

Internal/External Modifiers in Request Speech Act among Iranian Study Abroad Learners

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Abstract

Request as the most frequent speech act in communication, has been investigated enough in inter language pragmatics and cross-cultural studies. However, most of these investigations were cross-sectional studies. The present longitudinal study aimed to focus on the learners' use of internal and external modifiers among Iranian study abroaders. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) on request was administered to a group of 72 Iranian English language learners who enrolled in a study abroad program in language institutes in Mysore, India. This questionnaire was given to these participants at three phases over time as a pre-test (at the beginning), post-test 1 (after three months), and post-test 2 (after six months). A group of 60 native speakers also filled the questionnaire to provide the researcher with criteria for a comparison. The elicited data reveal that the number of employed internal and external modifiers increased in each phase compared with the previous one. The results in this study further indicated that a sustained sojourn in the L2 context provides a positive impact on the study abroad learners' development in the use of internal and external modifiers. Furthermore, findings from this study show that longer length of stay helps the learners to modify their request utterances more skillfully with internal and external modifiers to make them appropriate according to the context.

Keywords: Request, internal and external modifiers, interlanguage pragmatics, speech acts.

Introduction

Among different aspects of speech acts such as request, apology, refusal, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise, etc., request is the most frequent one in language use. Requests are important in second language learning because the learners need to apply this speech act to ask somebody to do something. Requests are used in everyday life for different purposes such as asking for information, food in a restaurant, or asking somebody for favors, etc. In a request, the speakers ask another person to do something, therefore because of the variety in the number of actions, the illocutionary force of the request is also countless. Consequently, based on the contextual condition, a suitable request with an exact amount of imposition is required. Request is a face threatening act i.e. if the interlocutor for some reasons rejects to do the desired act, the speaker is eminent to lose face. As a result, it is important to know how to express a request in special contexts. The learners are required to be equipped with certain linguistic and pragmatic elements so that they can use the appropriate language in a situation with different contextual variables (e.g., equal/higher status or high/low imposition). In simple words, because of the variety in possible situations in request, asking different techniques are also needed for a request to work.

Schauer notes that learners are primarily required to have a precise understanding of the social distance with the interlocutor, then decide to employ the linguistic forms

appropriate for that certain context and finally express their requests¹. Even if the L2 learners are probably able to judge about the context appropriately, because of their cultural background, probable L1 transfer and range of forms to be employed in formulating a request the learners may have problems in selecting correct linguistic forms¹⁻³. As a matter of fact, due to the aforementioned factors, this speech act has been studied in more detail than others^{1,4-9}. Studies on learners' ability to employ the appropriate linguistic form in request speech act can yield valuable insights into learners' pragmatic knowledge and can also give us useful information on how well they can express themselves in a, for example, face threatening condition in the L2.

Statement of the Problem: Apart from the factors such as learners' motivation and willingness to communicate with native speakers, length of stay also seems to be important. Previous studies proved that longer residence in the native context certainly provides more opportunity for more interaction with the native speakers which consequently can lead to more proficiency in pragmatic competence^{1,10}. This study made an attempt to find out what kind of internal and external modifiers are gained sooner than others and what modifications are used more after their six months sojourn in the L2 context by the SA learners.

Despite the importance of the type of request strategies and ways to modulate the request utterances to make them suitable

for a certain situation, fewer studies have been so far conducted on internal and external modifications than other aspects of the request speech act. The present longitudinal study aimed to focus on the learners' employment of internal and external modifiers in the L2 context which is further sub-classified as downgraders which decrease the imposition of a request and upgraders that intensify the illocutionary force of request utterances. More specifically, in this study, the researcher was determined to find out the impact of length of stay in a study abroad context on using internal and external request modifiers among Iranian study abroad learners.

Request Modifications: Apart from different types of strategies namely, direct (*imperatives, performatives, want statements, locution derivables*), conventionally indirect (*suggestory formulas, availability, prediction, permission, willingness, ability*), and non-conventionally indirect (*hints*) that can be used by learners to decrease the illocutionary force of a request, there are also different request modifications that can be employed to further lessen the imposition of a request^{10,1}. Internal and external modifiers in request strategies are employed to make a request more appropriate and polite in certain contexts. Figure 1 illustrates the categories for the internal and external modifications presented by House and Kasper¹¹.

Internal Modifiers: Schauer distinguished two types of internal modifiers, downgraders (used to soften the imposition or illocutionary force of a request) and upgraders (used to increase

the impact of a request)¹. These modifications are discussed in detail below:

Downgraders: Lexical Downgraders: Lexical downgraders are words and expressions that are employed by the speakers to decrease the illocutionary force of a request. These words and expressions are presented with short descriptions and examples from the SA and native speaker participants in this study.

