Learners' use of request modifiers across two University ESP disciplines

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Abstract

The field of interlanguage pragmatics has recently received a lot of attention. Among the features examined within this field, learners' awareness and production of a variety of speech acts has been widely investigated in both second and foreign language contexts. Focusing on the latter, there has been increasing interest in analysing learners' use of requests, suggestions and advice acts across different ESP disciplines (Martínez-Flor & Alcón, 2004). However, results from this research provided a partial report of learners' requesting behaviour, since it only dealt with the request head act realisations without considering those devices that accompany such a speech act in order to modify its pragmatic effect (Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999). Bearing this fact in mind, the present study examines learners' requesting performance from two different ESP disciplines, namely those of English Philology and Computer Science Engineering, with a focus on both the amount and type of modifiers they employ when requesting in two different situations. Findings show on the one hand that learners from the English Philology discipline employed a higher amount of modifiers than the Computer Science Engineering learners; and on the other hand, the analysis of the type of internal and external modifiers employed by both groups revealed a similar trend, which indicates the lack of variety in using these modification devices. On the basis of these findings, some pedagogical implications, as well as suggestions for further research are presented.

Key words: interlanguage pragmatics, requests, modifiers, English as a foreign language

Resumen

El uso de elementos de mitigación en peticiones por estudiantes universitarios en dos disciplinas de IFE

El campo de la pragmática del interlenguaje ha recibido mucha atención recientemente. Entre los temas que se han examinado, uno que se ha investigado especialmente es la comprensión y producción de actos de habla por parte de estudiantes tanto en contextos de segundas lenguas como lenguas extranjeras. Centrándonos en éste último, se ha prestado interés en analizar el uso que hacen los estudiantes de las peticiones, sugerencias y consejos en diferentes disciplinas del campo del IFE (Martínez-Flor & Alcón, 2004). Sin embargo, los resultados de esta investigación mostraron sólo una parte del

comportamiento de los estudiantes al realizar peticiones, puesto que sólo se trató la forma lingüística de la propia petición y no en los modificadores que acompañan a este acto de habla para modificar su efecto pragmático (Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999). Teniendo en cuenta este aspecto, la presente investigación analiza la realización de peticiones de estudiantes que pertenecen a dos disciplinas diferentes, Filología Inglesa e Ingeniería Informática, prestando atención tanto a la cantidad como al tipo de modificadores que emplean al realizar las peticiones en dos situaciones diferentes. Los resultados muestran por un lado que los estudiantes de Filología Inglesa emplearon un mayor número de modificadores que los de Ingeniería Informática. Por otro lado, el análisis del tipo de modificadores tanto internos como externos utilizados por estudiantes de los dos grupos reveló una tendencia similar, lo que indica la poca variedad que hacen de estos modificadores. En base a estos resultados, se presentan varias implicaciones pedagógicas, así como futuras líneas de investigación.

Palabras clave: pragmática del interlenguaje, peticiones, elementos de modificación, inglés como lengua extranjera

Introduction

The field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) has been defined as the area of research that "seeks to describe and explain learners' development and use of pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper, 1989: 42). Therefore, in contrast to cross-cultural pragmatics, which deals with the comparison of learners' pragmatic performance with that of native-speakers (NSs), research conducted in the area of ILP adopts a second language acquisition perspective by focusing on those developmental issues that affect learners' acquisition of pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, 2001, 2002). This research has been divided into cross-sectional and longitudinal studies devoted to analysing learners' awareness and use of a wide range of pragmatic aspects, such as greetings, conversational abilities, discourse markers, interactional routines and modality in disagreements (see Kasper & Rose [1999, 2002] for a review).

Among those target pragmatic aspects being examined in ILP research, learners' ability to comprehend and produce different speech acts has received a great deal of attention in both second (Schmidt, 1983; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989; Ellis, 1992; Barron, 2003) and foreign language contexts (House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Hill, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Rose, 2000). The overall results from these studies illustrated that the learners immersed in the second language community showed a developmental pattern in their acquisition of requests, since they were daily exposed to authentic pragmatic input, as well as opportunities to make requests in different contextual situations. In contrast, learners' chances to develop an appropriate requesting behaviour in the foreign

language context were very limited, since their only contact with the target language was restricted to the classroom setting.

