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Abstract

This study employs innovative ICT tools to enhance an explicit instructional period to help international learners develop their pragmatic competence, defined as 'the ability to communicate and interpret meaning in social interactions' (Taguchi, 2011: 289). Specifically, the study focuses on developing Mexican learners' ability to produce pragmatically appropriate refusals and disagreements in spoken English, which are relatively under-explored interlanguage features and have been reported to differ among Spanish and English first language speakers (e.g. Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; 2008). Virtual role-plays and online learning activities designed for the study are incorporated into the instruction with an experimental group (n=16), and used as assessment tools during the testing stages which include a control group for comparison purposes (n=16). A pretest–posttest design is employed to measure the extent of instructional gains within and between the two groups. In addition, participants reflect on their experience of using technology-enhanced materials. The results are viewed from the perspectives of how appropriate the responses are, acknowledging that differences in the status of the interlocutor and contextual situation will trigger different ways to refuse or disagree, and from a linguistic perspective with regards to the content and organisation of the responses. The aim is to examine to what extent technology-enhanced teaching and learning can benefit the development of these specific pragmatic targets.

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1

Introduction

Despite acknowledgement that pragmatic competence (knowledge and use of the target language cultural and linguistic norms) is one of the key skills required for being a successful communicator in a foreign language (e.g. Bachman and Palmer, 1996), and that appropriate levels of interactional competency and intercultural competency are much needed in today's globalised world, developing pragmatic competence is generally still given much less attention than developing the grammatical aspects of a foreign language. This approach tends to be perpetuated by mainstream language textbooks (e.g. Crandall and Basturkmen, 2004), which also dedicate minimal attention to the presentation of linguistic and cultural norms in functional language, beyond highlighting politeness scales for request expressions in English, for instance. Empirical studies reporting a disparity in grammatical and pragmatic knowledge even among advanced learners of English seem to confirm there is a need for concern (Kasper and Rose, 2002). All this is in spite of research reporting that native English language teachers favour pragmatic competence over grammatical competence when evaluating communicative success (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998), that pragmatics can be effectively taught in language classrooms (Halenko and Jones, 2011; 2017; Taguchi, 2015), and that pragmatic instruction is highly beneficial for language learners who engage in an overseas stay as part of their language training programmes (Kinginger, 2013). Without the benefits of pragmatics instruction, research also indicates that the development of appropriate pragmatic knowledge under natural conditions through an immersive experience in the target language environment, for instance, can be a slow process (Cohen, 2008), or may never be achieved despite permanent residency in an L2 context (Cohen, 2008; Kasper and Rose, 2002).

Investigations into the pragmatic targets of refusals and disagreements are fewer in number than other speech acts, such as requests and apologies. That both refusals and disagreements can differ between Mexican Spanish and English in both structure and content when attempting to achieve the same pragmatic outcome also make this investigation a worthwhile undertaking. The following are examples of pragmatic differences in refusals and disagreements between Mexican Spanish and English which illustrate the typical variation in degree of (in)directness between the two languages.

1.1 Refusal

Example 1:
*Muchas gracias amigo pero me hubieras avisado con tiempo – pero igual 'si tengo un tiempito libre'... pues podría ir a tu fiesta, pero lo dudo – como quiera / gracias. (MS)**

Thank you very much friend, but you could have told me with time – but still if I have free time... then I could go to your party, but it's difficult, anyway, thank you.

Example 2:
*Why didn't you tell me earlier?! I can't come now! We'll have to do something together afterwards. Let me know what you wanna do. (AE)***

1.2 Disagreement

Example 3:
*Sabe bien, pero a mi gusto le falto un poco de picante a la salsa, no lo crees? (MS)**

It tastes good, but to my taste it lacked a bit of spicy sauce.

Example 4:
*For me, this is really spicy. (AE)***

*MS = Mexican Spanish
**AE = American English

In Example 1, the Mexican speaker adopts a common strategy of selecting an indirect strategy to refuse the invitation, but leaves the possibility of attending the party open, even when he knows he will be unable to go. In contrast, in Example 2, a direct strategy may be more typically preferred for American and British English speakers. In Example 3, the Mexican speaker uses an indirect strategy to express her disagreement. On the other hand, in Example 4, the American did not hesitate to state his preferences by using a very direct strategy to disagree.

In the last decade, more focus on the role technology can play to enhance the teaching and learning of pragmatics has revealed that digitally mediated learning platforms may bridge some of the gaps between pragmatics development in a classroom environment and developing pragmatic competence in authentic L2 environments. This study contributes to the growing research in this area by employing online language learning activities and virtual role-plays as innovative tools for teaching and assessing pragmatic development. The study will address the following research questions:

- To what extent are the refusals and disagreements considered more or less appropriate following an explicit instructional intervention using ICT?
- What are participants' perceptions of using ICT tools to enhance the teaching and learning of refusals and disagreements?

