Developing spoken requests during UK study abroad: A longitudinal look at Japanese learners of English

Abstract

The present study tracks the longitudinal pragmatic development of spoken requests by Japanese, adult learners of English during an academic year abroad, and aims to examine whether and how their requestive performance develops over time in high and low-imposition situations. Data were collected at three points of the academic year using oral, virtual role plays, and semi-structured and group interviews. Data analysis examined the type and frequency of request strategies and modification devices employed by the group over time. Findings revealed that there were only some pragmatic gains (e.g. a slight drop in the use of want statements) as learners were very slow in adopting a new form-function mapping and expanding their pragmalinguistic repertoire. They relied on (and overused) a limited set of request sequences and had clear preferences for particular ways to express (in)directness, confirming that pragmatic gains might often be small, and development may follow a non-linear trajectory.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research within the field of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) has investigated the development of L2 pragmatic competence in study abroad (henceforth SA) contexts using a longitudinal approach to examine learners' competence over a period of time abroad (see Xiao, 2015, for a review of longitudinal ILP studies). Pragmatic competence has been defined as 'the ability to convey and interpret meaning appropriately in a social situation' (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Taguchi, 2012: 6), and aspects of this competence are believed to be assisted by

the SA context (Perez Vidal & Shively, 2019). SA settings, unlike traditional classrooms, can provide ample pragmatic input through greater opportunities for observations and for real-life interactions with NSs in different cultures and in a variety of different social situations. It is therefore assumed that spending a sojourn or more abroad can lead to pragmatic gains (Kinginger, 2008, 2009) by helping towards the development of L2 learners' pragmatic abilities (Shively & Cohen, 2008).

However, previous research and the results of a number of SA longitudinal studies have indicated that the picture is far more complex and less clear-cut than that. Even though the majority of studies have confirmed that a sojourn in the SA context has a generally positive impact on L2 learners' pragmatic performance (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Barron, 2003, 2007; Halenko, Jones, Davies & Davies, 2019; Schauer, 2006), 'learners may not become native-like in all respects and may not make the same progress' (Schauer, 2010: 105). Research has also indicated that pragmatic development often occurs at different rates on different aspects of pragmatic features, and hence not all pragmatic features seem to develop to the same degree or at the same pace over the same SA period (e.g. Schauer, 2009). Therefore, mixed gains have been reported across various aspects of pragmatic competence (Xiao, 2015), while considerable individual differences in L2 gains often stand out (Perez Vidal & Shively, 2019). Thus, even though the SA context can provide ample resources of pragmatic input, learners' actual access to these pragmatic resources differs among individuals (Kinginger, 2008), with variables such as length of stay in the target-language (TL) culture, intensity of contact, and proficiency affecting the facilitative role of the SA context in pragmatic development.

The present study is situated within the fields of ILP and second language acquisition (SLA), and aims to track the longitudinal pragmatic development of spoken requests by ten Japanese,

adult learners of English during an academic year abroad in the UK. The study seeks to examine whether and how the Japanese learners' requestive performance develops over time in the study abroad context, by collecting data at three points of the academic year (month 1, month 5 and month 8). Data are collected using oral, virtual role plays, and group interviews, and the analysis examines the type and frequency of request strategies and modification devices employed by the group over time in high and low imposition situations.

More specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do the Japanese learners' request strategies develop over time in the study abroad context, if at all?
2. How do the Japanese learners' request modification devices develop over time in the study abroad context, if at all?

The chapter begins with a review of the relevant research on SA, longitudinal ILP investigations of request development, and then presents some key findings that specifically concern the pragmatic performance and development of Japanese learners of English (sections 2 and 3)**.** Section 4 continues with the presentation of the methods, and procedures used in the study, while section 5 presents and discusses the findings. The conclusions and limitations of the investigation are offered in the last section.

2. Background

Aiming to explore any possible developmental trends within the context of SA and requests, a number of studies have taken a longitudinal approach to examine how spending a sojourn

abroad can have an impact on L2 learners' pragmatic performance and development. This section will limit itself to review SA studies in non-instructed settings, relating primarily to the development of requests strategies, with reference mainly to English as a second/foreign language and adult learners.

2.1 Study-abroad research and request development

Most research on L2 pragmatic development in SA contexts has confirmed that spending time abroad as a student can lead to some pragmatic gains, and that an even fairly short SA period 'can result in an increase in L2 pragmatic competence' (Perez Vidal & Shively, 2019: 359). Nevertheless, research (e.g. Barron, 2003; Li, 2014; Ren, 2015; Schauer, 2007, 2009; Woodfield, 2012) has also reported much variability in acquiring target-like competence and has suggested that in such uninstructed SA contexts, pragmatic gains might sometimes be small and development may follow a non-linear trajectory. There is therefore 'not always a positive association between the SA experience and improved pragmatic comprehension or production' (Halenko et al., 2019: 73).

Schauer's longitudinal SA studies (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) used a multimedia elicitation task to examine the development of request strategies and of internal and external modification of advanced German learners of English who were studying at a British university over a period of nine months. Her studies report a generally positive impact of the SA context on her learners' performance as far their requests strategies were concerned - her SA learners stopped using the direct request strategies imperatives and unhedged performatives in the final data collection phase unlike their earlier sessions. However, the author also reports that some L1 influence persisted, as her learners continued to transfer from L1 and used the direct strategy of hedged performatives in high imposition scenarios and with a high-status interlocutor. Her analysis of

the learners' modification strategies further indicated the pervasive role of individual learner differences, as a different development was observed for different learners. While they all increased their repertoire of internal modification, not everyone increased their external modification, and those who did, increased their repertoire differently.

Schauer's findings regarding learners' internal modification development were in agreement with those reported in Barron's (2003) study which investigated the internal modifiers of the requests produced by Irish SA university students learning German. Barron's (2003) learners, similarly to Schauer's (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009), also increased their use of lexical/phrasal modifiers towards that of the German NSs during their stay. However, the learners' syntactic modifiers presented no marked development, and it was claimed that L2 learners in the SA context might use a greater variety of lexical/phrasal modifiers earlier than syntactic modifiers.

Some mixed results regarding the request modification of the learners' requests are also reported in Schauer's earlier 2004 study. In this study, Schauer (2004) reports that some external modifiers that were initially underused (small talk, flattering, showing consideration) approached the native-level after 4 months. However, several internal modifiers remained underdeveloped (such as consultative devices, imposition minimisers, tag questions) while morphosyntactic devices showed a slow development. This development included a slowly increased use of appreciation devices: (*it'd be nice*), and conditional clauses (*I'd like to ask if you could do this*).

More recently, Sell, Renkwitz, Sickinger and Schneider (2019) examined the requests produced by 17 German high-school students before and after a 10-month stay in Canada, and compared their production with that of NSs. Sell et al.'s (2019) study showed that the learners

displayed a strong preference for a conventionally indirect strategies (of the query preparatory type: *can you, would you mind*) both before and after their stay. Their performance, however, was non-target like as the learners overused these strategies and their internal and external modification moves compared to the NSs. Yet, the learners showed a development from initial reliance on syntactically more simple structures (in phase 1) to more complex structures (in phase 2), and they increased their use of external moves even more in the second phase of the study. The authors (2019: 115) explain this increased use of modifiers as a feature of the later stages of pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002) and refer to the 'waffle phenomenon' and the learners' desire to be 'explicit about their communicative goals and the reasoning behind them' (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993: 9).