Paying attention to learners' performance in foreign language contexts, there has been increasing interest in examining whether learners' opportunities to practice different speech acts may vary depending on the specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) discipline they are engaged in. To this respect, Martínez-Flor and Alcón (2004) compared learners' awareness and use of three exhortative speech acts, namely those of requests, suggestions and advice, in different contextual situations across six University disciplines: English Philology, Primary Education, Law, Business Administration and Management, Computer Science Engineering, and Agricultural Technical Engineering: Horticulture and Gardening Speciality. The common feature among these ESP disciplines was the fact that all had English as a compulsory subject, although each syllabus was adapted to the particular ESP course to be covered. These six disciplines were distributed into the three main types of ESP categories developed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), that is, the first two disciplines were related to English for the Social Sciences (ESS), the next two were related to English for Business and Economics (EBE), and the last two disciplines were concerned with English for Science and Technology (EST).

Results from Martínez-Flor and Alcón's (2004) study showed that learners engaged in the ESS category performed better than learners from the other disciplines in both their awareness and production of the three speech acts being examined. The authors argued that this could have been due to the fact that this type of discipline covers a more "traditional humanities-based General English" than the other ESP disciplines (Hutchison & Waters, 1987: 16-18). Thus, the kind of English that students from English Philology and Primary Education had received could have included more general situations eliciting a variety of speech acts, such as the ones examined in their study, than the more specific syllabi involving particular vocabulary and discipline-related situations covered in the other ESP categories. To sum up, this study pointed to differences between learners' speech act performance from different ESP disciplines within the foreign language classroom. However, focusing specifically on the speech act of requesting, it provided a partial report of learners' actual requesting behaviour, since it only dealt with those linguistic formulae employed to make the request act itself without considering those devices that accompany such a speech act in order to modify its pragmatic effect.

The speech act of requesting

According to Trosborg (1995) and Sifianou (1999), requests consist of two main parts, namely those of the core request or head act, and the peripheral modification

devices. Whereas the head act consists of the main utterance which has the function of requesting and can stand by itself, the peripheral modification devices are optional items that serve to either mitigate or intensify the force of the requesting move. Additionally, these modification items can be of two types: internal, which appear within the same request act (e.g. Could you *possibly* open the window?), and external, which appear in the immediate linguistic context rather than in the request act itself (e.g. *It is quite hot in here.* Could you open the window?). Therefore, considering the fact that requests are directive face-threatening speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and that their performance may threaten the hearer's negative face, the use of these modifiers is essential so that the speakers' requesting performance may be considered as appropriate in a variety of situations.

Research examining learners' use of these modification devices when requesting has obtained different results concerning the amount and type of modifiers employed by their participants (Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Hill, 1997; Hassall, 2001; Achiba, 2003; Barron, 2003; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003; Schauer, 2004). Regarding internal modification, some studies have shown learners' underuse of this type of modifiers in comparison to NSs, and more specifically the "downtoner" (Kasper, 1981; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hassall, 2001; Barron, 2003), whereas other studies, such as the one conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), reported no differences in the amount of this type of modifiers between learners and NSs. In contrast, focusing particularly on the politeness marker "please", the studies by Faerch and Kasper (1989), Hill (1997) and Barron (2003) found that learners overused it. With respect to external modification, Kasper (1981) reported that learners and NSs used the same amount of this type of modifiers, and Trosborg (1995) stated that learners underused them when compared to NSs. However, the overall result found in most of the studies showed that learners overused external modifiers, and particularly the type known as "grounders" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; House & Kasper, 1987; Hassall, 2001; Achiba, 2003; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003; Schauer, 2004). In fact, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) and Hassall (2001) reported that their learners' grounders created a verbose effect because they contained excessive information and, consequently, were regarded as inappropriate.

A common feature among all these studies that have investigated learners' use of peripheral modification devices concerns the fact that all included participants who were learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with the exception of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), Achiba (2003) and Schauer (2004). However, none of these studies examined whether there were differences between their use of different modifiers depending on the particular ESP discipline they were engaged in. Taking

this aspect into account, and considering results from the above-mentioned study by Martínez-Flor and Alcón (2004), the present paper examines learners' requesting behaviour from two different disciplines, namely those of English Philology and Computer Science Engineering, with a focus on their use of peripheral modification devices when requesting in two different situations. More specifically, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

> 1. Do learners from two ESP disciplines employ the same amount of modifiers when requesting?

