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Explicit Intervention for Spanish Pragmatic Development During Short-Term Study Abroad: An Examination of Learner Request Production and Cognition

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Abstract

The present study examined the impact of pedagogical intervention on students' request performance during short-term study abroad (SA). Prior to departure, students received explicit instruction about requests. During their time abroad, they were given tasks to strategically develop their pragmatic competence. Requests were

assessed with a discourse completion task. Results indicated that over time the students improved their request performance, as rated by two native Spanish speakers. Examination of the students' requests revealed that their use of strategies also improved. Retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) performed after the posttests indicated that during second language (L2) Spanish request production, the students attended to politeness, task outcome, and past experiences. In addition, the RVRs indicated that specific sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic strategies targeted during the pragmatic intervention informed learners' cognition during request planning and production. Findings suggest that when combined with pedagogical intervention, SA has the potential to facilitate students' L2 pragmatic development.

Headnote

The present study examined the impact of pedagogical intervention on students' request performance during short-term study abroad (SA). Prior to departure, students received explicit instruction about requests. During their time abroad, they were given tasks to strategically develop their pragmatic competence. Requests were assessed with a discourse completion task. Results indicated that over time the students improved their request performance, as rated by two native Spanish speakers. Examination of the students' requests revealed that their use of strategies also improved. Retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) performed after the posttests indicated that during second language (L2) Spanish request production, the students attended to politeness, task outcome, and past experiences. In addition, the RVRs indicated that specific sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic strategies targeted during the pragmatic intervention informed learners' cognition during request planning and production. Findings suggest that when combined with pedagogical intervention, SA has the potential to facilitate students' L2 pragmatic development.

KEYWORDS

Spanish, cognition, postsecondary, pragmatics, speech acts, study abroad

The Challenge

While study abroad has often been viewed as having the greatest impact on students' progress toward proficiency, research results do not always confirm this belief. How can faculty better support students' second language pragmatic development, especially during the short-term stay? What impact does pragmatic instruction have on students' performance, for example, when making requests? How do retrospective verbal reports allow researchers to better understand learners' cognitive processes when they are planning and carrying out specific language tasks?

1 INTRODUCTION

Although it is often assumed that study abroad (SA) offers an ideal environment for pragmatic development, research has suggested that students' insufficient exposure to the target language imposes limits on such development (Barron, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Shively, 2010) and that even highly motivated SA students are often unaware of how to take full advantage of the SA environment and strategically develop their pragmatic competence (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Shively, 2010). These limitations are further exacerbated by the often short duration of the immersion experience: Recent statistics attest to the increasing number of U.S. students selecting short-term stays over semester-long programs, up from 46.7% of the total number of students studying abroad in the 2005-2006 academic year to 55.4% in 2015-2016 (Institute of International Education, 2017, n.p.). While previous research suggested that SA has a positive impact on a wide range of second language (L2) outcomes for students who spend a semester or more abroad (e.g., Collentine, 2004; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Hernández, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2006; Lord, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007), it remains uncertain whether those students who participate in short-term programs also experience measurable gains in their L2 development,

especially in the area of pragmatic competence (Félix-Brasdefer & Hasler-Barker, 2015; Hernández, 2016). Consequently, several researchers (e.g., Halenko & Jones, 2017; Shively, 2010, 2011) have advocated for the integration of classroom-based pragmatic instruction into SA programs, particularly since explicit instruction has been found to promote L2 learners' pragmatic development (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008b; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006). Few studies, however, have examined the impact of explicit instruction on pragmatic development during short-term SA. Finally, as scholars have pointed out (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a; Ren, 2014; Woodfield, 2012), although a number of interlanguage pragmatics studies have offered descriptions of the speech acts of L2 learners, research focusing on the cognitive processes and perceptions involved in speech act production is lacking. To better understand the impact of a pedagogical intervention on L2 pragmatic development during shortterm SA, the present study examined students' request performance on a discourse completion task (DCT) administered before and after SA. The study also employed retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) to explore learner cognition during L2 Spanish request production.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Requests

Requests involve one person asking another to perform an action, provide goods or services, give information, or share an object (Usó-Juan, 2010). A request is often considered a face-threatening speech act because it threatens the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In order to demonstrate concern for the hearer's face needs, the speaker may mitigate the request through indirectness or tentativeness (e.g., "I was wondering if you could give me an extension on my paper"), internal modification (e.g., lexical downgrading with a politeness marker such as please, as in "Please open the door" or verbal downgrading with the conditional, as in "Could you lend me your notes?"), or external modification (e.g., giving an explanation or justification for a request, as in "I haven't had time to finish my paper because I have been sick") (Márquez Reiter, 2002). The development of appropriate L2 request behavior represents a significant challenge for learners who must acquire both pragmalinguistic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the specific forms and linguistic strategies that a speaker can use to make a request) and sociopragmatic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the sociocultural appropriateness of the request in relation to its context) in order to make a request without being perceived as rude or demanding (Usó-Juan, 2010) or causing communication breakdown.

