

Pragmatic development in the instructed context

A longitudinal investigation of L2 email requests

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This article reports an eight-month investigation into the long-term impact of explicit instruction on the learnability of different aspects of email requests by a group of Vietnamese university students. Two intact classes were randomly assigned to the treatment ($N = 13$) and control conditions ($N = 19$). Over a four-week period, the treatment group received six hours of instruction which comprised consciousness-raising, meta-pragmatic explanation, repeated output practice and teacher feedback. The control group, on the other hand, only followed the usual syllabus. Results of the study indicate that the treatment group obtained significantly greater pre-to-posttest gains than the control group, and that their improvement was retained by the time of the eight-month delayed post-test. Despite the learners' overall progress, however, it was also found that different aspects of their performance appeared to respond differently to instruction. The article supports the need for instruction of email politeness and discusses implications for future pedagogy and research.

Keywords: e-politeness, email requests, pragmatic instruction, second language, learnability

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a growing number of studies on students' email requests to faculty in higher education (e.g. Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Bjørge 2007; Chang and Hsu 1998; Chen 2001, 2006; Chen 2015; Chen, Rau and Rau 2016; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Felix-Brasdefer 2012; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Nguyen et al. 2015). With the spread of the Internet, email has rapidly become a common means of communication in this context, providing students with "the convenience to obtain feedback, clarification and information as soon as they need it" (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 3193). However, research has indicated that students do not use this communication medium without difficulty (Alcón-Soler

2013; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Felix-Brasdefer 2012; Chang and Hsu 1998; Chen 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). The major challenge seems to arise from the absence of “generally agreed-upon conventions for institutional email communication” for students to observe (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, 62). As a form of computer-mediated communication, email discourse represents a hybrid register that resembles both speech (i.e. less formal) and writing (i.e. more formal), and thus may afford a great range of styles (e.g. from those of a casual telephone conversation to those of a conservative business letter), depending on particular communicative contexts and writer-recipient role relationships (Barron 1998). In the institutional setting, although emails addressing authority figures are generally expected to display status-congruent appropriateness, standards of appropriateness may in fact vary among individual professors. While many would expect a standard letter format (e.g. see Li and Chen 2016), others may be more accepting of a free communication style (e.g. see Formentelli 2009), leaving students relatively uncertain regarding making stylistic and pragmatic choices appropriate for the hierarchical student-professor relationship (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007).

For many second language (L2) learners, writing an effective and appropriate email message to meet the authority figure’s expectations may involve even a greater amount of guesswork due to their low linguistic proficiency and unfamiliarity with email conventions in the target language (TL) (Chen 2001). In order to communicate their intent successfully, L2 students require not only knowledge of conventions for linguistic behaviour but also ability to judge the kind of relationship they have with their recipient in terms of social roles, solidarity, rights and obligation. However, the fact that such judgments may be culture-relative can make L2 learners struggle, especially if they are not guided adequately. As previous research has indicated, although with experience L2 students may gradually improve their email etiquette in the TL, many culture-specific appropriateness rules may be tacit and difficult to acquire without instruction (Chen 2006). As such, it has become clear from this discussion that L2 learners need to be made aware of language forms and sociocultural norms required for successful email writing to authority figures in L2 institutional contexts. Unfortunately, research into the effects of pedagogical interventions on email pragmatics to inform classroom practices is nevertheless scarce (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Ford 2006; Nguyen et al. 2015). This is in stark contrast to the substantial body of research that documents the effectiveness of explicit instruction of oral requests (e.g. see Alcón-Soler 2005; Halenko and Jones 2011; Martínez-Flor 2008; Safont 2003; Takahashi 2005; Takimoto 2006, 2009). To address the above gap, this article presents the findings of an eight-month investigation into the impact of explicit pragmatic instruction on Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students’ email writing practices. With a view to informing future research and pedagogy of the long-term effect of explicit

teaching on the learnability of different aspects of email pragmatics, the study asks two questions: (1) what is the instructional effect on the students' overall ability to write socially appropriate email requests to professors? (2) In what aspects of the email discourse (e.g. organisational structure, request forms, address forms, politeness strategies and aggravating devices) is the improvement (if any) evident and retained over an extended period of time?

2. Background

2.1 Pragmatics of email requests in student-faculty communication

Research has indicated that students write emails to professors to achieve a variety of important communicative functions, among which making requests seems most common (Chen 2015). Writing email requests to those with higher institutional status requires not only pragmatic sophistication but also critical language awareness of how status-congruent appropriateness is “ideologically situated in different socio-cultural contexts” (Chen 2006, 36). In the asymmetrical student-faculty relationship, students are expected to use language in a way that “properly acknowledges their own lower institutional status and the faculty’s higher institutional status” (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, 61). Research has shown that email messages from students to faculty generally display high formality, indirectness, and conformity with conventional forms in order to convey respect and deference (see Bou-Franch 2011; Chang and Hsu 1998; Chen 2006; Formentelli 2009). On the other hand, pragmatic failure may occur when students use language in a status-inappropriate manner, for example, by issuing directives to the professor, assuming that he or she is obliged to grant them the request, and showing no acknowledgement of the cost of the request, or appreciation of the professor’s time (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2006). Similarly, omission of greetings and closings and using inappropriate address forms also constitute pragmatic infelicities (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). Unfortunately, previous research has shown that the above examples are pervasive in many L2 email messages, thus capable of threatening the faculty’s negative face (i.e. desire to be free from imposition) and risking the student’s own positive face (i.e. desire to be approved of) (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), investigating 200 email requests sent by Greek Cypriot ELF university students to their professors, found that the majority of these requests were made up of direct rather than indirect strategies, thus inconsistent with the students’ lower social status. At the same time, softeners were rarely used for toning down the coerciveness of the requests, while linguistic devices for upgrading the force of the requests were abundantly used. Omissions of greetings and

closings as well as instances of incorrect academic titles were also observed. As a result, many of the email requests were regarded as disrespectful and inconsiderate by the native speaking (NS) professors in the study. Similar findings are also reported in other studies. For example, Felix-Brasdefer (2012), examining 240 email requests written by L1 English and L2 Spanish students to faculty, found that compared to L1 requests, L2 requests were less frequently softened while containing the address form inappropriate for the hierarchical student-professor relationship. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), comparing email messages to faculty written by 34 NS students and 65 L2 English students, found that the L2 students employed linguistic devices for politeness effects far less frequently while regularly emphasizing their personal needs and the urgency of their requests. The authors concluded that the students' choice of these discourse forms and strategies reflected an overestimation of their institutional rights on the one hand, and incognizance of the institutional hierarchy on the other.

The difficulty experienced by many L2 students in composing status-appropriate email messages may be caused by both linguistic and cultural factors. Some studies have found that compared to NS students, L2 students tend to demonstrate a lower level of linguistic flexibility, which may limit their ability to express politeness effectively. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007), for example, found that although L2 students may use similar request strategies to NS students in email correspondence with their professors, L2 students seemed to rely on more restricted resources for creating e-polite messages. Their pragmatic choices appeared to be constrained by a lack of linguistic means as well as the inability to select appropriate politeness devices in accordance with particular request scenarios. Other studies indicate that L2 students' pragmatic choices may be guided by their cultural values, which in many cases may clash with those of their NS interlocutors. For instance, Bjørge (2007)'s study demonstrates how cultural background may determine students' perceptions of the student-professor role relationship, and hence their linguistic choices for rapport management. In low power-distance (PD) cultures (see Hofstede 2001) education is generally student-centered and based on student-teacher equality. In comparison, high PD cultures emphasize institutional hierarchy and respect for authority. Therefore, while low PD students prefer to adopt informal and egalitarian email styles when communicating with their professors, those from high PD cultures may hesitate to do so. Instead, these high PD students tend to opt for formal conventions which are rarely used by their NS fellow students. It should be noted further that cultural differences, if ineffectively negotiated, may inadvertently lead to negative perceptions of the learner. In Chang and Hsu (1998), Chinese learners of English are found to rely heavily on pre-request supportive moves rather than linguistic forms to achieve indirectness. This is because in their L1, indirectness is generally manifested at the discourse level, by delaying the face-threatening act,

rather than through linguistic devices at the sentence level. In contrast, request messages in English are more often structured in a direct sequence, but realized by means of indirect linguistic forms. Due to these cultural differences in the manifestation of politeness, Chinese students' email requests may be considered as unnecessary detours and discourteous by NS recipients. In a similar vein, Krulatz & Park (2015) discuss how a Korean learner of English may be perceived by her prospective American employer as lacking in confidence because of the self-humbling strategy she employs for politeness effects in her email of job application. While the Korean culture holds modesty as an important value and regards confidence as undesirable, self-denigration may not be an appropriate pragmatic choice in job application according to US cultural norms.