> 2. Does the type of modifiers (i.e. internal and external) vary depending on the ESP discipline the learners belong to?

Methodology

Participants

Participants taking part in our study consisted of two groups of students of Universitat Jaume I (Castellón) who were in the second-year course of the degrees/ESP disciplines of English Philology and Computer Science Engineering, respectively. The former group involved twenty-eight female and twelve male students (n=40), whereas the latter group involved nine female and fifteen male students (n=24). Their age ranged between 19 and 23 years old, the average age being 21.5 years.

Data Collection

The data were collected during the oral exam the two groups had to take at the end of the semester with their respective lecturers. Therefore, the same steps were followed with both the English Philology and Computer Science Engineering groups. Once the learners had individually performed their assigned oral exam, the lecturer asked the next student to enter her office. Then, the lecturer gave the pair of students a role-play situation, and asked them to spontaneously perform it, that is, the two students were asked to perform the role-play without having any time to prepare what they had to say (see Appendix A). After performing this role-play, the same procedure was followed with the next two students, who were provided with a different role-play situation (see Appendix B).

These two role-plays were specifically designed for this study, since they elicited request use and varied according to one of the three sociopragmatic factors described in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, namely that of social status. This

politeness variable was taken into account, since it has been regarded as one of the factors that affect the choice of particular pragmalinguistic forms as well as the use of mitigation devices to make appropriate requests. Thus, whereas the first role-play (Appendix A) involved an equal status relationship between the interlocutors (i.e. two classmates), the second role-play (Appendix B) addressed a higher status relationship between the interlocutors (i.e. a student and a professor). Regarding the other two politeness variables, those of social distance and degree of imposition, they were kept similar in both role-plays, that is, the interlocutors knew each other (i.e. close social distance), and the request to be made involved a high degree of imposition (i.e. asking to lend the class notes in the first role-play, and asking for an extension of the deadline to hand in some coursework assignment in the second role-play).

All role-plays were tape-recorded and transcribed in order to analyse the amount and type of internal and external modifiers employed by learners from the two ESP disciplines when making their requests. For this analysis, we considered previous ILP studies (House & Kasper, 1981; Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999; Márquez-Reiter, 2000; Achiba, 2003) that have presented classifications of modification devices used by second and foreign language learners when requesting (see Table 1a for Internal modifiers and Table 1b for External modifiers).

Internal Modifiers			
Openers	Questions		• *Do you think* you could open the window?
	Consultative device		• *Would you mind* opening the window?
	Negation		• I don't suppose you would mind closing the window.
	Conditional		• I would be grateful if you could open the window
Hedges	Softeners	Diminutives	• Abbreviations (*info* for information)
		Tag questions	• You could open the window, *couldn't you*?
		Miscellaneous	• Could you *possibly* open the window *for a moment*?
	Intensifiers		• You *really* must open the window.
Fillers	Hesitators		• I *er, erm, er – I wonder* if you could open the window
	Cajolers		• *You know, you see, I mean*
	Appealers		• *OK?, Right?, yeah*
	Attention-getters		• *Excuse me ...; Hello ...; Look ...*

Table 1a. Internal modifiers used in requests.

External Modifiers	
Preparators	• *May I ask you a favour?* Could you open the window?
Grounders	• *It seems it is quite hot here.* Could you open the window?
Disarmers	• *I hate bothering you but* could you open the window?
Expanders	• Would you mind opening the window? *Once again, could you open it?*
Cost minimizing	• Could you open the window? *I'll close it after the class session.*
Promise of reward	• Could you open the window? *If you open it, I promise to take you to the cinema.*
Please	• Would you mind opening the window, *please*?

Table 1b. External modifiers used in requests.

Results and Discussion

The first of our research questions referred to the overall amount of peripheral modification devices employed by learners from the two ESP disciplines. Results obtained after analysing all the transcripts showed that learners from English Philology modified forty request moves out of a total of forty-five, whereas learners from Computer Science Engineering only employed modification devices, either external or internal, in eleven out of twenty-five request moves (see Figure 1).
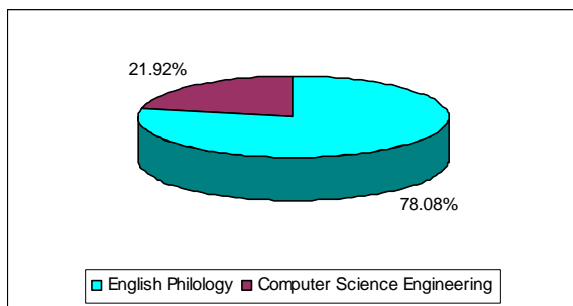

Figure 1. Learners' overall use of peripheral modification devices from the two ESP disciplines.

As illustrated in Figure 1, learners engaged in the English Philology degree employed a higher amount of peripheral modification devices when requesting (78.08%) than learners from Computer Science Engineering (21.92%). These findings may have been related to the specific ESP syllabus to be covered in each degree, since the first group of learners majored in English and, consequently, the English language was both an object and a tool of study for them. In other words, apart from studying a particular subject devoted to practicing the English language (in which similar types

of role-plays could be practiced), learners also employed English as the means of communication in other subjects from their degree. In contrast, learners from the second group, that is, Computer Science Engineering, only had this compulsory subject of English, which mainly covered specific vocabulary and situations related to the computer-science field. These differences may have therefore exerted an influence in their overall use of peripheral modification devices.

These results are in line with Martínez-Flor and Alcón's (2004) study, which also showed that learners from the English Philology degree performed better when requesting (i.e. their use of linguistic realisations to express the request head act) than learners from other ESP disciplines, such as Computer Science Engineering or Business Administration and Management. The following examples illustrate this point by showing learners' request moves from English Philology (Example 1) and Computer Science Engineering (Example 2) when performing the first role-play designed for this study (see Appendix A):

Example (1)[1]

    A. eh … *hello Silvia … I have to ask you a question*. I haven't gone to the classes eh … *because I have been working* … in a restaurant … and <u>I would need your notes</u> *if you don't mind for the exams.*

    B. OK. I will go with you …eh … to copy my notes … because I understand that you … eh … you were not able to come to class … so don't worry.

Example (2)

    A. eh … hello Manel
    B. hello Sandra
    A. … <u>I need the class notes for the subject</u> that … I part on Monday
    B. OK … I have all the last class
    A. *you give me the … notebooks?*
    B. eh … yes is this … would you have any copy?
    A. eh … yes … eh *I need this notebooks* … I go I go to reprography for photocopy …
    B. OK thank you
    A. bye

As can be observed in Example 1 above, the learner from the English Philology discipline employed four peripheral modification devices when making his request (e.g. *hello Silvia, I have to ask you a question, because I have been working*, and *if you don't mind for the exams*), which mitigated, to a great extent, the pragmatic force of such speech act. In contrast, the request performed by the Computer Science Engineering learner was more direct with no instances of peripheral modification devices serving to soften the impositive requesting act, with the exception of a repetition (i.e. an

"expander"). Moreover, it is also interesting to point out that although the first example is shorter than the second one, it shows a more coherent piece of discourse than the second one, which is ungrammatical and highly repetitive. This fact, therefore, may indicate that having a certain degree of grammatical competence might influence learners' pragmatic performance by increasing the number of modifiers employed when requesting, as well as by producing more coherent request moves (see Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, 2003, on the relationship between grammar and pragmatics).

Apart from considering the overall amount of peripheral modification devices employed by the two groups, we also examined the number of internal and external modifiers they produced in an attempt to ascertain whether there were preferences of one type of modification over the other depending on the discipline learners were engaged in (see Figure 2).
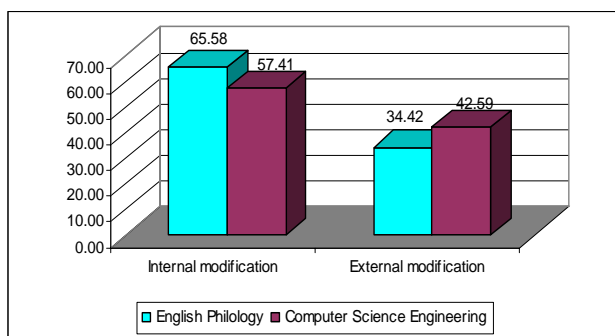

Figure 2. Learners' use of internal and external modification devices from the two ESP disciplines.

As illustrated in Figure 2, it seems that learners from the two ESP disciplines employed more internal than external modification devices. In particular, learners' use of internal modifiers from English Philology amounted to 65.58% as compared to the low use of external modifiers (34.42%), and a similar pattern was found for the Computer Science Engineering learners, who employed a higher number of internal modification devices (57.41%) than external (42.59%). This tendency of preferring internal over external modifiers seems to support the study by Faerch and Kasper (1989) which found that their two groups of participants (i.e. Danish learners of English and German, and NSs of both languages) also employed more internal than external modification devices. According to these authors (1989: 242), this could have been due to the fact that "internal modification is an obligatory choice, [while] external modification [is] an optional choice". However, the data collection technique in Faerch and Kasper's (1989) study was that of a written Discourse Completion Test

(DCT), whereas we employed oral spontaneous role-plays to collect learners' requests, something that may have also influenced the results. In fact, considering the particular situation in which our data were collected, that is after taking part in an oral exam at the end of the semester, we may assume that learners' performance in an additional unexpected oral task could have contributed to the higher use of internal modifiers (e.g. *you know, you see, excuse me*) and, consequently, the lower use of the external type of modifiers, which may be more difficult to produce, since they involve "conscious planning decisions on the part of the speaker" (Faerch & Kasper, 1989: 244).

In order to provide a more detailed picture of which particular types of internal and external modifiers learners had employed, we posed our second research question. Specifically, we were interested in examining whether the type of modification devices produced varied depending on the ESP discipline learners belonged to. Starting with the internal peripheral modification devices, Figure 3 shows that the most frequent type of modifier employed by learners from both groups was the "hesitator" type, followed by "attention-getters", "cajolers", and "softeners"[2]. To a lesser extent, learners from English Philology employed "openers"[3] and "cajolers", and no instances of "intensifiers" were found. The opposite results were obtained with the Computer Science Engineering learners, since they employed "intensifiers" to a lesser extent, and no instances of "openers" and "appealers" were found in the data.
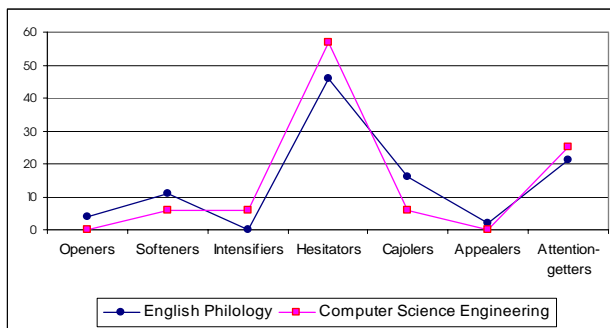

Figure 3. Learners' use of different types of internal peripheral modification devices from the two ESP disciplines.

The high use of "hesitators" by learners has also been reported in other studies which have employed oral role-plays as the data elicitation instrument (Kasper, 1981; Trosborg, 1995). In this line, it could have been the case that our learners employed a high use of this internal modifier due to the nature of the task they were asked to perform, that is, a spontaneous role-play in which they did not have time to prepare in advance what they had to say. Therefore, as previously mentioned, this fact may

have been the cause why learners' overall amount of modifiers fell under the internal rather than the external type of modification devices. However, Trosborg (1995: 261) also pointed out that the hesitation phenomena found in her learners' speech was mainly "caused by linguistic insecurity and lack of proficiency, rather than being used strategically as a downtoning device". Bearing this fact in mind, the author claimed that learners employed a high use of "hesitators" because they were less competent than the NSs, who could resort to a variety of other mitigating devices. Similar reasons could explain why our learners, indistinctively from the discipline they were engaged in, resorted to a high use of "hesitators" instead of employing other devices, such as "downtoners" (i.e. a type of softener) which, as Faerch and Kasper (1989) state, require more pragmalinguistic competence on the part of the learners. The following examples illustrate this point by showing the high frequency of "hesitators" employed by both learners from English Philology (Example 3) and Computer Science Engineering (Example 4) when performing the second role-play designed for this study (see Appendix B):

Example (3)

    A. good day
    B. morning
    A. I was … I'm I'm one of your students for English practice and … I know … I have to we had to … hand in some … *eh* … some work last week but … I'm one of the students … I think I'm one of the students who didn't bring them … *eh* … *I was wondering if* <u>you could extend the deadline</u> … *eh* … and I could bring them … *eh* I don't know … next week or or … in two days time …
    B. Next week on Monday?
    A. It's OK
    B. Thank you. No problem, next week.
    A. Thank you.

Example (4)

    A. hello
    B. hello
    A. I … I have a … mmm… my my sister … he … get married and I … eh … to hand coursework
    B. OK … and what what you want?
    A. *eh* … I decide that … *eh* … that you … if you can … *eh* … <u>if you could give me … two days more</u>
    B. OK … if you give me an authorization … you will … you will get to … you will get your housework two days late
    A. I can't … no authorization … because I wasn't in any official situation

The next two types of internal modifiers most employed by learners were "attention-getters" and "cajolers". These findings seem to indicate that the type of "fillers", which includes hesitators, cajolers, appealers and attention-getters (see Table 1 above), was the learners' preference from the two ESP disciplines. In fact, and as previously mentioned, this result may have been related to the fact that data were collected through interactive oral role-plays and, consequently, the use of fillers, which are "optional lexical items used by speakers to fill in the gaps that occur during an interaction" (Sifianou, 1999: 179), was highly employed in contrast to their low occurrence in other studies which have collected data using written instruments (House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989). The use of "softeners", which refer to adverbs (e.g. *possibly, just*) and fixed expressions, such as *a moment* or *a little bit*, was the next type of modifiers employed by the two groups of learners. Finally, some differences were observed among learners' use of "openers", "appealers" and "intensifiers". Learners from English Philology employed a limited number of "openers" and "appealers", whereas the Computer Science Engineering learners did not use any of these modifiers. This could have been due to the fact that the use of "openers" requires more grammatical competence on the part of the learners (i.e. using questions, negative constructions and conditional sentences), and the use of "appealers" may also require more strategic or discourse-based competence (i.e. use of *OK?*, *Right?*, *yeah*). Regarding learners' use of "intensifiers", which refer to devices "rarely used with requests" since they have the function of aggravating the impact of the request indicating impolite behaviour (Sifianou, 1999: 157), it is interesting to point out that only learners from the Computer Science Engineering discipline employed them (see Example 5 taken from learner's performance in the second role-play designed for this study included in Appendix B).

Example (5)

> "eh … hello teacher … mmm … eh … I *really* <u>want an extension of the deadline</u> because I can't make the … the coursework because my mother … eh … was being to the hospital … and … it's impossible … but eh … I have a …"

Moving on to the type of external modification devices, Figure 4 shows that the most frequent type of modifier employed by learners from both groups was that of "grounders", whereas the use of the other external modifiers varied depending on the ESP discipline learners were engaged in. On the one hand, learners from English Philology employed "preparators", followed by both "expanders" and "please" to the same degree, and finally, "disarmers". There was no occurrence of the "cost minimizing" and "promise of reward" in the data from this group of learners. On the other hand, the Computer Science Engineering learners resorted to the use of "please", followed by "preparators", "expanders", and to a lesser extent, the type of

"promise of reward". Finally, no instances of "disarmers" or "cost minimizing" were found.
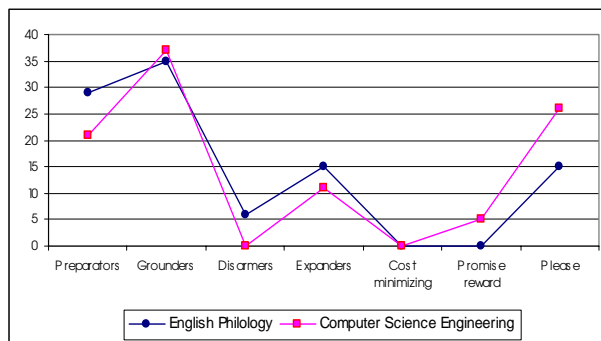

Figure 4. Learners' use of different types of external peripheral modification devices from the two ESP disciplines.

The high use of "grounders" on the part of learners from both ESP disciplines seems to be in line with previous research that has illustrated learners' overall preference for this type of external modifier when compared to other external modification devices (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Hassall, 2001; Achiba, 2003; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003). According to House and Kasper (1987: 1281), this may be due to the fact that "it is psychologically most plausible to make the addressee understand the reason(s) behind a request". Moreover, it has been claimed that "grounders" are more explicit in their politeness function than other types of modifiers and, therefore, they are regarded as an efficient mitigating strategy which reduces the threat to the hearer's face (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hassall, 2001). This may have been the reason why our learners employed a higher number of these devices, since they could have felt easier to justify the imposing nature of their requests by expressing the reasons why such requests were made. The following examples illustrate this point by showing the use of "grounders" by both learners from English Philology (Example 6) and Computer Science Engineering (Example 7) in the first role-play (see Appendix A):

Example (6)

 A. hi Estela
 B. hi Ana
 A. I have a little problem *because I I couldn't go to classes lately … I was ill* you know … and I don't have the notes … so <u>would you mind giving me your notes</u> please?
 B. no … I will give you my notes … eh … what … eh … for how many days?
 A. eh … I think only one week

Example (7)

A.   hello
B.   hi Lafuente
A.   eh … I need the classnotes … eh … *because … because … because … eh … I didn't can … I didn't go to the class* … I need classnotes … do you do you can you … eh … can you … eh … can you [prestarme] the classnotes … eh … for … in the evening … it's very important … *because I can't go to class* but I need them … *my mother in hospital … she was ill* … but *I didn't go because no taxis … because* …
B.   eh … yes I can … if you come to my house this afternoon and then you give them back to me again … yes
A.   OK thanks
B.   bye

As can be observed in the two previous examples, both groups of learners employed "grounders" to support and justify their requests. However, the utterance from the Computer Science Engineering learners was very long with the inclusion of excessive information. In fact, most of the "grounders" found in this group of learners showed a tendency towards *verbosity*, that is, producing long utterances with the inclusion of too much redundant and unnecessary information (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Hassall, 2001; Schauer, 2004). This verbose pragmatic behaviour may have been due to several reasons already identified in previous research, such as their lack of confidence in their ability to make their meaning understood, or to be adequately polite (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hassall, 2001: 274). In addition, and as previously mentioned, this tendency to produce lengthy utterances could have also been related to their lack of enough pragmalinguistic competence to produce what they wanted to express in less, but more appropriate, words.

Regarding the next types of external modification devices employed by the two groups of learners, it is interesting to point out that the Computer Science learners also resorted to a high use of the politeness marker "please", which supports previous research that has found learners' overuse of this modifier given the fact that it is an explicit and transparent marker of politeness (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hill, 1997; Barron, 2003). Therefore, in line with Hassall (2001), it seems that learners from this discipline showed a tendency towards clarity, either by producing lengthy speech act realisations or favouring a high use of "please", in order to make sure they were understood in a language over which they had imperfect control. Instead of employing this politeness marker to a considerable extent, learners from English Philology preferred the use of "preparators" (see Example 8), which have also been regarded as one of the modifiers most employed by learners, since they prepare the addressee for the ensuing request (Kasper, 1981; Hill, 1997; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2003).

Example (8)

A. Hello good morning … *I would like to speak to you* because I have some problems and … and I haven't … I haven't had time enough to finish my work and <u>I would like to know if it was possible to have … eh … more time to finish it …</u>

B. OK you can have … eh … one more week but no more because if there are any students that know that I'm making you that favour maybe they'll get angry … OK? … so only one more week …

A. thank you very much

The use of "expanders", that is repeating the same request head act or employing synonymous expressions with a mitigating effect, were the next type of modifiers employed by the two groups of learners. This result could also be related to the fact that instead of resorting to a greater variety of different modifiers, learners repeated their requests again probably due to their lack of pragmalinguistic competence. Finally, whereas no instances of the "cost minimizing" type of external modifier were found in any of the two groups of learners, the type of "disarmers" was only used by learners from the English Philology discipline (see Example 9), and the "promise of reward" modifier was only employed by Computer Science Engineering learners (see Example 10). It is our belief that the "disarmer" type required more elaboration than the "promise of reward" type, and this may have been the reason why a different use of these modifiers was found in each of the two groups of learners.

Example (9)

A. *I'm very sorry to bother you but* … eh … I have a couple of problems and <u>I'd like you to … eh … let me an extension for the deadline</u> of … of ... the coursework assignment … to be able to .. eh …

B. do you think a couple of days would be enough?

A. yes I think so

B. OK then … a couple of days

Example (10)

A. hello

B. hi

A. eh … <u>I need the classnotes</u> … eh … because I … I not go to class the other day and …

B. eh … yes … but … eh …

A. *I can help you another day with the programmes* …

B. well … I'm a very good friend and I'm giving you my notes

A. OK thanks

To sum up learners' use of different types of internal and external modifiers, it seems that some differences were observed regarding some specific modifiers, such as "openers" or "intensifiers" with respect to internal modification, or "please" and "disarmers" as regards external modification. However, the general trend regarding the variety of modifiers employed seemed to be quite similar for the two groups of learners, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 above.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The aim of the present study was to provide more insights into learners' requesting behaviour in the foreign language context. In particular, we examined whether learners' performance from two ESP disciplines, namely those of English Philology and Computer Science Engineering, was different regarding the amount and type of modifiers employed when requesting in different situations. Results concerned with the first research question showed that learners from the English Philology discipline employed more modification devices than those from Computer Science Engineering. Additionally, when comparing the number of internal and external modifiers employed by the two groups, findings illustrated that both groups of learners employed more internal than external modifiers, something that could have been related to the type of data collection instrument employed (i.e. spontaneous oral role-play) and the data collection situation (i.e. after taking part in an oral exam). With respect to our second research question, results indicated that the most frequent type of internal modifier employed by both groups was the "hesitator", and regarding the external modifiers, the "grounder" was the most frequent type of modifier. Although some differences were observed in relation to the use of other types of modifiers, the general trend was quite similar for learners belonging to each ESP discipline.

In relation to these findings, some pedagogical implications may be proposed. First, employing interactive role-plays as the data elicitation instrument is advisable, and particularly in the foreign language context, since they allow learners with opportunities to practice the target language. However, the situations designed for the two role-plays employed in the present study only varied in terms of the social status between their participants (i.e. equal versus higher status), and no attention was paid to whether learners' performance when modifying their requests varied from one situation to the other. Therefore, the analysis of learners' performance in a variety of role-plays that differ depending on other politeness variables, such as social distance and degree of imposition, should be investigated in future studies. By so

doing, we could provide more insights into whether learners' requesting behaviour is influenced by the sort of situations they are asked to perform.

Second, the fact that learners' variety of different types of modifiers did not differ considerably, irrespective of the ESP discipline they were engaged in, seems to indicate that instruction of these modifiers would be necessary, particularly in the foreign language classroom. According to Kasper (2001) and Kasper and Roever (2005), the classroom context has been regarded as an impoverished environment for the acquisition of pragmatics, since learners are not provided with appropriate input, opportunities for contextualised practice, and chances of receiving feedback on their pragmatic competence. Consequently, it would be very beneficial to provide learners with metapragmatic explanations regarding the importance of softening the impositive force of requests on the one hand; and to engage them in a variety of awareness-raising and production activities that include the use of both internal and external modifiers when requesting in different contextual situations on the other hand.

These activities could be adopted and tailor-made for different ESP disciplines. In this way, pragmatics could be integrated in different foreign language learning syllabi attending to learners' needs in a given discipline. Future investigations therefore are needed to examine the teachability of these modifiers in the foreign language classroom, and more specifically in different ESP disciplines. Moreover, the design of various teaching approaches that may best suit our learners' pragmatic development when modifying their requests by accounting for their individual differences, such as proficiency level, motivation or learning style, should also be addressed in future research. It is our belief that considering all these aspects in further observational and empirical research would enrich our understanding of how pragmatics can be developed and integrated in foreign language learning contexts.

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NOTES

[1] Learners' responses have been transcribed as originally written by them. The examples included throughout this paper present the underlined request head act underlined, and the *peripheral modification devices* in italics for the readers' quick identification

[2] Since learners did not employ any "diminutives" or "tag questions" within the group of *softeners*, we have decided to term *softeners* only those expressions included within the subtype of "miscellaneous" (e.g. *probably, just, for a moment* …)

[3] Among the four subtypes of *openers* illustrated in Table 1, only the "consultative device" was employed by the two groups of learners. This is, therefore, the reason why we have termed this type *openers* without including further subtypes within it.

Appendix A

A. You did not attend the classes of a very important subject and the exams period is near. One of your classmates has all the class notes and you need to review them for the exam. What would you say?

B. One of your classmates did not attend his/her classes and wants your notes to study for the exams.

Appendix B

A. You were supposed to hand in some coursework assignments last week, but you couldn't finish them on time. What would you say to your teacher to get an extension of the deadline?

B. One of your students is going to tell you that he/she couldn't finish the coursework assignments last week so he/she wants an extension of the deadline.