2.2 L2 request development in SA contexts

Studies on the acquisition of requests in a SA context have identified five primary developmental patterns for students who spend a semester or more abroad. Students may (1) shift from direct to indirect requests (Cole & Anderson, 2001; Schauer, 2007; Woodfield, 2012); (2) move toward the use of direct requests, particularly when the target norms favor direct requests, as is the case with service encounters in Peninsular Spanish (Shively, 2011); (3) begin to incorporate formulaic language into their request performance (Barron, 2003; Schauer, 2007); (4) decrease their use of nontarget-like formulaic expressions that are the result of first language (L1) transfer (Schauer, 2009; Shively & Cohen, 2008); and (5) increase their use of internal and external modification1 (Barron, 2003; FélixBrasdefer, 2004; Schauer, 2004, 2007).

Evidence from several studies, however, indicates that L2 pragmatic development during SA is neither consistent nor straightforward. Schauer (2007, 2009), for example, studied the request production of German students participating in a SA program in Great Britain. While some learners' requests became more indirect over time, others continued to use direct requests in high-imposition scenarios and in situations involving a higher-status interlocutor. Schauer attributed the students' overuse of direct request strategies to negative transfer from German.

Shively and Cohen (2008) examined the request development of 67 American SA learners during a semester abroad in a Spanish-speaking country. Request performance was assessed with a written DCT consisting of five vignettes. Ratings of students' pragmatic appropriateness before and after SA were significant on two vignettes. An examination of request strategies revealed that the students underused verbal downgrading on both pre- and posttests. In addition, the SA group overused speaker-oriented and impersonal requests during their time abroad. No clear patterns of development for external modification were observed.

Using role-plays, Bataller (2010) discovered that during a semester abroad in Spain, U.S. students did not improve their use of request strategies in service encounter exchanges. Learners overused direct requests (e.g., Quiero cambiar estos zapatos [I want to exchange these shoes]) when indirect requests (e.g., Quería cambiar estos zapatos [I wanted to exchange these shoes]) would have been more appropriate. Similarly, in a study on pragmatic development during short-term SA, Hernández (2016) found that students' use of verbal downgrading, external modification, and request perspective did not change from pre- to posttest. All of these findings confirmed Bataller's (2010) conclusion that pragmatic instruction should be incorporated into SA in order to make students aware of pragmatic features of the target language that they may not simply acquire on their own.

2.3 Pragmatic instruction and the SA context

Because previous studies have not identified a clear relationship between pragmatic development and SA, several researchers have examined the effects of pedagogical interventions on L2 learners' developing pragmatic competence in the SA context (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Halenko & Jones, 2017; Hernández & Boero, 2018; Shively, 2011). Shively (2011) considered the request performance of seven U.S. students during their exchanges with service providers in Spain. During the first week of their time abroad, the students were given 90 minutes of explicit instruction on pragmatics. In addition, participants were given 30 minutes of instruction on making requests during the fifth week of the semester. Naturalistic audiorecordings of service encounters (e.g., a student ordering a coffee) taken throughout the semester indicated that the students shifted from a preference for speakeroriented forms to a greater use of hearer-oriented and elliptical requests. Interviews with the researcher and the students' reflective journal entries revealed that they had few opportunities for pragmatic learning to take place in addition to the explicit instruction provided them. Neither the host families nor the service providers offered corrective feedback, nor did they apparently comment on the students' pragmatic choices. This lack of attention to linguistic detail suggests that SA program leadership may find it useful to provide predeparture explicit instruction about pragmatics (e.g., speech acts) so that students can fully develop their pragmatic competence while abroad. Because Shively's findings suggest that pragmatic instruction may be beneficial to SA learners in the context of service encounter exchanges, it is worth considering whether a similar approach could also produce comparable gains in other aspects of request performance or in a short-term SA context.

Cohen and Shively (2007) also reported on the impact of pragmatic instruction on the request production of U.S. students during their semester abroad. Before departing, the experimental group received instruction about speech acts and a self-study book on language strategies. While abroad, the students also wrote reflective e-journal entries about their SA experience. The control group, in contrast, did not participate in these activities. Despite these differences, no significant group differences in pre-posttest performance ratings were observed, perhaps due to the treatment's use of self-access materials. In a similar study, Hernández and Boero (2018) examined the effect of explicit predeparture instruction accompanied by in-country opportunities to perform language tasks. The tasks themselves were designed to heighten student awareness of pragmatic norms of the host culture of seven U.S. students during their five-week SA program in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Results of pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest role-plays indicated that the SA group increased their use of verbal downgrading and external modification while also shifting from speaker-oriented to hearer-oriented and

elliptical requests. Thus, findings suggest that combining predeparture explicit instruction with incountry tasks does contribute to L2 pragmatic development in both the short and the long term.

2.4 RVRs

RVRs consist of obtaining verbal reports from a learner after completion of a task while information is still available in the learner's short-term memory (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a). The procedure provides insight into the cognitive processes learners use while performing a task, such as information on their assessment and planning of speech acts, their language of thought, and their choice of language forms (Ren, 2014; Woodfield, 2012). Félix-Brasdefer (2008a) examined the cognitive processes and perceptions of advanced learners of Spanish when they declined invitations from a person of equal or higher status. Data consisted of role-plays and RVRs. The role-plays indicated that the students often did not have sufficient pragmalinguistic knowledge to mitigate their refusals. Meanwhile, the RVRs demonstrated that when they were declining an invitation, the learners transferred their social perceptions and behavior from the L1, which often contributed to pragmatic failure and misunderstandings. Like other researchers, the author concluded that L2 learners would benefit from explicit instruction in pragmatics to increase their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence at the discourse level. Woodfield (2012) used RVRs to investigate the perceptions of eight SA students with regard to their performance of two role-plays eliciting status-equal and status-unequal requests. The RVRs indicated that the students paid attention to grammar and vocabulary, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge, and politeness. The RVRs also suggested that it was often difficult for students to select appropriate forms to communicate their pragmatic intent. Based on these findings, Woodfield concluded that RVRs (1) are instrumental in revealing how learners make manifest their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge, (2) can make researchers aware of the linguistic difficulties that learners face during speech act production, and (3) may communicate learners' perceptions that do not always align with their actual performance.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because some studies in the SA literature have suggested that students who spend a semester or more abroad become more target-like in some aspects of their request performance while other studies have indicated that students abroad do not improve or become more-target-like in their use of other features of request production, particularly during short-term SA, the present study investigated the combined effect of short-term SA and pedagogical intervention on students' request production. RVRs were also employed to provide additional insights into the thought processes and perceptions that shaped students' requests. The study addressed the following specific questions:

1. To what extent do native Spanish speakers rate L2 learners' request performance as more appropriate after a short-term SA experience that includes pedagogical intervention?
2. To what extent do L2 learners become more target-like in their request strategy use after a short-term SA experience that includes pedagogical intervention?
3. What do RVRs reveal about the students' cognition during L2 Spanish request production?

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

Fifteen (N = 15) undergraduate students (five male, 10 female) participated in a 4-week SA program in Valladolid, Spain, during summer 2017. All were adult L2 learners of Spanish, between 19 and 30 years old (M = 21.33, SD = 3.68). English was their L1; there were no heritage speakers. The students represented a wide range of academic majors and included only five who had declared a major in Spanish. The five who were Spanish majors were double majors (two majored in exercise science and one each majored in social work, nursing, and engineering). All participants had completed between three and six semesters of college Spanish, or the

equivalent, before the program. None had prior SA experience or had received previous pragmatics instruction. During their time abroad, the students took two courses, selecting among language, culture, and advanced topics. Courses were taught in Spanish and were designed for language learners. None addressed pragmatics as a specific unit of instruction. Cultural and academic excursions, also conducted in Spanish, complemented classroom instruction. All participants lived with host families.

Fifteen native Spanish speakers, ranging in age from 20 to 25 years old, who were exchange students at the first author's home institution, and who had been living in the United States for 2 weeks at the time of the data collection, also participated in the study.

A group of approximately 60 native Spanish speakers were recruited in Valladolid by the U.S. SA students to perform four pragmatic tasks (see "Pedagogical Intervention" below). Students were asked to recruit a different native Spanish speaker for each task. In some cases, the students recruited members of their host family; in others, the participants were native Spanish speakers from the host institution or surrounding community.

4.2 Predeparture and postprogram discourse completion task

Learners completed a written DCT that was adapted from Shively and Cohen (2008) 4 weeks prior to their departure for SA. The 15 native Spanish speakers from Spain also completed the DCT in order to provide a baseline comparison with the SA students' data. The American learners completed the DCT again at the end of the 4-week program.

The DCT consisted of five vignettes. Each vignette represented social and situational variation based on three variables: social status, social distance, and degree of imposition. The five vignettes are described in Table 1 (see Shively & Cohen, 2008, for further information).

Two native Spanish speakers from Spain rated the SA group's responses on the DCT. The raters (one male and one female) were in their early 20s. Both were exchange students enrolled in the graduate MBA program at the first author's home institution and had been living in the United States for 1 month at the time of their participation in the study. After describing the general goals of the project, the first author described the instrument and explained that raters were to evaluate the pragmatic appropriateness of the requests in terms of the following 5-point Likert "overall success" score based on the criterion outlined in Shively and Cohen (2008):

> 5 I would happily comply with the speaker's request.
> 4 I would comply with the speaker's request, but somewhat reluctantly.
> 3 I would comply with the speaker's request, but reluctantly.
> 2 I would comply with the speaker's request, but only very reluctantly.
> 1 I would not want to comply with the speaker's request.

The raters were reminded that the score was intended to represent how the native speaker believed that he or she would react to the student's responses in each vignette. Afterward, the first author and the two raters discussed examples of native Spanish speaker and student responses to the DCT items and scored a practice test together. Ratings were compared and discussed.

The students' written responses were entered into a Word document and randomized so that the raters would not know whether a given response was from the pre- or the posttest. Both raters scored each vignette for each student and then submitted their ratings to the first author. In the few instances when there was disagreement of more than one point for a given student on the same vignette, the raters discussed their scores with the first author, and ratings were adjusted if needed following discussion.

The raters' scores were subjected to an interrater reliability analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were high on the five pretest vignettes (0.77-0.96) and were also high on the five posttest vignettes (0.76-0.95). In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were high on the entire pretest measure (0.93) as well as on the entire posttest measure (0.94).

In order to create one final score for each DCT vignette for each student's pre- and posttest, the two raters' scores were averaged. Each student also received final composite scores on the pretest and posttest representing his or her combined performance across all five vignettes. In addition to numerical ratings, the raters were asked to describe their rationale for each rating.

4.3 RVRs

Immediately after the posttest DCT, all students completed RVRs to examine the cognitive processes involved in their request planning and production, sharing what they were thinking about in responding to each scenario while explaining their decision-making process. Because the participants reported attending to a core group of factors in a multiplicity of ways, discerning these essential categories required that the researchers look for salient themes and common denominators across all reports. Therefore, the analytical approach adopted involved careful reading of the RVRs in order to thematically organize their content into representative yet manageable and discrete categories that were rich in descriptive value. After carefully reading, thematically coding, rereading, and reconsidering coding categories in order to synthesize without distorting the RVR content, the researchers concluded that the students reported attending to three primary factors: (1) politeness, (2) task outcome, and (3) past experience.