The facilitative role of the SA context in pragmatic development is also reported in Cohen and Shively (2007) and Shively and Cohen's (2008) studies which analysed the requests and apologies of 67 U.S. American SA students before and after spending one semester in a Spanish-speaking country. The study divided participants into two groups: a control group that received no pragmatic intervention, and a treatment group that received pragmatic instruction. Cohen and Shively's (2007) results showed that the learners' pragmatic performance was significantly improved over the course of one semester in the TL environment irrespective of whether the learners had received pragmatic instruction or not. Their qualitative analysis also showed an observable increase of use of verbal downgrading. Shively and Cohen's (2008) study, however, found that while in some cases learners shifted towards more native-like performance, in other cases, they also remained or moved away from native-speaker norms.

Other studies examining the development of request performance over a sojourn abroad produced mixed results. For example, Vilar Beltran's (2008) investigation of the development

of request performance of 104 non-native speakers over their stay abroad in the UK, found an increased range of modification but no significant differences in speech act use. A complex picture was also received in Woodfield's (2012) SA investigation whose results indicated that advanced learners' pragmatic behaviour 'tend(s) to show a complex and wide range of behaviour, from divergence to convergence' (Dalmau & Gotor, 2007: 209). Woodfield (2012) examined the development of request modification strategies in eight graduate students in a British university over a period of eight months using roleplays, and found that her participants relied more on lexical/ phrasal forms of internal modification (notably downtoners) at the beginning of their sojourn (with a decreasing frequency), as compared to syntactic forms of modification which followed a slower development. Syntactic devices such as the interrogative were totally absent, in line with findings from Barron (2003), Schauer (2009) and Cole and Anderson (2001).

Woodfield's study further confirmed that even though all learners presented evidence of acquisition of new forms of internal modification during their SA, there was also evidence of important individual variation (2012: 41), something that echoed findings from previous longitudinal studies (e.g. Schauer, 2006, 2009). In terms of external modification, learners' frequencies approximated the NS data throughout the study, with a preference for alerters, grounders, imposition minimisers and preparators. Importantly, Woodfield's results regarding internal modifiers indicated a linear decrease in the use of these markers across the three time periods, a finding which was also in line with that of Cole and Anderson's study (2001) with Japanese learners of English.

Cole and Anderson's (2001) longitudinal study used a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to examine the pragmatic development of 35 high school Japanese participants during their 10-

month stay in New Zealand or Canada. Similar to Woodfield's (2012) study, their participants also decreased their use of downgraders after their stay in the TL community, although a converse trend was observed in requests to interlocutors of a high status. Cole and Anderson explain this decrease through the 'playing it safe strategy' (Faerch & Kasper, 1989: 239) that learners sometimes employ in the early stages of their development in order to adhere to the principle of clarity through the production of unambiguous realisations. In line with Schauer (2004), Barron (2003) and Woodfield (2012), Cole and Anderson's (2001) study additionally revealed that syntactic modifiers were employed more extensively by the end of the learners' sojourn, confirming the claim that syntactic modifiers develop at a slower pace and at a later stage than lexical/phrasal mitigators. At the same time, their participants moved from a direct style to conventionally indirect in all the situations on the DCT at the end of their SA sojourn, a development that confirmed the findings of Ellis' study (1992) which showed that learners follow a developmental pattern from direct to conventionally indirect request strategies.

To sum up, research suggests that the SA context alone does not unequivocally lead to pragmatic gains for all learners (Taguchi, 2014), and there is much variability in acquiring target-like pragmatic competence. However, some pragmatic gains are reported in the majority of SA investigations despite the fact that these gains may be marginal and development non-linear or slow. These gains seem to relate to a shift from nontarget-like directness to conventional indirectness, and an increase in the repertoire of lexical mitigators and/or external modifiers. It also appears, however, that syntactic forms follow a slower development.

2.2 Japanese learners of English and requests

Some further investigations particularly relevant to the focus of the current research have focused exclusively on Japanese L2 learners of English (henceforth JEs) and their speech act performance and/or development (e.g. Beebe et al. 1990, Osuka, 2017; Taguchi 2011, 2012; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, 1993). Findings from a number of such studies have underlined pragmatic transfer from L1 as a common phenomenon in Japanese learners' pragmatic performance, and/or a general tendency for high degree of nontarget-like requestive directness.

With specific reference to cultural interference, Beebe et al. (1990) found that their Japanese learners of English displayed a sensitivity towards context-external factors (i.e. interlocutors' familiarity and social status) and context-internal factors (i.e. degree of imposition and right to make the request), often displaying instances of sociopragmatic transfer in their refusals. Beebe at al. (1990) demonstrated that JEs varied their selection of refusal strategies along the same contextual parameters as NS of Japanese, namely whether the speaker's status was higher or lower than that of the hearer. Transfer was also evident in the order, frequency and content of semantic formulas, all of which followed Japanese NSs' trends. Takahashi and Beebe's (1993) developmental study, similarly to Beebe et al. (1990) found that, in the speech act of correction, Japanese learners, like Japanese NSs, style-shifted more according to interlocutor status than did speakers of American English. As the authors explain, whereas 'Americans go by the polite "you and I are equals", Japanese go by the polite "you are my superior"' (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993: 154). More recently, Osuka's (2017) investigation which focused on a group of JEs during a one-semester in the US, similarly highlighted L1 transfer as one of the main impeding factors relating to the learners' limited development of pragmatic routines. The study revealed that only one conventionalised expression showed a significant increase after their sojourn abroad, and that 'many of the expressions preferred by the JEs (were) a kind of direct translation from Japanese' (Osuka, 2017: 289).

An instance of pragmatic transfer and sociopragmatic failure is also reported by Fukushima (1990) whose study compared the requests of tertiary-level Japanese learners of English with British NSs. The Japanese learners used significantly greater directness than the British as they tended to use request strategies that were too direct in English, yet appropriate in Japanese, which nevertheless resulted in situation-inappropriate expressions (e.g. 'Give me back my Y5000') (Fukushima, 1990: 323). The learners were unsuccessful in differentiating expressions according to the relationships between the interlocutors or according to the situation (i.e. degree of imposition).

Along the same vein, a number of other interlanguage request studies confirmed the JEs' preference for directness, and more specifically for want statements (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003; Timpe-Laughlin & Dombi, 2020), or mood derivables of the "imperative + please" structure (Akutsu, 2012). More specifically, Timpe-Laughlin and Dombi's (2020) recent study examined the request realisations performed by Japanese and Hungarian learners of English in a fully automated, multi-turn dialogue. The study showed that the JEs (who were of a B1 language proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)), employed direct strategies in the majority of their requests (80%), with want statements being their most preferred substrategy. They used no external modifications at all and made only a minimal use of internal modifiers (30%).

Particularly relevant to the focus of the present investigation is Taguchi's (2012) longitudinal, developmental investigation of the requests of 48 JEs (B1 level) in Japan, over the course of one academic year. The study, which focused on the learners' pragmatic development in low and high imposition requests, confirmed that, over time, there was a gain in all aspects of

pragmatic production, although different developments were received in these two different types of situations. While low-imposition requests developed with a steady, even pace, especially in the first time period, high-imposition requests followed a slow development which only became evident in the later time periods 2 and 3. In terms of overall requests strategies, the learners at all three time points employed a significantly higher degree of requestive directedness than the NS control group, relying mainly on imperatives with 'please' (in high and low imposition requests), a result that supports the findings of the studies above. However, this direct syntactic construction decreased over time, and progress was also observed through their increased use of preparatory constructions and permission questions ('could you', 'may I'). Regarding the learners' use of external modifications, they were found to overuse grounders (reasons, explanations) in all three phases, again a strategy which gradually decreased over time (especially in low-imposition requests) but still remained nontarget-like. A construction that revealed no change over time and was almost completely absent from the learners' repertoire, was the mitigated preparatory construction which involved embedded questions and bi-clausal structures (e.g. 'I was wondering if') possibly due to the learners' low proficiency levels. High imposition requests were also almost completely devoid of internal modifiers such as hedges and amplifiers.

