The effectiveness of instruction and pragmatic corrective feedback to improve students' writing of appropriate email requests

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Research examining email requests during academic consultation has shown that, in general, second/foreign language (L2) students place greater emphasis on their own needs and employ insufficient mitigation, running the risk of, unintentionally, being impolite (Codina and Salazar 2019; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Tseng 2015, among others). Consequently, these studies have suggested the need for teaching how to compose email requests that are appropriate in relation to the recipient (i.e., professor) and the specific request being formulated (i.e., the request imposition). Surprisingly, only a few studies have been conducted to address this need (e.g., Nguyen and colleagues, 2015, 2018, 2019), so more research is required to inform teaching practices that are optimal for appropriate email communication in an academic context.

In an effort to expand this line of research, this study investigates whether the combined effects of pragmatic teaching plus pragmatic corrective feedback could be effective in developing students' use of email request modifiers, not only immediately after participating in the instructional sessions, but also in the long-term. The study included twenty-five Spanish university students with an intermediate proficiency level in English who were enrolled in a mandatory writing course. The pedagogical intervention was designed to help students understand the form-function-context relationship of email requests in the academic context. Students' pragmatic performance was measured by means of a pre-test, immediate and delayed post-tests, which consisted of writing two request emails. Results of the study revealed that students made a significant progress in their use of request modifiers as evidenced in the delayed post-test administered two months later. The findings, however, also indicated that some types of request modifiers were more amenable to instruction than others. These results are discussed and suggestions for future investigations that examine the effects of different types of written corrective feedback to foster L2 pragmatic knowledge are presented.