Downtoner: an adverbial which is used to mitigate the force of a request.

(1) Could I **possibly/maybe** have some of them?

Politeness marker: an exclamation word like 'please' which is used to show politeness.

(2) Could you bring me some articles, **please**?

Understater: an adverbial modifier which is used to lessen the imposition of a request.

(3) Excuse me! Can you speak that **a bit** louder, please?

Past tense modals: modals such as 'could' instead of 'can' which makes a request more polite.

(4) **Could** you open the window, please?

Consultative devices: expressions used to ask somebody politely to do something.

(5) **Would you mind** if we rescheduled to another day?

(6) Excuse me Jane, **would you mind** opening the window? It's very hot in here. Thank you.

(7) **Do you think** you could open the window?

Hedge: an adverbial which makes a request appear vaguer.

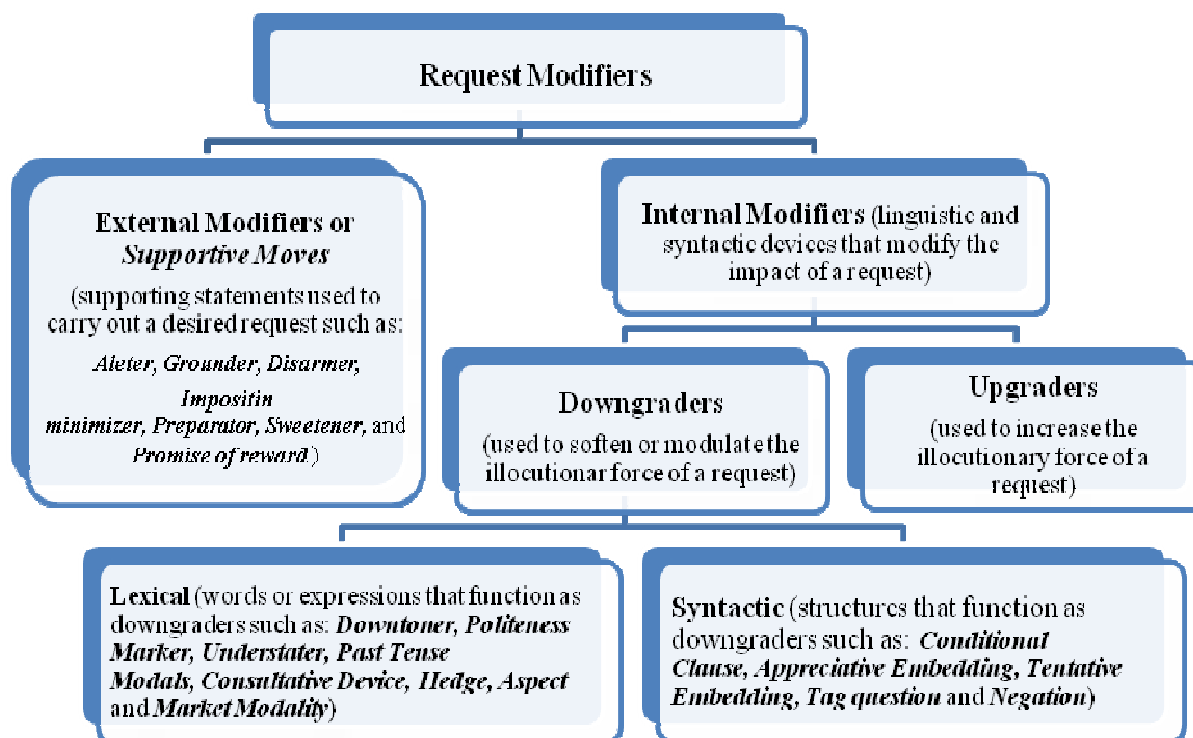


Figure-1
Classifications of Request Speech Act

(8) Is it **somehow** possible to meet another day?

Aspect: using the progressive form of a verb.

(9) I was **wondering** if you were available to meet some time over the holidays.

(10) Professor, I was **hoping** you might be able to see me during the holidays as I ...

Marked modality: using modals such as 'might' and 'may' which make a request seem more tentative.

(11) Excuse me please! **May** I pass?

(12) Excuse me professor, I wonder if I **might** get passed you as I have to ...

Syntactic Downgraders: Syntactic downgraders are the structures that function as downgraders which mitigate the imposition of request utterances. These structures are presented along with short descriptions and also examples from the SA learners and native speakers in this study.

Conditional clauses: used by the speakers to make themselves less involved in the request.

(13) I was wondering **if** you could bring me some articles that...

Appreciative embedding: used by the speakers to positively reinforce the request by expressing their positive feelings about the favor the interlocutor is asked to provide.

