Examination of Learner and Situation Level Variables: Choice of Speech Act and Request Strategy by Spanish L2 Learners

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Examination of Learner and Situation Level Variables: Choice of Speech Act and Request Strategy by Spanish L2 Learners

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Abstract: This study focuses on variation within a group of learners of Spanish (N = 253) who produced requests and complaints via a written discourse completion task. It examines the effects of learner and situational variables on production—the effect of proficiency and addressee-gender on speech-act choice and the effect of perception of imposition on request strategy. Unique to the design are 1) learners were not told what speech act to produce (but rather they chose how to respond); and 2) the design and sample size allowed for statistical techniques appropriate for nested data (regression in single level analyses and hierarchical linear models for nested data in multilevel models), which let one determine simultaneously the effects of learner and situation level variables on an outcome without violating the assumptions of the analytic technique. The following findings are described: more proficient learners produced requests more often, and less proficient learners produced complaints more often, net of other effects; female addressees were less likely than males to receive requests; and learners’ perception of the imposition of the scenario did not significantly influence their production. The results highlight the need to account for learner and situational variables simultaneously when predicting speech-act production, using techniques appropriate for nested data.

Keywords: complaints/quejas, pragmatics/pragmática, requests/peticiones, second-language speech acts/actos de habla de segunda lengua, Spanish/español

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the pragmatic competence of second language (L2) learners of Spanish by examining how several variables affect their production. These variables encompass traits of individual learners, situational parameters of the written Discourse Completion Task (DCT), and learners’ impressions of the situation. Emphasis is on predicting L2 speech-act choice by examining variation in their production of requests and complaints. I report on a subset of findings from an original data set—namely, the speech act that learners chose to produce (when presented with a scenario and asked to respond), and the directness of the request strategy (if a request was used).

Scholars in interlanguage pragmatics have mainly examined how nonnative speakers (NNSs) comprehend and produce L2 speech acts, how their usage patterns differ from those of native speakers (NSs) and other NNSs, how first language (L1) influences L2, and, to a lesser degree, how pragmatic competence develops over time. Some studies focused only on NS data (e.g., Garcia 1993), others only on NNSs data (e.g., Kasper and Schmidt 1996; Lafford 1995; Matsumura 2003), and still others on data from NNSs with a NS baseline group (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Félix-Brasdefer 2003; Hinkel 1994; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Taguchi 2007). In general, research has emphasized the comparison of NSs and NNSs (Bardovi-Harlig 1999a) to establish a baseline for how closely and in what ways NNSs approximate the target norm or how NSs perceive NNS production (e.g., García 1989; Hinkel 1994; Le Pair 1996; Rodriguez 2001). Such an approach, though not necessarily requiring large sample sizes, does require
fairly homogeneous, well-defined samples of NSs and NNSs, which is not always feasible. Other concerns include suitability (i.e., approximating a target norm may not be as meaningful as being more appropriate in specific cultural contexts) and being able to capture in detail the development of pragmatic competence over time or the variation that exists within the NNS group at a given point in time. This variation is worth examining to better understand what affects NNS speech acts and how different types of variables interact. Specifically, what effect do situational variables (e.g., gender of interlocutor) and individual level variables (e.g., proficiency) have when taken into account simultaneously? To answer this question, a large sample is needed with enough of both types of variables. The focus of the present study is prediction of speech act choice by examining variation within the NNS group as evidenced by their DCT production of requests and complaints. This variation is described in terms of several classes of variables—namely, situation or scenario level effects, individual or learner level effects, and sociopragmatic assessments (each briefly discussed below).

Situation level variables can affect speech act traits (e.g., choice of speech act, directness level, and use of modifications to mitigate or intensify), and prime among them are interlocutor traits—gender, status, and familiarity/social distance. Others included location (Billmyer and Varghese 2000), age of interlocutor (Harlow 1990), and urgency of message (Fraser, Rintell, and Walters 1980), but they have been less commonly investigated. Gender, status, and familiarity of the interlocutor have, for the most part, shown correlations with perception and production outcomes in studies that have included them as independent variables, though many have not included all three (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2003; García 1989; Rodríguez 2001). In the present study, all three were included, but given the scope of this paper, I report on gender, which has been less studied than status or familiarity. Overall, the picture is incomplete: some studies found no significant effects for gender (e.g., Harlow [1990] reports no effect of gender on request strategies, structure, or length of utterance); others conflated gender and status in investigating requesting (García 1989); others avoided mixed gender dyads (e.g., García [1992] investigated only female subjects’ request role plays) or administered gender specific DCTs (e.g., Pinto [2005] used no cross-gender request scenarios); others found some significant effects (e.g., Geluykens and Kraft [2005] found gender specific results in complaints; Rintell [1981] found an opposite gender effect on deference in L2 requests and suggestions); and many others found this variable beyond their scope. Given research showing differences in the linguistic behavior of men and women (e.g., Tannen 1991; see Ross-Feldman [2006] for a summary of SLA research on gender and L2 interactions), whether L2 speech act studies with same and mixed gender dyads have different traits, begs further examination. A further gap in the literature is whether gender (a situation level variable) has the same effect when taken into account simultaneously with individual level variables.