4.4 Pedagogical intervention

The intervention was based on an awareness-raising approach to developing pragmatic competence (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006; Shively, 2010). Several principles guided this approach: explicit instruction of target pragmatic features, exposure to authentic input and awareness-raising activities, opportunities for communicative practice, feedback, and guided reflection about pragmatic performance. During the predeparture orientation, the students received 90 minutes of explicit instruction about requests from the second author. This explicit instruction consisted of discussion about pragmalinguistic strategies (e.g., the pragmatic functions of the conditional to express politeness and of the past imperfect to demonstrate hedging), followed by information about those sociopragmatic factors (social status, social distance, and degree of imposition) to consider when performing a request. External modification, speaker- vs. hearer-oriented requests, and the use of tú (informal) and usted (formal) address forms in Spain were also discussed. The second author also made the students aware of strategies from their L1 that might interfere with their request performance, could contribute to the learner being perceived as rude, or could result in communication breakdown.

As part of the predeparture orientation following the explicit instruction module, the students were then introduced to and asked to perform five request scenarios: see Appendix B in IRIS2 (https://www. iris-database.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york%3a934499&ref=search) for a sample practice scenario in which a student had to ask a 55-year-old man if he could change seats with a group of students so that they could sit together. For each scenario, the students considered how the three dimensions of social status, social distance, and degree of imposition would affect a speaker's pragmalinguistic choices. The students practiced each scenario and shared their responses. The second author provided the group with responses from native Spanish speakers from Spain who had previously completed the same scenarios.3 Group discussion comparing and contrasting the students' responses and those of the native speakers followed. Once again the second author offered feedback, drawing attention to strategies for making a request in each situation.

One week prior to their departure for Spain, the students were given a self-assessment to evaluate their understanding of the concepts discussed during the predeparture intervention. The students submitted their assessments to the second author, who in turn provided them with feedback.

The second part of the treatment took place during the first 3 weeks of SA. Students were given four tasks: see Appendix C in IRIS (see the link above) for a sample task in which a student had to ask a professor to reschedule an exam. For the first and the third tasks, the students used a digital recorder to record their own responses to the request scenarios. The participants then recruited native Spanish speakers from Valladolid to perform the same tasks. To facilitate data collection, the researchers wrote task instructions in Spanish for the native speakers to read prior to performing the audiorecordings with the learners. The students then transcribed their own responses and those of the native Spanish speakers. For the second and fourth tasks, the students and the native Spanish speakers recruited in Valladolid completed a written DCT. After each task, the students answered questions that required them to compare their language use with that of the native Spanish speakers. The students' responses to the questions, their transcriptions, and a short reflection for each task were then submitted to both researchers by e-mail. For each task, the researchers provided written comments to the students to make them aware of similarities and differences in their request performance and target norms. Errors in transcriptions were also corrected. Explicit corrective feedback was given to the students to draw their attention to mismatches between their language use and pragmatic choices and those of the host culture.

4.5 Request strategy use measure and scoring

In addition to the performance ratings, the researchers coded and quantified the request strategies of the students and the 15 native Spanish speakers (those who were exchange students at the first author's home institution, discussed in "Participants" above) using an adapted version of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project Coding Manual (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Request head acts were coded for request strategy use. External modification included five supportive moves that were produced before or after a request head act: preparators, grounders, disarmers, acknowledgment of imposition, and appreciation. Request perspective was also examined: hearer-oriented, speakeroriented, the inclusive "we," and impersonal. Examples of the request strategies identified in the data are provided in the Appendix. The data were coded independently by each author, and interrater agreement was 95%. All differences were resolved and adjustments made before performing the analyses.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 24.0) was used to analyze the request strategy use data. The statistical tests employed were paired-samples t tests (research question 1) and exact McNemar's tests and Fisher's exact tests (research question 2). All tests were performed using the Holm-Bonferroni method to adjust for inflated alphas.

5 RESULTS

This study investigated the appropriateness of L2 learners' request performance after a short-term SA experience combined with a pedagogical intervention designed to sensitize students to and teach them to use socially appropriate language. Students' pre- and posttest request performance scores on the five individual vignettes and on the five combined vignettes (composite) are shown in Table 2.

Posttest mean scores were higher than pretest mean scores for all five vignettes and for the composite. Paired-samples t tests were performed to measure differences in pre-posttest performance ratings. Significant differences were found on four out of the five vignettes (Speak Slower, Paper Extension, Airplane Seat, and Less Food) and also on the composite score. In the Leaving for School vignette, the difference between the students' pre- and posttest scores was not significant. Measures of effect size using Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988) (d = 0.2 as a small effect, d = 0.5 as a medium effect, and d =.8 as a large effect) indicated very large effects for Speak Slower

(d = 1.336), Airplane Seat (d = 1.683), Less Food (d = 0.947), and the composite score (d = 1.964). A medium effect was found for Paper Extension (d = 0.722). Taken together, these findings suggest that the students' requests were indeed rated higher after SA than before.