2

Current research literature

2.1 Refusals

The speech act of refusing has been extensively studied in the literature due to its notorious face-threatening nature (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is part of an adjacency pair that consists of two sequences:

1. *Can you lend me your camera?*
2. *I'd like to lend you the camera, but it's not working. I need to buy a new part. Let me fix it and next time you can use it, OK?*

The first part of the sequence can be an invitation, an offering, a suggestion or a request (Gass and Houck, 1999; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2011). The second part is typically a response that can be an acceptance that is the preferred act (Pomerantz, 1984) or, in this case, a refusal that is the dispreferred act. Refusals are considered to be complex speech acts since pre-production and planning time of this second part are limited (Houck and Gass, 2011), and it often involves a lengthy negotiated sequence whose form and content may vary considerably depending on the language event (Eslami, 2010). Beebe et al. (1990) categorise refusal strategies as being either direct such as *'Oh no. Thank you. I don't think I can eat any more'*, or indirect, for instance by explaining a pre-commitment such as *'Sorry, I already have plans. Maybe next time.'* A refusal can be further supported with adjuncts which soften it, for example, *'I'd love to but…'* Table 1 summarises Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy for refusals with relevant examples as illustrations.

Table 1: Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy for refusals

Strategies	Examples
Direct	
Flat	**No,** thank you, I'm full.
Negation of a proposition	I'm really OK, **I really don't want a drink.** But thanks anyway.
Negative ability	Oh I'm so sorry **I can't go.** I've already made plans.
Indirect	
Mitigated refusal	**I don't think** I'll be able to make it…
Explanations	Sorry I can't next Saturday. **I already have plans with my family.**
Indefinite reply	**I can't promise anything,** but I'll see what I can do.
Promise to comply	… If I can't, I promise I'll make it up to you.
Regret/apology	**I'm sorry** I can't come to your party…
Alternative	I don't think I'll be able to make it but **maybe we can go together next time.**
Postponement	**Do you mind if we go another time?**
Set condition for future acceptance	Why didn't you tell me earlier?! I can't come now! We'll have to do something together afterwards. Like, let me know what you wanna do.
Set condition for past acceptance	My bad, bro. I already have plans. **I wish you would've told me earlier.**
Request for additional information	**Do you already have the tickets?** But um: I've already made plans with my family so I'm so sorry I can't go.

Strategies	Examples
Adjuncts	
Positive opinion	**The dinner was really delicious** but I feel really full.
Willingness	**I'd love to,** sir, but I can't. I've got a family get-together on that same day.
Gratitude	No, **thank you.** I'm actually pretty full but it was really good. **Thank you.**
Empathy	**I understand,** but I can't help you. I don't know anything about the subject.
Request for clarification	I will send my cousin a wedding gift, but I cannot go to the wedding because I need to study, **is it OK?**
Agreement	**OK,** I will send a card and gift, but I can't afford to miss time to study.

Empirical examinations of refusals across a number of languages have shown that the degree of directness, the selection and content of refusal strategies and the sensitivity of social variables vary from culture to culture: Japanese (Beebe et al., 1990; Kondo, 2008), Mandarin (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996), Farsi (Allami and Naeimi, 2011), Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008), Egyptian Arabic (Nelson et al., 2002), Korean (Kwon, 2004) and English (Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull and Saxton, 1997). For instance, Mexican Spanish speakers prefer to refuse indirectly (Félix-Brasdefer, 2002) and use expressions of regret, expressions of uncertainty, willingness and more than one explanation to downgrade their refusals, while American English speakers tend to be more direct. The acquisition of refusals has also been found to be challenging for language learners, in these and other studies, due to the lack of linguistic resources, sociocultural knowledge and pragmatic ability in the target language (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2011).

2.2 Disagreements

According to Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010), a disagreement is an incompatible opinion in response to what the interlocutor has previously expressed. Bond et al. (2000) consider that disagreements occur when a participant communicates a belief or beliefs which are partially or fully inconsistent with the belief or beliefs expressed by the other interlocutor in the same situation. While definitions of disagreements are fairly consistent, the ways in which disagreements are perceived and expressed are certainly not, rather they are governed by underlying L1 cultural values and beliefs. These influences mean L2 language users may find expressing opposing views to be particularly challenging since, as with refusals, disagreements are known to be highly face-threatening acts which require sensitive modification to maintain social harmony between speakers.

In contrast to refusals, a variety of taxonomies have been proposed to analyse disagreements, e.g. Pomerantz (1984), Kakavá (1993), Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), and Rees-Miller (2000). This study follows Kreutel's (2007) more recent classification of 'desirable' features, which adopt mitigated disagreement strategies to minimise any threats to face, or 'undesirable' features which show strong disagreement and lack any mitigation. This classification was originally designed to represent learners of English so is the most appropriate for the context of this particular study. Table 2 summarises and illustrates examples of these two main categories.

Table 2: Disagreement strategies as outlined by Kreutel (2007)

Desirable features	Example
Token agreement	**I like your idea, but** I don't think we can go to the movies at 8 p.m, it's too late.
Hedges	**Oh, but I think** *Roma* is an excellent movie.
Request for clarification	**Really?** I think Cuarón is one of the best Mexican directors.
Explanation	I don't think it's a good idea, **there are long queues at the supermarket checkout.**
Expressions of regret	**I'm sorry,** but I don't think that's right.
Positive remarks or suggestions	**It's a great idea,** but there are some points that are not very clear for me, why don't we discuss them during the lunch?
Undesirable features	**Example**
Lack of mitigation	What? **You know I don't like those things.**
Use of the performative negation	**I disagree** because the exam was very difficult.
Bare exclamation	**No,** I'm not going to clean.
Blunt statement of the opposite	**I don't** – I like going to the movies.
Exclamations of indignation	**It's not right,** you should have turned left.