(14) Would you have some articles you could lend me, I **would really appreciate it** if I could have them as soon as possible.

(15) It **would be really helpful** if you could bring me some articles.

Tentative embedding: used to make a less direct request by showing hesitation.

(16) I realize your time is precious, however I **wonder if** we could meet another day.

(17) I'm sorry Jane, I **wonder if** you could speak up, it's very noisy in here and I'm having trouble hearing you.

Tag questions: used to decrease the impact of a request.

(18) You can speak louder, **can't** you?

Negation: is used to provide the interlocutor with more optionality.

(19) You **can't** speak a bit louder?

Internal Upgraders: Internal upgraders on the other hand, are those that increase the impact of request utterances i.e. internal upgraders are employed by the speakers to persuade the interlocutor to perform the desired action. Internal upgraders are listed as follows with short descriptions and examples provided by participants in the present study.

Intensifier: an adverbial modifier that emphasizes a certain element in a request.

(20) I'm wondering if you are able to meet during the holidays. It would be **really** helpful. Is it possible to meet?

Time intensifier: used to stress the temporal aspect of a request.

(21) Would you have some articles you could lend me, I am **short on time** and would appreciate it very much if you I could have them as soon as possible.

Time intensifier +Intensifier: used to place more reinforce on the urgency of a request.

(22) I am really sorry; I came to tell you that I have a **very urgent** dental appointment at 4 p.m.

Expletive: used to show the speaker's frustration.

(23) I can't for the life of me understand this **bloody** postmodernism in art article. Could you ...

(As nobody used expletive in this study, this example is from Schauer¹)

Overstater: an exaggerated word or phrase added to the request to reflect the need of the request to be performed.

(24) I'm in **real** need of some articles and books relating to my topic.

External Modifiers: External modifiers which are also called supportive moves are additional statements that are used to support the request utterances. In other words, they are employed to carry out the desired action. Dissimilar to the internal modifiers that are used within the head act or actual request, external modifiers precede or follow the actual requests.

Alerters: linguistic devices that are employed to get the interlocutor's attention.

(25) **Hey Bob; Excuse me guys; Jane;**...

Preparators: short utterances that are used to prepare the hearer for the request.

(26) **May I ask you a favor?**

Head: is the actual request.

(27) **Do you have some articles for me?**

(28) Excuse me professor Jones, **whereabouts is the Trent Building?**

Grounder: grounders provide explanations for the request.

(29) Excuse me, but I **am having trouble finding** information for my essay.

Disarmer: is used to pre-empt the requestee's potential objections.

(30) I **know you have a lot on/are really busy** at the moment, but I wonder if you would help me by filling this questionnaire.

Imposition minimizer: used to decrease the illocutionary force of a request.

(31) **I will return them as soon as possible.**

Sweetener: used to flatter the interlocutors and provides a positive mood.

(32) **I really feel you are the best person for it.**

(33) Excuse me, but I am having trouble finding information for my essay. **I loved your seminar and it is very relevant to my essay**, so...

Promise of reward: the speaker offers the interlocutor a reward for the favor.

(34) **I would help you** as well if you needed any.

Methodology

In the present study, the researcher tested a group of Iranian English language learners who registered to study English in Indian language schools as a study abroad program. The researcher investigated to see if length of stay affects learner's pragmatic competence in the employment of internal and external modifiers, and what changes are observed in the learners' employment of these modifiers.

Participants: A group of 72 Iranian learners that enrolled at two different language schools in Mysore in a six month study abroad program has been selected as participants. Through administering a placement test and an interview, the learners were placed at the intermediate level by the institutes. Another group in this study is the native speaker group. During the two years stay in Mysore, where a great number of foreigners pay a visit and join yoga training courses, 60 native speakers from the U.S., Britain, Australia, and Canada accepted to take part in the study. These native speakers were met individually and were asked to fill the questionnaire.

Instruments: A request Discourse Completion Task (DCT) developed by Schauer was used in this study¹. The questionnaire included 16 scenarios related to academic settings in which a request had to be made to a friend or a professor. The scenarios were skillfully devised to show the testee's pragmatic competence regarding understanding the distance and power. As a matter of fact, this questionnaire was comprised of 8 scenarios but each scenario was used in equal (friend) and higher (professor) status. In an equal status, both the speaker and the hearer belong to the same social level, whereas in the higher status they belong to different social levels.

Procedure: To collect the required data for the present research, the researcher administered the DCT in request at three different phases overtime. The DCT was administered for different purposes as follows: i. at the beginning of the course as a pre-test which provided information about the learners' basic knowledge for future comparison, ii. after three months of instruction as post-test 1 which provided information about the learners' amount of gain during the first three months of their sojourn, and iii. finally, after six months staying in the L2 context as post-test 2 to measure the learners' total achievement at the end of the program on the use of internal and external modifiers in request speech act.