Overall, results from previous studies indicate that JEs often exhibit evidence of cultural interference and pragmatic transfer from L1, and they are most likely to employ an inappropriate degree of requestive directness and limited use of mitigations, especially in high imposition requests. Nevertheless, developmental studies, either SA or at home, indicate that some pragmatic development can take place with time, and/or instruction (see Takimoto 2006; Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay & Thananart 1997), although 'the mastery of pragmalinguistic

forms is a slow developing process' (Taguchi, 2012: 123) that can be influenced by a number of different factors (learners' proficiency, individual differences, amount of contact etc.).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Ten Japanese undergraduate exchange students agreed to participate in the study. The group arrived from various universities across Japan and had chosen the UK as their preferred SA destination to improve their language skills and cultural knowledge. The exchange students were enrolled on various teacher training and business communication programmes but came together to receive additional English language classes as part of the international exchange. The study was undertaken during these sessions which monitored their English language development over the ten-month stay.

All students met the CEFR B2 level requirement of the exchange programme. Further details of the students were obtained from a background questionnaire completed at the start of the study. The group comprised six females and four males who ranged in age from 20 to 22. On average, the group had between four and seven years of formal English language instruction in Japan (mean average of 5.9 years). Four students reported previous SA stays of between two weeks and two months in English-speaking countries.

3.2 Data collection

To assess pragmatic development over the SA period, the students completed a computer-animated production task (CAPT) designed to elicit oral responses via virtual role plays, using university campus staff as simulated interlocutors (Figure 1). The CAPT has the benefits of being able to simultaneously capture large amounts of oral data whilst maintaining controlled conditions. The instrument has been used successfully in a number of other pragmatic studies examining instructional effects during study abroad (Halenko 2018, 2021; Halenko & Jones 2017; Halenko et al. 2019) but has yet to be employed examining longitudinal acquisition of oral requests. The computer-based format of the CAPT meant it was also a suitable fit for a study of this kind. The CAPT was administered in the same computer lab at three specific time points of the study abroad period (month 1- October, month 5- February, month 8- May). Each test contained the same scenarios to directly compare responses and track evidence of pragmatic development but were ordered differently each time to reduce test effects.

You want to find out how to book a study room at the library.

You ask a library assistant about it.

You do not know her.

You say?

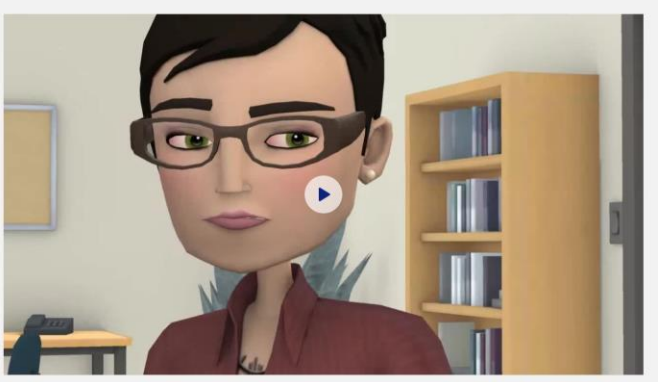

Figure 1. Example of request scenario on the CAPT

The CAPT contained six request scenarios, differentiated by level of imposition, which were set in the context of situations the students were likely to experience on a university campus (Table 1). All scenarios involved requests for action which places a higher degree of burden on the interlocutor than when requesting information, for instance. The four animated interlocutors

(librarian, campus security guard, accommodation officer and class tutor) were considered higher status (+P) but otherwise varied on the levels of familiarity (+/-SD) or imposition of the request presented (+/- R). Completing each oral response on the test required a three-step *read, listen, speak* process. Participants first read the brief contextual information about each request scenario, listened to an initial turn made by the animated interlocutor, then provided a situationally-appropriate oral response. The six-scenario CAPT was completed in approximately fifteen minutes though no overall time limit was imposed. All responses were recorded and stored for analysis.

Table 1. Request scenarios on the CAPT

Scenario	**Interlocutor**	**Imposition**
1. Book at study room at the library	Librarian (+SD)	Low (status congruent request)
2. Intervene with badly behaved students	Campus security guard (-SD)	Low (status congruent request)
3. Collect worksheets from a tutor after missed class	Class tutor (-SD)	Low (status congruent request)
4. Change unsuitable room in accommodation	Accommodation officer (+SD)	High (status incongruent request)
5. Negotiate new deadline on assignment	Class tutor (-SD)	High (status incongruent request)
6. Extend library loan beyond due date	Librarian (+SD)	High (status incongruent request)

Low imposition requests were those considered status-congruent where the requests match the role and status of the student (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993) e.g. requesting to collect worksheets from a tutor. In these cases, since the requests fall within the roles of responsibilities of the academic staff, mitigation devices to soften the request may not be a high priority. High imposition (non-congruent) requests, on the other hand, are those where the status of the staff

member is challenged (ibid.) e.g. negotiating a new deadline on an assignment. The academic staff in these situations are not obliged to comply with the request and an additional burden in terms of time and effort may apply in doing so. Within the requests in this study, the interlocutor is also being asked to bend the institutional rules in order to grant the request. High imposition requests, therefore, typically warrant high levels of mitigation in the form of linguistic (e.g. situationally-appropriate request strategies) or non-linguistic (e.g. brief and timely acts) status-preserving strategies (SPS). These additional moves are rapport-building and help ensure the request is accomplished in a favourable way. Including this level of analysis helped provide a more comprehensive picture of request performance over time.

3.3 Coding and analysis

Following administration of the CAPT at the three time points (henceforth T1, T2 and T3), the recorded request data were transcribed. All ten learners attended the T1 and T2 tests and eight learners attended the final test at T3. This yielded a total of 168 request responses across the three tests.

To categorise the data, a framework based on Blum Kulka House and Kasper (1989) and Taguchi (2012) was adopted for comparison purposes and previous successful use coding oral requests from Japanese learners of English (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding framework for requests (based on Blum, Kulka, House & Kasper 1989; Taguchi 2012)

Direct expressions	Imperatives	Lend me your pen. Please lend me a pen
	Performatives	I'd like to ask you to lend me a pen
	Obligation statements	*You should lend me a pen*
	Want statements	I want you to lend me a pen I'd like you to lend me a pen
Indirect expressions	Preparatory questions	Could you/would you/can you lend me a pen?