It would be expected that through socialization into institutional email culture, over time L2 students may improve their email etiquette in the TL. However, Rau and Rau (2016) observed limited progress by a group of Taiwanese EFL graduate students when writing emails to their NS instructor. It was found that throughout the 12-week course the majority of the students employed the same formal forms of address when communicating with the instructor, and resorted to formulaic closings without any changes, thus displaying little evidence of negotiation of personal relationship with the instructor over time. The authors attributed these findings to the students' limited exposure to email guidelines and argued for the necessity of email instruction. Chen (2006) presented a longitudinal case study of a Taiwanese graduate students' email practice in English during her two and a half year studies in the USA. She found that as Ling (the student's pseudonym) gained more institutional emailing experience, Ling relied less heavily on statements of personal needs and more increasingly on conventional indirect requests, thus projecting a more positive and competent student-image while demonstrating a higher level of deference to the professors. Ling also acknowledged the imposition more often, and provided more legitimate explanations for her requests. Ling's improvement was seen as a result of her evolving understanding of email communication, changing performance of student identity, and developing knowledge of institutional roles, rights and obligations in the TL context. Despite her progress, however, Ling's email practices demonstrated constant struggle with language use in order to achieve her communicative goals while maintaining status-congruent politeness. Similarly to Rau and Rau (2016), Chen (2006) points out that the development of L2 email literacy is not an easy process because culture-specific appropriateness rules are tacit, and many of the challenges that Ling faced earlier in her course of study were due to the absence of explicit models for her to learn from. The author therefore advocated that email instruction be provided to help L2 learners communicate successfully with higher-ups in emails.

2.2 The role of instruction in developing L2 pragmatic competence

A general consensus has been reached in L2 pragmatics research that mere exposure is insufficient for L2 pragmatic development and therefore instruction is required to raise the learner's awareness of language forms and sociocultural norms of interaction. Research of instructed pragmatics development over the last few decades has revealed the superior effect of explicit instruction (i.e. teaching involving meta-pragmatic discussion) over implicit instruction (teaching not involving meta-pragmatic discussion) (Jeon and Kaya 2006; Taguchi 2015). Implicit instruction, on the other hand, is said to increase awareness and understanding of pragmatic rules only when it provides learners with opportunities for noticing and conscious processing of pragmatic input (e.g. through a consciousness-raising or structured input processing approach) (Taguchi 2015). A bulk of studies that focuses on the instruction of L2 oral requests (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2005; Halenko and Jones 2011; Martínez-Flor 2008; Safont 2003; Takahashi 2001; Takimoto 2006, 2009) has attested to the above generalizations. For example, explicit instruction of L2 requests has been found to contribute significantly to learners' post-interventional improvement in Halenko and Jones (2011), Martínez-Flor (2008), and Safont (2003). Explicit instruction has also been found to work more effectively than implicit instruction in enhancing students' awareness and appropriate use of L2 request strategies in Alcón-Soler (2005) and Takahashi (2001). On the other hand, Takimoto (2006, 2009)'s studies show that when learners receive implicit instruction that requires them to process and understand pragmatic form – meaning connections, they can also significantly increase their knowledge of and ability to use English request downgraders.

In contrast to the substantial literature on the instructional effects on L2 oral requests (see above), the teachability of L2 email requests has only been addressed in a few studies (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Ford 2006; Nguyen et al. 2015). Alcón-Soler (2015) compared two groups of Spanish study-abroad students – those who were instructed how to soften requests in emails during four 20-minute lessons, following an explicit, deductive-inductive approach, and those who were not instructed. Two important findings were observed during the 36 weeks of investigation. First, the instructed learners demonstrated an advantage as compared to the control learners in terms of their socio-pragmatic knowledge. Second, the instructed learners employed, and, as their exposure to authentic language use increased, reconstructed the knowledge gained from instruction to inform their pragmatic behavior in real-world communication. Taken together, these findings illustrate how instruction may interact with study-abroad experience to benefit pragmatic development. Ford (2006) examined how a group of mixed L1 study-abroad students in the USA learned to write email requests to their professors. He found

that after only a 50-minute lesson about netiquette, the students significantly improved the perlocution of their email requests by using more downgraders and supportive moves, and structuring their email messages more appropriately. However, he pointed out that the above effect was not maintained in the longer term, which indicated that an extensive treatment may be required for knowledge retention. Ford also warned that without the benefits of explicit discussion of politeness rules, instruction may inadvertently lead to over-generalization.

In contrast to the above studies, Chen (2015) and Nguyen et al. (2015) focused on the learning of email requests in EFL classrooms, which are often considered less advantageous learning contexts due to an absence of authentic language use models. Chen (2015) found differential effects of five hours of deductive instruction on the various aspects of Chinese EFL learners' email performance. Particularly, although the learners demonstrated great improvement in using framing moves (i.e. subject, greetings and closings), they displayed only modest progress in using content moves (i.e. request strategies and support). The author explained the different learning outcomes in terms of the functional distinction between the moves. Specifically, as framing moves are highly formulaic, they tend to be easier to acquire. On the other hand, because content moves are more idiosyncratic in nature, they may require more extensive exposure. Nguyen et al. (2015) compared the relative efficacy of two written corrective feedback techniques on improving Vietnamese EFL learners' production and recognition of socially appropriate email requests addressing professors. During a six-hour course, the learners received explicit meta-pragmatic explanation regarding how to write email requests to professors in institutional scenarios varying in imposition levels. The two treatment groups were then engaged in email writing practice and respectively received one of the two feedback types: Meta-pragmatic feedback (i.e. meta-pragmatic comments on the pragmatic infelicities) or direct feedback (i.e. suggestions of how to improve the infelicities), on their work. The instructed learners were finally compared with a control group in regard to their performance in a production and recognition tasks. The findings suggested general effectiveness of both feedback techniques in enhancing the learners' production scores (as compared to no instruction), but a greater effect of meta-pragmatic feedback on enhancing the learners' recognition scores. Despite their different approaches to teaching email requests, both Chen (2015)'s and Nguyen et al. (2015)'s studies indicate that email requests are teachable to EFL learners, and open up issues of how instruction impacts different aspects of pragmatic performance for further investigations.

As a follow-up study to Nguyen et al. (2015), the present study seeks to investigate the long-term impact of explicit pragmatic instruction on developing the various aspects of writing email requests by a group of Vietnamese EFL learners. The current study adopts Nguyen et al. (2015)'s instructional approach which features an

innovative integration of instruction and evaluation of pragmatics in the instructed context. However, the current study focuses on a different type of feedback, i.e. explicit feedback, which combines the advantages of both meta-pragmatic and direct feedback in the previous study. The present study also departs from Nguyen et al. (2015) and other previous pragmatics studies in its longitudinal approach to instructed pragmatic development. Whereas most of these studies do not observe their effects beyond a short delayed post-test, i.e. four to five weeks following the intervention (but see Alcón-Soler 2015), the current study seeks to assess its impact over an extended period of eight months during which the instructional effect will be repeatedly measured. It is hoped that such a prolonged investigation can help to determine whether the effect of the instruction, if any, is durable enough to recommend teaching pedagogy.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The study recruited thirty-two Vietnamese EFL female students, aged 19–20, who were English majors in the freshman year at a teacher's college in Vietnam. Two intact classes were randomly assigned to the treatment ($N = 13$) and control conditions ($N = 19$). The students' proficiency level was intermediate, as established by the college. Prior to the admission into the undergraduate program, the students had learned English for at least six years. They were all enrolled in a grammar and communication skills courses in the current program. Although during their study program the students had learned some basic forms for making requests in everyday situations (e.g. modal constructions such as “*Can/ could/ may I?*”), they had not been taught the pragmatics of email requests in academic communication. Especially, since their English textbooks focused more predominantly on reinforcing language forms than on explaining sociocultural codes of language use, the students may have developed a higher level of linguistic competence than pragmatic competence. Regarding their prior real-world interactional experience, the students had made regular use of email communication to submit assignments, schedule appointments and solicit feedback from their instructors, but they mainly communicated in Vietnamese because the students and most of the instructors shared the same L1. Despite this experience, the students had rarely received feedback on the impression their email messages left on the faculty. Hence, it could be assumed that they had not been adequately guided in composing pragmatically appropriate emails addressing authority figures in the institutional context. To help them communicate effectively with their professors in the TL, pragmatics instruction focusing on email requests in academic contexts is hence considered essential.

3.2 Instructional intervention

Since making requests was covered in one unit of the students' textbook, the teaching of email requests for academic correspondence fitted appropriately into the course. In addition to the above unit, the treatment group received six hours of explicit meta-pragmatic instruction spreading over four weeks and focusing specifically on three email scenarios: (1) requesting a face-to-face appointment with the professor (low imposition); (2) requesting the professor's feedback on work-in-progress (medium imposition); and (3) requesting extension of a due date for an assignment (high imposition). The scenarios represent most frequently occurring requests in student-faculty email communication, yet being difficult for L2 students to handle due to the varying imposition levels involved (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). Hence, the scenarios were selected as the learning targets.

Both framing and content moves were included for instruction (see Chen 2015). Framing moves, consisting of email openings and closings, a salient feature of emails sent up the institutional hierarchy, contribute to the physical layout of the email message (Kankaanranta 2006; Bou-Franch 2011). Content moves contribute to the key communicative goals of the email message (Kankaanranta 2006), and comprise its core elements such as request strategies, supportive moves, and aggravators (Chen 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). See Table 1 for a description of the various elements of the framing and content moves intended for instruction. The present study did not target lexical modification as part of the instructional intervention due to the limited curriculum time. However, syntactic modification (e.g. *past tense with present time reference*, *progressive aspect*, *interrogative*, and *embedded 'if'* – see Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) was taught as integral components of conventionally indirect request strategies. (Findings regarding learners' post-instructional use of syntactic downgraders are reported in Nguyen et al. 2017). Emphasis was placed on syntactic rather than lexical modification because previous research suggests that syntactic modification may present greater challenges to L2 learners due to its lack of transparent pragmatic meaning, as well as the tendency to increase the structural complexity of the request (see Hassall 2001). This holds especially true for Vietnamese EFL learners, whose native language is primarily based on semantic rather than syntactic properties for expressing pragmatic meanings (see Nguyen 2008a).

The pedagogical approach adopted in this study was informed by the view that pragmatic development requires acquiring knowledge of form-function-context mappings and gaining automatic control of attention to this knowledge in real time communication (Taguchi 2011). Accordingly, the instructional procedure comprised four major stages: (1) consciousness-raising to develop students' awareness of language forms, functional meanings and pertinent contextual features; (2) meta-pragmatic explanation to develop students' understanding of form-function-context relationships; and (3) repeated output practice and (4) feedback and revision to develop autonomous

control in processing knowledge of form-function-context mappings. With a view to develop students' intercultural awareness, the instruction also incorporated L1-L2 comparison. The students were encouraged to discuss the extent they wanted to conform to L2 norms, adhere to L1 norms or blend both, and the possible perlocutionary effect of their choice. This practice is informed by the 'intercultural dimension' in language teaching which aims to train "intercultural mediators" who can understand and accept people from other cultures and negotiate their own values, beliefs and behaviors in order to communicate successfully across cultural boundaries without stereotyping other cultures or losing their own cultural identity (see Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002, 5). To this end, instead of imposing NS norms of interaction on learners at the expense of their own cultural beliefs and values and individual identity, pragmatics instruction should enable learners to develop awareness of intercultural differences between their own pragmatic norms and those of their interlocutors and draw on their pluralistic resources to negotiate such differences (see McKay 2002, 2003).

The procedure for carrying out the above stages is presented in Figure 1 and an example of how feedback was given in stage 4 is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Target features included in the intervention

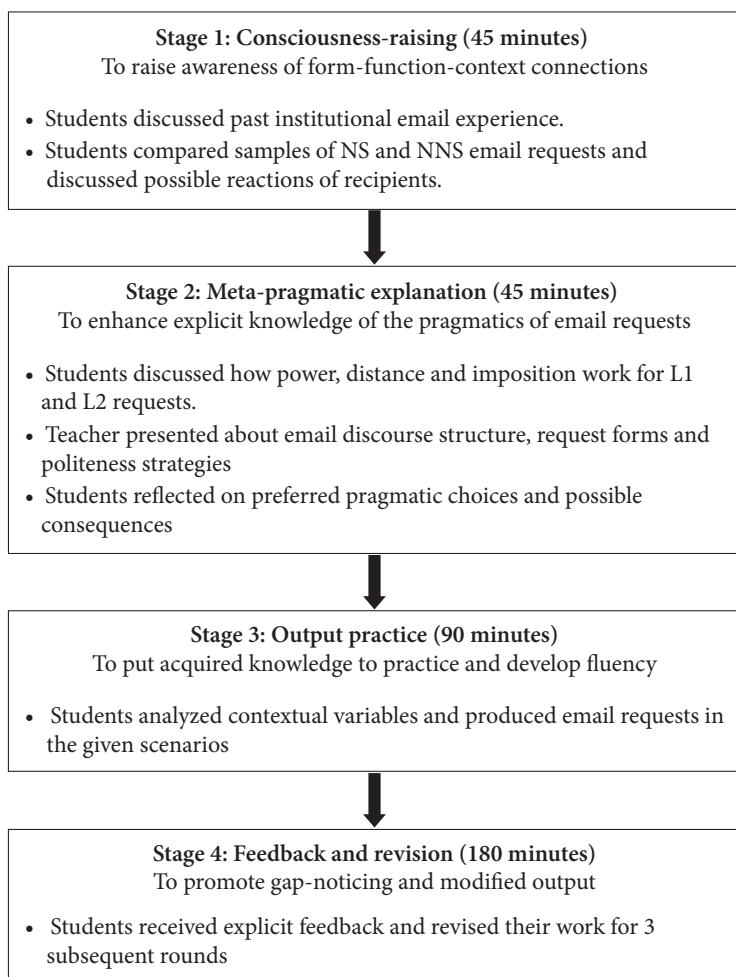
| Type | Description | Examples |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Framing moves | Layout of the email message, including opening and closing moves (Kankaanranta 2006) | |
| a. Openings | Often realized by greetings and self-introduction (Bou-Franch 2011) | |
| – Greeting | the writer opens the email with a greeting (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) | <i>Dear ...</i> <i>Good morning</i> <i>How are you? I'm sorry to hear you are unwell</i> |
| – Self-introduction | the writer gives information on his or her name and class (Chen 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) | <i>I'm ... from your ... class</i> |
| b. Closings | Conventional phrases to signal closings such as expressing appreciation for the recipient's time, appealing for action, good wishes, or farewell (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Kankaanranta 2006) This sequence also includes signatures (Bou-Franch 2011) | <i>Thank you for your time</i> <i>I look forward to hearing from you</i> <i>Have a nice weekend!</i> <i>Best</i> <i>Sincerely</i> |
| 2. Content moves | Core elements of the email message (Kankaanranta 2006) | |
| a. Request strategies (the head act) | Two types of strategies are included in instruction: direct and conventionally direct strategies (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) | |
| – Direct | including imperative requests and want statements (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) | <i>Please let me know what you think/ you have any comments/ suggestions</i> <i>I would like to set up an appointment with you</i> |

Table 1. (continued)

| Type | Description | Examples |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| – Conventionally indirect | including query preparatory requests (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) | <i>Could I meet with you ...?</i> <i>Would it be a problem if I turned in ...?</i> <i>I was wondering if ...</i> <i>How about ...?</i> |
| b. Mitigating supportive moves | including moves occurring outside the head act for politeness effects (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) | |
| – Grounder | explanation of the reason for the request (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) | <i>I would like an assignment extension because I could not deal the typing time</i> |
| – Disarmer | showing the writer's awareness of the inconvenience of the request (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) | <i>I'm very sorry but ...</i> <i>... if it is not too inconvenient</i> <i>... if you are busy</i> <i>... if you feel that this notice is too short</i> |
| – Sweetener | employed to grease the social relationship with the recipient and to put him or her into a positive mood (Schauer 2009) | <i>How are you these days?</i> <i>I highly appreciate your comments</i> <i>I greatly enjoyed your lesson</i> |
| – Optionality | checking the recipient's availability or to give optionality | <i>What time would it be best for you?</i> <i>If you are not able to make it next week, we can ...</i> <i>... if you are available</i> |
| c. Aggravators | words or phrases that could increase the coerciveness of the request and need to be avoided | |
| – Intensifier | adverbial modifier that stresses specific elements of the request (Schauer 2009) | <i>I truly/really/ desperately need this extension</i> |
| – Statement of urgency | words or phrases that emphasise the temporal aspect of the request (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Schauer 2009) | <i>as soon as possible</i> <i>urgently</i> <i>right now</i> <i>I need to have the reference letter in three days</i> |
| – Limiter | words or phrases that limit the hearer's option regarding the content of the request | <i>I will expect your positive reply</i> <i>I'd like to meet with you this weekend</i> <i>Thank you in advance</i> <i>I look forward to your confirming that you will meet me ...</i> |
| – Statement of responsibility | emphasise the responsibility of the hearer to comply with the request/ require the hearer's compliance with the request | <i>As my supervisor, you ...</i> |

Table 2. Teacher's feedback on the students' email requests

| Description | Example of pragmatic infelicities | Example of teacher's responses |
|--|--|---|
| Comprising three moves: 1. Statement of the infelicity 2. Provision of the suggested answer 3. Provision of the explanation of the answer | "Please give me more time to complete my work" | (1) This does not sound very nice. The teacher has a higher social status than you. She is also not obliged to give you the extension. So you should not use a direct request. (2) You may want to write something like " <i>I was wondering if I could have more time</i> " instead. (3) This request gives the teacher an option. It does not sound like a directive, so it sounds more status-congruent. |

**Figure 1.** Flow chart of the instructional procedure

Unlike the treatment group, the control group only followed the normal syllabus in which they were taught one lesson (i.e. 50 minutes) about making requests in everyday and work-related situations. The course materials used for this lesson included a conscious-raising activity focusing on recognizing levels of formality and directness, and a production task. Although explicit instruction on request forms and politeness elements was provided, no feedback was given on the students' output production. The control and treatment groups were taught by different female, qualified Vietnamese EFL instructors, who had had at least 2 years of EFL instruction in the local context. Although it would have been ideal if both groups had been taught by the same teacher, it was impossible for such an arrangement to be made due to workload issues. To ensure minimal teacher effects, the teachers were carefully trained about the instructional protocol intended for each group. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the learning outcomes of the two groups may still be affected by the possible differences in the teachers' teaching styles and respective realizations of the curriculum, and thus should be interpreted with caution.

3.3 Data collection procedure

The main source of data came from a discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of the three aforementioned request scenarios, conducted at four different points in time: Prior to the intervention (pre-test, hereafter Time 1), immediately at the end of the intervention (immediate post-test, hereafter Time 2), one month after the intervention (delayed post-test, hereafter Time 3), and eight months after the intervention (post-delayed test, hereafter Time 4). In order to minimize the possibility of students recalling answers from the practice tasks, the level of imposition in each test scenario was adjusted so that the practice and test scenarios were not exactly identical. Despite criticisms about its inauthenticity (see Beebe and Cumming 1985), the DCT was yet employed for practical reasons. First, the DCT allows researcher's control of social and situational variables, thus enhancing the comparability of the data (Yuan 2001). Second, since the students in the present study rarely wrote emails in the TL, it was challenging to gather a large enough pool of naturalistic data for each test scenario. Although the DCT may be suitable for investigating written genres (Bardovi-Harlig 2010), the fact that the data was elicited for research purpose may still affect the students' production. Thus, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results from DCT data.

A total of 384 DCT email requests (32 students x 3 scenarios x 4 times) were gathered. Additionally, the experimental group was also asked to submit post-treatment authentic emails for the purpose of triangulation. Because the students rarely emailed

their instructors in English, only 5 samples were collected from the entire group. Although the authentic emails provided valuable insights into the students' post-interventional real-world email communication, the small sample size could limit the findings to some extent. In order to understand the students' reasoning behind their pragmatic choices and how this changes as a result of the instruction, a questionnaire was also carried out for the experimental group. The questionnaire consisted of four sample email requests concerning making and cancelling an appointment, obtaining feedback, and asking for an extension (see below).

Email 1 (Feedback)

“Dear Professor Lee,

I have done some data analysis but seem to get lost. I need your feedback to make sure I'm on the right track. I'm attaching my notes. Please advise as soon as possible.

Thanks in advance,

Jen”

Email 2 (Appointment):

“Dear Dr. Miller,

I was wondering if I could come by and see you sometime this week to discuss my data.

I have done some initial analysis but am not sure if I am on the right track. When would it be convenient for you?

Thank you,

Tom”

Email 3 (Extension):

“Dear Cathy,

Gee ... I'm really having a hard time finishing this paper. So won't be able to turn it in today, I'm afraid. Can you give me two more days to finish it up?

Thanks a lot.

Mary

PS: Should have asked you sooner but I didn't know it would take so much time. Sorry about this.”

Email 4 (Cancellation):

“Professor Yu,

How are you? I'm supposed to meet with you later today but unfortunately I am down with a flu. I wonder if I could see you another day, when you are available. I'm really sorry about this.

Regards,

David”

The students were required to rate the emails in terms of formality, directness, and appropriateness, using a defined three-point Likert scale, as well as to explain their answers. Due to the logistic difficulty, the questionnaire was not conducted at Time 4. Therefore, a total of 156 questionnaire responses were collected from the 13 learners at Time 1, Time 2 and Time 3.

3.4 Scoring procedure

To answer the first research question, “What is the instructional effect on the students’ ability to write socially appropriate email requests to professors?”, each DCT email was rated on a defined five-point Likert scale, with 5 being “appropriate”, 4 “adequately appropriate”, 3 “not so appropriate”, 2 “mostly inappropriate”, and 1 “completely inappropriate” (adapted from Akikawa and Ishihara 2010). The four areas of assessment included: (1) goal (i.e. whether the intent was successfully communicated), (2) appropriate register for the context (evidenced in the chosen level of formality, directness, and politeness), (3) overall discourse (i.e. organisational structure and coherence), and (4) language usage (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation), with greater importance placed on the first three criteria. A student’s total score was the sum of his or her scores gained for each scenario, with the following interpretation: 13–15: “appropriate”; 10–12: “adequately appropriate”; 7–9: “not so appropriate”; 4–6: “mostly inappropriate”; 1–3: “completely inappropriate”.

To answer the second research question, “In what aspects of the email discourse is the improvement (if any) evident and retained over an extended period of time?”, the DCT emails were qualitatively analyzed using the classification in Table 1. Students’ authentic emails were also analyzed using the same classification for the purpose of triangulation. In analyzing framing moves and supportive moves, only those used both accurately and appropriately by the learners were counted. Finally, students’ qualitative comments in the questionnaire were coded in terms of their pragmalinguistic awareness (i.e. awareness concerning the degree of directness and formality of the request strategies), sociopragmatic awareness (i.e. awareness concerning the context of interaction and the interactants’ role relationship), and awareness of pragmalinguistics-sociopragmatics connections (i.e. awareness of the form-function-context relationship).

To enhance reliability, all the data were coded independently by two trained raters who were also the instructors in the intervention. Then one-third of the coded data were cross-checked and cases of discrepancy were decided by the researcher based on the above rubrics and classifications.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Research question 1

In order to answer research question 1, both within-group (pre-test versus post-tests) and between-group (treatment versus control) comparisons of the students' DCT scores were made. After preliminary checks, which indicated that the assumption of normality was violated, non-parametric Friedman tests were conducted for the within-group comparisons. The results indicated that while the treatment group displayed a significant improvement in their median scores across time [Time 1: 9.00; Time 2, 3, and 4: 11.0; $X^2(3) = 27.8, p = .000$], no such progress was found for the control group [Time 1: 8.00; Time 2: 8.00; Time 3 and 4: 9.00; $X^2(3) = 3.96, p = .27$] (Figure 2). Further pairwise analyses for the treatment group indicated that the students scored significantly higher in all the three post-tests than they did in the pre-test ($p = .001$ in each pairwise comparison), but there was no difference in their performance of the three post-tests (Table 3), suggesting that their post-treatment improvement was retained over time.

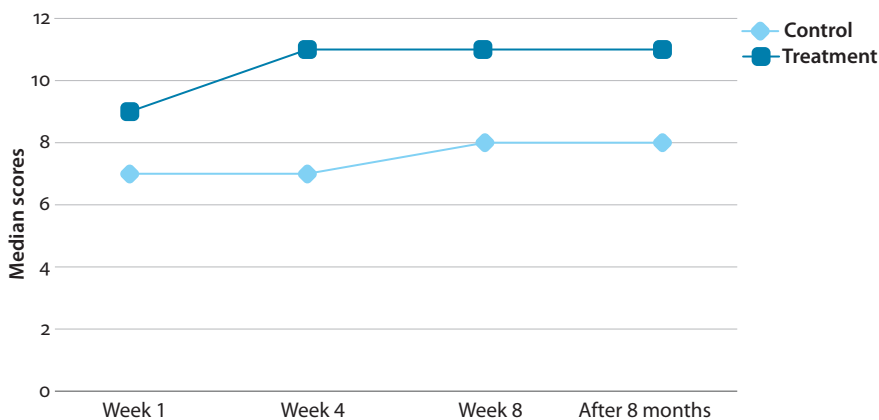


Figure 2. Pre- and post-test median scores of the control and treatment groups

Table 3. Results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests for the treatment group

| | Z | p |
|----------------------|------|--------|
| Time 1 versus Time 2 | 3.30 | .001** |
| Time 1 versus Time 3 | 3.21 | .001** |
| Time 1 versus Time 4 | 3.20 | .001** |
| Time 2 versus Time 3 | 1.10 | .22 |
| Time 2 versus Time 4 | 1.27 | .21 |
| Time 3 versus Time 4 | 1.79 | .07 |

** $p < .01$

With respect to the between-group contrasts, gain scores were computed to determine whether there was any difference in the pre-to-posttest change between the treatment and control groups. Gain scores were used to avoid bias against the control group because they scored significantly lower than the treatment group in the pre-test ($U = .37, p = .049$). Since preliminary checks indicated that the assumption of normality was not met, Mann-Whitney tests were conducted. Results showed that the treatment group made significantly greater pre-to-posttest progress than the control group on all occasions [at Time 2: $U = 2.00, p = .000$; at Time 3: $U = 24.5, p = .000$; at Time 4: $U = 10.0, p = .000$].

In sum, based on the findings of the within-subjects and between-subjects comparisons, the answer to the first research question was positive. In particular, the instruction enabled the students to progress from a “not so appropriate” level (median score: 9.00) in the pre-test to an “adequately appropriate” level (median score: 11.0) in the three post-tests. The control group, on the other hand, remained at a “not so appropriate” level throughout the study (median scores ranged between 8.00 and 9.00 in all four tests).

The improvement by the treatment group was further supported by the intertextual analysis of their emails before and after the study. Let us consider Anne (pseudonym)’s examples. Before the intervention, her DCT request for the professor’s feedback (Excerpt 1) was rated 3 (“not so appropriate”) since it contained quite a number of pragmatic infelicities typical of L2 email messages (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Chen 2001, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996). To begin with, she addressed Professor Smith as “Mrs. Smith”, which was an incorrect academic title, thus capable of offending the professor (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). In addition, she did not identify herself, making an assumption that the professor should have known who she was, while at the same time introducing redundant contextual information (“After doing all the necessary research ...”), making her email unnecessarily lengthy. Since time is considered a “precious commodity” in the institutional context (Chen 2006, 40), it was necessary for Anne to learn how to open her email more effectively to protect her lecturer’s time. Regarding the content of the email, although Anne was able to convey her intent, she employed a narrow range of semantic moves to support it. In fact, she relied solely on the grounder “I am still not so sure I’m on the right track” to justify the email, while showing no acknowledgement of the cost of her requests. Her requests (e.g. “I am writing to ask ...” and “I hope you can ...”) were also too direct to be considered status-congruent (Brown and Levinson 1987). By stating the requests as her own wants and desires, she did not give optionality to the professor, which appeared to elevate her institutional rights (see Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996 for a similar discussion on this point). Further, Anne rarely used politeness features to soften her message, while aggravating it by assuming compliance on the part of the professor (“thank you in advance”). Finally, although she employed a formal closing

to show deference to the professor (Bjørge 2007), she did not use it correctly. Being a relic of printed letters, “yours faithfully” is often used when the message is addressed to an unnamed audience, which is not the case here. Note that while epistolary closings rarely occur in email messages written by NSs in the institutional context, these forms are commonly used by NNS students from high PD cultures to acknowledge the unequal power between students and professors (Bjørge 2007). Therefore, Anne’s choice of formality here may have arisen from her exercise of agency (Chen 2001). Nonetheless, while her socio-pragmatic decision might be legitimate, she still needed to use the closing in accordance with conventions for messages sent to named recipients. Note also that Anne’s closing contained a grammatical mistake (i.e. “your” instead of “yours”), which should not occur in a formal email.

Excerpt 1:

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am writing to ask you for feedback on my discussion chapter. After doing all the necessary research and taking your advices, I have carefully written the chapter. However, I am still not so sure if I am on the right track. I hope you can point out the mistakes I have made and give me some advices to improve my work.

The discussion chapter is attached with this email. Thank you in advance for your time.

Your faithfully

Anne

In contrast to her “not so appropriate” performance in the pre-test, Anne progressed to an “adequately appropriate” and “appropriate” level in her post-tests. She respectively received a score of 4, 5, and 4 (out of 5) at Time 2, 3, and 4 for her DCT feedback request. Particularly, her authentic emails which were collected five months after the final delayed post-test (i.e. 14 months after the intervention) indicated considerable improvements not only with respect to the levels of directness and politeness of the requests but also with respect to the overall tone of the emails. Excerpt 2 illustrates an email Anne wrote to a Vietnamese female tutor to obtain feedback on her essay outline. She opened the email with the greeting “Dear Ms. + First Name”. First, concerning the title “Ms.,” since the tutor did not hold a doctorate degree or a full professorship, Anne’s choice was status-appropriate. Next, the combination “Ms. + First Name”, while considered incorrect in English, is the correct way to address a female authority figure in Vietnamese.¹ Hence, Anne’s greeting

1. It is customary that Vietnamese interlocutors address one another by their first name rather than last or full name, regardless of social distance and power. To show deference or solidarity, the speaker mainly relies on an appropriate choice of address terms or titles.

was considered socio-culturally appropriate.² In the next move, Anne introduced herself and provided information on her class (“My name is ..., from class ...”) to help save the tutor’s time in identifying her (see Bou-Franch 2011 for a similar discussion on this point). Regarding the degree of politeness of the chosen request form (“Could you please ...”), it should be mentioned that Anne’s email was sent at the tutor’s instruction that “an outline should be submitted for feedback before students embark on writing up the essay”. Given the entitlement, Anne’s requesting act was considered to involve a relatively low level of imposition, and hence, her choice of the query preparatory form was considered to be adequately mitigated. Anne further expressed her gratitude for the tutor’s input (“I would appreciate ...” and “Thank you very much”) in the next moves. The act of thanking indicated that despite that Anne’s request was sanctioned by the tutor she did not take her student’s rights for granted. The second thanking move also served as a closing device (Bou-Franch 2011). In sum, the overall tone of Anne’s post-treatment email displayed status-congruent politeness, suggesting her increased awareness of form-function connections in making requests. The email was also brief and succinct, suggesting Anne’s increased understanding of the need to respect the faculty’s time and ability to observe institutional email etiquette (see Chen 2006 for similar findings). Anne’s progress has demonstrated the positive impact of the explicit instruction on her pragmatic development, a finding consistent with previous studies in instructional pragmatics (e.g. Álcón-Soler 2005, 2015; Halenko and Jones 2011; Martínez-Flor 2008; Safont 2003; Nguyen et al. 2015).

Excerpt 2:

Dear Ms. ... (first name deleted for anonymity)

My name is Anne, from class ... (class name deleted for anonymity). Attached is my outline for the first writing assignment for the ... course (course title deleted for anonymity). Could you please take a look and help me with some feedback? I would appreciate any comments and suggestions.

Thank you very much.

Anne

In addition to the authentic email data, students’ responses to the assessment questionnaire were also examined for the purpose of triangulating the findings from the DCT tests. It was found that before the study, many students seemed to possess a

2. The fact that Anne was sensitive to the cultural background of the recipient was supported by her choice of distinct patterns of greetings when writing to her Vietnamese and English-speaking tutors. To show deference to her Vietnamese tutor, she adopted the construction “Ms. + *First Name*”, which was, as said, highly acceptable in the student-teacher relationship in the Vietnamese culture. In contrast, when communicating with her English NS tutor, she employed the construction “Ms. + *Full Name*”, which was considered appropriately formal in English.

low level of pragmatic awareness. This was first evidenced by the fact that a number of them did not rate the samples in the same way as did their teachers. For example, while Sample 1 was rated “inappropriate” by the teachers, only eight students agreed with this rating. Five rated it to be “appropriate”. Similarly, Sample 2 was rated “appropriate” by the teachers, but only eight students shared this opinion. Five rated it to be “not so appropriate”. This lack of congruence was also observed in three students’ ratings of Sample 3, and six students’ ratings of Sample 4. Further, when explaining their ratings, most of the students only provided vague evaluative comments (e.g. “too direct”, “informal”, or “lack of respect”), and very few made references to the specific language forms occurring in the samples (e.g. “I was wondering if ...” was an indirect request). This behaviour appeared to indicate that students’ comments were mainly intuition-based rather than resulting from an explicit knowledge of particular form-function relationships.

On the few occasions in which they made comments on the language forms, the students tended to misjudge the politeness values of the forms. For example, two rated the request “I need your feedback” in Sample 1 as being “appropriate” because, according to them, “it clearly pointed out what the writer wanted”. Only one student commented that the phrase “as soon as possible” in Sample 1 might have aggravated the force of the request, while the rest seemed to have overlooked this aggravator. One student even suggested that in order to increase the level of formality, one should have addressed his or her lecturer as “Sir” or “Madam” instead of “Professor”. On the other hand, another student misperceived that it was rude to address the professor by her first name (e.g. “Dear Cathy”), reflecting the influence of the student’s L1 pragmatics. In the Vietnamese culture teachers are generally treated with utmost respect and thus should not be addressed without proper titles by their students (see Nguyen and Ho 2013). It appears that here the student transferred this norm of interaction when interpreting L2 messages.

Students’ responses also demonstrated limited awareness of the student-teacher relationship and status-congruent politeness in the TL. For example, when commenting on Sample 1, two students wrote that “an indirect request was unnecessary” because “it was the professor’s duty to give feedback on the student’s work”, thus overestimating the student’s rights (see Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996 for similar findings). Another student considered the unmitigated request in Sample 3 “somewhat acceptable, given the close relationship between the student and the professor”, without awareness of the need to acknowledge institutional hierarchy in this situation (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Chen 2006 for a similar discussion). In sum, the students’ questionnaire data indicated a relatively inadequate level of pragmalinguistic awareness, sociopragmatic awareness, as well as awareness of pragmalinguistics-sociopragmatics connections for many of them before the instruction.

After the instruction, most of the students improved in all the three areas. For example, congruent with the teachers' ratings, 12 out of 13 learners rated Sample 1 as being "very direct" and "inappropriate", citing reasons such as "the writer and the professor do not hold the same position" and "it sounds like the professor is obliged to do what the student told him to do". Only one student still misjudged this email to be "somewhat acceptable", justifying that the student and professor had a close personal relationship. Eleven out of 13 students rated Sample 2 as being "appropriate", which agreed with the teachers' ratings. All of the students rated Sample 3 similarly to the teachers' ratings, and 10 out of 13 did so regarding Sample 4. Especially, in contrast to their vague comments in the pre-test, the students gained greater awareness of the politeness rankings and contextual appropriateness of the various pragmalinguistic features, making more frequent references to these features and their associated functional meanings in the responses.

In short, similarly to previous instructed pragmatics studies (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Nguyen et al. 2015; Takimoto 2009), in this study the multiple data sources have confirmed the beneficial role of the intervention in improving and retaining the students' overall ability to produce email requests in the institutional context. Especially, the students' authentic email data, though limited to only 5 samples, seem to suggest that they are able to transfer the knowledge acquired in the classroom to real-world communication.

4.2 Research question 2

After having established that the instruction generally produced positive effects on the treatment group, further analyses were conducted to identify in which aspects of the students' performance the improvement was evident and retained over time. Analysis was done with regard to the learners' use of opening and closing sequences, as well as request strategies, supportive moves and aggravators.

4.2.1 *Opening sequences*

Opening and closing sequences are optional segments of email messages but they occur frequently in initiating emails sent up the hierarchy in the educational context (Bou-Franch 2006, 2011). Although "empty of content", these sequences are "interpersonally loaded" in the sense that "in opening sequences the social relationship between participants is negotiated and established, or recalled", and "in closing sequences participants work to accomplish a joint, negotiated, frictionless termination of the social event" (Bou-Franch 2011, 1773). Opening sequences are often realized by two moves: Greetings and self-introduction (or self-identification) (Bou-Franch 2011; Chen 2001; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch 2013). From the perspective of the

rapport management framework, the choice of forms of greeting reflects “a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between interlocutors” (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 29). In particular, greetings can contribute to the formality/ deference or informality/ closeness of the email: While formal moves such as “Dear + Title + Last/ Full Name” express deference politeness, informal moves such as “Hi + first name” indicate solidarity politeness (Bou-Franch 2011, 1776). Previous research on email communication in academia has shown that although there may be great variability in the way the greeting move is realized (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Felix-Brasdefer 2012), some constructions may be considered less acceptable than others in the unequal power student-professor relationship in particular socio-cultural contexts. For example, informality of address is not preferred by British university students, and some of their lecturers who consider it necessary to set clear boundaries regarding the student-teacher role relationship (Formentelli 2009). This also holds true for international students from high PD cultures who prefer to employ formal address strategies to show deference to institutional hierarchy (Bjørge 2007; Chen 2015). Similarly, the employment of incorrect academic titles (e.g. “Mrs.” instead of “Dr.”) is considered likely to cause offence to faculty (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). On the other hand, the informal first-name strategy, which indexes a friendly, close relation with the professor, has been found to be employed by many American students to signal solidarity politeness (Chen 2001).

With regards to greeting strategies, the present study found that all of the students in the pre-test employed the deference form “Dear” followed by the professor’s last or full name, suggesting that the students preferred a formal register when communicating with the professor. This finding is not surprising since in a high PD culture such as Vietnam power asymmetry tends to be expressed through formal communicative styles (Hofstede 2001). Despite the students’ choice of a high level of formality, however, it was also found that a title was used only in 35 out of 39 emails. In the other four emails, the professor was simply addressed by her full name without any title (e.g. “Dear Catherine Smith”), demonstrating a lack of awareness of status-congruent politeness on the students’ part. Further, even when a title was used, the students’ choice indicated that the majority of them were unaware of the address system used in higher education. A correct academic title (e.g. “Professor”) was used in only 11 out of 35 emails (31%). In the remaining cases (i.e. 14 out of 35 emails), a wrong academic title (e.g. “Mrs. or Ms.”) was employed, thus capable of violating social appropriateness (see Chen 2015 for similar findings). Particularly, some students even varied address terms when writing to the same professor in different scenarios (e.g. “Dear Professor Smith” in scenario 1, but “Dear Ms. Smith” in scenarios 2 and 3), suggesting their uncertainty regarding which form was most acceptable (see Bjørge 2007 for a similar discussion).

After the instruction, the students significantly improved their knowledge of the address system in the university context [$X^2(3, N = 156) = 65.7, p = .000$]. They opted for a correct academic title in 95% (37 out of 39) of their emails as measured at Time 2. This rate was maintained at 97% (38 out of 39 emails) at Time 3, and slightly decreased to 80% (31 out of 39 emails) at Time 4. Particularly, none of the students omitted a title when addressing the professor.

Despite the above gains, it is noted that similarly to the pre-test, none of the students opted for an informal construction such as “(Dear) + First Name”, which is common in familiar student-professor relationships in the TL (see Chen 2001). Given that both formal and informal greetings were taught in the intervention, the students’ consistent preference for the more formal construction (e.g. “Dear + Professor + Last/ Full Name”) can be interpreted by the influence of their ethnic culture. In the high PD Vietnamese culture, the teacher is held in utmost respect and hence it is a moral obligation for students to conform to this hierarchy (Hofstede 2001). A ‘no-naming style’ (Vietnamese: *‘nói trống không’*), that is the omission of titles or address terms, must be avoided in student-to-teacher communication as it is considered disrespectful, hence capable of violating social norms (see Nguyen and Ho 2013). Here it appeared that the students preferred to adhere to their own L1 norms, despite their knowledge of L2 options. In other words, the conformity to the L1 norms of interaction here may not reflect a lack of TL knowledge but simply the students’ expression of their own linguistic and cultural identities (see Chen 2001 for a similar discussion). This assumption is confirmed when looking at the students’ questionnaire data, which showed even after the instruction some still considered it “disrespectful” to address the teacher by the first name, despite the familiarity between them (see Chen 2001 for a similar discussion of the Address Maxim in Chinese).

Following greetings, self-introduction forms the second part of the opening sequence. Self-introduction is normally given when the interlocutors meet for the first time (Chen 2001). Although this is not the case in the classroom context, self-identification is still considered necessary when writing to course teachers because the teachers may be working with a great number of students from diverse courses (Bou-Franch 2011). Self-identification may also serve to render a more specific role relationship with the faculty and thus give the student a legitimate reason for making certain requests (Chen 2001). In fact, earlier studies indicate that this move tends to occur quite frequently in both NS and NNS email to faculty (see Al-Ali and Sahawneh 2008; Chen 2001). Although an effective self-introduction needs to provide sufficient institutional information such as the student’s name and class (Chen 2015), the present study found that before the intervention, only 11 out of 39 students’ emails (28%) contained a specific self-identification. The rest

either omitted this move or provided vague information (e.g. “I am your student”). Nonetheless, after the instruction, the students were able to properly introduce themselves for the majority of the time, e.g. in 30 out of 39 emails (77%) at Time 2, 35 out of 39 emails (90%) at Time 3, and 31 out of 39 emails (80%) at Time 4. Results of a Chi square test revealed that this improvement was statistically significant [$\chi^2(3, N = 156) = 41.0, p = .000$]. In short, based on the above findings, greetings and self-introduction appeared teachable (see Chen 2015 for similar findings).

4.2.2 *Closing sequences*

Previous research indicates great stylistic variations in email closing strategies, ranging from a simple *thank you* plus a signature, to good wishes (e.g. “Have a nice day!”), appeals for actions (e.g. “I look forward to hearing from you”), farewell (“See you”, “Regards” or “Sincerely”) or a combination of the multiple moves (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Kankaanranta 2006). Similarly to the opening sequence, how the closing sequence is formed may depend on the writer’s perceived relationship with the recipient (Bjørge 2007). While the most common types of closing in NS email messages tend to be thanking plus name (signature), suggesting an emergence of new email conventions (Biesenbach-Lucas 2009), formal, epistolary closings are more preferred by NNSs, especially those from high PD cultures (Bjørge 2007; Chen 2001, Chen 2015). Professors in high PD cultures also tend to expect students’ emails to follow a standard letter format in terms of the layout (Li and Chen 2016).

Following Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013, 7), formal and informal closings in the present study are defined based on the “absence or presence – respectively – of colloquial/ conversational lexis and contracted/ abbreviation forms”. Accordingly, combinations of closing moves such as “Thank you for your time. Regards” are categorized as formal whereas combinations such as “Thanks. See you” are categorized as informal. When the closing sequence of an email message is consistent with its opening in terms of the chosen level of formality and contains no grammatical/ spelling errors or aggravating devices (such as “thank you in advance” or “I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible”), the closing is categorized as appropriate, and vice versa.

Similar to previous studies (e.g. Chen 2001; Eslami 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch 2013), the present study found four major closing strategies in the entire dataset of the treatment group, including thanking (occurring in 74% or 115 out of 156 emails), farewell (occurring in 59% or 92 out of 156 emails), appeals for actions (occurring in 15%, or 23 of out 156 emails), and signatures (occurring in 97% or 151 out of 156 emails). The present study also found that students rarely used single closing moves (this happened in only 5 out of 156 emails). On the contrary, students often combined different closing moves when ending their emails, suggesting that

the closing sequence can be more complex and elaborate than the opening sequence (see Bou-Franch 2011 for a similar discussion). The most common combinations in the whole dataset were “thanking + signature” (occurring in 36% or 56 out of 156 emails) and “thanking + farewell + signature” (occurring in 34% or 53 out of 156 emails), which suggests that students were “aware of their roles as the institutionally non-dominant participant and thus chose expression of gratitude to show deference and respect” (Bou-Franch 2011, 1781). Other combinations occurred much less often, including “(thanking) + appeal for action + (farewell) + signature” (23/ 156 emails), “(thanking) + apology + (farewell) + signatures” (4/ 156 emails), “farewell + signature” (14/156 emails).

With regard to pre-to-post instructional changes, it was found that students tended to employ the two aforementioned thanking combinations even more frequently after the instruction, which also resulted in the decreased use of other combinations (Table 4). Especially, their use of “thanking + signature”, while totally absent in the pre-test, increased markedly to 79.5% in the immediate post-test. Although the students’ use of this combination subsequently decreased in the delayed post-tests, it still constituted the most common type of closings in students’ post-treatment emails (47.8%, or 56 out of 117 emails) (see Table 4), suggesting a strong tendency to move towards new email conventions and away from printed letter conventions (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2009). In this respect, the present study appears to contradict Chen (2015) who reported an increasing variety of epistolary closings in the students’ post-treatment emails.

Table 4. Closings in the pre- and post-tests

| Type | Before the instruction | | After the instruction | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Time 3 | | Time 4 | | Total | |
| | Counts | % | Counts | % | Counts | % | Counts | % | Counts | % |
| Thanking + Farewell + Signature | 15/39 | 38.5 | 3/39 | 7.7 | 14/39 | 36 | 21/39 | 53.8 | 38/117 | 32.5 |
| Thanking + signature | 0/39 | 0 | 31/39 | 79.5 | 17/39 | 43.5 | 8/39 | 20.6 | 56/117 | 47.8 |
| Thanking | 2/39 | 5 | 0/39 | 0 | 0/39 | 0 | 0/39 | 0 | 0/117 | 0 |
| Signature | 0/39 | 0 | 3/39 | 7.7 | 0/39 | 0 | 0/39 | 9 | 3/117 | 2.5 |
| Other combinations | 22/39 | 56.4 | 2/39 | 5 | 8/39 | 20.5 | 10/39 | 25.6 | 20/117 | 17 |

Table 5. Directness level in pre- and post- tests

| | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Time 3 | | Time 4 | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| | Frequency count | % | Frequency count | % | Frequency count | % | Frequency count | % |
| Directness | 26/41 | 63 | 8/41 | 19 | 10/39 | 26 | 6/40 | 15 |
| – Unmitigated | 16/26 | 62 | 0/8 | 0 | 0/10 | 0 | 0/6 | 0 |
| – Mitigated | 10/26 | 38 | 8/8 | 100 | 10/10 | 100 | 6/6 | 100 |
| Conventional indirectness | 15/41 | 37 | 33/41 | 81 | 29/39 | 74 | 34/40 | 85 |

In terms of formality, prior to the treatment, only 31% (12 out of 39) of the students' emails displayed an appropriate level of formality that was consistent with their openings. For the other 69% of the time, the students either combined formal and informal moves (e.g. "Thanks. Regards") or used the moves grammatically incorrectly (e.g. "your sincerely" instead of "yours sincerely"). These results suggest that students may have experienced difficulty in choosing appropriate closings in accordance with the level of formality they wished to express. After the instruction, although the rate of appropriate use increased notably to 87% (34/ 39 emails) at Time 2, this figure slightly decreased to 61.5% (24/39 emails) at Time 3 and dropped markedly to 46% (18/39 emails) at Time 4. The above pre-to-post interventional changes were found statistically significant [$X^2(3, N = 156) = 27.5, p = .000$].

Based on the above findings, the instruction seemed to yield a less stable effect on the students' performance of closing sequences than on their use of the opening moves. Particularly, while the instructional effect was observed immediately for the rate of use of appropriate closings but diminished over time, more consistent patterns of gains were found with regard to students' post-instructional use of greetings and self-introductions. The above difference might have been explained in terms of the differential degrees of opaqueness of the pragmatic rules involved in learning opening and closing sequences (see Taguchi 2015). Regarding the opening sequences, greetings may be used as a strategy for either solidarity (e.g. "(Dear) + First Name") or deference politeness (e.g. "(Dear) + Title + Full or Last Name") (Chen 2001). Similarly, there also seem to be concrete rules concerning self-introductions. That is, this move requires the provision of specific information on who the writers are and what class they are in (Chen 2015). In contrast, closing sequences often comprise more moves and display greater stylistic variations (e.g. "Thanking + signature", "Thanking/ other moves + farewell + signature", or "Thanking + other moves + farewell + signature"), and thus may be more complex, both functionally and structurally (see Bou-Franch 2011; Chen 2015; Eslami 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch 2013). Particularly, the farewell move alone may also be realized by means of a great variety of forms (e.g. "yours sincerely", "sincerely", "regards",

“best”, and so on), depending on the degree of formality/ distance vs. informality/ closeness the writer may wish to convey (Bjørge 2007). This diversity may in fact add further challenges to the learning task. As a result, the students may have had a less clear idea with regard to the rules of use of closing constructions. This might have explained why the students tended to unanimously adopt a formal greeting form, but varied in their choice of the closing format even after the intervention.

4.2.3 *Request strategies*

Whereas framing moves such as openings and closings are concerning the external layout of an email, request strategies constitute the core part of the email as they carry the communicative intent of the message (Chen 2015). Since requests may pose a threat to the hearer’s negative face, they are more preferably realized by means of conventional indirectness in order to decrease the imposition involved and increase optionality for the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987). However, the present study found that before the instruction, as many as 63% of the students’ requests (26 out of 41) were realized by means of a direct strategy, such as want statements (24 out of 26) and performatives (2 out of 26), regardless of situational factors. Especially, 16 out of these 26 direct requests were given bald-on record (i.e. without any mitigation such as “I want to meet you” or “I write to request”), thus capable of inadvertently being rendered as impolite and causing pragmatic failure. In contrast, only 37% (15 out of 41) of the requests were expressed indirectly by means of query preparatory (14/15) or suggestory (1/15) forms. This over-reliance on direct strategies, especially unmodified want statements, is typical of L2 email requests (see Al-Ali and Sahawneh 2008; Alcón-Soler 2015; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006; Chang and Hsu 1998; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Felix-Brasdefer 2012; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch 2013; Zhu 2012), and seems to suggest that the students lacked awareness of the need to adhere to the principles of negative politeness when interacting with people in a superior position. This observation was consolidated by scrutinising the students’ questionnaire data, which indicated that many of them did not associate directness with a lack of status-congruent politeness. On the contrary, while some mistakenly regarded indirectness as unnecessary due to the professor’s obligation to “help the students”, others emphasized a preference for “clear, to- the- point emails”, as they misperceived clarity as an essential feature of polite emails (see Section 4.1).

Looking at the students’ post-test data, it seemed to suggest that the instruction was effective in raising their awareness of how politeness operates in the TL, especially when communicating up the hierarchy. Compared to the pre-test, there was a marked increase in the students’ use of indirect strategies [Time 2: 33 out of 41, or 81%; Time 3: 29 out of 39, or 74%; Time 4: 34 out of 40, or 85%] and a corresponding decrease in their use of direct strategies [Time 2: 8 out of 41, or 19%;

Time 3: 10 out of 39, or 26%; Time 4: 6 out of 40, or 15%]. These positive changes were found statistically significant [$X^2(3, N = 161) = 27.9, p = .000$], and confirmed by the questionnaire data, which showed that after the intervention more students perceived indirectness to be essential for polite emails to professors.

Qualitative analyses of the students' direct requests revealed two further differences between their pre-test and post-test performance, which suggests the students' increasing sensitivity to situational variations. First, while their choice of direct strategies was not affected by situational factors in the pre-test, directness was more evident in lower-imposition (i.e. appointment and feedback) than in higher-imposition scenarios in the post-test (cf.: 16 occurrences in the appointment scenario, 8 in the feedback scenario, and none in the extension scenario), suggesting that the students now considered directness inappropriate for high-imposition requests (see Biensenbach-Lucas 2007 for a similar discussion regarding NS email requests). Second, compared to the pre-test, the students' post-test direct requests were heavily mitigated. For example, instead of the bald want statements (e.g. "I want to meet you", or "I really need your feedback") which were abundantly represented in the pre-test (16 out of 26 instances), students relied more extensively on such hedged expressions as "I would like to meet with you", "I would appreciate it if you can/ could", and "I would be grateful/ happy if you can/ could" after the instruction. This happened in all 24 instances in which direct requests were used in the post-test. The post-treatment preference for linguistic indirectness seems to demonstrate the students' increased awareness of the politeness effect of internal mitigation, which they may have not noticed before due to its lack of transparent pragmatic meaning (see Hassall 2001). In short, based on the above findings, request strategies appeared highly amenable to the intervention (see Alcón-Soler 2005, 2015; Halenko and Jones 2011; Martínez-Flor 2008; Nguyen et al. 2015; Safont 2003; Takahashi 2001; Takimoto 2006, 2009 for similar findings).

4.2.4 *Supportive moves*

Supportive moves can help soften the force of the request by modifying the linguistic context in which the request is embedded. For example, disarmers, which may occur before or after the request, serve to decrease its coerciveness by acknowledging the cost to the addressee. Sweeteners, on the other hand, serve to elevate the addressee's face. Thus, supportive moves are important for expressing addressee-oriented meanings and maintaining social harmony (Croates 1987). Four types of supportive moves, i.e. grounders, disarmers, sweeteners, and optionality (see Table 1) were taught during the treatment. However, it was found that among the four types, the instruction only increased the students' use of optionality (e.g. "if you are available") [$X^2(3) = 8.10, p = .04$], particularly when making

appointments (cf.: 31 occurrences in the appointment scenario versus 3 times in the feedback scenario, and 2 times in the extension scenario). In comparison, there was no change in the students' use of grounders, disarmers, and sweeteners over time ($p > .05$). The students' authentic emails also indicated no instances of disarmers and sweeteners, suggesting a possible lack of awareness of the politeness effects of these moves, especially when used in high-imposition scenarios. The students' lack of improvement in using grounders may be explained by their already high use in the pre-test (median being 1.00, suggesting that almost every email contained a grounder) and hence no further increase is needed. On the other hand, the scarcity of disarmers in the students' post-test email requests may have been L1-induced (see Nguyen 2008a, Nguyen and Ho 2013 for similar findings). In particular, prior research has pointed out that the notions of face as an individualistic, self-oriented image and its concomitant negative politeness seem to hardly apply in the Vietnamese collectively oriented culture (Nguyen and Ho 2013; Pham 2008; Vu 1997). In this culture, politeness is more about – on the one hand – acting in relation to one's social standing, and on the other hand – showing compassion and empathy to other members of the community. Vietnamese politeness is therefore more about the conformity of individuals' behavior to social expectations, and less about attention to individual face wants (Nguyen and Ho 2013). In accordance with this lack of concerns for negative politeness, pragmatic strategies such as disarmers are rarely utilized for politeness work by Vietnamese NSs (Nguyen 2008a; Nguyen and Ho 2013). However, there was no easy explanation for the lack of progress in the students' use of sweeteners, which were also under-represented in the pre-test data (medians being .33, suggesting that each type occurred once in approximately every three emails). Since sweeteners are a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987, 103), it could be argued that this pragmatic strategy may be preferred by members of cultures with orientation toward intimacy, bond and solidarity such as the Vietnamese culture. In fact, this politeness strategy has been found quite common among Vietnamese students when needing to sugarcoat their critical writing feedback given to peers during peer review sessions (see Nguyen 2008a, 2008b). A possible explanation for the rarity of sweeteners in the present study, therefore, could be the emphasis on formality in unequal power relationships in this high PD culture that may have made the students feel uncomfortable to adopt a solidarity politeness strategy. Another plausible explanation for the varying instructional effects described above might lie in the unintentionally unequal distribution of time to teach the different types of supportive moves.

4.2.5 *Aggravators*

Aggravators are words or phrases that serve to increase the force of the request and therefore must be avoided, particularly in emails addressing authority figures (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). Before the intervention, the students employed quite a great number of aggravators (median being 1.00, suggesting the occurrence of this device in almost every email). Among the four types of aggravators, i.e. intensifiers, statements of urgency, limiters, and statements of responsibility, the students seemed to prefer limiters the most. This type of aggravators occurred for a total of 19 times in the pre-test data, and was employed to set expectations for the professor (e.g. “I want to meet you at 9:00 on this Saturday at Highlands Coffee to discuss my findings”, or “Thank you in advance for your kind cooperation”). Notably, the students were found to prefer to set an appointment outside of the professor’s office hours (e.g. on weekend) and at a private place (e.g. at the professor’s home, restaurant, or cafe), without knowing that such requests were socio-culturally inappropriate. Their aforementioned behaviour may have been explained by the collectively-oriented Vietnamese culture, which tends to place a greater emphasis on such values as bond and intimacy than on autonomy and privacy, which are highly valued in the Anglo-Saxon traditions (Nguyen and Ho 2013). Without being guided, the students were, therefore, not aware that their requests may have been inadvertently interpreted as invading the professor’s personal space and territory.

Students’ next commonly used type of aggravators was statements of urgency (e.g. “Please reply as soon as possible”), which were employed to urge the professor to grant the request. This type of aggravators occurred six times in the students’ pre-test data. By appealing to the professor’s compliance with an externally-imposed time frame, without regarding his or her personal timetable, the students put them out of status in this power asymmetrical relationship, thus capable of causing pragmatic failure. The other two types, intensifiers (e.g. “I really need your feedback”) and statements of responsibility (e.g. “Because you are my supervisor ...”) were used less often (3 times each), but their aggravating force was not less negative. While the use of intensifiers could portray the students as being needy and dependent, which was an undesirable characteristic in the higher education context, stating the professor’s responsibility indicated a miscalculation of institutional rights and obligations, and failure to show status-appropriate deference (see Chen 2006; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996 for similar discussion on this point).

Despite their high use of aggravators in the pretest (31 times totally), however, the students’ post-test data showed that after being instructed, they significantly decreased the use of these devices [Time 2: median: .00, range: .67; Time 3: median: .00, range: .67; Time 4: median: .33, range: .67; $X^2(3) = 20.2$, $p = .000$], thus considerably reducing the coerciveness of their requests. These findings suggested that similarly to request strategies, aggravators were highly likely teachable.

5. Conclusion

The present study seeks to answer two research questions. First, what is the effect of explicit instruction on Vietnamese EFL university students' overall ability in writing email requests to faculty recipients? Second, in what aspects of the students' email discourse is the effect (if any) evident and retained?

Regarding the first question, the findings of the present study corroborate those of the previous studies in instructional pragmatics (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2005, 2015; Halenko and Jones 2011; Martínez-Flor 2008; Safont 2003; Nguyen et al. 2015) and indicate that the treatment group achieved significant gains from the pre-test to all the three post-tests, whereas the control students demonstrated no such progress. The treatment group also obtained significantly higher gain scores as compared to the control group on all three post-test occasions: At the end of the study, one month, and eight months after the study. These findings are further consolidated by the findings from the treatment groups' post-test authentic emails and assessment questionnaire, which reveal considerable improvement for this group in both areas of pragmatic production and awareness. Taken together, the findings of the present study suggest an advantage of the pedagogical approach implemented for the learners in the treatment group, and that the positive effect of this approach can be retained even after 8 months (see Alcón-Soler 2015 for similar findings regarding the durable impact of L2 pragmatics instruction). The benefits of the approach can be explained in terms of its effective integration of the various useful instructional procedures during an extensive period (i.e. 6 hours). First, consciousness-raising activities help to draw students' focal attention to TL linguistic forms, their functional meaning and contextual features, which is seen as a necessary condition for learning to take place (Schmidt 1990). Next, meta-pragmatic explanation contributes to developing students' deeper awareness of the rules involved, which is considered facilitative for their pragmatic acquisition (Schmidt 1990). Output practice enables students to put the acquired pragmatic knowledge to use, while multiple cycles of feedback and revision afford students opportunities not only for gap-noticing, but also for task repetition, which is regarded essential for fluency development (Taguchi 2015). The results of the control group, on the other hand, point out to the ineffectiveness of the instruction they received. Recall that unlike the treatment group, the control group only followed the course syllabus. Although the syllabus prescribed the instruction of requests, the amount of time devoted to this lesson was limited to 50 minutes. Needless to say, this brief instruction was not as effective as the extensive instruction experienced by the treatment group. Further, the control group was also not provided opportunities to engage in repeated feedback and revision, thus being deprived of the benefit of this type of practice. Comparing the two instructional approaches, it seems to suggest that pragmatic development may benefit when the

length of instruction increases, and when students are provided opportunities for extensive practice of output and receive feedback for improvement.

Concerning the second research question, the findings suggest that instruction may produce differential effects on the various aspects of the students' performance. With respect to the framing moves, opening sequences appeared more amenable to instruction than closing sequences. These findings only partially corroborate those of Chen (2015) who found both features highly teachable due to their formulaic nature. Note, however, that it might not be completely fair to compare the two studies in this respect, since they measure the teachability of email closings differently. Chen does not analyze the students' email closings in terms of appropriateness as does the present study. Hence, it remains unknown to what extent the students in Chen's study have improved the appropriateness level of their email closings after the instruction. The findings of the present study seem to more closely echo Taguchi (2015)'s observation which suggests that concrete, systematic pragmatic rules may be easier to acquire through explicit instruction than opaque rules. From this perspective, greeting constructions, which tend to have relatively transparent functional meaning (e.g. formality versus informality), seem to respond more readily to the instructional approach applied in this study. Similar things can also be said about self-introduction, which is used to render the specific student-professor relationship. Email closings, on the other hand, though also formulaic in nature, seem to display much greater stylistic variations than greetings, and less clear-cut rules of use. Therefore, they may be less effectively taught deductively, and require more extensive exposure to be internalized.

In terms of the content moves, the present study found positive effects of the instruction on the students' use of request strategies and avoidance of aggravating devices. However, only modest progress was found for their use of supportive moves, indicating the need for a greater emphasis on teaching request support in emails. Particularly, attention needs to be paid to the deliberate teaching of L2 politeness strategies that vary considerably from students' L1 in order to enhance their awareness of those strategies. The above findings also only partially support those of Chen (2015) who reported minimal effects for both request strategies and request support (i.e. grounders). A possible explanation for this difference may lie in the way instruction is implemented in the two studies. Despite the similar length (i.e. 6 hours), the instruction in Chen (2015) does not include the multiple feedback and revision component, which is believed to contribute to the effectiveness of the instruction in the present study.

In conclusion, despite a small and gender-biased sample, which necessitates caution in generalizing the findings, the present study confirms that email requests are generally teachable, and advocates an explicit approach to raising students' awareness of email pragmatics (see Ford 2006; Nguyen et al. 2015). As discussed earlier, without the benefits of instruction, writing emails to authority figures remains a daunting task for many L2 students who may struggle in terms of both language use and negotiation of politeness norms in the TL. Considering the neglect

of teaching email communication in current ELT materials (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Ford 2006), the need for such instruction becomes pressing, particularly in the EFL context where learners have limited opportunities for exposure and language use. In order to benefit classroom practices, more studies are apparently needed in this area. One possible issue for future examination is what constitutes effective instruction for the different aspects of email writing. Further, since studies which examine effects of instruction on long-term acquisition of email pragmatics (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2015) are still scarce, this question can be pursued in future research in order to offer more valid pedagogical recommendations. Future studies may also move beyond the classroom context to investigate the impact of instruction on students' real-world pragmatic practices. For this purpose, it is helpful to go beyond post-test and analyze students' real-life language use, e.g. authentic email messages (see Alcón-Soler 2015). Given the limited number of such studies, the question of whether instruction facilitates the transfer of learning to authentic communication should be worthy of further empirical investigation (see Taguchi 2015 for similar discussion on this point).

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