Unlike refusals, disagreements have not been extensively analysed in the literature. There are few studies to date dealing with disagreements from a cross-cultural and a variational perspective such as the research conducted by Pomerantz (1984), Kuo (1994) and Rees-Miller (2000) in American English, the investigation of Moyer (2000) in Spanish contexts and Curcó and de Fina (2002) in a comparative study of Peninsular and Mexican Spanish speakers. These studies have consistently demonstrated that there are considerable differences in the frequency of use and selection of strategies between native speakers and language learners when performing disagreements and that the cultural values affect the way disagreements occur. For example, in Mexican culture it is difficult to perform a speech act that threatens the addressee's positive face. Therefore, similar to refusals, Mexicans tend to be more indirect and use a wide range of mitigation strategies to downgrade the force of a disagreement. In contrast, English speakers tend to be more direct and are less inclined to hesitate in expressing preferences or opinions (LoCastro, 1986).

2.3 Pragmatics instruction

There are few instructional pragmatics studies which involve planned pedagogical action in comparison to investigations adopting a developmental focus such as those tracking learner performance over time, in a study-abroad context. Kasper and Rose (2002) broadly categorise instructional investigations into three main types: 'teachability studies', examining the extent to which pragmatic items are teachable in a classroom setting; 'instruction versus exposure studies', comparing an experimental group receiving instruction with a non-instructed control group; and 'studies adopting different teaching approaches', such as including the presence (explicit) or absence (implicit) of metapragmatic input (rules governing form and function of the target language). This study falls into the first category of teachability studies where classes of learners are provided with explicit pragmatic input on the speech acts of refusals and disagreements, and whose performance is measured before and after input, and compared with the performance of a control group receiving no instruction. As with many other speech act studies, a high success rate is reported for investigations analysing instructional effects of refusals (e.g. Ahmadian, 2018; Alcón Soler and Guzmán Pitarch, 2010; Glaser, 2016) and disagreements (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Maiz, 2014). As examples of refusal studies, both Glaser (2016) and Ahmadian (2018) found that participants exposed to inductive techniques (guided rule-discovery) alongside explicit instruction outperformed those experiencing an (overtly rule-driven) deductive approach in terms of production of refusal strategies. As for disagreements, Maiz (2014) revealed some benefits of explicit instruction, but suggested that proficiency played a decisive role in terms of the extent of these benefits.

2.4 Technology-enhanced teaching and learning

From a language practice perspective, digitally mediated platforms have advanced the possibilities available for introducing greater access to context-rich input and opportunities for pragmatic development. A growing body of research has demonstrated tangible benefits to facilitating instruction with the aid of computer-assisted language learning or computer-mediated communication technologies (e.g. Gee, 2005; De Freitas, 2006; Belz, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Sykes et al., 2008; Taguchi and Sykes, 2013; Taguchi, 2015). First, authentic, meaningful interaction can be created through the use of online materials (Belz, 2008), enhanced by an, arguably, more dynamic and motivational learning environment (Taguchi, 2015). As in this study, virtual interaction can be enhanced by animated interlocutors who are also able to display a range of prosodic language features and non-verbal signals such as facial expressions and gestures, thought to be as powerful as verbal cues, to enhance authenticity (Wik and Hjalmarsson, 2009; Yang and Zapata-Rivera, 2010). Pressures from the face-threatening nature of functional language such as refusals and disagreements, for instance, may be alleviated in simulated contexts, allowing for a stress-free, 'low-risk' learning experience (Sykes et al., 2008) which can be individualised and paced (Gee, 2005; De Freitas, 2006). Many of these advantages are illustrated in recent studies employing a range of technologies for developing pragmatic competence (Cunningham, 2016; Sykes, 2009, 2013; Johnson and deHaan, 2013; Taguchi et al, 2017; Yang and Zapata-Rivera, 2010).

The virtual role-plays designed for this study incorporate design and operational features of both face-to-face role-plays and virtual multiplayer online games. In face-to-face role-plays, participants typically adopt assigned roles and interact with one another to achieve a restricted, but defined, communicative goal. Multiplayer online games, on the other hand, are also goal-oriented but have the advantages of being able to more accurately simulate specific interactive and input-rich environments, promote motivation and learner engagement, and provide a low-risk, self-paced and self-directed learning experience. The virtual role-plays in this study feature structured communicative tasks while engaging learners in a simulated, motivational, highly contextualised virtual environment, where the task can be completed at the learners' own pace.

