMP
PreB3: Raise*	- SD	x < y	+ IMP
PreB4: Pick up kids	- SD	x = y	- IMP
PreB5: Extra shift*	+ SD	x = y	- IMP
PreB6: Babysitting*	- SD	x = y	- IMP
Post-Test			
Post1: House-sitting neighbor	- SD	x = y	- IMP
Post2: House-sitting friend*	- SD	x = y	- IMP
Post3: Ride to store	- SD	x < y	- IMP
Post4: Time off*	+ SD	x < y	- IMP
Post5: Weekend babysitting*	- SD	x = y	+ IMP
Post6: Apartment info	+ SD	x = y	- IMP
Post7: Change of shifts*	+ SD	x < y	+ IMP
Post8: Seat kicker	+ SD	x > y	- IMP
Post9: Seat kicker's mother	+ SD	x = y	- IMP

x: Speaker
y: Hearer
+ SD: Great social distance
- SD: Little social distance
* Item considered in data analysis for research question 1
(Table modified from Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989)