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REQUEST MODIFICATION IN THE PRAGMATIC PRODUCTION OF INTERMEDIATE ESP LEARNERS

Abstract

The present paper explores the types and frequency of usage of internal and external request modifications in the production of ESP learners in an attempt to provide a fuller picture of their request performance. The devices under scrutiny include both lexical and syntactic downgraders, upgraders and both mitigating and aggravating supportive moves. The research participants were 37 ESP students, aged 20-22, whose level of general linguistic competence was intermediate (B1 or B2 according to CEFR). Performance data were elicited using a modified version of the written discourse completion test (WDCT) including six situations in which the variables of social power and degree of imposition were varied. The results of the research support the initial hypothesis, which is that the request production of intermediate ESP learners will show very limited variation both with respect to the type of modifications (both external and internal) and the frequency of their usage. The pragmatic production of the intermediate ESP learners who participated in this research is thus shown to be the result of pedagogical instruction and is clearly at a significantly lower level than their linguistic development.

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Key words

ESP, pragmatic competence, speech act, request, internal modification, external modification.

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Sažetak

U radu se istražuju tipovi i frekvencija upotrebe eksternih i internih modifikacija u produkciji studenata engleskog jezika struke s ciljem da se stekne bolji uvid u pragmatičku kompetenciju ispitanika, naročito u njihovu produkciju govornog čina molbe. Sredstva koja se ovde analiziraju uključuju leksičke i sintaksičke oslabljivače i pojačivače značenja, te potporne iskaze, kako za ublažavanje govornog čina tako i za njegovo ugrožavanje. Ispitanike je činilo 37 studenata engleskog jezika struke, starosti između 20 i 22 godine, čije je znanje engleskog jezika na srednjem nivou (B1 ili B2 Zajedničkog evropskog okvira za žive jezike, utvrđeno na osnovu testa opšte jezičke kompetencije). Podaci o produkciji ispitanika prikupljeni su pomoću unekoliko modifikovane verzije testa nadopunjavanja diskursa, koji je obuhvatao šest situacija u kojima smo varirali vrednosti za promenljive društvene moći i stepena nametanja. Rezultati istraživanja potvrđuju početnu hipotezu da će produkcija molbi kod studenata engleskog jezika struke na srednjem nivou biti veoma ograničena u pogledu tipa modifikacija koje se koriste (kako internih tako i eksternih), ali i u pogledu frekvencije upotrebe. Iz ovoga sledi da je pragmatička produkcija studenata engleskog jezika struke na srednjem nivou u potpunosti rezultat pedagoške instrukcije i, u skladu s očekivanjima, na znatno je nižem nivou u odnosu na opšti jezički razvoj ovih studenata.

Ključne reči

engleski jezik nauke i struke, pragmatička kompetencija, govorni čin, molba, interna modifikacija, eksterna modifikacija.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence is one aspect of communicative competence which in Bachman's (1990) model subsumes illocutionary competence (i.e. knowledge of communicative action/ speech acts and how to carry them out) and sociolinguistic competence (i.e. the ability to use language appropriately according to context). Early studies of speech acts have established that speech act behaviour and realization is to a great extent culture specific and that there are "differences in systems of conversational inference and cues for signalling speech acts which combine to form the culture's distinctive interactional style" (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989: 6). Therefore, the development of pragmatic competence in language learners is of extreme importance since failure to use or interpret language in a way which is appropriate to a given situation may lead to

misunderstanding or even to a complete breakdown of communication, paired with the stereotypical labelling of second language users as people who are insensitive, rude, or inept (Thomas, 1983).