In summary, there seems a strong case for the explicit teaching of both refusals and disagreements for developing learners' pragmatic competence as both speech acts are (1) highly face threatening, (2) structurally complex, (3) challenging to acquire without instruction and (4) can differ considerably (culturally and linguistically) in Mexican and English. To date, no studies have been conducted on Mexican learners' ability to produce pragmatically appropriate refusals and disagreements in English, so this study also serves to fill this gap.

3

Methodology

3.1 Participants

Thirty-two Mexican Spanish language learners of English participated in this study. Participants were native speakers of Mexican Spanish and natives of the state of Puebla, Mexico. They were undergraduate students studying their second year of English Teaching as a Foreign Language at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico. With respect to their language level, they had an approximate TOEFL score of 510, which placed them in a low intermediate level. The population in this study may best be described as representing a continuum from middle to low social class. Ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 22 years. The participants were divided into experimental (n=16) and control (n=16) groups for comparison purposes. The former received ten hours of explicit instruction on refusals and disagreements in English and the latter received no instruction. The aim was to exceed Jeon and Kaya's (2006) suggestion that five hours or more of pragmatics instruction seems to maximise learning benefits. The need for a control group to measure the true effectiveness of instruction is also widely advocated (e.g. Cohen and Macaro, 2010; Jeon and Kaya, 2006; Norris and Ortega, 2000; Taguchi, 2008). Participants of both groups were asked if they were willing to participate in the research to obtain extra credit on their midterm assessments.

3.2 Data collection instruments

In order to analyse the extent of instructional gains within and between the two groups, this study used an experimental pretest–posttest design. Experimental studies are characterised by Cohen and Macaro (2010) as the manipulation of a situation to determine if an independent variable (e.g. instruction) has some kind of effect on a dependent variable (e.g. learning of pragmatics). The instruments used and each phase of the research will be explained in detail in the following sections.

3.2.1 Background questionnaire

In order to ensure that groups were as homogeneous as possible and to achieve optimum comparability among them so that the differences could not be attributed to variables other than those being studied, all the English language participants completed a background survey. The background questionnaire consisted of 12 questions presented in the mother tongue of the language learners (Spanish). In addition to their name, age, mother tongue and place of birth, it also included the following information: a) the number of English courses that learners had taken; b) the course level that they were currently taking; c) their last grade in an English course; d) where they started learning English; e) whether they had taken a proficiency exam; f) the name of the proficiency exam and the score that they obtained; g) whether they had visited an English-speaking country; and h) if they had, how long they were there. The two groups of learners did not differ significantly in terms of average age, contained individuals from both urban and suburban areas, and males and females were fully represented in each group. However, gender was not a factor considered in this study.

3.2.2 Pretest and posttest

The computer-animated production task (CAPT) was used as a pretest (before instruction), and a posttest (after instruction) data collection instrument to capture the quantitative data in order to analyse the productive pragmatic ability of the learners. Previous studies (Halenko, 2016; Halenko and Jones, 2011; 2017) have shown this instrument to be successful from an operational perspective (capturing large amounts of oral data in an efficient and controlled way), and in terms of learner engagement (participant feedback revealed the CAPT to be motivational, and good at simulating real-life experiences). The CAPT also draws on the need to ensure elicitation tasks match the modality of the simulated language event, i.e. oral for oral (Bardovi-Harlig, 2018), and incorporates an interactive computerised presentation format that takes advantage of role-play features. A role-play involves the presence and participation of two interlocutors, most commonly a learner and a second person. In the case of the CAPT, one is a virtual participant and the other is the learner. Ten situations, which Western college students might typically encounter, were designed for the study. The situations consisted of four refusal scenarios, four disagreement scenarios and two request scenarios, which acted as distractors.

During the CAPT, each situation was presented by a series of animated slides that provided rich audio and visual contextual information. In each slide, there was a brief description of the situation written in English that explained the setting, the social distance between the interlocutors and their status relative to each other. This information allowed the respondents to understand the context and helped them to provide an appropriate response in English. In addition, it ensured the adequate comprehension of the task and scenarios. According to Harada (1996) and Schauer (2009), it is important to give time to participants to think about what they are going to say because this is something that we commonly do in a real-life situation.

Figure 1: Audiovisual information[1]

The slide also included audiovisual information in the form of an animated cartoon depicting the situation as well as the first turn that initiated the conversation produced by a native English speaker (see Figure 1). Participants were asked to a) imagine themselves in each situation, b) listen to the animated interlocutor's initiating turn, and c) provide an appropriate response in English. The social situations represented in the scenarios took into account two social variables: power and distance, which have been shown to be important variables in determining speech act performance (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Byon, 2004; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Rose, 2000). Distance was treated as binary-valued; either they knew one another (-) or did not know one another (+). The social power also considered two possible values: status equal (=) or speaker dominant (+). Gender of speakers in the initial turns was considered and varied randomly across all situations. However, the purpose of the study was not to investigate this variable. Table 3 presents a summary of the way in which each item varied by social power and social distance.