The study also investigated the extent to which L2 learners became more target-like in their request strategy use after a short-term SA experience combined with a pedagogical intervention. In so doing, the researchers examined students' use of language and comparisons of students' language with native speakers' use of request head acts, external modifications, and request perspective. To remind the reader, the head act is the core of the request sequence. External modification refers to the strategies that either precede or follow a request head act and serve to mitigate the impact of the request. Requests may also incorporate a range of perspectives: hearer-oriented, speaker-oriented, impersonal, and the inclusive "we."

In order to understand the nature of the students' use of verbal downgrading (e.g., using the conditional or past imperfect to mitigate the impact of the request), which increased from pre- to posttest (Table 3), exact McNemar's tests were conducted. Significant differences were observed on four out of the five vignettes: The students increased their use of verbal downgrading in Speak Slower (p = 0.000), Paper Extension (p = 0.001), Airplane Seat (p = 0.004), and Less Food (p = 0.016). In Leaving for School, the students' increased use of verbal downgrading from 13 to 47% was not significant (p = 0.125).

Fisher's exact tests were performed to compare the students' use of verbal downgrading to that of the native Spanish speakers. At the time of the pretest, four significant differences were observed between the two groups: The students underused verbal downgrading in Speak Slower, Paper Extension, and Airplane Seat (p = 0.000) as well as in Leaving for School (p = 0.003). By the time of the posttest, however, there were no significant differences between the students' responses and those of the native Spanish speakers. Taken together, these findings indicate that over the course of their time abroad the students became more target-like in their use of verbal downgrading.

Exact McNemar's tests were also performed to determine if significant differences existed in the students' use of external modification before and after SA, as shown in Table 4.

In Paper Extension, the students increased their use of the acknowledgment of imposition strategy from pre- to posttest (p = 0.004). No significant differences were observed for the other strategies. Fisher's exact tests revealed that when compared to the native Spanish speakers, the students underused four strategies on the pretest: The disarmer strategy was underused in both Paper Extension (p = 0.006) and Leaving for School (p = 0.005), and acknowledgment of imposition was underused in both Paper Extension (p = 0.002) and Less Food (p = 0.002). It is worth noting that the significant differences reported on the pretest (i.e., the students' underuse of external modification compared to the native Spanish speakers) were no longer observed at the time of the posttest, which suggests that the students became more target-like in this aspect of their request performance.

Exact McNemar's tests revealed two significant differences from pre- to posttest for students' request perspective, as shown in Table 5. The students' increased use of hearer-oriented requests in Paper Extension was significant (p = 0.001), as was their concomitant decrease in the use of speaker-oriented forms (p = 0.008). No significant differences were observed in the remaining four vignettes.

Fisher's exact tests were performed to compare the students' use of request perspective on the pre- and posttest to that of the native Spanish speakers. Two significant differences were observed on the pretest. In Paper Extension, the students underused hearer-oriented requests (p = 0.003) while overusing speaker-oriented forms (p = 0.000). At the time of the posttest, no significant differences were found between the SA students and the native Spanish speakers. These findings demonstrate that the students adopted more target-like request perspective during their time abroad.

The study also examined students' RVRs as a window into their cognition during their L2 Spanish request production. Immediately after finishing the posttest, and prompted by the following two questions, the participants wrote their RVRs: (1) What were you thinking about as you responded to each scenario? and (2) Can you explain to us your decision-making process? The RVR responses are presented in Table 6, in discrete thematic categories and quantified in terms of the percentage of students that reported thinking about each topic as they engaged with each of the five request vignettes. Because a significant percentage of the 15 students reported thinking about specific sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic features that directly impacted their ability to project appropriate degrees of politeness, these results are also included in Table 6 as a subset of the "politeness" category. The percentages for the five combined vignettes showed that participant attention was primarily focused on two aspects: (1) the desire to project politeness (56%) and (2) the request outcome: communicating with clarity and persuasion in order to have their requests granted (72%).

Across all vignettes, 38% of the participants reported attending to social distance and/or power factors before choosing between the tú and the usted forms. While 40% of the students considered the request's degree of imposition, some 27% indicated intentionally using conditional forms-or sometimes imperfect past tense forms to mitigate requests or to convey appropriate levels of formality or respect. In addition to politeness and task outcome, the third distinct category to emerge from the inductive analysis of the RVR data revealed that in both Speak Slower and Less Food, the students' attention also turned to recalling and employing pragmatic knowledge gleaned from previous experiences with similar requests during SA.

Sixty-seven percent of the participants reported focusing on the importance of projecting politeness in Speak Slower. In terms of their sociopragmatic awareness, 47% of the students recognized the social and power distance between them and their interlocutor and therefore employed the usted form. From a pragmalinguistic perspective, 60% of the students indicated thinking about and using verbal downgrading as a mitigation strategy. Finally, 20% of the Speak Slower RVRs contained statements from students who recounted reflecting on similar exchanges with professors during their stay in Spain.

The Paper Extension's RVR data showed that 33% of the students reported attending to communicating politeness. Sixty-seven percent reported thinking about this request's degree of imposition-which most of them interpreted as inappropriately high, given the justification the vignette's instructions required them to provide to the professor. Although nearly as many participants in this vignette as in Speak Slower produced verbally downgraded requests, thereby demonstrating knowledge of how to mitigate with this pragmalinguistic strategy, only 13% reported attending to doing so in this vignette. In fact, most of the reported cognitive focus for the Paper Extension task was on making sure the request was well grounded and delivered to merit its being granted by the interlocutor. A total of 87% of the students reported thinking about the task outcome in planning or performing the request.

In Airplane Seat, 60% of the students reported making a conscious effort to be perceived as polite; 40% explicitly stated that they chose to use the formal usted address form. Several noted the social distance factor and the age of the male interlocutor as justifications for this choice. The request's high imposition was the third sociopragmatic factor, to which 53% of the students reported having paid attention in their planning and production of this task. This assessment prompted 27% of them to communicate that "in real life" they would avoid making such a request. In terms of pragmalinguistic awareness, 27% of the participants reported using conditional forms to mitigate the request.

In Less Food, 73% of the students reported attending to expressing politeness in order to not offend their host mother. Although there was no consensus about whether to address her using tú or usted, 33% of the participants recounted focusing their attention on this sociopragmatic choice. Although 67% of participants verbally downgraded their request by using conditional forms in the posttest, only 13% indicated attending to

this pragmalinguistic strategy in the Less Food RVRs. The percentages of the reported focus on task outcome were much higher, with 80% of the students recalling the conscious effort they had to make to ground this request so as to be persuasive without being rude. Finally, 53% reported recalling a similar past experience as they planned for and completed the Less Food request task.

The Leaving for School RVR data showed that 47% of the students attended to the expressing politeness factor as they interacted with the 15-year-old host sister throughout this task. The social distance and power variables that conditioned their relationship were attended to by 53% of the students. Similarly, some 40% of them reported on the impact the host sister's age had on their request production. Although 47% of the students recounted considering the imposition factor associated with having to make such a request of the teenager, several of them (see "Discussion" below) misunderstood the very nature of this imposition. This in part helps explain why only 20% of the students indicated concentrating on downgrading the request while 73% of them reported focusing on the task's outcome and on being sufficiently logical and persuasive to convince the host sister to leave for school earlier with them.

6 DISCUSSION

The present study examined the impact of pedagogical intervention on students' request performance during a 4-week SA experience. Results indicated that the students improved their request performance during their time abroad, as rated by two native Spanish speakers. The students' request strategies also became more target-like over time. RVRs indicated that the students attended to politeness, task outcome, and past experience during request planning and production as well as to specific sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic strategies targeted during the pragmatic intervention.

6.1 Request performance ratings

The paired-samples t tests revealed that for the five combined vignettes the students were rated higher on the posttest than the pretest. Note that the students were also rated higher on the posttest on four out of the individual five vignettes (Speak Slower, Paper Extension, Airplane Seat, and Less Food). This corroborates findings by other researchers, such as Shively and Cohen (2008), who also found that after a semester abroad their participants were also rated higher on the posttest than on the pretest on the same five combined vignettes, although their students' significant gains were limited to two vignettes (Speak Slower and Paper Extension), both of which represent a mid-level degree of imposition. Their findings are not surprising: As suggested by Shively and Cohen, the act of making a request to a professor may have been something that the students were more accustomed to and had gained practice doing while abroad. This stands in contrast to the findings of the present study in which students' performance rating gains extended across the range of low(Less Food), mid- (Speak Slower and Paper Extension), and high-imposition (Airplane Seat) requests. Taken together, these results suggest that pragmatic instruction, such as the pedagogical intervention employed in the present study, may be necessary for students to fully develop their pragmatic competence while abroad.

6.2 Request strategies

In examining the request strategies employed by the students before and after SA, it is evident that over time they increased their use of the important strategy of verbal downgrading. Before SA, the students showed a strong preference for the unmitigated query preparatory strategy (¿Puedo tener una extensión? [Can I have an extension on my paper?]), as demonstrated by their frequent use of the present indicative to make their requests (see also the Appendix). Félix-Brasdefer (2007) and Shively and Cohen (2008) found similar results with both intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish. At the end of SA, the students in the present study became more target-like by increasing their use of the query preparatory strategy with verbal downgrading (¿Me daría una extensión en mi trabajo? [Could you give me an extension on my paper?]) while also decreasing their use of

query preparatory. This suggests that the students had begun to acquire more target-like use of the conditional to soften the force of their requests. The native speaker raters' comments on the preand posttest performance ratings corroborated the importance of verbal downgrading. Both raters indicated that the SA group's use of verbal downgrading on the posttests contributed to their higher performance ratings.

6.3 External modification

Because external modification was also targeted during predeparture orientation and again in the course of the time abroad, it was expected that students would become more native-like in this aspect of their request behavior, which in fact they did. In the area of grounders and appreciation, the SA group was similar to the native Spanish speakers, on both the pre- and the posttests. Meanwhile, the students did move toward target norms with their more frequent use of the disarmer and acknowledgment of imposition strategies on the posttests. In some cases, however, the participants seemed to have moved in the opposite direction of the target norm; for example, their increased use of preparator in Speak Slower and Paper Extension, concurrent with their decreased use of acknowledgment of imposition in Leaving for School, suggests that some students had not acquired full control of the required sociopragmatic knowledge.

6.4 Request perspective

The students shifted from a predominance of speaker-oriented requests on the pretest to a greater use of hearer-oriented forms on the posttest. Previous studies have suggested that the persistence of speakeroriented requests in L2 Spanish request production is attributable to L1 transfer (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007). As a result, even students who spend a semester abroad often continue to use speaker-oriented requests in those contexts where hearer-oriented forms are more appropriate (Shively & Cohen, 2008). Given the students' shift from speaker- to hearer-oriented requests, one can conclude that the intervention was successful in making them aware of the importance of request perspective in Spanish. These findings thus affirm previous research on the positive effect of pragmatic instruction on this aspect of request behavior (Hernández & Boero, 2018; Shively, 2011).

6.5 RVRs

The RVRs provided insights into the cognitive processes as well as into the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge and perceptions involved in the students' request performance that would not have been available had the analysis been limited to their DCTs. During request production, the students attended to politeness, task outcome, and past experiences. The RVRs also provided access to the specific sociopragmatic factors and pragmalinguistic features that consciously informed and shaped their request planning and production. Particularly in connection to the Leaving for School vignette, the RVRs revealed that in some instances, the students' lack of sociocultural knowledge or their reliance on inaccurate assumptions undermined their ability to formulate more target-like requests.

Similar to what other researchers have observed (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a; Woodfield, 2012), the students reported attending to politeness, sociopragmatic factors, pragmalinguistic features, sources of pragmatic knowledge, and task outcome. With regard to Speak Slower, for example, RVR data revealed that 60% of learners were consciously attending to language form exclusively in terms of its pragmatic function. This focus on the pragmatic dimension of language indicates a degree of conscious awareness that explains why all participants used some form of verbal downgrading on the posttest. The Paper Extension RVRs showed that part of the students' success in making significant gains with regard to the perceived levels of appropriateness was related to their awareness that as request imposition rises, so should their conscious attention to grounding such a request and projecting a commensurate degree of politeness. Airplane Seat RVRs, for their part, revealed that the learners' evolving sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic awareness was closely bound to their realization

that in the performance of a request, appropriateness, content, and form decisions are interrelated and therefore need to be simultaneously considered and reconciled.

Two tasks required the students to engage with interlocutors in low social distance situations. In the Less Food RVRs, evidence suggested that a wide range of factors might account for the nontarget-like degree of directness characterizing several students' performances: the preconditioning effect of past experience; inaccurate sociopragmatic knowledge about the impact of social distance on directness; cultural underestimation of this request's degree of emotional, if not practical, imposition; and overestimation of the mitigating impact of grounders in this request scenario. Finally, the Leaving for School RVRs identified one important pragmatic and one key sociocultural misconception that limited the ability of several participants to produce more appropriate and target-like requests. With regard to pragmatic miscalculation by the SA students, evidence from the RVRs suggested that the participants' focus on the host sister's young age may have led them to dismiss other important variables, such as the degree of imposition. In turn, this act of omission may have disproportionately influenced the students' decisions related to appropriate levels of formality, directness, and politeness. In addition to capturing many of the students' failure to grasp the request's high imposition, the Leaving for School RVRs pointed to a thought pattern that is possibly responsible for this misunderstanding: Several participants incorrectly assumed that their interlocutor fully shared their views regarding the rigid cultural expectations of arriving to class on time and that she fully understood-as they did-the negative consequences of not doing so. Making such assumptions impacted learners' ability to gauge the request's imposition correctly. This in turn caused many of the SA students to calibrate their tone and level of directness inappropriately. Therefore, with this vignette, as with the other four, the RVRs provided insights that informed both the native raters' assessments of the students' performance and the particular characteristics of their request production.

6.6 Pedagogical implications
In both the SA and quite likely in the "at home" classroom context as well, the findings of this study show that an appropriately developed pedagogical model can empower students to become more proficient and effective users of the L2. Such a model must include five features. First, faculty members, or in the SA context the SA program director, must recognize the need to focus instruction on speech acts and other pragmatic characteristics of the L2. In the "at home" and SA contexts, faculty and program directors must possess a strong knowledge of language acquisition, pragmalinguistics, and sociopragmatics so as to be able to discuss with students the ways in which pragmatics contributes to more successful interactions both within the home community (e.g., daily life encounters or servicelearning) and during the SA experience.

Second, all parties must recognize that explicit instruction in speech acts (e.g., apologies or requests) is required. Central to this discussion is helping students to embrace the importance of grammar as a communicative resource to accomplish social action, such as apologizing for having broken a friend's laptop or asking a professor for a letter of recommendation (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012). Instruction must address, at a minimum, the pragmalinguistic strategies (e.g., the progressive aspect and the conditional) that a speaker uses to express politeness, deference, and respect as well as how sociopragmatic factors (e.g., social status, social distance, and degree of imposition) influence the appropriateness of pragmatic choices, thus providing a framework to which students can refer when choosing appropriate language forms for a given social situation.

Third, exposure to authentic input combined with awareness-raising activities seems to facilitate and support learning. This transitional step in either an existing course or a predeparture SA model raises students' awareness of the choices that native speakers make in both the oral and the written interpersonal modes, particularly concerning the relationship between grammatical structures and communicative contexts. For example, in the case of exchanging shoes without a receipt (see Appendix D in the IRIS database; https://www.iris-database.org/iris/app/home/detail?id=york%3a934499 &ref=search), students' attention can

be directly focused on how a native speaker uses intonation, pauses, repetitions, and hedging to frame the speech act-all of which are characteristics of advancedlevel language proficiency.

Fourth, once students clearly understand how situational and contextual variables impact linguistic choices, they must have opportunities to put their pragmatic knowledge into practice (Shively, 2010; Usó-Juan, 2010). Engaging students in guided, controlled activities (e.g., written discourse completion tasks) as well as communicative practice (e.g., role-plays) involving different sociopragmatic features (Usó-Juan, 2010) allow learners to consider how the three dimensions of social status, social distance, and degree of imposition affect the choice of pragmalinguistic forms. For example, a sample scenario may require students to ask a professor to reschedule a missed appointment, while another scenario may have them ask a friend to borrow a book that they need to finish an assignment. As with students in the predeparture pedagogical intervention described in this article, students in the "at home" context could perform role-plays in class and then debrief with peers or as a whole group under the instructor's guidance and/or compare their enactment of the request with videorecordings of a native speaker. In both contexts, raising students' awareness of the targeted pragmatic features through focused practice and discussion about the appropriateness of the selected pragmalinguistic forms and the sociopragmatic factors that were the focus of the individual scenarios is critical.

In the fifth and final step, in both the in-program SA context and in the "at home" course model, engaging students in person-to-person encounters that require them to carry out specific tasks, followed by written or oral analysis and in direct comparison with approaches used by native speakers, allows students to put their knowledge and skills into practice and reflect on the way in which their speech act would be perceived by members of the host community (Shively, 2010). Pragmatic tasks such as those employed in the present study represent one approach to facilitating students' social interaction with native speakers. While it is perhaps easier to carry out this step in the context of SA, students in classrooms can also complete these tasks with foreign students on their home campuses or in their home communities, or by using technology to connect with native speakers abroad.

For those instructors and SA directors who want to assist their students in becoming proficient in the target language, pragmatic instruction must become a core aspect of their language teaching. This five-step pedagogical model for developing learners' pragmatic competence is a researchbased approach that will guide students to understanding the explicit connections between language forms and their uses during speech act production. Such an approach will empower students to take into account the appropriateness of linguistic choices that are based on social and situational variables.

6.7 Limitations and future research

The present study had several limitations. First, there was no control group. Without a control group, one might argue that the students' L2 pragmatic development was due simply to their time abroad in Spain and not necessarily a consequence of the intervention. It could be argued, however, that if one compares the current study's findings with existing research on SA students who are not exposed to a pragmatic intervention (e.g., Hernández, 2016; Shively & Cohen, 2008), one might conclude that the participants in this study outperformed the learners in other studies with similar backgrounds and SA experiences. Regardless, a research design that compares an experimental group receiving pragmatic instruction with a control group that does not would be an important contribution to the SA literature. A second limitation is that there was no delayed posttest to measure the long-term retention of request production. Incorporating a delayed posttest into the research design could provide important insights into the long-term effectiveness of the intervention. The third limitation was the use of a DCT to assess request production. DCTs are an indirect measure of pragmatic competence, measuring what students know rather than how they use their knowledge to interact with an interlocutor (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Shively & Cohen, 2008). While there are advantages to using role-plays, the DCT used in the present study

allowed for comparisons between this study's findings and previous research (e.g., Shively & Cohen, 2008). However, in order to have a more complete understanding of the effects of explicit instruction on L2 pragmatic development, future studies might incorporate both online (e.g., roleplays) and offline (e.g., written DCTs) measures into their research design.

7 CONCLUSION

The present study measured the combined effect of explicit intervention and short-term SA on the request performance of students enrolled in a 4-week program in Spain. First, previous research and these findings suggest that without direct instruction and guided exposure to samples of pragmatic input and explicit information about how pragmalinguistic strategies and sociopragmatic factors inform speech act production, it is unlikely that learners will have, or spontaneously adopt while studying abroad, the tools and understandings that are necessary to interact with native speakers using socially appropriate language. In addition, based on performance ratings by native Spanish speakers, the findings show that the students made significant gains in pragmatic appropriateness in all but one of the five scenarios. Examination of request strategies before and after SA demonstrates that the students became more target-like in their increased use of verbal downgrading from pre- to posttest. Gains in external modification and request perspective were also observed. In addition to offering insights into sociocultural factors and perceptions influencing learner production, the RVR data reveal that students attended to politeness, task outcome, and relevant past experiences during the planning and execution of requests. Moreover, the RVRs suggest a relationship between the learners' conscious efforts to project politeness and their attention to pragmalinguistic features and sociopragmatic factors that had been targeted throughout the intervention and noticed during their time abroad. In light of the RVR findings regarding learner cognition and perceptions at the end of the data collection period, future researchers might incorporate RVRs into the pretest phase of their studies so as to note and address problematic production tendencies, assumptions, and knowledge held prior to the intervention. Researchers might also retroactively evaluate those aspects of learners' pragmatic performance that prove most difficult to correct or alter.

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Sidebar

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Footnote

ENDNOTES

1 Internal modification refers to strategies that a speaker can use as part of the core request sequence to lessen the impact of the request. In Spanish, internal modification includes verbal downgrading (e.g., the conditional, the past tense), the politeness marker por favor [please], and other lexical tokens (e.g., quizás [maybe], un poquito [a little bit], unos días más [a few more days]). External modification refers to strategies that a speaker can use prior to or after the core request to also soften the impact of the request (e.g., providing an explanation or justification for the request).

2 Readers are referred to Marsden, Mackey, and Plonsky (2016) for a discussion of the materials available in IRIS.

3 The authentic input used during predeparture orientation consisted of DCTs that the first author had previously collected from native Spanish speakers in Spain as part of a larger research project.

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