Collecting the required data from the native speakers was done individually during the researchers stay in India.

Results and Discussion

As it was mentioned above, based on different situational conditions speakers employ a variety of different strategies when making requests. But they do not merely content themselves with the type of strategies, and to further modulate the illocutionary force of their requests, speakers make use of request modifications to make sure that their desired action is fulfilled. The impact of these modifiers on the interlocutors have already been well proved in previous studies^{1,3,5,9,11,12}.

In this section, the results of this study will be explained by analyzing the collected data through administering the DCT. Due to different group sizes (learners 72 and native speakers 60) the data are illustrated in per cent.

In the following, the researchers will first compare the learners' employment of *internal lexical downgraders* (downtoner, politeness marker, understater, past tense modals, consultative device, marked modality, aspect, and hedge) and *internal syntactic downgraders* (conditional clause, appreciative embedding, tentative embedding, tag question, and negation) during their sojourn in pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 with reference to the native speakers' performances. Then, they will discuss the findings regarding the internal upgraders in the pre-test and subsequent post-tests 1 and 2 with a comparison with native speakers' performance on the DCT as well. Finally, the results regarding external modifiers obtained from the elicited data will be presented and discussed in detail.

Internal Lexical and Syntactic Downgraders: Table 1 and figure 2 represent the number of internal downgraders employed by the learners and native speakers. Comparing the averages in table 1 and also the learners' performances in figure 2 in pre-test and subsequent post-tests reveals that the study abroad learners developed their internal downgraders repertoire steadily from pre-test to post-test 1 and accordingly to post-test 2. A development toward being native like in the employment of the number of internal downgraders is seen in the figure above from pre-test (at the beginning of the program) to the post-test 1 (after three months) and to post-test 2 (after six months). This finding supports the finding by Schauer with German learners¹.

Table-1
Average number of internal downgraders by SA and native speaker groups

Participants	Average number of downgraders
pre-test	3.90
post-test 1	5.34
post-test 2	6.80
Native speakers	8.43

Results pertaining to the kinds of lexical downgraders reveal that they were employed much more than syntactic ones. This result was expected because as Schauer also noted, lexical downgraders seem to be easier to learn than syntactic ones¹. Lexical downgraders seem to be more popular than syntactic

ones because they are easier to be embedded within sentences. In general, lexical downgraders were used by the learner group (72%) in all the three tests closely similar to native speaker (81%) group.