Table 3: Situational variation

Speech act		Situation	Power	Distance
1.	Disagreement	Classmate/test	=	–
2.	Disagreement	Professor/course	+	+
3.	Disagreement	Boss/staff meeting	+	+
4.	Disagreement	Friend/bank	=	–
5.	Refusal	Boss/extra hours	+	+
6.	Refusal	Classmate/help	=	–
7.	Refusal	Friend/borrow car	=	–
8.	Refusal	Professor/change appointment	+	+
9.	Request	Friend/money	=	–
10.	Request	Professor paper	+	+

1 https://www.nawmal.com/

The ten CAPT situations followed a randomised order in the pretest and a different one in the posttest. In addition, there was an apology situation that was employed as a training scenario so that the participants could practise in class before they answered the pretest.

3.2.3 Instructional material

In order to analyse the extent of instructional gains, only the experimental group participated in the instructional phase. Four audiovisual and online activities were especially designed for this phase: feature films, matching columns, multiple-choice exercises and role-plays. The aim of these exercises was to help language learners to comprehend and produce the refusal and disagreement strategies in the target language. These activities are described as follows.

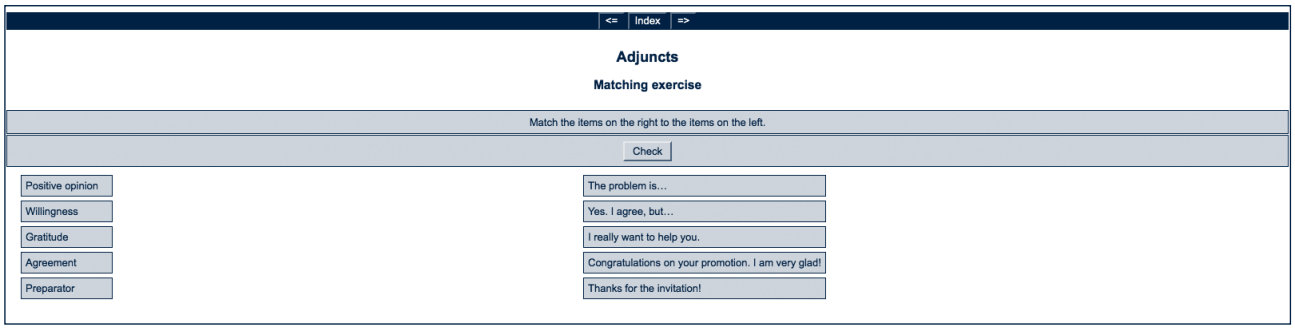
Feature films

Selected scenes of two movies were employed to raise awareness about how refusals and disagreements were employed by native speakers of English. Ishihara (2010) considers that movies offer verbal and non-verbal information and even though the dialogues are scripted, they provide relatively authentic information for pragmatic use and they are especially valuable in a foreign language setting where there is a lack of authentic input. Scenes of two movies were selected: *Me Before You* and *The King's Speech.* The chosen scenes that used refusals and disagreements were cut and pasted in a PowerPoint presentation. Subtitles were used so that the learners could comprehend the dialogues. Before they watched the scene, there was a slide that described the situation that they were going to observe to help them to interpret the speech act. After the students watched the scenes, they compared their L1 and target language pragmatic norms.

Matching columns

These exercises were used to identify the strategies that tend to be used in the speech acts of refusal and disagreement. The strategies used in the exercises were based on the refusal taxonomy proposed by Beebe et al. (1990) and on the disagreement classification made by Kreutel (2007). By using the free software *Hot Potatoes*, six exercises (three for refusals and three for disagreements) were created. The use of this instructional technology allowed the learners to work at their own pace (Ishihara, 2010). Some of the main characteristics of this activity are kinaesthetic, interactive and attractive. As can be observed in Figure 2, learners read the refusal or disagreement expression given in the left column and matched them with the semantic description in the right column by physically moving them. They received immediate feedback when they clicked on the 'Check' button.

Figure 2: Matching exercise



Multiple choice

With the use of the *Hot Potatoes* software, 16 situations (eight for refusals and eight for disagreements) were created to enhance learners' pragmatic awareness by addressing comprehension of several refusal and disagreement expressions. Learners were asked to read each situation and then to select one of the four answers that were provided. The situations and the answers were based on previous studies conducted on refusals and disagreements (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004). Learners could also check their responses on the spot by clicking on the 'Check' button.

Figure 3: Multiple-choice exercise

Role-plays

Sixteen open role-plays (eight refusal and eight disagreement situations) were employed to practise the refusal and disagreement strategies previously taught. This instrument gave learners the opportunity to interact with one another, choose the grammatical structures and words to formulate the speech act, and select appropriate and effective strategies depending on the contextual aspects described in the role-play. This activity allowed the learners to put in practice what they had already learned in the instruction sessions. Each situation was devised and embedded into a PowerPoint format.

3.2.4 Interview

An oral interview aimed to corroborate the findings of the production data and to ascertain the learners' perceptions of and motivation for pragmatics instruction as an aspect of language learning. The 16 interviews with the experimental group took place immediately after the completion of the posttest. The questions relating to the use of technology as a learning tool were: an evaluation of which activities were helpful in understanding refusals and disagreements in English; and an evaluation of the virtual role-plays in terms of enjoyment, realistic to real-life interaction, and helpful for developing spoken skills to interact with native speakers. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

3.3 Data collection procedure

The data collection procedure followed in the present study is described in this section.