	Suggestions	*How about lending me a pen?*
	Permissions	May I/Could I/Can I borrow a pen?
	Mitigated expressions	Do you think you can lend me a pen? / I wonder if you can lend me a pen?
	Hint	*My pen's just run out*
Conventional questions	*Formulaic expressions that convey request intent*	*Do you have a pen? / Pardon? / What did you say?*
Internal modification	Hedging	A little, a bit, maybe, perhaps
	Amplifier	Really, so, very absolutely
	Token 'please'	Could you extend the deadline please?
External modification	Grounder	I misunderstood the due date
	Apology	I'm sorry / It's my fault but
	Preparator	I'd like to ask you something / I have a request / can you do me a favour?
	Confirmation	It is ok? Can I?
	Appreciation	Thank you / I appreciate it
	Request for suggestion	What do you think I should do?
	Imposition minimiser	If it's ok with you / If you have time / If possible
	Hearer benefit	*I need this so that I can turn in a quality paper*
	Promise	*I'm sure I will finish it in two days*
	Attention getter	Hello Professor Smith / Excuse me Dr Santos

Note: Strategies in italics were absent from this study's data set

Like Timpe-Laughlin and Dombi (2020), but on a much greater scale, the coding procedure highlighted that 45% of the requests contained a combination of two different request strategies within a single turn; a direct request followed by an indirect request as in the example, *'I want to move accommodation so could you help me with this?'*. For analysis purposes, these were counted as two distinct requests to explore this trend in more detail.As such, a total of 246 request tokens (from the original 168 test responses) were analysed according to the framework in Table 2.

The eight participants at T3 also took part in short, semi structured group interviews with one of the researchers. The aim was to ascertain their general perceptions of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development of request language during their year abroad exchange. The

participants were divided into two smaller groups (*n*=4) and each interview lasted approximately 8-10 minutes.

Analysis of the oral tests began with a quantitative SPSS examination of frequency counts of the number and range of direct and indirect strategies, and internal and external modification devices employed across the three time periods. Following this, a qualitative analysis of the data on these four levels allowed the researchers to observe trends at the lexical level including preferred formulaic expressions, or other patterns used to realise the requests. A breakdown of these analyses according to the two levels of imposition was also conducted. The interviews were analysed according to emergent themes arising from the participants discussing their own experiences of when and how to use request language in Japan and the UK. The themes supporting the quantitative data are the main focus.

4. Findings

This section presents the qualitative and quantitative findings of the study. First, a quantitative overview of the frequency of request strategies T1-T3 is presented. Second, a qualitative account of the data examines the levels of directness and indirectness employed. Third, follows an analysis of internal and external modification. The section concludes with an examination of request moves not present in the T1 data, but observed as emergent interlanguage features as the SA period unfolded.

4.1 Overview of request performance T1-T3

Beginning with the quantitative analysis, Table 3 shows the average number of request strategies produced by the group over each of three time periods during their study abroad stay.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for request strategies T1-T3

	Mean	**SD**	**N**
T1 total	22.88	2.85	8
T2 total	26.13	4.51	8
T3 total	28.13	5.86	8

Note: Listwise deletion in the GLM repeated measures test means the T3 cases with missing data have been excluded from the entire data set (including T1 and T2), lowering the overall sample size. Replacing missing data with Series Means is not advised (Pallant, 2020). The Mean totals represent the average number of strategies produced by the group over each time period.

A repeated measures ANOVA reveals a significant main effect of time on the number of request strategies produced by the group; $F(2, 14) = 6.22$, $p = 0.012$, partial $\eta^2 = .471$. Likely due to the small sample size, pairwise comparisons show between time differences as follows; T1-T2 ($p = 0.169$), T2-T3 ($p = 0.363$), T1-T3 ($p = 0.077$). These results show the group steadily increases the frequency of their request strategy use over the study abroad period. This indicates the group felt the need to include additional request moves over time to achieve the same outcome. These analyses of group change are further examined at the imposition level in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for low and high imposition request strategies T1-T3

	Mean		**SD**		**N**
	Low	High	Low	High	
T1 total	11.00	11.88	1.93	1.55	8
T2 total	12.75	13.38	2.43	2.50	8
T3 total	14.25	13.88	3.62	3.14	8

A repeated measures ANOVA reveals a significant main effect of time on the number of request strategies produced by the group for low imposition scenarios; $F(2, 14) = 8.47$, $p = 0.004$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.547$. Pairwise comparisons show between time differences as follows; T1-T2 ($p = 0.05$), T2-T3 ($p = 0.311$), T1-T3 ($p = 0.035$). For high imposition scenarios, there is no significant effect of time $F(2, 14) = 2.14$, $p = 0.154$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.234$. In other words, significant changes in request strategy use are only observed in low imposition scenarios. Findings in Tables 3 and 4 are verified and explained in the following sections detailing the qualitative aspects of the data.

4.2 Syntactic request forms

As illustrated in Table 5, direct and indirect request sequences are prominent features across all time periods. Almost half of the data set is characterised by the request pattern 'direct request + indirect request' in a single turn, as in the example, 'I want to book a study room so could you help me?' This sequencing accounts for the high levels of both direct and indirect request expressions across the data set.

Table 5. Frequency of direct and indirect request forms

Coding	**Sub-strategy**	**Data**	**T1 L**	**T2 L**	**T3 L**	**Total Low**	**T1 H**	**T2 H**	**T3 H**	**Total H**	**T1 Total**	**T2 Total**	**T3 Total**
Direct expressions	Imperatives (1a)	Please tell me (them)	3	3	0	6 (12%)	0	0	0	3 (5%)	4 (10%)	4 (9%)	1 (3%)
		Please give me	0	0	0		1	1	1				
	Performatives (1b)	Can I ask you to	1	0	0	9 (17%)	0	0	0	9 (14%)	4 (10%)	8 (18%)	6 (18%)
		I want to ask you to	1	1	1		2	1	1				
		I'd like to ask you	0	2	3		0	4	1				
	Want statements (1d)	I'd like to	4	7	5	37 (71%)	9	10	4	54 (82%)	32 (80%)	33 (73%)	26 (79%)
		I want (to)	8	8	5		7	5	7				
		I need	0	0	0		4	3	5				
Total											40 (34%)	45 (38%)	33 (28%)
		Could you	15	10	13		7	12	6				

Indirect expressions	Preparatory questions (2a)	Can you	3	5	2	50 (74%)	3	1	2	32 (53%)	29 (60%)	30 (71%)	23 (61%)
		Would you	0	2	0		1	0	0				
	Permissions (2c)	Can I	8	4	2	15 (22%)	7	2	4	20 (33%)	18 (38%)	9 (21%)	8 (21%)
		May I	0	0	0		1	1	1				
		Could I	0	1	0		2	1	1				
	Mitigated expressions (2d)	Is it possible to	0	1	0	3 (4%)	1	2	3	8 (13%)	1 (2%)	3 (7%)	7 (18%)
		Would it be possible to	0	0	1		0	0	0				
		I'm wondering if I could	0	0	1		0	0	1				
		I'm wondering if it would be possible to	0	0	0		0	0	1				
Total											48 (37%)	42 (33%)	38 (30%)

At each time period, the study abroad students display an overwhelming preference for *want statements* (T1 80%; T2 73%; T3 79%), whilst *imperatives* (T1 10%; T2 9%; T3 3%) and *performatives* (T1 10%; T2 18%; T3 18%) are employed at much lower levels. In general, a non-linear trajectory in relation to direct strategies across time can be observed (34%, 38%, 28%) with slight increases at T2 and falls by T3. By T3, *want statements* continue to be used consistently (79%), marked by higher frequencies of unhedged statements ('I want') than by hedged statements ('I'd like to'). Observing directness at the imposition level across time, *want statements* occur more frequently in the high imposition scenarios and the unhedged 'I need' only appears here. *Imperatives* are mostly found in the low imposition scenarios. Figure 1 illustrates these observations.