Individual level variables can include proficiency, personality, study abroad, motivation, and out-of-class L2 activities. Given its prevalence in prior studies and its significance in this particular data set, proficiency is the main individual level variable discussed here. Prior research has confirmed that learners with higher proficiency (i.e., high grammatical competence) may not have correspondingly high L2 pragmatic knowledge (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig 1999a, 2001; Félix-Brasdefer 2003; Kasper and Schmidt 1996). However, overall, as learners make gains in proficiency, they make more gains in pragmatic functions, though perhaps not reaching NS levels. Studies that included proficiency as an independent variable used various methods for measurement. Some found that proficiency affected request performance (e.g., Al-Gahtani and Roever [2011] for interactional correlates in requests; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain [1986] for utterance length; Takahashi and DuFon [1989] for request strategies), whereas others found stronger effects for other variables (e.g., Takahashi [2005], with a noticing-the-gap activity to test Japanese EFL learners’ pragmalinguistic awareness, found that noticing of target features was correlated with motivation but not with proficiency; for additional studies, see Bardovi-Harlig 1999a; Félix-Brasdefer 2004; Kobayashi and Rinnert 2003; Matsumura 2003; Taguchi
2011). Proficiency continues to be included in studies that investigate pragmatic competence to better understand what underlies the process of developing pragmatic competence, and of particular interest for the present study is that there is a gap in the literature regarding the effect of proficiency on speech act choice.

Finally, learners’ metapragmatic assessments of situations and of their own production can encompass aspects of life that an individual considers infringed upon (time, effort, etc.), can be affected by the interlocutors’ traits, and can have varying effects depending on its operationalization (e.g., whether participants provide the imposition rating or others do). Studies including Goldschmidt (1996), Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, and Liao (2001), Hudson (2001), and Rodríguez (2001) operationalized imposition in different ways. Although this makes the comparison of their findings challenging, it underscores the need to continue working with this variable because 1) speakers take imposition into consideration when determining the seriousness of a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987); 2) “learners evaluate the values and weights of the contextual variables that influence strategic and linguistic choices, such as . . . degree of imposition. . .” (Kasper and Rose 2002: 100); and 3) we know less about this variable when taken into account simultaneously with other variables. In sum, three types of variables were examined here (situation level, learner level, metapragmatic assessments) for the most common speech acts in this data set—requests and complaints.

Substantial work has been done in L2 requests in multiple languages, including Barron (2003), Cohen and Shively (2007), García (1992), Koike (1989), Lafford (1995), Pinto (2005), Shively and Cohen (2008), and Trosborg (1995), among others. Research has also been done in L2 complaints, including DeCapua (1989), Geluykens and Kraft (2003, 2005), Olshtain and Weinbach (1993), and Trosborg (1995). These studies asked somewhat different research questions and applied somewhat different methods. For example, Geluykens and Kraft (2005) found gender specific differences in the realization of complaints (whereas in the present study I do not), which could be due in part to how the variables were operationalized and effects measured. From these studies we know that NNS speech acts tend to be longer than NS speech acts (e.g., Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986) and more direct (e.g., House and Kasper [1987] for requests; Geluykens and Kraft [2003] for complaints) and that the patterns in their use of upgraders (intensifying devices), downgraders (mitigating devices), and request strategies do not match that of NSs (e.g., Trosborg [1995] found fewer upgraders and downgraders and different request strategies than NSs, whereas Olshtain and Weinbach [1993] found that NNSs used more downgraders and upgraders). For a summary of work on requests in Spanish, see Félix-Brasdefer (2007) and Shively (2011).

Much literature on L2 speech acts has relied on data elicitation via DCTs, which have shortcomings that must be recognized along with efforts to enhance this technique. As Golato (2003) noted, DCTs allow time for reflection, thus tapping into metapragmatic knowledge: “what [participants] believe would be situationally appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary, interactional settings” (92). Speakers’ metapragmatic knowledge is not necessarily replicated in their performance, as seen in the response patterns to Golato’s compliment DCT; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) reached similar conclusions. Furthermore, due to their static nature, DCTs cannot capture turn-taking details. Additionally, some DCT-based studies (e.g., Lafford 1995; Pinto 2005; Trosborg 1995) constrained the choice of speech acts (e.g., by instructing NNSs to invite, request, or refuse). If participants cannot imagine themselves in the role, the representativeness of their responses may be further brought into question (e.g., Cohen 1998; Kasper 2000; Rintell and Mitchell 1989). When DCTs are used, the quality of the data can be enhanced by adding more detailed contextual information, administering oral DCTs, letting learners choose their speech acts or opt out, and utilizing contextualized (written) DCT descriptions to obtain a large sample size, to maintain control over task variables, and to allow for examination of factors that predict speech act choice, as done in the present study. Furthermore, the prompts were informed by returnee focus groups to more closely approximate
situations that students encounter abroad, which therefore should produce more realistic data (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig 1999b).

What makes this current study unique is that its design and sample size allowed for the inclusion of numerous control variables and statistical techniques appropriate for nested data: hierarchical linear models (HLM). Thus, it is possible to include a large number of variables in the models that have yielded somewhat mixed results in extant literature (as noted above) and make more meaningful predictions about learner production by weighing the relative contributions of individual and situational effects simultaneously.