1. All the participants of both the control and experimental groups were asked to complete a background questionnaire at the beginning of the research.
2. Prior to the instructional phase, the experimental and control group participants completed the pretest version of the ten-situation CAPT in order to set a baseline of their current ability in producing appropriate refusals and disagreement responses in English.
3. Before the students completed the test, they had a short training session. The instructions to work in the test were presented and then one example scenario, which did not appear on the actual test, was used for practice.
4. During the pretest and posttest phases, the CAPT was played on the classroom computer. The researcher instructed the participants to read the brief description (in English) and listen to the animated cartoon. They were then asked to say the exact words that they would use if they were in that situation. All the participants recorded their voices on their mobile phones and then emailed the recording at the end of the session.
5. The experimental group then participated in ten hours of explicit instruction on how to formulate refusals and disagreements in English, as well as on understanding the relevant cross-cultural differences which may influence language choice. The classes were given for 30 minutes, five days a week over four weeks. The instruction broadly followed Ishihara and Cohen's (2010) and Shively's (2010) teaching framework which included a) cross-cultural discussions of refusal and disagreement situations, considering power–social distance–imposition variables which may affect language choice, b) introduction of formulaic language sequences to realise refusals and disagreements, c) controlled and freer language practice activities to consolidate learning, and d) review and class feedback on input. The instructional length of ten hours was above the optimum time of five hours, which is considered sufficient for maximising learning effects (Jeon and Kaya, 2006).
6. Following instruction (a month after the pretest), the experimental and control groups completed a posttest version of the CAPT which contained the same situations, for data comparison purposes, but which were presented in a different order to avoid test effects.
7. Only the experimental group participated in an interview following the posttest regarding their perceptions of their learning experience, the instruction and CAPT as a testing tool.
8. All the oral responses to the ten situations and the oral interviews were transcribed for analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Following transcription of the oral responses, the data were rated by native English speakers in terms of 'appropriateness' for the situations presented. The rating was a five-point Likert scale based on Shively and Cohen (2008) where a rating of '1' is interpreted as 'not at all satisfactory' and '5', 'completely satisfactory'. For the purposes of this study, 'appropriateness' is defined as, 'the knowledge of the conventions of communication in a society, as well as linguistic abilities that enable learners to communicate successfully in L2' (Taguchi, 2006: 513). Then, the data was subject to a linguistic analysis of the formulaic sequences and strategies in order to compare pretest and posttest differences between the experimental and control groups. The participant responses were analysed against the main strategies categorised in Beebe et al. (1990) and Kreutel (2007), as described earlier.

4

Findings

We present and discuss our findings in relation to the original research questions which focus on the extent of instructional effects and learners' perceptions of the online tools employed.

4.1 To what extent are the refusals and disagreements considered more or less appropriate following an explicit instructional intervention using ICT?

One male and one female native speaker tutor, both of whom had at least 20 years' EFL teaching experience, rated the refusal and disagreement responses on a five-point Likert scale to determine their success from a sociopragmatic perspective. A subsequent SPSS analysis was conducted using parametric *t* tests, since the data was normally distributed, and an alpha level of 0.05 set as a measure of statistical significance. For background information, a Pearson correlation coefficient found moderately high interrater reliability at the pretest (.80) and posttest (.84) stages, demonstrating consistency of scoring between the raters. Table 4 summarises the descriptive statistics from the raters' scores at the pretest and posttest stages for both refusal and disagreement responses.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics: pretest and posttest rater scores for refusal and disagreement responses

Groups	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)
Experimental group (n=16)	41.56 (6.61)	51.63 (7.29)
Control group (n=16)	41.81 (5.54)	42.50 (6.49)

Note: maximum score = 80 (8 scenarios x max 5 points x 2 raters)

An independent sample *t* test revealed that there were no between-group differences at the pretest stage, suggesting both groups shared the same levels of prior knowledge before the instruction took place. This is evidenced in the group means where each group received around half of the available scores: t (30) = -.116, p = .908, 95% CI [-4.65, - 4.15], no effect size. In contrast, at the posttest stage, significant between-group differences were found with a large effect size, t (30) = 3.739, p = .001, 95% CI [4.14, 14.11], d = 1.33, suggesting the experimental group produced responses which were considered more appropriate by the raters. These calculations seem to reveal instruction on both of these speech acts had some benefit for the experimental group but not for the control group.