Research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has shown that grammatical development does not necessarily go hand in hand with a corresponding level of pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1997, as cited in Kasper, 1997) and that even advanced learners may fail to comprehend or to convey the intended intentions and politeness values (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Even though learners often get a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge “for free”, either because it is universal (e.g. the basic organizational principles of a conversation) or because it may be transferred from the learner’s L1, pragmatic ability still requires special attention in language teaching given that learners often fail to use their universal or transferable L1 pragmatic knowledge in L2 contexts. Various studies have shown that advanced EFL learners tend to have poor command of indirect responses or implicatures (Bouton, 1994), discourse markers and strategies (House & Kasper, 1981), speech acts in different social contexts (Morrow, 1996, as cited in Kasper, 1997; for ESP learners see Halupka-Rešetar, 2013), etc. Yet other studies have examined the production and comprehension of speech acts by second language learners compared to that of native speakers to see to what extent language learners’ pragmatic competence deviates or approximates native speakers (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; House & Kasper, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Rose, 2000; Hassall, 2001, 2003; Schauer, 2004; Woodfield, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008a, 2009; as cited in Najafabadi & Paramasivam, 2012). Especially important in this respect was the large scale study initiated by Blum-Kulka et al. in the 1980s under the title *Cross-cultural speech act realization project* (CCSARP), the aim of which was to examine cross-cultural, sociopragmatic and interlanguage variation in speech act realization in a large number of different languages. Request production and perception has been a very fruitful area of interlanguage pragmatic research in the past three decades. As Savić (2013) points out, Faerch and Kasper (1989) explored internal and external modification in request realizations of Danish learners of English and German, Kim (1995) studied levels of directness and supportive moves in advanced Korean learners’ production of requests, Fukushima (2003) conducted research on request and request response behaviour in British English and Japanese, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008b, 2010) investigated the use of downgraders and external supportive moves in requests made by Greek learners of English and compared the requestive behaviour of advanced Greek EFL learners with that of British native speakers’. The present study, however, will not make such comparisons, as the only research question it aims to address is the following: what types of internal and external modificational devices are used most frequently by intermediate-level ESP students who are native speakers of Serbian?

The results of this study can be compared with the production of various other populations, e.g. advanced ESP students, EFL students who are native speakers of Serbian (for advanced students see Savić, 2013), ESP students who are native speakers of other languages, as well as with the production of native speakers of English (both British and American, see Creese, 1991).

The paper is structured in the following way: Section 2 gives a brief overview of Speech act theory, focusing on the speech act of requests. Section 3 presents the typology of speech act modifications that will be adopted in this research. Section 4 presents the research methodology employed, including the participants, the data collection instruments and the procedures, while Section 5 brings the results and findings of the research. Section 6 briefly recapitulates the main findings of the paper and gives pedagogical implications. Finally, Section 7 concludes the paper and suggests directions for future research.

2. THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST

Speech act theory aims to account for how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers infer intended meaning from what is said. Building on Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) theory, Cohen (1996) classifies speech acts into five groups based on the functions assigned to them. These are (1) representatives (assertions, claims, reports), (2) directives (suggestions, requests, commands), (3) expressives (apologies, complaints, thanks), (4) commissives (promises, threats, offers) and (5) declaratives (decrees, declarations). Clearly, there are other classifications of speech acts, but what most authors agree on is the important distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, a distinction based on whether the speaker actually says what he means or whether he "communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer." (Searle, 1975: 60-61).

Requests are one of the most important speech acts: they occur very frequently in everyday situations, the desired aim of the request utterance can involve a very diverse number of actions or things and also a variety of interlocutors (ranging from equal status individuals, e.g. friends or flatmates to higher status individuals, e.g. landlady or professor), there may be significant cross-cultural differences in the linguistic forms used for formulating requests, therefore L2 learners will need to correctly assess the contextual conditions of the situation and then choose the appropriate linguistic forms to express their request (Schauer, 2009: 25) as inappropriate use of the request act by non-native learners of language can serve to make them look rude or impolite and even cause the communication to break down. An interesting conclusion that various researchers have reached is that some native speakers consider pragmatic errors to be more serious than phonological or syntactic errors (Thomas, 1983). As Blum-Kulka (1991) points out, requesting style is a good

index of a cultural way of speaking. However, in order to appropriately make requests and also perceive the illocutionary force of an utterance as a request, learners have to acquire sociopragmatic knowledge such as the relative degree of imposition of a speech act in the target language/culture, as well as pragmalinguistic knowledge such as the degree of politeness of utterances in the target language in order to avoid being considered rude by native speakers.