2. Hypotheses

This study focuses on three hypotheses:

1) Proficiency will have an effect on learners' production (speech act choice), net of other influences.
2) Gender of NS addressee will have an effect on learners' production (speech act choice), net of other influences.
3) Participants' perception of the level of imposition of the situation will have an effect on their production (request strategy chosen), net of other influences.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Participants

To test these hypotheses, a study was carried out that was cross-sectional and quasi-experimental in design in that it has survey and experimental design features. Learners were not selected for having any trait beyond enrollment in a 300- or 400-level Spanish course (i.e., survey design whereby learner traits were statistically controlled). By including gender, familiarity, and status in the statistical model, these variables were methodologically controlled to generate the desired combinations of male/female interlocutors with high/low familiarity and low/equal/high status (i.e., experimental design in manipulation of task conditions). The data analyzed here come from 253 participants (L1 = English; 73 men, 180 women) in 20 classes in Spanish linguistics, literature, and culture at a large, midwestern US university. Most had studied Spanish in high school (97%) for 3.7 years on average. Sixty one (24%) had studied abroad in a Spanish-speaking region. They were freshmen (8%), sophomores (35%), juniors (33%), and seniors (23%). In their coursework (one component of the proficiency scale, to be subsequently described), some had one Spanish course beyond the 200-level and others up to nine. Thus, variation was expected in their proficiency, which overall ranged from intermediate to advanced. A summary of learner traits appears in Table 1.

3.2 Instruments and Administration

Participants completed four instruments in this order: a written DCT, a personality test (measuring extraversion and neuroticism), a language background questionnaire, and a test of grammatical competence. The focus here is on the results from the DCT, background questionnaire, and grammatical competence test.

The DCT contained 12 scenarios that describe contextualized interactions in a Spanish-speaking region between a NS (varying roles) and NNS (as a study abroad student). Because 24% of them had studied abroad, the scenarios were designed to be as country-neutral and yet detailed as possible, including location (e.g., home or cafeteria), interlocutor's name, any prior events, and degree of familiarity among interlocutors. Furthermore, as others had not studied
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for learner traits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>$\bar{x}$</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic traits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>$1 = \text{female}$</td>
<td>0.711</td>
<td>0.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (range: 18–29)</td>
<td>years</td>
<td>20.230</td>
<td>1.381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course (300- or 400-level)</td>
<td>$1 = 400$-level</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish major</td>
<td>$1 = \text{yes}$</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>0.487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish minor</td>
<td>$1 = \text{yes}$</td>
<td>0.585</td>
<td>0.494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personality measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion (range: $-.05$ to $0.857$)</td>
<td>alpha scale</td>
<td>0.599</td>
<td>0.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism (range: $-.087$ to $0.652$)</td>
<td>alpha scale</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of another L2 or L3</td>
<td>$1 = \text{yes}$</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>0.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency Scale (range $-1.637$ to $1.829$)</td>
<td>alpha scale</td>
<td>$-0.001$</td>
<td>0.595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of grammatical competence</td>
<td>correct out of 19</td>
<td>11.443</td>
<td>2.749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-rating in Spanish listening</td>
<td>$6 = \text{near-native}$</td>
<td>4.417</td>
<td>0.826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-rating in Spanish speaking</td>
<td>$1 = \text{very poor}$</td>
<td>3.560</td>
<td>0.902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-rating in Spanish reading</td>
<td>$6 = \text{near-native}$</td>
<td>4.214</td>
<td>0.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-rating in Spanish writing</td>
<td>$1 = \text{very poor}$</td>
<td>3.829</td>
<td>0.846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average grade for courses beyond S275</td>
<td>$5 = \text{A}, 4 = \text{B}, 3 = \text{C}, 2 = \text{D}, 1 = \text{F}$</td>
<td>4.416</td>
<td>0.490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses taken beyond S275 (range: 1–9)</td>
<td>number of courses</td>
<td>2.850</td>
<td>1.890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities in Spanish</strong></td>
<td>alpha scale</td>
<td>2.873</td>
<td>0.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative (scale)</td>
<td>$7 = \text{strongly agree}$</td>
<td>5.498</td>
<td>1.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental (scale)</td>
<td>$7 = \text{strongly agree}$</td>
<td>5.083</td>
<td>0.958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in foreign languages (scale)</td>
<td>$7 = \text{strongly agree}$</td>
<td>6.000</td>
<td>0.941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study abroad experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studied abroad</td>
<td>$1 = \text{yes}$</td>
<td>0.241</td>
<td>0.429</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 253$
abroad and thus had to imagine themselves in the situations (rather than recalling experiences as returnees perhaps could), the descriptions needed to be clear. DCTs cannot measure actual language usage but rather how participants think they would respond; therefore, the scenarios needed to be contextualized, straightforward, and accessible. NS age was kept constant, but other features were experimentally varied (NS gender, familiarity among interlocutors, and NS status; see Figure 1 whereby each scenario occupies one cell in the right column.). Each description was followed by a question in Spanish: “¿Qué le dirías en español a él?” for male NSs, and “¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?” for female NSs (“What would you say to him/her in Spanish?”). The five response lines were enclosed in quotes and thus reduced reported speech: less than 1% of responses constituted reported speech (and were omitted from analyses). It must be noted that, to examine factors that predict speech act choice, learners were not required to produce a specific speech act: the descriptions allowed them to respond as they saw fit (or opt out).\(^4\) Likert scale self-assessment items followed to measure learners’ perception of the situation and their response to it (see DCT sample page in appendix).

![Figure 1. 2 x 2 x 3 matrix of situation level variables by DCT scenario number](image)

The background questionnaire collected data about L1 background, self-assessment of L2 skills/usage, prior L2 instruction, motivation (Gardner 1985), academic and demographic information (gender, age, grades, etc.), and sojourns abroad. The grammatical competence test had 19 multiple-choice items, primarily testing syntax and morphology.

### 3.3 Variables, Coding, and Analyses

Both dependent variables (choice of speech act and request strategy) were constructed by applying commonly used coding schemes to participants’ DCT responses. (See subsequent discussion.) To obtain a measure of interrater reliability, 20% of all responses were coded independently by a Spanish NS trained in the coding system (interrater reliability = 96%). All differences were resolved via discussion and adjustments made before running the analyses.
3.3.1 Dependent Variables: Average Number of Requests and Complaints

Requests and complaints were the most frequent speech acts (see note 5). Prior research has tended to use form-based coding systems for requests (principally the CCSARP; Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989)—namely, speech acts whereby the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something. Thus, in the present study, if the main purpose of the head act was understood by the coders as such, then it was determined to be a request (e.g., change a grade, stop smoking). The dependent variable, average number of requests, is the average number of requests by each learner across all scenarios produced.

Prior research on complaints has generally been analyzed within a content-based classification system (i.e., a semantic scale rather than a form-based scale), and complaints have been described primarily as speech acts that express displeasure or annoyance in response to an action for which the hearer is viewed as at least partially to blame (e.g., Murphy and Neu 1996; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Trosborg 1995). Thus, in the present study, if the main purpose of the head act was understood to be the expression of displeasure or annoyance or a disjuncture between what was expected and the outcome, then it was determined to be a complaint. The dependent variable, average number of complaints, is the average number of complaints by each learner across all scenarios produced. Thus, in sum, the variables average number of complaints and average number of requests were created to examine the effects of learner variables on speech-act choice in models where the unit of analysis was the learner, as each learner completed multiple scenarios (and thus each learner’s 12 DCT responses together occupied one row).

3.3.2 Dependent Variable: Request Strategy Chosen

Directness level of the strategy was coded following Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) and incorporating modifications from Márquez Reiter (2000) and some additional ones.

1. Mood derivable: Grammatical mood indicates illocutionary force (commands).
2. Obligation statement: Addressee’s obligation to comply is stated (tener que; ir a infinitive).
3. Need/want statement in present indicative: The need for the hearer to carry out the act, using present tense (e.g., necesitar or querer ‘need’ or ‘want’).
4. Need/want statement in past, conditional, or subjunctive: The need for the hearer to carry out the act, using past tense (indicative or subjunctive) or conditional (like number 3 but different tense).
5. Direct query: Lacking preparatory conditions or traits of other strategies, they may refer to the location, identity, preparedness, correctness, or possession of the item, etc. and tend to be syntactically simpler (e.g., ¿Y mi café? ’And my coffee?’).
6. Query preparatory in present indicative: Conventionalized preparatory conditions (poder ‘to be able’ in present indicative + infinitive).
7. Suggestory formula: Suggestions, including embedded si ‘if’ clauses (e.g., Si limpiarías esta semana, limpiaré la semana próxima. ‘If you would clean this week, I will clean next week’).
8. Query preparatory in past, conditional, or subjunctive: Conventionalized preparatory conditions (like number 6 but different tense).
9. Query preparatory with more than one precondition: Reference to preparatory conditions but, unlike 6–8, generally with a copula-headed precondition (e.g., ¿Está bien si podemos hablar de mi nota? ‘Is it all right if we can talk about my grade?’).
10. Hint: Partial reference is made to what is needed for implementing the act (largely declarative rather than interrogative; e.g., No estoy segura de que debo hacer. ‘I’m not sure what I should do’).
3.3.3 Independent Variables: Proficiency, NS Gender, and Imposition

A proficiency scale was constructed by standardizing and summing responses to four items: grammatical competence test score; average self-rating of L2 abilities (listening, reading, speaking, writing); self-report data for number of courses taken beyond S275; and self-report data for grades for courses taken beyond S275. Items were individually standardized and summed to create a single scale. Those who had average proficiency on all measures had a proficiency scale score of zero, whereas those with higher proficiency had scores above zero, and those with lower proficiency had scores lower than zero (see Table 1.) The scale was adopted because the reliability coefficient of the scale was greater than or equal to the scale’s alpha if any item was left out ($\alpha = .695$), and it was necessary because enrollment in 300- and 400-level classes is not sequential at this university and the large sample size precluded OPIs or other more in-depth tests of proficiency.

For NS gender, there was an equal number of male and female NS addressees (see Figure 1). For imposition, learners answered a Likert scale item after each scenario: How big of a deal would this be if it actually happened to you? (1 = not a big deal; 7 = very big deal). Imposition was operationalized as such because Rodríguez (2001) found that undergraduates understood the concept of imposition as a ‘big deal.’

3.3.4 Control Variables

Measures of personality, study abroad, language background, demographics, NS–NNS familiarity, NS status, and other variables were included in all models as statistical controls. (These findings are part of another project and not presented here.)

3.3.5 Analyses

Two levels of statistical analyses were conducted. The first were single level models using STATA 8.0 (a general purpose statistical software package). This allowed for the independent investigation of effects of learner and situational variables on the dependent variables: OLS regression for continuous, dependent variables; binary logistic regression for binary variables; and ordered logistic regression for ordered-category variables. Subsequently, all significant results from the single level models were then tested in multilevel models using HLM 6.02 (a statistical package specialized for multilevel analysis): situation level variables and imposition measures are included in Level 1, and learner level variables in Level 2. The rationale for employing HLM is that it accounts for dependency in clustered or nested data. That is, each observation is not independent but rather the DCT data is “bundled” for each person (each grouping of 12 DCT responses shares a common source—the individual). By using multilevel models, one can attempt to determine simultaneously the effect of learner and situation variables on an outcome without violating the assumptions of the analyses—namely, the independence of observations assumption of regression (or ANOVA). Thus, HLM allows for the testing of main effects and interactions across levels, which is not possible with regression and is a novel approach in speech-act research.

4. Results

4.1 The First Hypothesis: Proficiency Level Will Have an Effect on Learners’ Production

Results from the single level models (OLS regression) revealed a significant effect for proficiency on choice of speech act. This suggestive result was then tested in the multilevel models using HLM where the finding remained robust. The data reveal that learners with higher scores on the proficiency scale produced significantly more requests and fewer complaints, whereas those with lower scores on the proficiency scale produced significantly more complaints and
fewer requests, net of other effects. The examples in (1) correspond to scenario #7 (see appendix) and show responses from learners with higher proficiency-scale scores (1a, 1b) and from learners with lower scores (1c, 1d).

(1a) Oye, Marisa, ¿puedes abrir la ventana por favor?  
Hey, Marisa, can you open the window please?  
(1b) Oye chicas, ¿sería posible abrir las ventanas? El humo me molesta un poco.  
Hey girls, Would it be possible to open the windows? The smoke bothers me a little.  
(1c) Necisito aire.  
I need air.  
(1d) Por favor. No fumo y no me gusta fumar. Me siento mal cuando alguien está fumando.  
Please. I don’t smoke and I don’t like smoking. I feel sick when someone is smoking.

Thus, the first hypothesis is supported, suggesting that, on average, requests may require a more advanced level of grammatical competence and complaints a lower level (i.e., because those with lower proficiency scores produced significantly more complaints [and those with higher scores produced significantly more requests]—a robust outcome in the single level and multilevel models). This does not preclude the possibility that some complaints may require sophisticated use of linguistic and sociocultural information; however, this is not the central tendency here.

4.2 The Second Hypothesis: Gender of NS Addressee Will Have an Effect on Learners’ Production

This hypothesis also deals with speech act choice but instead of a learner variable, NS gender (situation level variable) is the independent variable of interest. Results from the single level models (binary logistic regression) revealed a significant effect for NS gender on choice of speech act. This preliminary result was then tested in the multilevel models using HLM where the finding remained robust. Like the first hypothesis, this hypothesis was also supported by the data: female addressees were less likely to receive requests than males.7 Male and female NSs received requests and complaints and, as shown in Figure 1, there was equal distribution of male and female NSs. The examples in (2) are from scenarios #1 and #9 (see appendix). The data in (2a) and (2b) were addressed to female NSs; the first was coded as a request and the second as a complaint. The data in (2c)–(2f) were addressed to male NSs; the first three were coded as requests and the last as a complaint.8 Head acts appear in bold.

(2a) Perdone Senora, pue de traerme otra bebida? Esto no es la que quiero.  
Excuse me Ma’am, can you bring me another drink? This is not the one I want.  
(2b) Pardoneme, este cafe no es correcto, yo preguntó por un diferente cafe.  
Excuse me, this coffee isn’t right, I asked for a different coffee.  
(2c) Perdone, pero pienso que me olvidó. Por favor, necesito mi cafe. Gracias.  
Excuse me, but I think that you forgot me. Please, I need my coffee. Thanks.  
(2d) Perdón, Pedro. ¿Puedes traerme azucar con el café, por favor?  
Excuse me, Pedro. Can you bring me sugar with the coffee, please?  
(2e) Pedro, ¿puedes darme mi café por favor? No tengo mucho tiempo. Gracias.  
Pedro, can you bring me my coffee please? I don’t have much time. Thanks.  
(2f) Pardonó Pedro. Todavia no he recibido el cafe.  
Excuse me, Pedro. I still haven’t received my coffee.

In supplemental analyses (not shown here), it was determined that this is not an interactive effect of NNS gender and NS gender (see note 7). Given that complaints could be expected to be
less polite than requests due to differences in face threats and at least the partial blame for the situation, this unanticipated finding suggests that women tended to receive less polite speech than men.

Tables 2 and 3 show the coefficient estimates for HLM models used for the second and third hypotheses.

### Table 2. HLM table for outcome variable request

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed Effect</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-ratio</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRCPT1, P0</td>
<td>0.701027</td>
<td>0.017999</td>
<td>38.948</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFICIENCY, B01</td>
<td>0.030788</td>
<td>0.011739</td>
<td>2.623</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For NSsex slope, P1</td>
<td>INTRCPT2, B01</td>
<td>-0.028249</td>
<td>0.010795</td>
<td>-2.617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The model also includes controls for NS status and imposition.

### Table 3. HLM table for outcome variable complaint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed Effect</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-ratio</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRCPT1, P0</td>
<td>0.451268</td>
<td>0.044036</td>
<td>10.248</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFICIENCY, B01</td>
<td>-0.035028</td>
<td>0.010999</td>
<td>-3.185</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The model also includes controls for NS status, NS familiarity, imposition, measures of difficulty, motivation, and personality.

### 4.3 The Third Hypothesis: Learners’ Perception of Level of Imposition Will Have an Effect on Production

Results from the single level models (binary logistic regression) revealed no significant effect for imposition on request strategy. Therefore, this result was not tested in the multilevel models. Hypothesis 3 is not supported. However, other significant effects of imposition were found in the single level models in subsequent analyses (e.g., choice of speech act, average mitigating supportive moves, average aggravating supportive moves, and upgraders), but when these outcomes were tested in the multilevel models, the significant effects were lost. In other words, the effects of imposition (Level 1 effect) were no longer significant when Level 2 variables were added to the model. This stands in contrast to the robust findings for the first and second hypotheses: The effect of imposition on production overall was not significant in the HLM analyses. Put simply, how much of a ‘big deal’ they thought the situation was did not significantly influence their request strategy or essentially anything else measured here. Furthermore, the patterns visible for imposition would not have emerged had the data been only analyzed using single level tests (e.g., regression or ANOVA), thereby reinforcing the importance of using statistical techniques appropriate for nested data.
5. Discussion

The findings for the first hypothesis revealed that learners with higher scores on the proficiency scale produced significantly more requests and fewer complaints, whereas those with lower scores produced significantly more complaints and fewer requests, net of other effects. Given the robustness of proficiency in the data set (i.e., it was associated with the greatest number of significant main effects and withstood the multilevel analyses better than any other variable), this finding is unlikely to be an artifact of the study’s design and suggests that it may be worthwhile to investigate in the future whether there may be a developmental order in speech-act preference. Studies have found evidence for pragmatic development within a given speech act (e.g., Rose [2000] showed that learners progress from direct to conventionally indirect request strategies and use more supportive moves, apology adjuncts, and compliment-response adjuncts as they advance). Is it possible that there is not just an order of development within a given speech act but also across speech acts? At this point it is valuable to recall that DCT data measures how learners think they would respond, not actual, online usage. Thus, the data suggest that they may perceive complaints to be less linguistically demanding than requests. Future studies could attempt to test the relationship between intentionality of speech act choice and proficiency scale score. By measuring learners’ intentionality (e.g., via retrospective verbal reports) one could examine if those who produced complaints and scored lower on the proficiency scale intended to produce complaints or simply lacked the linguistic resources for requests. Furthermore, because the most common coding systems for requests are structurally based, whereas the most common systems for complaints are content based, it may be worthwhile to attempt a taxonomy that incorporates structure and content.

The findings for the second hypothesis revealed that female NSs were less likely to receive requests than male NSs. This finding is admittedly odd on the surface and begs further investigation. Whether this denotes an underlying social norm, is an artifact of the scenario descriptions or the offline nature of DCTs, or is a function of the interaction between NS gender and unmeasured aspects of this DCT cannot be determined with confidence here. That said, its robustness in the data set suggests that NS gender should continue to be investigated. The findings for the third hypothesis, unlike those of the first and second hypotheses, revealed no significant effect for imposition on request strategy. Thus, learners’ perception of how big of a deal a situation was did not seem as important as other variables. The lack of a significant effect for the third hypothesis could suggest that this variable is irrelevant; nevertheless, this finding is important because it shows the need for multilevel models: When imposition was tested for a number of effects, significant outcomes were found in the single level models that then were lost in the multilevel models, which stands in contrast to the findings of the first and second hypotheses and shows the importance of not stopping with single level models for nested data. Thus, although the third hypothesis does not yield a statistically significant finding, it is methodologically important.

Although this study leaves some questions unanswered (e.g., reasons for the second hypothesis’s outcome) and points to directions for future research, it contributes to the field in several ways: It adds to our understanding of L2 speech acts by focusing on within group variation among NNSs; it augments the evidence in support of proficiency effects and suggests that it is an important predictor of not just features of the speech act (as prior research has shown) but also of the choice of speech act; and it expands research on interlocutor gender. Furthermore, many L2 pragmatics studies have examined how learners produce requests and complaints. The present study has done this and has added other layers of analysis, two of which are highlighted in this paper—attention to which speech act learners choose to produce and multilevel analyses that allow for the simultaneous comparison of the influence that learner and situation level traits have on speech acts. Perhaps one of the most notable contributions is this last point: the results show that it is critical, when working with nested data (and L2 pragmatics data is often nested because
learners usually respond to more than one prompt), to use statistical techniques appropriate for the data structure. The large sample size made possible the inclusion of more variables and data analysis using statistical techniques that allow for finer resolution: multilevel analyses (HLM). The multilevel results differ from the single level (regression) models, highlighting the importance of simultaneously accounting for learner and contextual effects when making predictions about production and showing the importance of using statistical techniques appropriate for nested data.

Regarding pedagogical implications, this study suggests that situational parameters are important in shaping learners’ perception and production and consequently, instructors could outline different response types based on interlocutor’s status, familiarity, and gender. Furthermore, DCTs are useful, along with role-play and video/audio of natural data, to draw students’ attention to specific elements of the input (e.g., different request strategies and mitigating/aggravating devices) and help them to see the impact of such pragmatic devices.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

The regression analyses yielded many significant findings, but not all remained significant in the multivariate models. When this statistical technique was applied, two hypotheses were supported and one was not. The main results reported here are that 1) proficiency and NS gender have an effect on production regarding speech act choice; and 2) perception of imposition did not significantly influence production. The findings highlight the need to account for learner and situational variables simultaneously when predicting L2 speech-act production and the importance of statistical techniques suitable for nested data (e.g., HLM).

The limitations of this study suggest directions for future research. For example, the design did not include NS judges of appropriateness (which would have allowed for comparison of NNS perceptions of the situation and their production with NS perceptions), nor did it include coding of scenarios for severity of situation. Future work could benefit from expanding the situation level analyses to include severity of situation, having another group of participants read the descriptions and rank them by severity, and then experimentally vary that feature alongside other features (NS gender, status, familiarity). Additionally, future work could also include a specific variable for sentence type (e.g., declarative vs. interrogative), utilize a pretest/posttest design for greater granularity regarding the effect of proficiency, and expand on L1 work by Forgas (1999a, 1999b), which showed that temporary mood can influence speakers’ requests (sad moods increase and happy moods decrease request politeness, and these effects are greater when dealing with more risky, unconventional requests). The task’s offline nature also precluded analysis of turn-taking and prosodics, and the issue of how best to measure and code requests and complaints along a more cohesive continuum went beyond the scope of this study, but both would be worthy of future research. Finally, as this study is not longitudinal, the findings cannot speak directly to developmental pragmatics, but it is hoped that this study will help to inform the design of future developmental studies.

NOTES

1 This refers to linguistic nuances of intended meaning, how pragmatic features are manifested, or how learners perceive differences in illocutionary force and imposition.
2 Nested data has a hierarchical structure in which individuals or responses are found within a higher-level grouping unit. This data is nested because the more than 3,000 DCT responses (from 253 learners who each produced 12 responses) are not discrete but rather grouped for each participant (i.e., the 3,000 responses are not independent of each other but rather “bundled” in groupings of 12 per person).
3 In analyses like regression and HLM, to calculate the effect of each variable ‘net’ of the effect of others means we account statistically for the effects of the other variables in the model in presenting the results. In so doing, we can be more certain that the effect that we are interested in is accurately measured and not partly a function of those other variables (i.e., is not spurious or falsely inflated).
As my focus is not reading comprehension, the descriptions were presented in English. Presenting them in Spanish could have created obstacles: lack of comprehension could have reduced validity; fewer scenarios would have been able to be included, thus reducing the number of situation level variables, too; participants could have copied words/phrases from the prompt (Cohen and Olshtain 1994).

Most produced requests and complaints, but threats and apologies were also found.

Most coding adaptations involved elimination of categories for which no data appeared or modifications based on tenses or verbs found in the data set. The major adaptation was the addition of direct query.

Learner gender was also considered. To determine if there might be undetected interactions, the variables NS gender, learner gender, and their interaction term were added to each run where these variables were not already present. Results revealed essentially no change (i.e., the findings remained nonsignificant in almost all cases and did not affect the significance of other variables in the models). This result may be a function of the tasks offline nature.

Head acts like (2f) were coded as complaints because they lack the “partial reference to what is needed for implementing the act” and instead highlight the difference between expectation and outcome. In general, the distinction between a requestive hint and a complaint was made by evaluating each case for its most salient traits (i.e., if more an expression of displeasure, then complaint; if more an appeal, then request).

Mitigating and aggravating supportive moves are phrasal elements (e.g., grounders or preparators) external to the head act and used to soften or intensify. Downgraders are lexical or syntactic (not usually phrasal) elements that mitigate the impositive force of the head act (e.g., por favor, un poco, use of past tense with present reference). Upgraders are similar but instead increase the impact (e.g., mucho, totalmente). These definitions and examples are consistent with the CCSARP.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX

Study abroad situations

1. You are meeting your housemate and her sister for coffee this afternoon at a café downtown. After a few minutes you find an open table and begin to read the newspaper while you wait for your friends to arrive. Once they arrive, the server comes to the table to take your orders. She appears to be no older than 25. After a few minutes, she brings the drinks, but what she has brought you is not what you ordered. In fact, it’s something you really don’t like. She starts to turn away to serve another customer.

¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

A. How difficult was it for you to come up with a response?

Not difficult

Very difficult

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I found it difficult to respond because I have had little experience with this kind of situation.

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. I found it difficult to respond because of personal reasons (shyness, dislike for confrontation, etc.)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. I found it difficult to respond because I couldn’t remember the necessary Spanish words to express myself.

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

B. How appropriate for the circumstances do you think your response was?

Very inappropriate

Very appropriate

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

C. How polite do you think your response was?

Not polite

Very polite

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

D. How big of a deal would this be if it actually happened to you?

Not a big deal

Very big deal

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
1. You are meeting your housemate and her sister for coffee this afternoon at a café downtown. After a few minutes you find an open table and begin to read the newspaper while you wait for your friends to arrive. Once they arrive, the server comes to the table to take your orders. She appears to be no older than 25. After a few minutes, she brings the drinks, but what she has brought you is not what you ordered. In fact, it’s something you really don’t like. She starts to turn away to serve another customer.

¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?

2. Several weeks ago you took an exam in the history class that you’re taking at the local university. The exam was challenging, but you are sure that you did well. You studied for a long time, and you usually get As in all of your classes. The professor for this course is a young man who could possibly still pass as a student. Up to this point you have not had any reason to talk with him outside of class time. Today in class the professor hands back the exams and, surprisingly, you have scored the equivalent of a B−. There is little feedback written on the exam to explain your grade. After class you hang around to talk with him. When the rest of the class has left, you move toward him.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?

3. Several weeks ago you took an essay exam in the literature class you’re taking at the local university, and you feel confident that you did well, as you do in all of your classes. The professor for this course is a young woman who still could almost pass as a student. So far, you have not had any reason to talk with her outside of class time. Today she hands back the tests, and you are surprised to see that your grade is the equivalent of a B−. You scan the pages and find few comments written by her. After class you hang around to talk with her. Once almost everyone else has left, you move toward her.

¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?

4. You decide to go down to the university cafeteria between classes. As usual, the place is packed with students and faculty having lively, loud conversations, and the smell of smoke and coffee fill the room. You make your way through the crowd, and at the counter you finally get the attention of one of the servers, who is male and looks about your age. You order a drink. However, when he brings it, it’s not what you had asked for. In fact, it’s a drink you really don’t like. He begins to turn away to attend to another customer.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?

5. You have been renting an apartment with two local students, María and Rafa, while studying abroad. Each person is responsible for cleaning the common areas of the apartment once a month, and everyone gets together to decide the schedule at the beginning of each month. Just yesterday you were invited to go on a week-long trip with another student from your program, and the plan is to leave tomorrow morning. If you go, you won’t be in town to take care of the cleaning during the following week, which is your scheduled week. Rafa is the roommate you have spent the most time with, and last week was his turn to do the cleaning. As you are washing dishes, he enters the kitchen and in the course of the conversation asks you what your plans are for next week.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?

6. A week ago you received back a composition that you wrote for the literature class you’re taking at the local university. You got a lower grade than you feel you deserved, and you set up an appointment for today with your professor to talk about your grade. Your literature professor is a young man who might be mistaken for a student if he didn’t dress up. You
have enjoyed his class overall, and you have talked to him on several occasions about class material and sometimes just stopped by his office to chat. He has always been friendly and helpful. When you arrive at his office, he invites you to sit down, smiles, and asks what he can do for you.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?

7. You have decided to accept an invitation to go on a road trip with three friends at the end of the semester. They are all local students whom you know from campus. The car is a small, two-door vehicle. Everyone smokes except you. You are sitting in the back seat, and your friend Marisa is the driver. It’s early summer, so it’s getting warm. The car has no air conditioning, and only the front-seat windows can be opened. The radio is playing in the background, and Marisa and Ana are discussing politics in the front seat. They both light up cigarettes, and the windows are up.

¿Qué les dirías en español a ellas?

8. Your alarm clock broke this morning, and you need to buy a new one today. You have a lot to do today so you stop at a familiar store in your neighborhood to buy one. You quickly find the alarm clocks on the shelf along with a few other items that you need, so it's good that the alarm clock isn’t expensive. You know the cashier, Luisa, from previous visits to the store; she is about your age. At the checkout, she greets you by name and you chat about the weekend as she rings up your items. The price of the alarm clock rings up as almost twice the amount you thought it was listed for on the shelf, and you quickly scan the contents of your wallet.

¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?

9. One afternoon on your way home from classes you decide to stop by a familiar café to have a coffee and read the newspaper. The server is always the same person, Pedro, who is in his early 20s. He greets you by name and asks how you’re doing when he comes to your table to take your order. After 10 minutes he still hasn’t brought you your coffee, but you’ve seen that other people who came in after you have already gotten their orders. He passes by your table to take the order of a couple that just sat down at a table across from you.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?

10. You have been sick with a bad sore throat for almost 2 weeks and have tried several non-prescription remedies, but you keep getting worse. You haven’t been to see a doctor because you’re not sure whom to call, you don’t think your insurance will cover it, and money is really tight. The problem is that you’re going on a trip in a week, and you need to get better so you can travel. As you are making lunch at home, your housemate María arrives with a close friend of hers, Gloria. You know Gloria by sight but really haven’t talked with her before. She is from a nearby city and is about the same age as you and María. She works as a nurse at the hospital. They come into the kitchen to make coffee. She hears you coughing, and in the course of the conversation asks if there is anything she can do to help.

¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?

11. You are taking an introductory linguistics course, and last week you missed a day of class for the first time. There is an exam next week. One of the other students, Antonio, usually sits in the front row and seems to have his act together. You haven’t really ever talked with him, but you’ve sat near him before and you know he takes good notes. Class has just ended, and you see Antonio putting his stuff together but he doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. You move toward him.

¿Qué le dirías en español a él?
12. You are taking a politics course at the local university while abroad. The course requires two exams and one paper. It is getting close to the end of the course, and the final deadline for the paper is two days from now. You’ve been working on it, but you’ve been sick so you doubt it will be done by then. The professor is a young woman who you’ve gotten to know pretty well because you’ve gone to her office hours for help and you’ve chatted over coffee in the university cafeteria periodically. After class lets out for the day and most people have left, you move toward her.
¿Qué le dirías en español a ella?