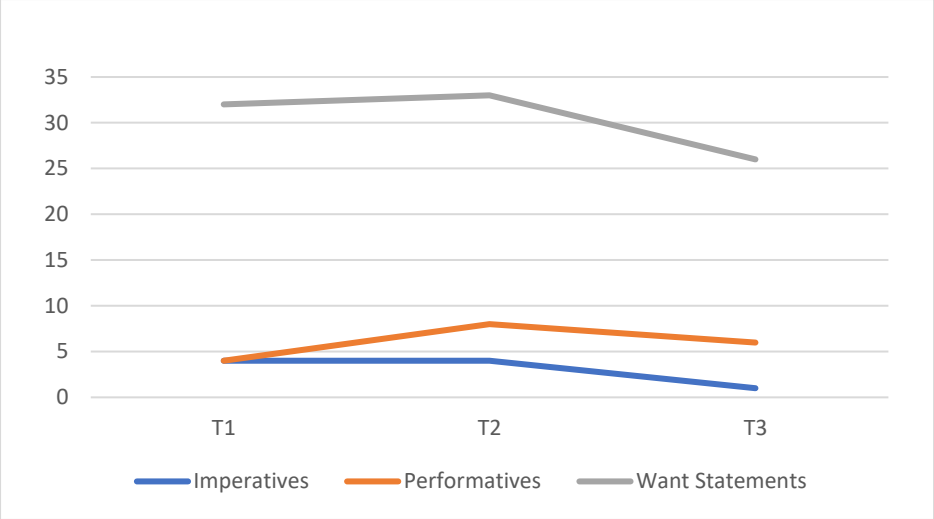

Figure 1. Most frequent direct request strategies T1-T3

Indirect request expressions also feature heavily in T1-T3, and to approximately the same degree as directness (Figure 2). Across time periods, the exchange students largely opt for *preparatory questions* ('could you') which reference the hearer's ability (64% of total indirectness), followed by *permissions* ('can I') (referencing the speaker's ability) (27% of total indirectness) and *mitigated expressions* (9% of total indirectness). Observations of small increments of progress are also evident here. Whilst the former two strategies generally evidence small to large decreases over time, mitigated expressions show the opposite pattern, particularly in high imposition scenarios. The formulaic sequence 'is it possible to' shows some development across time, with more complex bi clausal structures ('would it be possible to', 'I'm wondering if I could', 'I'm wondering if it would be possible to') appearing for the first time at T3 in both low and high scenarios. This group characterisation must be treated with caution, however, since these examples appear at very low levels and are employed only by a few individuals.

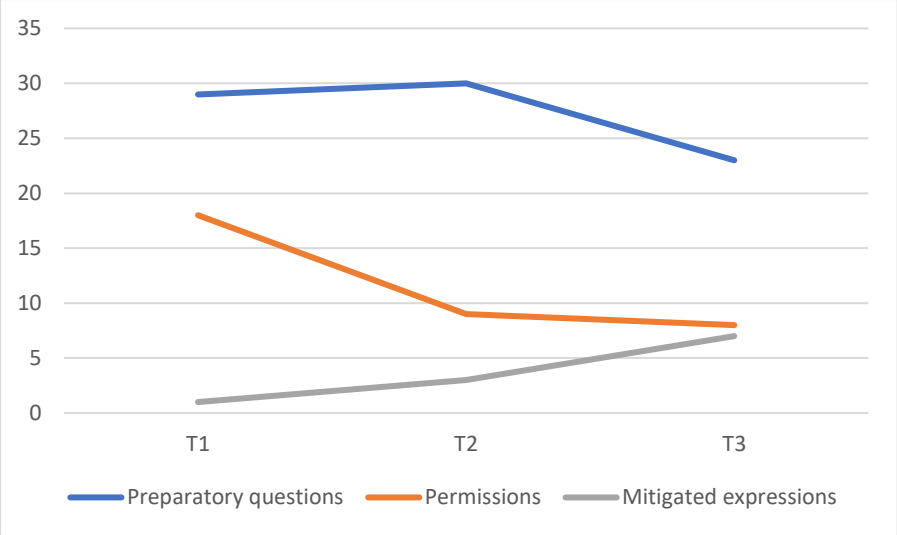

Figure 2. Most frequent indirect strategies T1-T3

In summary, frequency counts show that learners tend to rely on (and overuse) a limited set of request sequences within each category and have clear preferences for particular ways to express (in)directness. The three most common strategies observed are *Want statements* (T1 80%; T2 73%; T3 79%), *Preparatory questions* (T1 60%, T2 71%, T3 61%) and *Permissions* (T1 38%, T2 21%, T3 21%). Only occasionally are attempts made to experiment by expanding the range of expressions. For instance, there are signs of increasing the number of mitigators over the SA period, but development in this area is generally slow. A key point to note is that developmental shifts appear in only a few learners and are not common to all group members. Most learners' development remains static throughout the period abroad.

4.3 Lexical modification (Lexical/phrasal mitigators)

In contrast to syntactic forms, Tables 6 and 7 reveal that the employment of lexical and phrasal mitigators usedto soften the requestive force, varies to a much greater degree. Internal modification (Table 6) was employed in a limited way in T1-T3 (5 instances, 19 instances, 22 instances). By contrast, learners included at least one form of external lexical modification in 100% of the request tokens in all time periods (Table 7). The heavy reliance on this strategy

can be observed in the range and frequency external mitigators employed in Table 7 across T1-T3 (148 instances, 172 instances, 131 instances).

Table 6. Frequency and type of internal modification

Coding	**Sub strategy**	**Data**	**T1 L**	**T2 L**	**T3 L**	**Total low**	**T1 H**	**T2 H**	**T3 H**	**Total high**	**Total T1**	**Total T2**	**Total T3**
Internal modification	Hedging (4a)	kindly	1	1	0	8 (28%)	0	1	0	2 (12%)	1 * (20%)	5 (26%)	4 (18%)
		just	0	3	3		0	0	1				
	Amplifier (4b)	really	1	0	0	5 (17%)	1	0	2	6 (35%)	3 (60%)	1 (5%)	7 (32%)
		so	1	0	2		0	1	1				
		very	0	0	1		0	0	1				
	Token 'please' (4c)		1	8	7	16 (55%)	0	5	4	9 (53%)	1 (20%)	13 (68%)	11 (50%)
Total											5 (11%)	19 (41%)	22 (48%)

Note. *figures represent the number of times (instances) each internal modifier occurs in the dataset. % represents the percentage of the total number of internal modifiers produced at each test stage.

As can be seen from Table 6, learners' use of internal modification at T1 is extremely limited (11%) though developmental signs are evident as the months pass. In fact, although internal modification is employed at comparatively low levels at T3 (22 instances), the frequency of modification devices consistently rises. This increase is visually presented in Figure 3 and contributes to lexical/phrasal internal modification marking the greatest overall increase of 37% between T1 and T3 time points. Specifically, the use of *'please'* (T1= 1 instance; T2= 13 instances, T3= 11 instances) and *amplifiers* (T1= 3 instances; T2= 1 instance; T3= 7 instances) evidence the greatest marked changes, found most commonly in low imposition scenarios. This observation is made with the cautionary caveat that T3 frequency is still comparatively low overall.