Given that requests are face-threatening for the hearer, because they create pressure on the hearer to either perform or not perform an act and thus threaten his/her self-esteem (Brown & Levinson, 1978), and that they involve high social stakes for both interlocutors, requests call for redressive action and require mitigation to compensate for this impositive effect on the hearer (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The speaker can minimize the imposition by preferring an indirect strategy to a direct one, i.e. by activating choice on the scale of indirectness. In addition to this, even within a given strategy, there is a variety of verbal means available with which to manipulate the degree of imposition involved (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Within the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), requests are defined as consisting of three parts: (a) the *alerter* or *address term*, (b) the *head act*, and (c) the *adjuncts to the head act* (also known as *supportive moves*). The head act is the core of the speech act sequence and its only obligatory part. Within the head act, three different strategies have been observed: direct (or impositive), conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect (for a more detailed account of this continuum see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Alerters are opening elements and include items like attention getters (e.g. *Pardon me...*) and terms of address (e.g. *Mrs. Smith*), whereas supportive moves are modifications that precede or follow the head act and affect the context in which the actual act is embedded as they serve the purpose of either mitigating or aggravating the force of the request. In the next section, we will present the types of request modifications the current paper focuses on.

3. REQUEST MODIFICATION

Among the verbal means which can be used to modify requests, Faerch and Kasper (1989) distinguish between internal and external modifications. The former type of modification is achieved through devices within the same head act, while the latter are localized not within the head act but within its immediate context. In neither case does the modification affect the level of directness of the act, nor does it alter its propositional content. The CCSARP's coding manual contains a classification scheme for internal and external request modification based on earlier work by the researchers involved in the project (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; House & Kasper, 1981 and 1987; Kasper, 1981, as cited in Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) and was also partly influenced by literature on speech acts and politeness (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1978; Lakoff, 1973). While the

present study rests on a slightly modified version of this typology, which is based on grammatical and syntactic considerations (see also Achiba, 2003; House & Kasper, 1981; Trosborg, 1995; among others) note that there are other typologies, too, notably the functional typology of Alcon-Soler, Safont Jorda and Martinez-Flor, (2005), which takes into account interactional and contextual factors and is thus more pragmatics-based. The request data were analysed according to the taxonomy in Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010), which incorporated categories from the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and Sifianou (1999) but without the four additional categories they introduce, as the linguistic proficiency of the participants in the research did not call for the introduction of these categories.

External modifications (also called supportive moves) are external to the head act. They are additional statements, whose function is merely to support the request proper, to set the context for it, i.e. to indirectly modify its illocutionary force, either by mitigating it or by aggravating it. Table 1 below gives the final taxonomy of external modifications used in this research (taken from Woodfield, 2012, following Blum-Kulka et al., 1989 and Sifianou, 1999):

	Name	Definition	Devices
a)	Grounder	A clause which can either precede or follow a request and allows the speaker to give reasons, explanations or justifications for his or her request.	'I would like an assignment extension <i>because I could not deal with the typing time</i> ' ¹
b)	Disarmer	A phrase with which "a speaker tries to remove any potential objections the hearer might raise upon being confronted with the request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 287)	'I know that this assignment is important but could you ...?'
c)	Preparator	The speaker prepares the hearer for the ensuing request.	'I really need a favour...'
d)	Getting a precommitment	The speaker checks on a potential refusal before performing the request by trying to get the hearer to commit.	'Could you do me a favour?'
e)	Promise	The speaker makes a promise to be fulfilled upon completion of the requested act.	'Could you give me an extension? <i>I promise I'll have it ready by tomorrow.</i> '
f)	Imposition minimiser	"The speaker tries to reduce the imposition placed on the hearer by this request." (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 288)	'I would like to ask for an extension. <i>Just for a few days.</i> '
g)	Apology	The speaker apologises for posing the request and/or for the imposition incurred.	' <i>I'm very sorry</i> but I need an extension on this project.'
h)	Discourse orientation move	Opening discourse moves which serve an orientation function but do not necessarily mitigate or aggravate the request in any way.	'You know the seminar paper I'm supposed to be giving on the 29 th ...'

Table 1. The taxonomy of external modifications used in the research

¹ Italics are used when the device in question represents only part of the utterance.

Internal modifications, on the other hand, refer to those linguistic elements which, according to Sifianou (1999: 157-158) occur within the same head act. They are linguistic or syntactic devices that are used by speakers to modulate the illocutionary force of their request and can be further subcategorized as *downgraders* (i.e. modifiers that decrease the illocutionary force of a request) and *upgraders* (i.e. modifiers that increase the illocutionary force of a request [Schauer, 2009: 167]). In the CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) downgraders fall into two classes: lexical/phrasal and syntactic downgraders. The final taxonomy of internal modifications used in this research is presented in Tables 2 and 3 below:

Name		Definition	Devices
a)	Marker 'please'	"An optional element added to a request to bid for co-operative behavior" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 283)	'please'
b)	Consultative devices	"expressions by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly bidding for co-operation" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 283)	'would you mind', 'do you think', 'would it be all right if', 'is it/would it be possible', 'do you think I could', 'is it all right'
c)	Downtoners	"modifiers which are used by the speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 284)	'possibly', 'perhaps', 'just', 'rather', 'maybe'
d)	Understaters/ Hedges	"adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 283)	'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of', 'kind of'
e)	Subjectivizers	"elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affair referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of the request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 284)	'I'm afraid', 'I wonder', 'I think/suppose'
f)	Cajolers	"conventionalized, addressee-oriented modifiers whose function is to make things clearer to the addressee and invite him/her to metaphorically participate in the speech act" (Sifianou, 1992: 180)	'You know', 'You see'
g)	Appealers	Addressee-oriented elements occurring in a syntactically final position. They may signal turn availability and "are used by the speaker whenever he or she wishes to appeal to his or her hearer's benevolent understanding" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 285)	'Clean the table, dear, will you?... ok/right?'

Table 2. Lexical downgraders

	Name	Illustration
a)	Conditional structures	'Could you give me an extension...'
b)	Conditional clause	'...if it's possible to have an extension...'
c)	Tense	'Is it all right if I <i>asked</i> for an extension...'
d)	Aspect	'I <i>was wondering</i> if it's possible to have an extension for the assignment.'
e)	Interrogative	' <i>Would you mind</i> doing the cooking tonight?'
f)	Negation of preparatory condition	'I don't suppose there is any chance of an extension?'

Table 3. Syntactic downgraders

Unlike downgraders, upgraders may only be lexical and may include any of the following items, individually or in combination, as shown in Table 4 below:

a)	Intensifiers	'You <i>really</i> must open the window.'
b)	Commitment indicators	'I'm <i>sure/certain</i> you won't mind giving me a lift. '
c)	Expletives	'You still haven't cleaned up that <i>bloody</i> mess!'
d)	Time intensifiers	'You'd better tidy your room <i>right now</i> !'
e)	Lexical uptoners	'Clean up that <i>mess</i> !'

Table 4. Lexical upgraders

They may also include some less frequently used devices, such as determination markers, repetition of request, orthographic or suprasegmental emphasis, emphatic addition and pejorative determiners.

Having listed and illustrated the type of elements whose occurrence is explored in ESP students' request performance, we next turn to the methodology employed in the current study.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Participants

Since the aim of the present paper is to contribute to attaining a clearer picture of ESP students' request performance by examining the modifications they use, the research participants totalled 37 undergraduate students from the Department of Mathematics and Informatics at the Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Serbia. All of the participants were native speakers of Serbian, aged 20-22, whose level of proficiency in English was evaluated as intermediate (B1-B2 according to

the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), based on the *Quick Placement Test* (OUP, 2001) administered prior to the research.²

4.2. Data collection

ESP students' responses were elicited using the form of an open-ended written discourse completion test (WDCT), i.e. a questionnaire containing written prompts (brief descriptions of real-life situations) followed by a space in which the respondent was required to produce a response, in this case, a request for action.³ The questionnaire used in this research involved six situations in which the sociopragmatic variables of social power and degree of imposition were intertwined. The first variable concerns the power of the requester over the requestee (more power, equal power or less power), while degree of imposition refers to the importance or degree of difficulty in the situation (asking for a small favour or a large one). As for the third social factor that is commonly taken to affect the politeness of an utterance, social distance, which refers to the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors, in all the situations in the questionnaire, the interlocutors knew each other.

An example of a task is given below:

You are terribly late for class. On the way to the university, you see your classmate, Andy, who, it turns out, is also late for the same class as you. How do you ask for a ride?

You: _____

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Although WDCT, as a method of data collection has received criticism due to the fact that some situations may put the informants into roles with which they are unfamiliar and thus create unnatural utterances, as well as because the space provided on the sheets may constrain the length of the informant's response, it is also true that WDCTs are an effective means of gathering large amounts of data quickly and are fairly easy to administer.

4.3. Procedures

Research participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in order to find out their interlanguage pragmatic competence in making requests in English. The

² The author wishes to express her gratitude to dr Ljiljana Knežević for her help in collecting the data.

³ According to Sifianou (1992: 121-122), requests can be categorised into (1) requests for information, and (2) requests for action. The author states that requests for action involve a higher degree of imposition than the first category (Fukushima, 2006).

responses collected were then classified in line with the taxonomies of modifications listed above in Section 3. Then, the total frequency and percentage of both external and internal modifications used by participants were calculated. In the next section, we present the results along with a description and comparison of the differences in the linguistic forms used first as external modification, and following this as internal modification in each discourse situation.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most studies focusing on FL learners' request production have concentrated on advanced learners rather than lower level learners (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008b). And while the production of the latter population is more easily comparable to the production of native speakers, this paper aims to make a contribution to the still fairly understudied area of intermediate level FL learners' request performance. The author follows Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008b) in assuming with Bardovi-Harlig (1999: 677) that "although grammatical competence may not be a sufficient condition for pragmatic development, it may be a necessary condition" and given that the participants in this research had limited linguistic ability, we were interested in how this would affect their pragmatic performance, specifically the range and frequency of usage of internal and external request modification.

In order to calculate the type and frequency of usage of modification strategies in Serbian ESP students' request performance, the responses were first analysed and classified in a table according to strategy (rows), degree of imposition (colour) and social power (columns). The strategies which could not be found in any of the responses have been left out. However, before presenting the results of the analysis it is important to mention that although the majority of the participants produced the targeted speech act in the majority of cases, using a conventionally indirect speech act, this was not always the case. Namely, among the Low degree of imposition scenarios, in the Inferior participant case one participant used a hedged performative (*I would like to ask you...*), two respondents did not understand the task, while two further participants opted for a mood derivable direct request (*Tell Dennis...*). In the Equal participants scenario ten participants produced the wrong speech act (nine of them agreed with interlocutor instead of making a request and one offered to help). Lastly, in the Superior Participant situation as many as fifteen mood derivable direct requests occurred in the data (*Turn down the music.*) followed by *please* in only four of these cases. Among the High degree of imposition scenarios, in the Inferior participant case two participants stated they would lie to their superior (thus, they did not produce the targeted speech act), one participant left a blank line and one other student opted for an explicit performative (*I'm asking you...*). Similarly, one student failed to respond in the Equal participants situation, one apologized instead of

making a request and there was also one instance of a mood derivable direct request with *please*. In the Superior participant situation there were four mood derivable direct requests (with *please*) and three participants did not respond to this situation.

5.1. External modifications in ESP learners' request performance

As Table 5 below suggests, the participants in this research showed very limited interlanguage competence not only with respect to the range/types of external modification devices used but also with respect to the frequency of these in the participants' responses.

	Low degree of imposition			High degree of imposition			TOTAL
	Inferior participant	Equal participants	Superior participant	Inferior participant	Equal participants	Superior participant	
Grounder	1	3	13	29	14	2	62
Preparator				1			1
Getting a precommitment					1	1	2
Promise of reward				2	2		4
Imposition minimiser		2					2
Apology			1	2			3
EXTERNAL MODIFICATIONS TOTAL	1	5	14	34	17	3	74

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Table 5. Types and frequency of external modifications in ESP learners' request performance

Not one example of a disarmer was found in any of the 6 situations in any of the 37 participants' responses. Only one instance of a preparator was found in the 222 responses (*I have an important question.*), two examples each of getting a precommitment (*Can you do me a favour?*) and of imposition minimisers (*If you're (already) going to the library,...*), only three apologies (*I'm sorry*), four promises of a reward (*I'll make it up one day soon; We can go out for coffee after class, my treat; I will work (sic!) those hours tomorrow; I'll treat you at the Pub.*) but a total of 62 grounders, usually following the request (*My friend is getting married today; I'm late for class; I don't have time right now; I have a terrible headache, etc.*). Interestingly enough, two participants even decided to use a threat, an example of an aggravating supportive move, which was not expected at all – in both cases this occurred in the Low degree of imposition/Superior participant scenario.

Looking at the difference in the use of external modifiers relative to the social power variable, the current research provides no conclusive evidence for assuming that an inferior participant will use more mitigating supportive moves: as can be seen in Table 1, the figures for the total number of external modifications in the first three columns is the mirror image of the figures in the next three columns, thus there is no reason to believe that this variable in itself should affect the use of supportive moves. Degree of imposition, on the other hand, does seem to have an effect on the employment of mitigating supportive moves in the request production of intermediate ESP students: a total of 54 such moves in the three situations which involved a high degree of imposition is a significant increase compared to the 20 examples of external modifications in the situations which implied a lower degree of imposition. Still, while these devices are expected to occur most frequently in the High degree of imposition/Inferior participant scenario, it remains unclear why in the Low degree of imposition/Inferior participant scenario only one instance of this device was found.

Thus, while several studies conducted within the CCSARP framework have found that non-native speakers overuse external modifications in making requests, this is often due to cultural differences between the speakers' L1 and the target language (e.g. Eastern culture vs. British culture). However, numerous studies have also supplied evidence that intermediate (and advanced) learners modify their requests less frequently than native speakers (e.g. House & Kasper, 1987; Trosborg, 1995; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008a and 2009, to name but a few). In other words, given that at lower levels of proficiency learners (are required to) focus almost exclusively on grammatical competence, the low frequency and poor variation found in the supportive moves collected in this research is not entirely surprising.

5.2. Internal modifications in ESP learners' request performance

An overwhelming majority of the participants' responses were conventionally indirect requests involving the *Could you/Would you/Can I* type of structure, which is clearly the result of instruction, as these are the common forms for expressing requests taught at lower levels of proficiency (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008b). The politeness marker *please* is also introduced at a very early stage in language learning, in fact it is one of the first things any learner of English is taught. Thus, similarly to external modifications, apart from the two devices mentioned, internal modifications also varied little in the request production of intermediate ESP learners.

As Table 6 below shows, among the lexical/phrasal downgraders, *please* was used most often, in a total of 78 instances (out of the over 200 requests made). There were 8 instances of an understater (3 times *a bit*, 4 instances of *a little bit*

and one of *a little*) and only one example of a consultative device being made use of (*Any chance I could ...*, though used inappropriately in making a request to one's superior at work). Among the syntactic downgraders, the conditional structure was employed in the overwhelming majority of cases (174 times), other strategies occurred in the participants' responses extremely rarely. Only five examples of the conditional clause were found (*I would be very grateful if you...; If you are going to the library... (2 instances); I would appreciate it ... (2 instances)*) and only two interrogative sentences (both *Will you ...?*).

		Low degree of imposition			High degree of imposition			TOTAL
		Inferior participant	Equal participants	Superior participant	Inferior participant	Equal participants	Superior participant	
Downgraders								
Lexical	Please	15	10	18	6	12	17	78
	Understater	1		7				8
	Consultative device				1			1
Syntactic	Conditional clause		2		2	1		5
	Conditional structure	34	26	20	31	34	29	174
	Interrogative		1				1	2
DOWNGRADERS TOTAL		50	39	45	40	47	47	268
Upgraders								
Intensifier			1	1	1			3
Time intensifier				1				1
UPGRADERS TOTAL			1	2	1			4
INTERNAL MODIFICATIONS TOTAL		50	40	47	41	47	47	272

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Table 6. Types and frequency of internal modifications in ESP learners' request performance

The use of upgraders was even more limited. Of the five types of upgraders commonly used by native speakers the participants in this research used only intensifiers (*really* in all three cases) and only one of the participants used just one instance of a time intensifier (*right now*).

Examining the participants' use of internal modifiers relative to the social power variable, the current research again provides no conclusive evidence for assuming that an inferior participant will use more internal modifications, either downgraders (lexical or syntactic) or upgraders. The distribution of the politeness marker *please* and of the conditional construction show no significant differences with respect to the social power variable and all the other examples of internal

modifications are used too rarely to provide reliable data for valid conclusions. One exception might be the use of understaters, although the occurrence of *a bit/a little/a little bit* in the participants' responses seems to be motivated by the age of the addressee (an imagined niece) rather than any other factor.

In terms of the degree of imposition, the use of *please* is fairly balanced in the six discourse situations, except for the High degree of imposition/Inferior participant scenario, where fewer instances of this politeness marker are found. The use of the conditional structure does not differ significantly between the two sets of discourse situations, however in the Lower degree of imposition/Superior participant scenario fifteen participants used a mood derivable direct request (of which only four were accompanied by *please*).

All the results obtained in this research suggest that very scant attention is paid to developing the communicative competence of ESP learners. And while Alcon-Soler (2005) points out that some features of the EFL context hinder pragmatic learning, such as the narrow range of speech acts and realisation strategies, typical interaction patterns which restrict pragmatic input, large classes, limited contact hours and little opportunity for intercultural communication, the ESP context seems to be even more constrained by these factors. The results are obvious: ESP learners may ultimately attain a fair degree of linguistic competence (especially in terms of the vocabulary pertaining to their field of study) but with little awareness of how to use language appropriately in various situations. In order to improve this situation, ESP and EFL learners must receive explicit pragmatic instruction, some guidelines for which are suggested in the next section.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the analysis of the use of request modifications in the pragmatic production of ESP learners reveal that while most participants did use a conventionally indirect request strategy in most cases, their pragmatic competence in using request modifications, both external and internal, is significantly below their linguistic competence. Namely, supportive moves reduce to the occasional use of a grounder, almost as a rule in the High degree of Imposition/Inferior participant scenario, only sometimes in the High degree of imposition/Equal participants and the Low degree of imposition/Superior participant scenarios and hardly ever in the remaining three situations. The occurrence of all other supporting devices in the participants' responses can be attributed to chance.

The only strategies that the participants systematically used for request internal modification, regardless of the degree of imposition, were the lexical downgrader *please* and among the syntactic downgraders, the conditional structure. Other downgraders, but also upgraders were few and far between in the data. The results of the research presented here point to the conclusion that the

request performance of intermediate ESP learners is characterized by a significant underuse of modifications, both external and internal. The strategies occurring in the participants' responses are clearly the result of instruction. However, this is not to suggest in any way that no sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic instruction is required. On the contrary, the pedagogical implications of the present study are obvious: the amount and type of materials contained in most syllabi for B1/B2 level EFL/ESP learners need to be supplemented with explicit instruction regarding the pragmatics of English (specifically, speech act behaviour and realization, with special focus on the differences between L1 and L2). This may be achieved by using authentic audiovisual input (video, films and TV) for various tasks, e.g. discussing, interpreting, analysing the input (and comparing it to the students' L1), role play, various discourse completion tasks (DCT), etc. (cf. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study examines the use of external and internal modifications in the request production of 37 intermediate-level ESP learners. The data analysed in the paper were elicited from the participants using the Written Discourse Completion Test with 6 situations in which the variables of social power and degree of imposition varied between Inferior participant/Equal participants/Superior participant and Low degree of imposition/High degree of imposition, respectively. The data were categorized using Woodfield's (2012) taxonomy of external and internal request modifications, based on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Sifianou (1999).

The results of the research confirm the initial hypothesis that the request production of intermediate ESP learners will show very limited variation both with respect to the type of modifications (both external and internal) and the frequency of their usage. In the overwhelming majority of cases the participants produced the targeted speech act and in most cases they also opted for a conventionally indirect request. However, the analysis of the data indicates that among the supportive moves grounders were used almost exclusively, whereas among internal modifications only the use of the conditional construction and the politeness marker *please* is observed regularly (both downgraders), while upgraders occur extremely rarely. All this points to the dire need to devote more attention to developing ESP learners' pragmatic competence. It is hoped that the conclusions of this small-scale research will help researchers focus on the numerous areas of interlanguage pragmatics that are still understudied in ESP, but also show ESP educators and curriculum developers the importance of teaching L2 pragmatics.

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