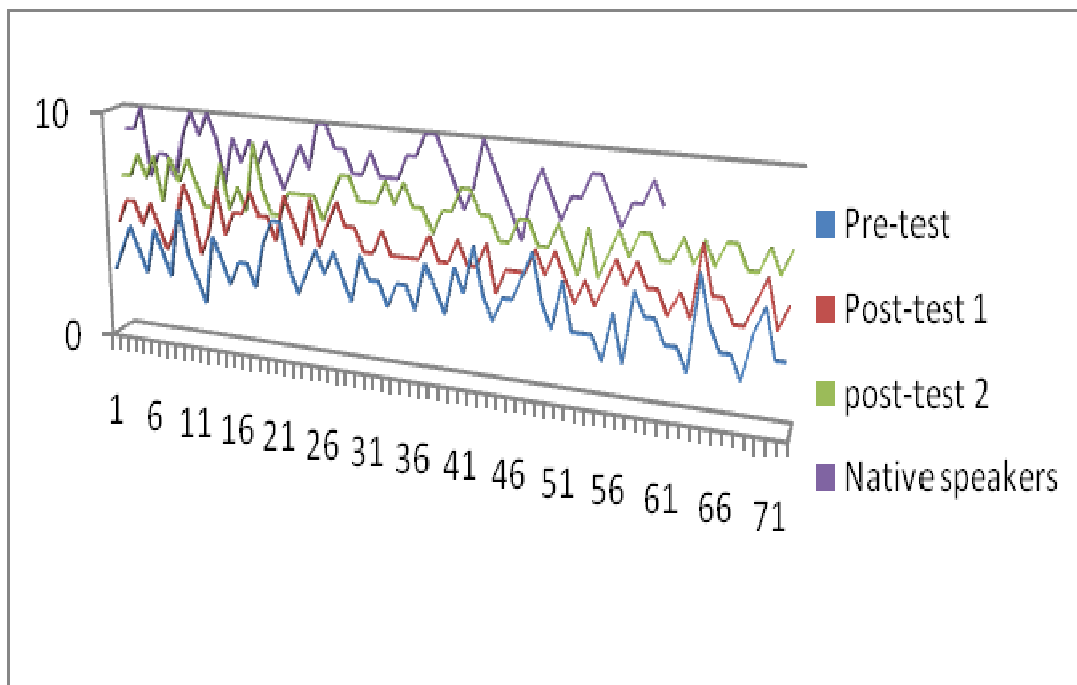


Figure-2
SA native speakers' employed number of downgraders in each phase

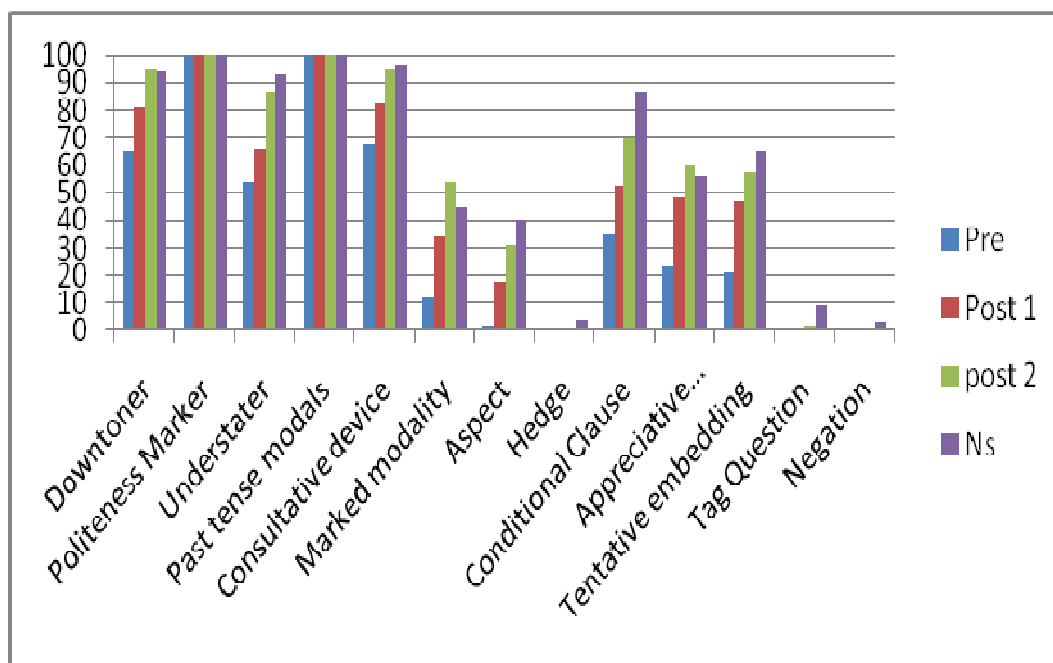


Figure-3
SA and native speakers' employment of downgraders in each phase

Regarding the employment of internal lexical downgraders, the results further show that the *politeness marker* and *past tense modals* were the most frequent among others. Both of them were used by all the learners in all three tests administered over time and native speaker participants. This result is in line with previous studies in which the researchers noted that these two lexical downgraders are easier to learn and that they are even used frequently in the beginning levels of language acquisition^{1,13,14}. Regarding the effectiveness of the study abroad, length of stay seems to have no positive impact on the use of these two downgraders because all the learners in pre-test and post-tests employed them the same as native speakers.

In post-test 2, Learners' performance in other lexical downgraders such as *downtoner*, *understater*, and *consultative devices* were very similar to the native speakers' which can be interpreted as a positive impact of duration of stay in L2 context. A look at the learners' performance on the three tests shows a rise in the number of learners who employed these three lexical downgraders in the subsequent tests.

On the other hand, *marked modality* was used by fewer native speakers than learner group. As it was mentioned before, *may* and *might* in marked modalities are used to make a request appear more tentative. One explanation for this exaggerated use of marked modality by the learners can possibly be that, because of a feeling of minority, foreigners tend to look more polite in the host context. Therefore, learners try to use stronger or even more modulators to show their politeness but in their native context they may not use so many modifiers with their own native people.

Regarding *aspect*, the results in this study further show that 40% of the native speakers used this lexical downgrader and learner

group's performance show an increase toward being native like gradually from pre-test to post-test 1 and to post-test 2.

The data in this study also revealed that none of the study abroaders used the *hedge* modifier in the test sessions and in the native speaker group only a few participants (4 out of 60) used this downgrader in their responses. This finding is dissimilar to Schauer's finding in which about 10% (one out of nine study abroad participants) used this lexical downgrader¹. Therefore, in this case also study abroad context plays no role in the development of hedge downgrader.

A close look at the use of syntactic downgraders by the participants in the figure 3 discloses the positive effect of length of stay in the learners' development of *conditional clause*, *appreciative embedding*, and *tentative embedding* downgraders. As it has been illustrated, these downgraders are employed less in pre-test but the number of learners who used these downgraders gradually increased in subsequent post-tests. Because of the complexity of the syntactic downgraders compared to lexical downgraders, longer stay which provides more prolonged exposure in the L2 context can certainly help the learners acquire these internal modifiers. This is why the learners' performance on the DCT improved in post-test 1 and post-test 2.

Internal Upgraders: Regarding the number of upgraders used by the SA and native speaker groups the data as illustrated in table 2 and figure 3, show a steady increase in the number of upgraders in the three phases of the test. This linear development in upgraders in the study abroaders along with their period of duration can be interpreted as the positive impact of sojourn in the L2 context.

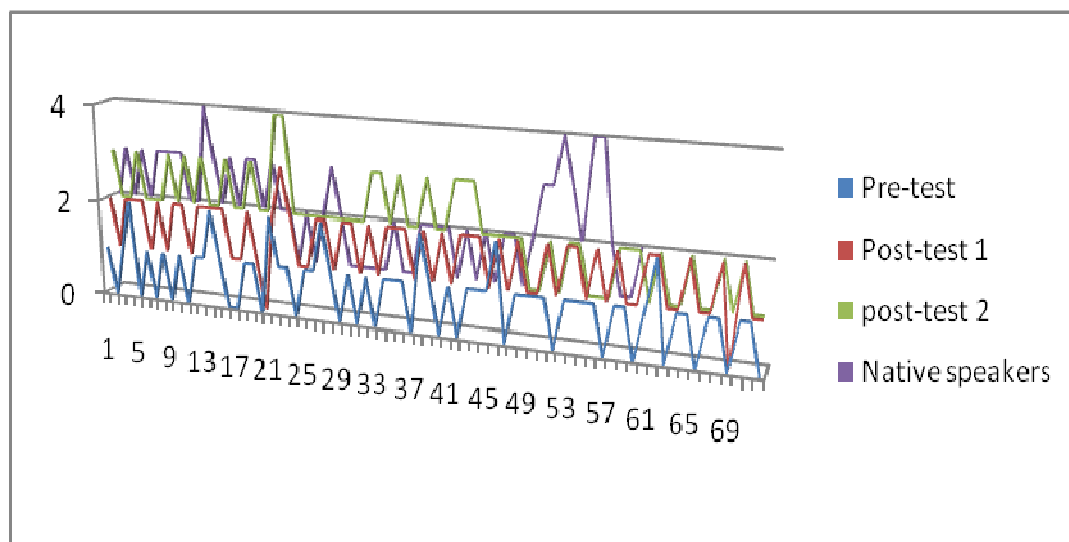


Figure-4
Learners and native speakers' employed number of upgraders in each phase

Table-2

Average number of upgraders employed by SA and native speaker groups

Participants	Average number of upgraders
pre-test	0.77
post-test 1	1.54
post-test 2	2.05
Native speakers	2.13

Unlike downgraders which are used to soften the imposition nature of request utterances, internal upgraders are employed by the speakers to increase the impact of a request on the hearer. As depicted in figure 5, again, dissimilar to lexical and syntactic downgraders which were employed frequently, these modifiers have been used infrequently by both the learner and native speaker groups. The data in this study show that the intensifier upgrader is the most commonly used modifier because 95% of native speakers and all the participants in learner group in post-test 2 employed this modifier to increase the force of their requests. Since the use of this modifier by the learners increased from 67% in pre-test to 100% in post-test 2, positive impact of

length of stay in L2 context in developing pragmatic competence regarding intensifier employment is evidenced in this study.

External Modifiers: Table 3 shows that the average number of external modifiers increased in each test compared with the previous one. By the same token, figure 6 depicts the SA learners' development toward being native like as their stay gets longer.

Table-3

Average number of external modifiers by SA and native speaker groups

Participants	Average number of external modifiers
pre-test	2.51
post-test 1	3.37
post-test 2	4.22
Native speakers	5.45