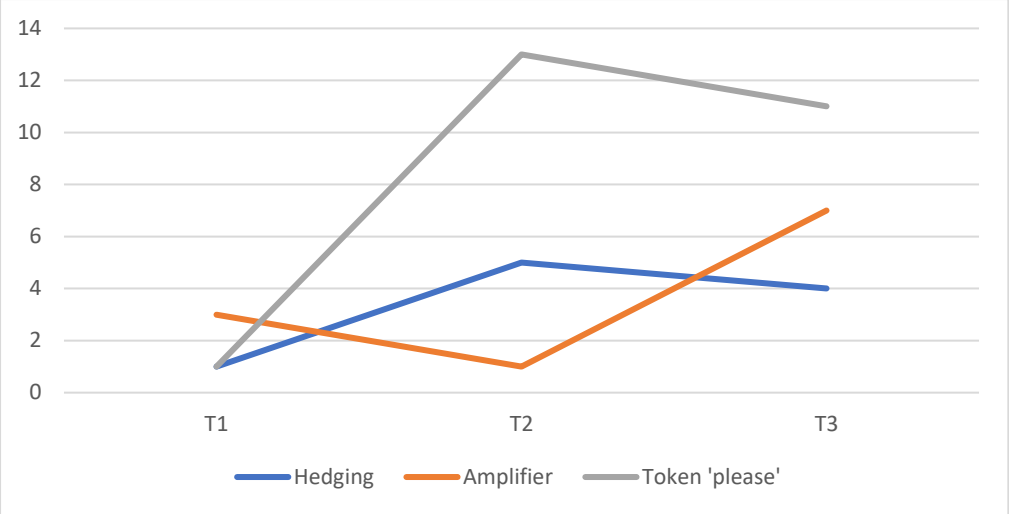

Figure 3. Changes in use of internal modification devices T1-T3

By contrast, external modification is employed to a much greater extent and range (Table 7). Learners typically combine two or three devices within a single turn as in the example, *'Excuse me. Can you help me? In this building some students make some noises so I couldn't, I can't concentrate on my study. So ... can you tell them ... to stop chatting or make noisy. Is that ok?'*

Table 7. Frequency and type of external modification

Coding	**Sub strategy**	**Data**	**T 1 L**	**T 2 L**	**T 3 L**	**Total low**	**T 1 H**	**T 2 H**	**T 3 H**	**Total high**	**Total T1**	**Total T2**	**Total T3**
External modification	Grounder (5a)		25	28	25	78 (35.5 %)	30	34	23	87 (37.5 %)	55 (37%)	62 (36%)	48 (37%)
	Apology (5b)	Sorry	1	0	0	20 (9%)	0	0	0	15 (6%)	9 (6%)	15 (9%)	11 (8%)
		I'm sorry	5	7	6		3	7	5				
		I apologise	0	1	0		0	0	0				
	Preparator (5c)	Can I ask a(some) question(s)?	1	1	0	19 (9%)	1	0	0	16 (7%)	12 (8%)	16 (9%)	7 (5%)
		May I ask (you) a question?	1	1	0		0	1	0				
		I have a(some) question(s)	0	1	0		2	0	0				
		I have something to ask/tell you	1	0	0		1	0	2				
		Can I ask you something?	0	1	1		0	1	0				

		I want to suggestion to you	1	0	0		0	0	0				
		I have a (some)problem(s)	2	3	1		0	0	0				
		I have (can I ask) a favour	0	0	1		1	1	0				
		I want to talk about…	0	0	0		1	1	0				
		Can you help me?	0	1	0		0	0	0				
		Can you talk with me now?	0	1	0		0	0	0				
		Do you have time(to speak)?	0	0	0		0	1	1				
		I would like to ask you something	0	0	0		0	1	0				
		Can I do you a favour?	0	0	0		0	1	0				
		Could you do me a favour	0	0	1		0	0	0				
	Confirmation (5d)	Can/could I (do that/it)?	0	0	0	1 (0.5%)	5	2	0	11 (5%)	7 (5%)	4 (2%)	1 (1%)
		Is that ok?	0	1	0		1	0	0				
		Is that/it possible?	0	0	0		1	1	1				
	Appreciation (5e)	Thank you	1	1	2	4 (2%)	0	1	0	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	3 (2%)
		I will appreciate it	0	0	0		0	0	1				
	Request for suggestion (5f)	How can I do it(that)?	2	1	1	4 (2%)	0	0	1	1 (0.5%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
	Imposition minimiser (5g)	If (it's) possible	0	3	2	5 (2%)	2	4	1	9 (4%)	2 (1%)	9 (5%)	3 (2%)
		If you like	0	0	0		0	1	0				
		If you are happy	0	0	0		0	1	0				
	Attention getters (5j)	Excuse me	5	6	8	88 (40%)	9	7	9	91 (39%)	60 (41%)	63 (37%)	56 (43%)
		Hi	11	8	9		8	8	8				
		Hello	12	14	6		13	15	9				
		Hi Mister	1	0	0		0	0	0				
		Hi/Hello teacher/Professor	0	1	2		1	0	1				
		Hey	0	2	1		0	0	0				
		Good morning	0	0	0		0	0	1				
		Excuse me Professor		1	1			1	1				
Total											148 (33%)	172 (38%)	131 (29%)

Grounders (37% of all external modification) and *attention getters* (40% of all external modification) stand out as the most preferred strategies across time points and follow a non-linear trajectory. Small T1 increases over time can be seen in the sub-strategies *apology* (+ 6 instances at T2, +2 instances at T3) and *appreciation* (+1 instance at T2, +2 instances at T3), whilst a slight decrease over time is observed in *confirmation* (-3 instances at T2, -6 instances at T3). Perhaps counterintuitively, both *apology* and *appreciation* are used more frequently in low imposition scenarios. Two sub-strategies show a T2 increase, followed by a T3 decrease; *imposition minimisers* (+ 7 instances at T2, -6 instances at T3) and *preparators* (+4 instances at T2, -9 instances at T3). These observations are illustrated in Figure 4.

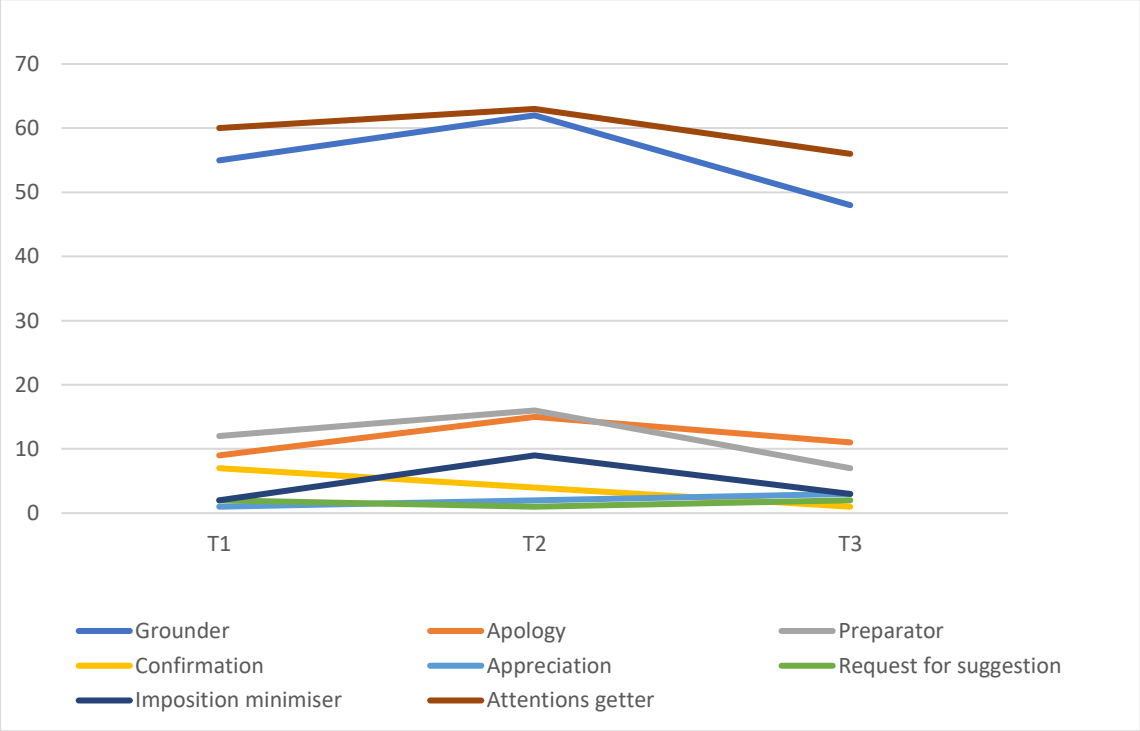

Figure 4. Changes in use of external modification devices T1-T3

Whilst a range of other request routines are employed at the testing points, these are limited to 1-2 instances in most cases - a pattern consistent with other findings presented so far. Overall, learners' request modification is limited in scope and tends to follow a predictable pattern

across time periods. External modification is favoured by far over internal modification throughout, with *grounders* and then *attention getters* being the go-to options.

4.4 Emergent interlanguage request features

To illustrate improved request performance in some group members, it is useful to examine non-salient request features at T1 and examine their developmental trajectory over time (Table 8). In other words, which pragmatic tokens or routines emerge as new interlanguage features during the study abroad stay?

Table 8. Development of non-salient request features

Sub-strategy	**Expression**	**T1**	**T2**	**T3**
Hedged performative (direct request)	*I'd like to ask you to…*	0	6	4
Hedging (internal modification)	*just*	0	3	4
Preparators (external modification)	*Can I ask you something?*	0	2	1
	I would like to ask you something	0	1	0
	Could you do me a favour?	0	0	1
Appreciation (external modification)	*I will appreciate it*	0	0	1
Imposition minimiser (external modification)	*If you like*	0	1	0
	If you are happy	0	1	0

The data shows the emergence of several mitigating techniques during the study abroad, albeit in small numbers and only used by four group members. These developmental features were absent in the T1 data, suggesting an influence of the year abroad on the learners' interlanguage. These emergent features in request directness or lexical modification offer ways to reduce the coerciveness of the request (*'I'd like to ask you to', 'just'*), engage in facework to prepare the

hearer for the request *('Can I ask you something?')*, adopt rapport-building techniques (*'I will appreciate it'*), or offer additional optionality for compliance *('if you like', 'if you are happy'*). Despite some mismanagement of the grammatical or contextual appropriateness of these features in some cases *('I will appreciate it', 'if you are happy'*), they all serve as markers to show that these learners have noticed and adopted these formulaic tokens during SA. It may also show learners have developed a greater sensitivity to the need for mitigation when making requests.

Though there is also positive development in the adoption of more syntactically complex routines in some learners (e.g., *would you mind, would it be possible to*), their personal journeys are in fact a story of mixed successes. These new request expressions are at times grammatically incorrect and often show repeated reformulation as learners stumble through the challenges of navigating formulaic expressions they have encountered, but not been explicitly advised or guided on the pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic aspects of their use. This characterisation of pragmatic development in this area is exemplified in (1) and (2) below.

(scenario 2)

(1) 4.26 – 'Hi. I have found some students are very noisy, so is it possible ... umm ... would you mind I ask you to go there to so ... and ... speak to them to ... would you minding I ask you to ... to meet them and speak them to ... not to do noise, not to make noise?' - 5.11

(scenario 4)

(2) 4.23 – 'Excuse me. I'm a student living in this accommodation, you know ... I have a problem, umm ... some students are very noisy, so ... umm ... is it be possible to you,

would it umm, be possible to umm, to .. go, go ... to meet them ... and, err, to ask them to be quiet?' - 5.04

In some cases, the data also reveals attempts at initiating L2-like bi clausal structures at T2 and T3 but giving up mid-way and returning to the safety of known expressions which are less cognitively demanding. Example (3), taken from T2, is illustrative of this risk-averse behaviour.

(scenario 4)

(3) 3.01 - Hello, can I do you a favour? ... err ... I'm sorry I have recently... I'm having a problem with my accommodation and I want to, I wonder...I'm wonder if ... I want to ask you to find a new place to live ... and do you have any suggestions to, err, new accommodation. - 3.30

5. Discussion

The present study examined Japanese learners' requestive performance in a number of +P scenarios, aiming to investigate the extent to which the learners' requests were affected by the SA experience. SPSS results revealed statistically significant differences, suggesting that learners increased the number and range of strategies performed over time. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, these strategies were still limited to the same basic linguistic forms to convey pragmatic intentions, and the learners were found to use predictable patterns of request performance with the same go-to options for sub-strategies across all three time periods. Even at T3, they relied on the same predictable patterns and exhibited dependence on routines they were already familiar with, avoiding experimenting with new constructions. More specifically,

at each time period, there was an overwhelming preference for want statements ('*I'd like to'* mainly used in low imposition requests, '*I want to*' slightly more preferred for low imposition requests). Similarly, overdependence on preparatory questions (mainly of '*could you'* type) and permissions ('*can you'*) was observed across time and for both high and low imposition situations.

This result echoes Taguchi's (2012: 137) finding whose Japanese learners also 'had a limited range of pragmalinguistic resources and overgeneralised one or two forms over a range of functions. They were slow in adopting a new form-function mapping and expanding their pragmalinguistic repertoire'. The learners' overall preference for want statements in the present study is also not surprising as it is in line with previous studies with Japanese learners that report reliance on such non-target-like directness (Fukushima, 1990, Timpe-Laughlin & Dombi, 2020), and more specifically on want statements (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003; Timpe-Laughlin & Dombi, 2020). In Timpe-Laughlin and Dombi's (2020) investigation, want statements were the most preferred strategy for their B1 Japanese learners (53.3%). These were also unmarked by internal or external modification but were followed by indirect expressions in many cases, similarly to the findings of the present study. The authors refer to their participants' low proficiency as an explanation of this finding and the 'lack of knowledge or resources' which 'is often manifested in the overgeneralisation of one or two forms (want-statements in this case) (2020: 28), something which suggested that their Japanese participants were at the early stages of request development (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Even though the participants of the present study were at a B2 level (slightly more advanced), it is likely that low or developing proficiency is an explanation for this overgeneralisation here as well.

At the same time, it can be argued that the ten-month stay of the learners in the SA context was not a long enough period for them to develop their L2 proficiency, which was at an intermediate level at the time of the investigation. A number of studies have pinpointed length of study as a factor affecting pragmatic development and have found that the longer the L2 students stay in the foreign country, the better their pragmatic performance (e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004; Schauer 2009). It is therefore likely that, as a result of their limited proficiency, the learners chose to prioritise urgency and clarity of message over politeness. Timpe-Laughlin and Dobi (2020: 246) explain that, low proficiency learners in particular, tend to rely on direct strategies when making requests because they are easier to produce and are transparent at both the propositional and illocutionary levels (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Sasaki, 1998; Timpe-Laughlin, 2016). Observing directness at the imposition level across time, our results indicated that *want statements* occurred more frequently in the high imposition scenarios – in situations where, it could be argued, transparency is more typically required as a way to justify the burden on the interlocutor.