Investigating instructional effects for refusals and disagreements separately, Tables 5 (refusals) and Table 6 (disagreements) reveal statistically significant posttest gains are evident in the refusals speech act only. Pretest stage: t (30) = .587, p = .562, 95% CI [-2.01, 3.64], d = 0.21. Posttest stage: t (30) = 4.29, p < .001, 95% CI [3.44, 9.68], d = 1.52. While the mean ratings for disagreements improve for the experimental group post-instruction, these are not statistically significant, so claims that the instruction was the main influential factor on performance cannot be made for disagreements: Pretest stage: t (30) = -.764, p = .451, 95% CI [-3.90, 1.78], d = 0.27. Posttest stage: t (30) = 1.90, p = .067, 95% CI [-.192, 5.32], d = 0.67. This pattern of larger experimental group gains for refusals and smaller gains for disagreements, can also been seen in the mean averages in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics: raters' scores for refusal responses

Group	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)
Experimental group (n=16)	21.44 (4.19)	27.38 (4.41)
Control group (n=16)	20.63 (3.61)	20.81 (4.23)

Note: maximum score = 40 (4 scenarios x max 5 points x 2 raters)

Table 6: Descriptive statistics: raters' scores for disagreement responses

Group	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)
Experimental group (n=16)	20.13 (3.76)	24.25 (3.96)
Control group (n=16)	21.19 (4.10)	21.69 (3.66)

Note: maximum score = 40 (4 scenarios x max 5 points x 2 raters)

In summary, the raters' scores suggest that the participants made greater gains from the instruction on refusals than disagreements. One possible explanation for this disparity is that disagreements occur less frequently than agreements in natural discourse (Pearson, 1986) due to a human desire for harmony. According to Leech's (1983) Agreement maxim, to be polite means to minimise disagreement and maximise agreement. Moreover, in Brown and Levinson's terms (1987), saving face is also a basic human need, so agreement is often the preferred and most common action to avoid loss of face. It may be the case that participants in this study prioritised the learning (and value) of refusals over disagreements. It is also plausible that disagreements were simply less amenable to instruction, or the cognitive load of learning two highly complex speech acts at the same time may have affected processing and subsequent production. In this case, learners maintained a focus on the refusal speech act. As one participant in the interview noted, 'Creo que ambas, pero las que se me quedaron más grabadas fueron las de los rechazos.' (E8). *I think both [were useful], but the ones that I remember the most were the refusals.*

The second analysis undertaken was a more detailed look at the linguistic components of the refusals and disagreements to determine if group differences could explain the raters' preferences for the experimental group responses.

4.1.1 Refusals

A closer examination of refusals shows the most notable difference for the experimental group was the increase in the use of adjuncts between pretest and posttest (nine instances to 23 instances). In contrast, the control group's production remain consistently low (eight instances). The most common strategies employed to initiate the interaction by the experimental group included the adjuncts (willingness, positive opinion, empathy) that reflect the desire of the speaker to protect their face and the other's face, as the following post-instruction examples illustrate:

Situation 5 (work extra hours)

(Participant 8, female, posttest)

*Umm **that's a good idea** but for me, it could be a little difficult because I have plans for that time so, I didn't know about to do the meeting at this time, so I'm sorry.*

Situation 8 (reschedule meeting with tutor)

(Participant 9, male, posttest)

*Sorry, **I'd like to help you** but I really can't because I don't have enough time to help you because I have other work to do.*

Although the structure of the refusals in both groups is similar (mitigated refusal, reason/explanation, and regret/apology), the refusals of the experimental group included more of these solidarity politeness strategies (mitigators) which may account for the higher rater scores. This finding suggests the instruction had a positive impact. The control group refusals, on the other hand, were often more direct and the participants expressed their feelings by means of various independence politeness strategies such as self-centred justifications. As basic language learners move to more advanced levels, they possess more linguistic resources to respond to the communicative demands of a situation. However, their lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge means that they are not always able to mitigate an illocutionary force by making their realisations of a given speech act syntactically more complex (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Flores-Salgado, 2011). These features may have been one of the main factors for the low-scoring control group and higher-scoring experimental group examples below.

Situation 7 (borrow car from friend)

(Control group, participant 11, female, posttest)

Erm, my friend, ***I'm going to tell you the truth. I don't trust you.*** *I won't borrow to you my car. I, I want my car safety, so … I'm so sorry but I, I won't.*

(Control group, participant 15, male, posttest)

Oh well. I am going to need it. Umm, ***I think that you are not responsible,*** *so … I think that, that … that this time not. Sorry.*

(Experimental group, participant 8, female, posttest)

Umm, I'm so sorry but I am going to use my car in the weekend so, umm, it's difficult for me to borrow you.

(Experimental group, participant 1, male, posttest)

Err, well, I think there will be a problem because I can't use the car this weekend. Maybe next time if I can go with you I can borrow you the car or I can take you from where you are going to.

Situation 8 (reschedule meeting with tutor)

(Control group, participant 5, female, posttest)

Erm … ***I don't really think that it's a good idea.*** *Maybe it's another ways to get in meh', in a meet. I don' know,* ***I don't really wan' it.*** *I don't guess it is the best idea.*

(Control group, participant 13, male, posttest)

I am disagree with this, this idea. I don't like it. *Err, I have to …*

(Experimental group, participant 8, female, posttest)

Umm that's a good idea but for me, it could be a little difficult because I have plans for that time so, I didn't know about to do the meeting at this time, so I'm sorry.

(Experimental group, participant 1, male, posttest)

I'm really sorry. Erm, I think that I need to rest because if, if I continue working and maybe we have a meeting, I … err, I will, I have, I will have a headache.

4.1.2 Disagreements

Turning to disagreements, the earlier statistical analysis revealed only marginal improvements for the experimental group which could not be attributed to instructional effects. This pattern can also be observed when comparing the linguistic components of the disagreement strategies. The main difference observed in the experimental group is the marginal improved frequency of desirable features in their disagreement responses. Similar to refusals, the differences in the disagreements can be observed in the selection of the strategies employed in each situation. In formal situations (Situations 2 and 3), both groups employed explanation as the main mitigating strategy. In Situation 3, however, the experimental participants also had a tendency to employ additional expressions of regret more frequently than the control group, showing more concern for the professional setting in which the disagreement was taking place.

Situation 2 (change of course)

(Experimental group, participant 6, female, posttest)

***I think is difficult but not impossible**. I would like to try this course.*

Situation 3 (lunchtime staff meeting)

(Experimental group, participant 1, male, posttest)

I'm think it's a good idea to have a meeting but I'm sorry, I don't think using the lunch time is the best idea because our co-workers need to go eat.

General observations of the refusal and disagreement data show that the experimental group used a slightly higher number of strategies than the control group in both speech acts. Group differences were apparent, however, in the preferences for strategy use, at each level of formality. Whereas the experimental group produced a higher proportion of strategies in situations of formal rather than informal status, the control group showed the opposite behaviour, with more strategies in informal status and fewer in situations of formal status. This suggests the instruction had been successful in heightening the experimental group's sociopragmatic awareness and sensitising them to considering the effects of situational variables on linguistic choices.

This heightened sensitivity differentiates pretest and posttest group performance in participants' linguistic choices too – see the examples below. In the pretest, both the refusals and disagreements data for both groups could frequently be characterised as being direct, with responses expressing feelings in a way that could be perceived as rude or aggressive, especially in Situation 2 (tutor) or Situation 3 (boss). This finding is both unexpected and uncharacteristic based on the reported claims that Mexican speakers typically demonstrate indirect linguistic behaviour as the norm. Lack of pragmalinguistic proficiency at the pretest stage may have played a decisive role here. Participants not possessing the linguistic means to express themselves in their preferred way which results in employing more basic structures, in this case directness, to convey their message, is a well-documented interlanguage feature in other speech act literature (e.g. Beebe et al., 1990; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Of note is that this tendency changed in the posttest for the experimental participants who used more solidarity strategies, irrespective of social distance (see examples below). This aspect, however, did not change over time in the refusals and disagreements produced by the control group, confirming the complexity of producing these speech acts appropriately.

Situation 2 (lunchtime staff meeting)

(Experimental group, participant 12, male, pretest)

***I disagree** because we need to work hard every day an' if we, we have a lunch time, we can work a lot and we can work, work err ...*

(Experimental group, participant 12, male, posttest)

***I think that it's a good idea, but** I am really hungry*

(Experimental group, participant 3, female, pretest)

***That's totally a bad idea.** I ... I want to have my lunch and break. Maybe later.*

(Experimental group, participant 3, female, posttest)

***I think we don't have enough time** because it is a ... is a lunch break ... an' I need it.*

4.2 What are participants' perceptions of using ICT tools to enhance the teaching and learning of refusals and disagreements?

Following the testing phases, the experimental group completed a short interview which included two direct questions regarding the value of the ICT technologies for language learning.

With respect to the first question, surveying which online language practice activities were the most useful, 87 per cent (14 out of 16) of the participants considered that two activities were particularly helpful: 70 per cent (11 out of 16) of them answered that feature films helped them to better comprehend the contextual situations and 44 per cent (seven out of 16) highlighted the value of the role-plays. The comments below mirror claims that computer-assisted language learning materials are more motivational (Taguchi, 2015), provide authentic, meaningful interaction (Belz, 2008) and offer simulated opportunities for communicative practice (Sykes, et al., 2008).

(Participant 1)

Ok, bueno, a mi me sirvió mucho la actividad de las películas porque de esa manera uno agarra el ejemplo de como hacer estas contestaciones y también los role-plays porque así lo pones en práctica.

The feature film activity helped me a lot because you get an example of how to answer in a situation, and also the role-plays because you can practise what you see.

(Participant 3)

Las actividades de las películas porque se siente un poquito más real la situación, aprendes un poco más del contexto aprendes más de pragmática, eso a mi me gusto.

The feature film activities because the situations feel a little more real, you learn a little more of the context, you learn more about pragmatics, and I like that.

Regarding the second question, which assessed the effectiveness of the virtual role-plays in terms of motivation and authenticity, 81 per cent (13 out of 16) of participants considered that they were realistic and entertaining, and that even though the characters in the animated cartoon did not move a lot, the gestures and suprasegmental features helped them to interpret the situation. The participants also appreciated that the virtual role-plays offered opportunities for simulated L2 exchanges which are otherwise absent or difficult to access.

(Participant 2)

Si por lo mismo que le digo, aunque los personajes se movían muy poco, pero a pesar no se al ver como se movían ellos me daban una idea de cómo podrían ser las situaciones. Si son realistas, hubo una que sí que cuando dices que podemos cambiar lo de la presentación es algo que si vivimos a diario bueno no a diario, pero si en la escuela. