

Research Article

# A Case Study on Enhancing Pragmatic Competence in EAP Learners: Examining the Impact of Targeted Instruction in Request Speech Acts

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**Abstract:** This article examines the role of pragmatic instruction on developing pragmatic competence in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners, particularly focusing on the speech act of requests. While research has long explored various factors influencing pragmatic competence, including instructional methods, this study specifically addresses how targeted pragmatic instruction impacts learners over time. Conducted as a qualitative longitudinal study, this research examines changes in learners' pragmatic performance over a four-week period, during which participants completed both written and oral discourse completion tasks. Findings suggest that pragmatic instruction significantly enhances learners' pragmatic abilities. Notably, participants have demonstrated a greater range of request strategies supportive moves, reflecting increased awareness of the social and cultural implications of their requests. These findings indicate the vital role of pragmatic instruction in enhancing learners' ability to adapt their language use based on social variables such as power dynamics and distance. The study also highlights the importance of integrating pragmatic instruction into EAP curricula to improve learners' communicative competence, enabling them to navigate both academic and social interactions with greater sensitivity and appropriateness.

**Keywords:** pragmatic performance; discourse completion tasks; supportive moves; request strategies

## 1. Introduction

The adoption of the communicative approach in language teaching has brought inter-language pragmatics to the forefront, capturing the interest of educators and scholars alike. There is a shared belief that pragmatic competence deserves greater emphasis in foreign language instruction, given its crucial role in overall communicative competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Taguchi, 2015). Despite numerous studies investigating the link between language instruction and pragmatic competence development, there remains significant hesitancy among English teachers to actively cultivate this skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Many international students studying in English-speaking countries have in-advertently displayed socially inappropriate behaviors due to limited pragmatic awareness (Wang, et al., 2016). This observation highlights the need to explore the role of language teaching in fostering learners' pragmatic competence, as pragmatic failures – misinterpretations of speaker intentions – can lead to misunderstandings, confusion, communication breakdowns, and perceptions of rudeness or insensitivity among EFL learners, even when unintentional (House & Kádár, 2023; Osuka, 2021).

This research seeks to explore how language instruction can facilitate learners' acquisition of pragmatic knowledge, particularly in the context of speech acts like requests. The speech act of requesting has been selected for its universal relevance in daily interactions and its recognized difficulty for language learners. Although prior research suggests that pragmatic instruction can support the development of pragmatic competence, there is a noticeable gap in studies focused on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). This is particularly significant, as international students in academic settings need to be adept at navigating the pragmatic nuances of English to succeed in their studies and avoid potential misunderstandings. Therefore, this study aims to address how the

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integration of pragmatic instructions in EAP context can effectively contribute to learners' pragmatic development in the use of request strategies and supportive moves whilst prompting a request.

This study involves five international students pursuing higher education in the UK, all of whom were enrolled in the same pre-session course at a university, situated within an EAP context. The course aims to familiarize students with the academic environment in a foreign country while offering some degree of pragmatic instruction. The primary objective of the research is to investigate the impact of classroom instruction on the development of pragmatic competence among English language learners, particularly. Furthermore, the study seeks to offer practical recommendations for teaching practices that may enhance the development of pragmatic competence in second language learners.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Speech act Theory*

A Speech Act can be defined as an action performed by a speaker when he speaks, and this act will be expressed directly or indirectly (Yule, 2020). Austin (1975) has introduced various speech acts types and the concepts of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts to describe common divisions in speech acts. Illocutionary acts are of particular interest in this respect because they have much to do with the intended meaning of the utterance (O'Keeffe et al., 2019). Therefore, illocutionary acts are by nature context-based, and this fits well with pragmatic competence goals. Nonetheless, Searle (1976) later criticised Austin's taxonomy for its inconsistencies and limitations. Adapting these concepts, Searle (1976) proposed a new set of speech acts labelled as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Of these, directives are of particular interest to this research because they are prevalent in various daily activities and interactions, thus prompting the needs to be explored and investigated. According to O'Keeffe et al. (2019), a directive is a speech act where the speaker tries to get the hearer to do something, and this research focuses on one particular type of directive - the request form.

Requests are ubiquitous in everyday communication, and not just in the context of foreign language teaching. The use of certain speech acts, particularly requests, can be challenging to learners as they require a significant amount of time for learners to develop thorough understanding (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This can be attributed to the fact that requests involve not only linguistic ability but also the proper consideration of several social and cultural factors, including the distance between speaker and hearer, the relative status or power between interlocutors and the degree of imposition in the request itself (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Divergent perceptions of such factors may lead to significant differences in the use of request strategies between learners and native speakers. Thus, the speech act of request among many other areas in pragmatics has been addressed by researchers, among which exists this study.

### 2.2. *Politeness theory and request strategies*

Directives, speech acts of request in particular, are generally assumed to be relevant to the concept of politeness. According to Watts (2003), politeness as a linguistic phenomenon lacked a theoretical base until the Speech Act theory was first introduced in the 1960s, and this has positioned politeness as one of the fairly new subfields of linguistic pragmatics. Given that politeness is inherently a cross-cultural concept that varies across different social settings, it has become one of the most debated topics within pragmatics. Individuals are able to differentiate between polite and impolite behaviours at a very young age, and yet they can find it challenging to interact appropriately across different cultural contexts due to discrepancies. As a result, defining politeness remains contentious, leading to the development of multiple theoretical frameworks. Chief amongst the influential models is Brown and Levinson (1987)'s politeness theory despite facing criticism.

The Brown and Levinson model, influenced by Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle as well as Goffman's (1959) notion of face, distinguish two types of face: the negative face and the positive one. Face, according to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61), refers to an individual's "public self-image" that they seek to maintain. Positive face involves the desire for one's self-image to be acknowledged and appreciated, while negative face refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Consequently, positive politeness aims to preserve a person's positive face, while negative politeness seeks to protect their negative face (O'Keeffe et al., 2019). Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) also introduced three key

variables to assess the degree of politeness required in an interaction: social distance, power differences, and the rank of imposition in a particular culture. Social distance is regulated by socio-cultural factors influencing the familiarity between two interlocutors; power differences refer to hierarchical dynamics in the interaction; and the rank of imposition (also referred as cultural ranking) determine how threatening a speech act is perceived to be within a particular culture. Speakers should select the appropriate politeness strategies in tandem with these factors and the contextual variables. While Brown and Levinson's framework has made a substantial contribution to the field of pragmatics, their approach has been criticised for its non-universality (Matsumoto, 1988). It is also worth mentioning that Watt (2003) has introduced another theory of politeness reckoned as a prominent complementation to Brown and Levinson's model, though it is out of the scope of this study.

In relation to requests, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) argue that requests can be understood as expressions of a speaker's desire for a future action. Requests, often interpreted as the action of asking the hearer to do a favour at the benefit of the speaker and thus viewed as impositive and intrusive, may threaten the hearer's negative face. As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) point out, certain speech acts inherently threaten face, particularly those that conflict with the face desires of either the speaker or the hearer. Requests, as a prime example, are frequently seen as face-threatening acts. Due to their imposition, requests often necessitate mitigation strategies to minimise the potential threat to the hearer's face. Indirect request strategies, alongside internal and external modifications, can help soften the imposition and make the request more polite (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

The standard sequence in requests usually includes alerters (e.g. 'Hai'), supportive moves or external modifiers (e.g. 'You have the most beautiful handwriting I've ever seen!'), head acts (e.g. 'Would it be possible to borrow your notes for a few days?') and internal modifiers, including downgraders (e.g., 'Would it be possible...') and upgraders (e.g., 'I really need it'). A classification framework of these components has been formulated and proven valid across languages in the findings of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Furthermore, Trosborg (1995) suggested an additional classification of requests depending on the level of directness. In this study, both schemes are employed with some adaptations in analysing requests strategies, with emphasis on the head act and external modifiers (supportive moves). The analysis of the internal modifiers like downgraders, upgraders, and alerters are beyond the scope of this research.

Blum-Kulka (1989) and Trosborg (1995) proposed distinct categorisations of request strategies, building upon earlier classifications that arranged these strategies according to levels of indirectness. The specific categorisation of request strategies used in this study is outlined in Table 1, as adapted from Blum-Kulka (1989, p. 202). This table is organised with an increasing level of indirectness.

**Table 1.** Request strategies

<b>Descriptive category</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Mood Derivable	Clean up the kitchen. Move your car.
Performative	I'm asking you to move your car.
Hedged performative	I would like to ask you to move your car.
Obligation statement	You'll have to move your car.
Want statement	I would you to clean the kitchen. I want you to move your car.
Suggestory Formulae	How about cleaning up? Why don't you come and clean up the mess you made last night?
Query Preparatory	Could you clean up the mess in the kitchen? Would you mind moving your car?
Strong hints	You've left the kitchen in a right mess.
Mild hints	We don't want any crowding (as a request to move the car).

*Note:* Adapted from *Cross-cultural pragmatics: requests and apologies* (p. 202) by S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, & G. Kasper, 1989.

External modifications, also referred to as supportive moves, are elements that occur outside the main speech act, either preceding or following it. These modifications generally serve to provide additional information that establishes the context and reinforces the request, thereby influencing its illocutionary force. Their primary function is to either mitigate or intensify the strength of the request. This study focuses on external modifications that serve to soften the request. The classification of external modifications used in this research is outlined in table 1 below.

**Table 2.** Types of supportive moves (external modifications)

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

Note: Adapted from "I just need more time": A study of native and non-native students' requests to faculty for an extension (p. 92) by H. Woodfield & M. Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010, *Multilingua*, 29(1), based on Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, and Sifanou, 1999.

### 2.3. Teaching of Pragmatics

A number of studies have explored the impact of pedagogical interventions on learners' pragmatic competence. Research indicates that certain aspects of pragmatics can be effectively taught through classroom instruction (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Notably, speech acts, hedges, discourse markers, and conversational structures are identified as some of the most teachable elements of pragmatics (Rose, 2005). Explicit instruction has been shown to aid learners in noticing specific aspects of the target language, transforming input into intake, and facilitating long-term retention (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). This is particularly relevant for nuanced language features like backchannels and turn-taking, which are often overlooked (Bardovi-Harlig, 2024). In contrast, implicit instruction is suggested to promote long-lasting and readily accessible pragmatic knowledge (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Therefore, integrating pragmatic elements into classroom activities – such as authentic dialogue analysis, pragmatic discussions, or role-playing – can enhance the development of pragmatic competence.

However, challenges remain in teaching pragmatics in classroom environments. One significant issue is that textbooks, a primary source of pragmatic input, frequently lack

sufficient coverage of pragmatic information or fail to provide adequate interpretations of language use (O’Keeffe et al., 2019). Additionally, many teachers may lack awareness of English pragmatic norms and may not have access to relevant research, leading to a reliance on intuition, which can be both inaccurate and unreliable (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Furthermore, the replication of real-world scenarios in classroom settings is limited, potentially impeding students’ preparedness for diverse language encounters. Bardovi-Harlig Dörnyei, and Dörnyei (1998) emphasized that the language students encounter in classrooms often lacks the variety and emphasis necessary for developing pragmatic competence. Van Dyke and Acton (2022) further argued that classroom interactions tend to be overly polite compared to real-world contexts, and only a narrow range of speech acts are typically represented in classroom discourse.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

The study’s participants consist of five international postgraduate students enrolled in a pre-session course aimed at preparing them for master’s or PhD programs at a university in the United Kingdom. Selection criteria for participants did not include restrictions based on gender, proficiency level, or field of study. However, two groups were formed based on nationality, enabling a more nuanced analysis for the research objectives. A summary of participant profiles is provided in table 3.

Throughout the research process, the researcher must consider various ethical concerns, with participant consent being a primary focus. To address this, a consent form was provided to all participants, detailing the study’s purpose and obtaining their agreement to participate. In accordance with the University’s ethical guidelines, participants’ identities have been strictly safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, all information gathered during the study has been used exclusively for this research and will remain confidential.

**Table 3.** Participants’ profiles

Name (codified)	Country of origin	Level of education	Level of English proficiency (IELTS score)
Student 1	Saudi Arabia	PhD	6.0
Student 2	China	Master	5.5
Student 3	China	Master	6.0
Student 4	China	Master	5.5
Student 5	Japanese	Master	6.0

#### 3.2. Research instruments

The present study involved two rounds of data collection with a four-week interval between each session. The research was carried out with qualitative research methods, utilizing production tasks such as Written Discourse Completion Tests (WDCTs) and role-play activities. These tasks were employed to observe the progression of participants’ pragmatic competence, specifically focusing on their use of pragmatic strategies.

The design of the tests and role-play activities was derived from prior research in the field of pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Rose, 1992; Tanck, 2004). The situations presented in the tasks varied in terms of social status and social distance and were situated within familiar contexts for the participants. The WDCTs comprised five scenarios in the pre-test and five in the post-test, while the role-plays featured six distinct situations. In the first session (the pre-test), students were provided with six cue cards representing different situations and were required to select and perform three, while the remaining scenarios were reserved for the second session.

To ensure clarity in question phrasing and relevance to the research objectives (i.e., eliciting the speech act of requests), the tests were piloted by five participants (three native English speakers and two EFL/ESL speakers). The participants, subsequently, completed the tasks under the supervision of the researcher to ensure the reliability and validity of the data.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

After completing the collection and selection of data, the analysis was conducted using the speech act of request framework mentioned in the previous section of this paper. This analysis involved classifying the data into specific categories to allow the formulation of a

working hypothesis based on the findings.

The data analysis process began with the identification of the strategies used by speakers when making requests, focusing on whether they primarily employed head acts or utilised modifiers in relation to the intended hearers. All the responses were coded as in the classification scheme mentioned in section 2.2. Afterwards, the data were interpreted and described to address the research question before presenting the conclusion.

## 4. Results

Discourse completion tests are employed as a method to elicit data and evaluate learners' pragmatic competence, serving to provide insights that address the first research question. This approach has been widely favored in prior research on second language pragmatic competence (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Sasaki, 1998; Billmyer & Varghese, 2000). The responses collected from participants are subsequently coded to delineate units for analysis. As outlined in section 2.2, the analysis focuses on identifying the strategy type in the head act of the request as well as supportive moves. To determine the type and calculate the frequency of request strategies or modifications used, the responses are first analysed and categorised in a table where strategies or modifications are displayed in rows. If a strategy is absent from any response, it is excluded from the analysis. All data are systematically coded and categorized following the coding scheme described in section 2.2.

### 4.1. Discourse completion tests

#### 4.1.1. Strategy types:

As indicated in Table 4, there is minimal variation in the request strategies employed by participants in the pre-test. The most commonly used strategy is the conventionally indirect request, specifically the query preparatory form (e.g., *Would you.../Could you...?*). This preference may be attributed to instruction, as these structures are frequently taught in formal classroom environments for making requests. Only one instance of the mood derivable strategy (a direct request) is observed, which appears in Student 4's response to question one in the first test (*Go for it, my friend.*). Considering the social distance between speaker and hearer, as well as the rank of imposition in question one, the conventionally indirect strategy may be more appropriate. Nonetheless, Student 4 is a Chinese student, aligning with findings from other studies that suggest direct request strategies are the second most commonly used among Chinese students (Chen et al., 2023).

**Table 4.** Distribution of request strategies used by participants (pre-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Mood derivable					1	1
Query preparatory	5	5	5	4	5	24

In the second test, a range of request strategies were observed, as illustrated in Table 5 below. Participants demonstrated the ability to generate more diverse types of requests compared to the first test. Notably, two examples of strong hints (*Our team has just got an important project which needs all the members to join.; The project is important, so we need all members to finish it on time.*) and two instances of obligation statements (*You have to finish the project before going on a holiday.; You will have to cancel your ticket.*) were identified in response to question four. While the former strategy appears appropriate given the context, the appropriateness of the latter is debatable. Interestingly, both students who used obligation statements also employed the phrase "I'm afraid that ..." – a way to soften the request; therefore, this strategy might be considered acceptable.

**Table 5.** Distribution of request strategies used by participants (post-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Obligation statement			1		1	2
Query preparatory	4	4	4	5	4	21
Strong hints	1	1				2

#### 4.1.2. Supportive moves

As illustrated in Table 6, the initial test reveals that participants in this study exhibit a very limited variety and frequency of supportive moves, with the exception of grounders. Notably, neither disarmers nor preparators are present in any of the responses across the five



situations analyzed. In contrast, grounders appear most frequently, with 25 instances identified, typically following requests. This finding aligns with prior research (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Hassall, 2001; Otcu and Zeyrek, 2008). Interestingly, four promises were made (e.g., *I'll transfer the money back to you tomorrow; I will return the money to you tomorrow; Tomorrow, I will return it to you; I can buy you lunch after we finish moving out*), with three of these promises occurring in the context of borrowing money. The act of promising repayment is thoughtful and appropriate in such situations, yet only three students – all Chinese – demonstrated the ability to utilize this form of modification.

**Table 6.** Distribution of supportive moves implemented by participants (pre-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Grounder	5	5	5	5	5	25
Getting a precommitment					1	1
Promise		1	2	1		4
Imposition minimiser			1	1	1	3
Apology	1		1			2
Discourse orientation move	1			2	1	4
<b>Supportive moves total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	

At a later stage, participants demonstrated their capability to incorporate a variety of external modification strategies in their responses. Notably, a majority displayed a tendency to employ at least one preparatory element in their requests. This observation aligns with the findings of Economidou-Kogesidis (2009) and Schauer (2008), whose studies also revealed a similar reliance on preparators. These researchers suggest that the use of preparators may be linked to the learners' proficiency level, which could result in diminished confidence, or to their social roles as international students. Moreover, participants showed an increased tendency to include apologies (e.g., *I'm sorry..., I'm sorry to trouble you...*) in their requests. The frequency of this strategy rose significantly from 2 to 14 occurrences, making apologies the second most common supportive move. The frequent use of apologies, along with the excessive use of "Thank you," can be seen as evidence of progress of pragmatic competence, since this aligns with British cultural context.

**Table 7.** Distribution of supportive moves implemented by participants (post-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Grounder	5	5	5	5	5	25
Disarmer	1		1		2	4
Preparatory	1	1	1	2		5
Getting a precommitment	1	1	1	1	1	5
Promise				1		1
Imposition minimiser	1	1	1		1	4
Apology	2	3	4	2	3	14
Discourse orientation move	1		1	1		3
<b>Supportive moves total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	

#### 4.2. Role-plays

In this study, a series of role-plays were incorporated alongside the WDCTs to gather more authentic data on the production of speech acts. The data obtained from the role-plays will be coded and presented in a manner similar to the WDCTs; however, instead of comparing the first and second role-plays, the analysis will focus on comparing the role-play data to that of the WDCTs.

##### 4.2.1. Request strategies

In the first role-play session, participants exhibited slight variations in their chosen

request strategies (Table 8). While the query preparatory remained the most favored strategy type, a modest increase in the use of the direct strategy, specifically mood derivable forms, was noted in the responses of all three Chinese participants (e.g., Please show your ID; So please give it back to me; Please return it to me). This observation aligns with prior findings indicating that, alongside the query preparatory approach, Chinese individuals tend to employ direct strategies in their request-making behaviors. However, distinctions between WDCTs and role-plays became less significant in the second role-play session (Table 9). The query preparatory strategy was predominantly used, though strong hints were notably absent, likely reflecting the influence of social distance and power dynamics between interlocutors in most role-play scenarios. Additionally, the obligation statement (e.g., I'm afraid you have to return it to me) appeared to be appropriately employed, incorporating the phrase "I'm afraid" to mitigate directness.

**Table 8.** Distribution of request strategies used by participants for role-plays (pre-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Mood derivable		1	1	1		3
Query preparatory	3	2	2	2	3	12

**Table 9.** Distribution of request strategies used by participants for role-plays (post-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Obligation statement					1	1
Query preparatory	3	3	3	3	2	14

#### 4.2.2. Supportive moves

In contrast to findings from the WDCTs, the initial role-play reveals an underuse of several supportive moves (Table 10). This outcome supports the observation that grounders are the most commonly employed supportive move or external modification in requests, aligning with prior research (in section 4.1.2). Participants' significant reliance on this modifier may be due to its capacity to allow speakers to provide reasons or justifications for their requests, positioning it as a fundamental component in the act of requesting (Schauer, 2008). This finding may also relate to the notion that “the addition of supportive moves will not generally result in more complex pragmalinguistic structures to be planned,” thereby making such modifications – particularly grounders – less grammatically complex and pragmalinguistically demanding (Hassall, 2001, p. 274). Such characteristics may facilitate early acquisition among learners, contributing to the prevalent use of grounders in this study. Regarding other supportive moves, there is no recorded instance of promise or imposition minimizers, which are used reasonably in the WDCTs. Notably, response lengths in the WDCTs are generally greater than those in the role-plays, potentially accounting for the limited use of external modifiers besides grounders. This disparity may also highlight the gap between participants' pragmatic awareness (receptive knowledge) and their actual communicative performance (production).

Nonetheless, contrary to the first role-play, the second role-play yields results more aligned with the WDCTs (Table 11). In the second session, a variety of supportive moves appear, particularly a notable increase in the use of apologies. This heightened presence of apologies suggests participants' growing awareness of the imposition involved in their requests.

**Table 10.** Distribution of supportive moves implemented by participants for role-plays (pre-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Grounder	5	3	3	4	3	25
Preparatory					1	1
Discourse orientation move	1		1	1		3
<b>Supportive moves total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	



**Table 11.** Distribution of supportive moves implemented by participants for role-plays (post-test).

Request strategies	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Total
Grounder	3	3	3	3	3	16
Disarmer	1	1	1			3
Preparatory				1		1
Getting a precommitment					1	1
Promise	1	1		2		4
Imposition minimiser			1	1	2	4
Apology	4	2	1	4	1	12
Discourse orientation move	1	1	1		1	4
<b>Supportive moves total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	

## 5. Discussion

The current study indicates that classroom instruction can positively impact learners' development of pragmatic competence. This finding aligns with previous research in pragmatics instruction (e.g. Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Sykes & González-Lloret, 2020; Taguchi, 2015), which demonstrates that learners generally exhibit improved appropriateness and a broader range of strategies for producing requests following instructional interventions. The observed enhancement in students' pragmatic awareness, as shown in the WDCTs and roleplays in this study, may be attributable to Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis. However, due to the study's time constraints, the long-term retention of students' pragmatic production remains uncertain, warranting caution when attempting to generalize the findings.

In terms of request strategies, the results indicate that learners predominantly rely on conventionally indirect request strategies, particularly the query preparatory form, in both pre- and post-instruction phases. This aligns with prior research suggesting that these forms are frequently taught in formal classroom settings and are considered polite and effective in various contexts (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Chen et al., 2023). However, the increase in diversity of strategies post-instruction, including the emergence of strong hints and obligation statements, demonstrates a developing awareness of contextual factors such as power dynamics and social distance. These findings support the argument that targeted pragmatic instruction enhances learners' ability to adapt their language use to different social settings (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). Future pedagogical efforts should focus on further diversifying the range of strategies taught, including less commonly used forms like strong hints and performatives, to prepare learners for nuanced real-world interactions (Taguchi, 2015).

The study also suggests that supportive moves, particularly grounders, were the most commonly used modifications throughout the study, reflecting their fundamental role in softening requests and providing context (Schauer, 2008). The significant increase in the use of apologies post-instruction highlights learners' growing sensitivity to potential impositions in their requests. This shift aligns with findings from studies emphasizing the cultural appropriateness of apologetic strategies in British contexts (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009). The introduction of other supportive moves, such as preparators and imposition minimizers, suggests that learners are becoming more adept at employing a range of pragmatic tools to navigate interpersonal communication effectively. These results underscore the importance of integrating explicit instruction on supportive moves into language curricula to foster comprehensive pragmatic competence, as suggested by Sykes and González-Lloret (2020). Expanding the scope of instruction to include various modifications could further enhance learners' ability to manage face-threatening acts in diverse cultural settings.

Nonetheless, the study's findings support pedagogical interventions designed to facilitate learners' acquisition of specific pragmatic skills, particularly in performing the speech act of requesting. Increasing students' sensitivity to cultural differences in request-making across languages through activities like discussions and roleplays appears essential. Such practices may enhance learners' understanding of the primary patterns involved in request production, promoting more appropriate language choices as their proficiency advances. Additionally, exposure to common request patterns used by native speakers is crucial for learners to make

suitable language choices. These patterns may be derived from established research on English requestive acts, such as Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) work. Moreover, integrating pragmatic instruction alongside traditional grammatical and lexical knowledge may yield more effective outcomes.

The findings also propose important implications for language teaching, particularly in the context of EAP. The positive impact of targeted pragmatic instruction on learners' request strategies and supportive moves suggests that integrating pragmatics into language curricula can significantly enhance students' communicative competence. Specifically, instructors should incorporate explicit lessons on speech acts like requests, emphasizing both strategy selection and the use of supportive moves to manage politeness and mitigate imposition. Given the increasing diversity of student populations in academic settings, particularly international students, there is a clear need for curricula that address the cultural nuances of pragmatics (House & Kádár, 2023). Teachers should also consider using role-plays, discourse completion tasks, and other interactive activities to simulate real-world communication, allowing students to practice and refine their pragmatic skills. Furthermore, these findings highlight the importance of ongoing research into the long-term retention of pragmatic skills, suggesting that future studies should assess the durability of instructional effects over extended periods and explore ways to integrate pragmatics instruction across different language proficiency levels (Jeon & Kaya, 2006).

## 6. Conclusions

The findings of this study align with prior empirical research on the pragmatic competence of English language learners, suggesting that pragmatic competence – a crucial aspect of communicative competence – can be more effectively developed with targeted instruction. Many international students for whom English is not a first language often encounter challenges in both interpreting and executing the pragmatic elements of speech acts, particularly requests. This underscores the necessity of incorporating pragmatic instruction within the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum, given its critical role in interpersonal communication, especially in the context of the United Kingdom. The benefit of explicit instruction observed in this study aligns with Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, which posits that such instruction aids in promoting the noticing process, thereby enhancing learners' awareness of pragmatics and contributing to the transformation of input into intake.

Additionally, this study indicates that cultural influences, along with other variables, also impact the development of pragmatic competence, supporting findings from other research. Consequently, language instructors should consider these factors to optimize students' pragmatic development.

However, this study has its limitations. Due to the restricted time frame, questions remain regarding the long-term retention of participants' pragmatic development. Furthermore, the study's small sample size (limited to five participants) warrants cautious interpretation of its findings. Future research is essential to address these limitations, with a delayed post-test potentially assessing the retention of pragmatic skills over time, and larger sample sizes aiding in broader generalizability. Such expanded research could yield deeper insights into the pragmatic competence of second language (L2) learners, benefiting both language learners and instructors in their respective pursuits of English language proficiency.

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