Our study's results further show the JEs's over-reliance on the preparatory question strategies of '*could you'* type, a finding which agrees with Sell et al.'s (2019) results whose German learners also overused their query preparatory type strategies throughout their SA. It also agrees with Osuka's (2017) findings whose study with Japanese learners showed that '*could you'* was one of the pragmatic routines which were already used by JEs before SA as it was taught to them at school in Japan and thus continued to be used post SA. During the group interviews, the learners of the present study similarly confirmed that the preparatory questions were a common feature of teacher and textbook input. They suggested that the most commonly taught expressions for them were '*Could you'* and '*Can you'* (with '*could you'* regarded as more polite), and that these are the routines that they 'use the most'. At the same time, conventionally

indirect requests are often a highlighted feature in EFL/ESL textbooks presented as the way to perform polite requests in English (Barron, 2016; Timpe-Laughlin & Dombi, 2020; Uso-Juan, 2008). This overuse of preparatory questions seems therefore to corroborate Bardovi-Harlig's (2009: 782) argument that 'overuse of familiar expressions'[…]'subsequently reduces the opportunity to use more target-like expressions' and that 'once conventional expressions are acquired, learner production will show a period of overgeneralisation' (2009: 783).

The learners of the present study were also found to make very little use of complex, bi-clausal structures (i.e. mitigated expressions: '*would it be possible to, I'm wondering if I could, I'm wondering if it would be possible to*) in each time period. Osuka (2017: 289), whose study gave similar results, explains that structures that do not have an L1 equivalent seem to be difficult to acquire, and routines such as the ones above have no equivalent in Japanese language which has no subjunctive mood. This seems to lead Japanese learners to view such subjunctive constructions as complex and therefore consciously avoid them because of their syntactic complexity (2017: 289). Interviews with the learners of the current study further revealed that learners would be hesitant to use expressions they had never seen in textbooks or never practised in the classroom pre-study abroad, even though they were familiar with these expressions. During the group interviews some learners commented that, during SA, they had been exposed to routines such as '*I'm wondering if you could'*, '*Would you mind'* but they admitted that they were not confident to use them productively, something which indicates that the learners have some receptive but not productive knowledge of such routines. There was also disagreement and confusion among learners about formality of these expressions, further suggesting that these learners were not fully aware of the sociopragmatic context within which to use these phrases, and they were not yet ready to make 'associations between these pragmalinguistic forms and their contextual requirements' (Taguchi, 2012: 137).

Nevertheless, the results of the present investigation indicated that, from T1 to T3, the learners decreased their use of directness and there was a slight drop, albeit marginal, in the use of want statements and imperatives, a finding which suggests some pragmatic gains. Results further revealed a slight increase in the learners' use of the formulaic sequence '*Is it possible to*' (mainly in high imposition situations), with more complex bi-clausal structures appearing for the first time at T3 in both low and high scenarios. This could also suggest some development across time, although at the group level there was little improved performance. This finding seems to support a number of previous studies which point out that the mastery of pragmalinguistic routines is a slow-developing process (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Osuka, 2017; Taguchi, 2012) and that syntactically modified sequences (typically embedded questions and bi-clausal structures) tend to be employed more extensively by the end of the learners' sojourn as they develop at a slower pace and at a later stage than lexical/phrasal mitigators (Barron, 2003; Schauer, 2004; Taguchi, 2012; Woodfield, 2012; Cole & Anderson, 2001). Overall, the improvements currently observed at the syntactic level of request strategies could be characterised by baby steps rather than strides forward.

With regard to request modification devices and their development over time, external mitigators featured more prominently than internal modifiers across time - a finding that is in line with previous interlanguage investigations on request modification (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2009; Woodfield, 2008). Studies have argued that external modification in the form of supportive moves is acquired by learners quite early on and are extensively used probably due to the fact that, unlike internal mitigators, they often involve a syntactically simple clause and they therefore tend to be less demanding and pragmalinguistically less complex for learners (Hassall 2001, Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009).

The learners of the present study, similarly to Taguchi's (2012), over-relied on grounders (i.e. reasons, explanations) to support their requests, a preference which followed a non-linear trajectory: the use of grounder increased even more in T2 and then decreased in T3 reaching a slightly lower level than that of T1. Even though the current study used no NS baseline data to confirm this, it could be argued that extensive reasons are nontarget-like and, according to Taguchi (2012: 123), a possible indication of the learners' limited pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic ability.

Importantly, however, some development in the use of lexical downgraders could be observed across time, as there was an increase in the employment of hedges, amplifiers and 'please' from T1 to T3, mainly in low imposition scenarios. This finding agreed with Schauer (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009), Timpe-Laughlin and Dobi (2020), and Taguchi's (2012) results whose learners also increased the use of these internal modifiers during their SA, suggesting a small sign of progress and some SA effects. Yet, overall, the learners' use of internal modification was extremely limited. A potential reason for the small number of internal modifications, as compared to external modifiers, might be the automated nature of the computer-animated production task (CAPT), and the learners' 'limited processing capacity' (Taguchi, 2012: 139) when faced with the online, oral production task. It is likely that the learners, whose proficiency was rather low, could not retrieve the expressions needed to formulate internally modified requests on the spot, despite having no time pressure. This suggestion relates to the learners' oral fluency as part of their pragmatic production, and it is an area of investigation that is pending further research.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

This small-scale study aimed to examine the longitudinal pragmatic development of spoken requests by Japanese, adult learners of English during nine months studying abroad in the UK. Results from the analyses of their request strategies in three different moments in time, showed that learners were very slow in adopting a new form-function mapping and expanding their pragmalinguistic repertoire as there were only some pragmatic gains that could be characterised as baby steps rather than strides forward. The learners relied on (and overused) a limited set of request sequences and had clear preferences for particular ways to express (in)directness, confirming that pragmatic gains might often be small and development may follow a non-linear trajectory. The most common strategies observed were *Want statements*, *Preparatory questions,* and *Permissions and* attempts made to try something new and expand the range of expressions were made only very occasionally. Significant changes in request strategy use were only observed in low imposition scenarios, while developmental shifts appeared in only a few learners with most learners' development remaining static throughout the period abroad. Overall, learners' request modification was also limited in scope and tended to follow a predictable pattern across time periods. External modification was favoured by far over internal modification throughout, with *grounders* and *attention getters* being the go-to options. Overall, no dramatic changes were observed in the group during their SA, and the improvements currently observed at the directness and modification level of request strategies could be characterised as marginal, allowing one to confirm that 'living and studying in an EFL environment alone may not be sufficient to become pragmatically competent in the target speech community' (Velar Beltran 2014: 82).

Nevertheless, the present study does not come without its limitations which dictate that these findings need to be treated with caution. Firstly, the present study used only a small sample of ten learners and a larger number of participants would have allowed for greater generalisation.

In addition, no baseline English NS data were utilised and, as such, the learners' performance cannot be confidently compared with the NSs' production. And perhaps even more importantly, the present investigation did not examine individual variability and/or quality and intensity of interaction in the L2. The examinations of these factors are pending for further research as they will allow us to delve deeper into how such external variables may affect the facilitative role of the SA context in pragmatic development.

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