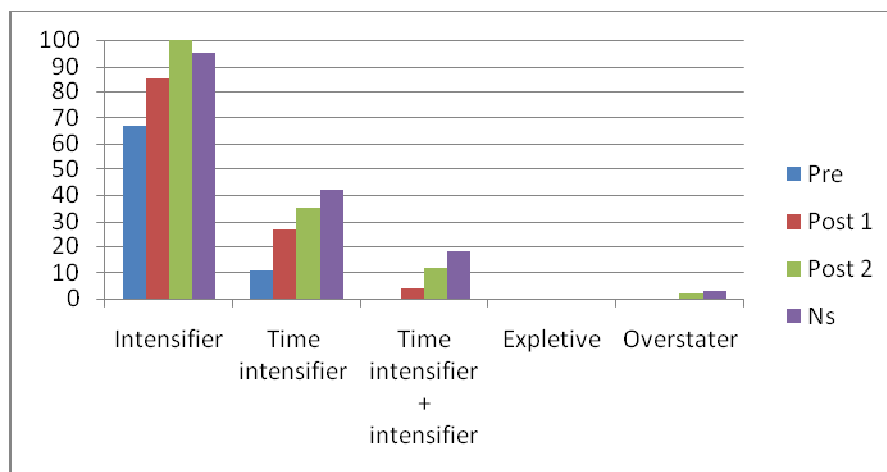


Figure-5

SA and native speakers' employment of upgraders in each phase

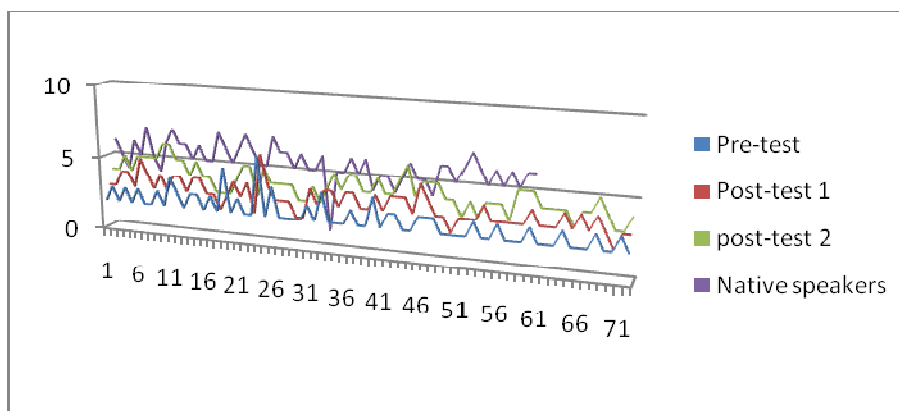


Figure-6

Learners and native speakers' employed number of external modifiers in each phase

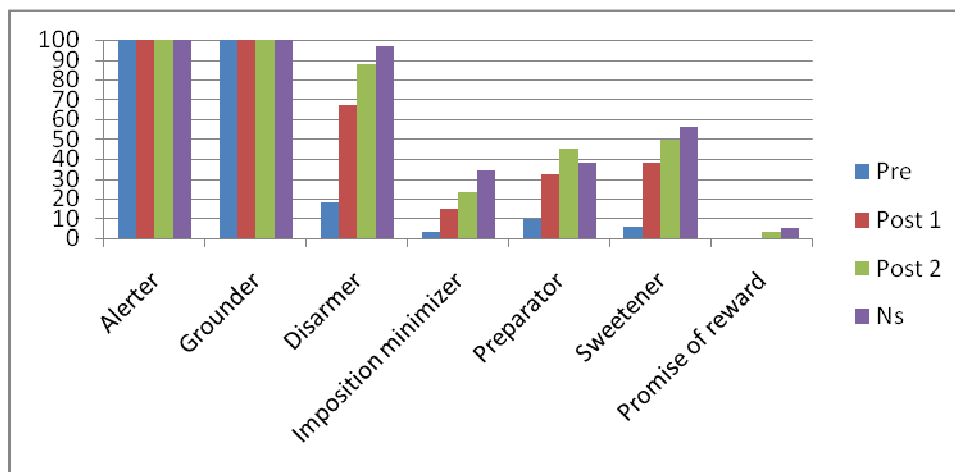


Figure-7
SA learners and native speakers' employment of external modifiers in each phase

Figure 7 schematically illustrates the employment of the external modifiers in the study abroad group in pre-test and post-tests 1 and 2 and native speaker group. As the data depict, the external modifiers *alerter* and *grounder* are used by all the participants in the two groups. As these two modifiers are the main elements of request utterances, speakers tend to use them frequently in their requests¹. The abundant use of alerter was also observed in previous studies by Warga and Schauer^{1,15}. Warga found out that learners are likely to use alerter even at early stages. The frequent employment of grounders in request utterances was also examined and proved in studies by Kasper as well as House and Kasper^{11,16}.

Regarding the other external modifiers such as *disarmer*, *imposition minimizer*, *preparator*, and *sweetener*, the results indicate that SA learners made a good deal of development after a three month stay in the L2 context. For the second period of the three month stay, although the SA learners made improvement in their use of these modifiers to some extent, their progress in post-test 2 was remarkably less than their achievement in post-test 1.

One possible explanation for this can be that learners felt the gap in their repertoire for this modifier and then they tended to use them in their requests to make their requests work more effectually. This improvement in the application of these modifiers can be evidenced as a positive impact of study abroad context on SA learners' use of these modifiers.

For the *promise of reward* only 5% of native speakers and 3% of the learners in post-test 2 used this modifier. In this particular case, the improvement in the pragmatic competence was too meager to be considered as the impact of the L2 context. On the whole, the results regarding the effect of sustained sojourn in general and length of stay in particular seem to be beneficial to the development of pragmatic competence in the employment of external modifiers in request speech act.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of length of stay on the study abroad learners' pragmatic development in internal and external modifications with a reference to the native speakers' performance as a criterion. The results from the elicited data regarding the number of downgraders employed by the study abroad participants revealed that learners' repertoire has gradually increased from pre-test to subsequently post-tests 1 and 2. They used at least one new downgrader in the subsequent post-tests. This progress can be because of the possible positive effect of L2 context on the learners' pragmatic competence.

The data further indicated that lexical downgraders were the most commonly used among the learner group while, syntactic downgraders were used infrequently, especially in the pre-test. However, the employment of syntactic downgraders increased steadily in the subsequent post-tests and moved toward being native like. Therefore, the positive impact of the L2 context on the learners' performance in these modifiers is also evidenced. With regard to this development in the learners' use of syntactic downgraders, the findings confirm that lexical downgraders precede syntactic downgraders in the language learning process. This finding supports the findings in previous research^{1,8,17,18} in which their participants also used more lexical downgraders than syntactic ones and is in disagreement with Warga's¹⁵ finding in which the learners employed more syntactic downgraders. More specifically, the data corroborated that at the end of the SA program (six months) the learners have got a broad repertoire of downgraders and their final performance was very close to the native speakers'.

Regarding the learners' performance in internal upgraders the results suggest that the internal upgrader intensifier was considerably employed by the learners in post-test 2 and native speakers. In this case, the learners even slightly outperformed the native speakers. One possible explanation for why most learners used this modifier in pre-test and why they

outperformed the native speakers in post-test 2 may be that this internal upgrader is easily learned at the early stages of language learning and during their stay in the L2 context the learners got confident that this modifier is safe to use to increase the illocutionary force of a request without being impolite. The results also show that the upgrader time intensifier was employed significantly more in the subsequent post-tests 1 and 2 and moved toward being native like. Although time intensifier+ intensifier was not used frequently, a small increase is seen in the learners' performance over time. This finding is in disagreement with Schauer 1 in which her learners used more time intensifier+ intensifier than intensifier upgrader. This nativization process during the residency in L2 context can be implied as the positive impact of the study abroad context.

Regarding the external modifiers, the results show that learners used new external modifiers in post-test 1 and post-test 2. Consequently, length of stay provides learners with more modifiers i.e. at the end of the six month sojourn the learners' employment of the number of modifiers were closer to the native speakers' performance. The data related to the employment of external modifiers in request further reveal that internal modifiers are employed more than external ones by the learners. One possible justification for this result can be that internal modifiers are easier to learn than external modifiers. The results further indicate that among the external modifiers, alerters and grounders are the most commonly used ones by the learners and native speakers. Although the number of these modifiers was different in the three steps of tests, all the learners used these two modifiers in their responses. This finding is in line with Schauer's¹ in which she explained that this high frequency of the employment of these two external modifiers pertain to the fact that "alerters and grounders could be regarded as the core elements of the request utterances" (p. 198). Disarmer was another external modifier that was commonly used by the native speakers and the learners in the final test. The learners' development pertaining to this modifier was dramatic during the first three months of the stay. This suggests that learners tended to use it because they found it applicable in uttering their requests. In the use of other external modifiers namely, imposition minimizer, preparator, sweetener, and promise of reward the learners also made a progress toward being native like.

On the whole, a study abroad program in general and length of stay in particular can have a positive impact on L2 learners' employment of internal and external modifiers in request speech act. This impact is most demonstrated in *marked modality* (pre=12%, post-test 2=54%), *aspect* (pre=2%, post-test 2=31%), *disarmer* (pre=35%, post-test 2=88%), *preparator* (pre=10%, post-test 2=45%), and *sweetener* (pre=6%, post-test 2=50%).

In closing, Language learning encompasses different aspects of life. Learning just a list of vocabulary and expressions doesn't necessarily result in a good L2 speaker. In addition to language there are some other factors such as culture that needs to be

absorbed through exposure during language learning. Culture as a part of language learning process is likened to an onion-like construct which is comprised of various levels that each impacts the higher levels¹⁹.

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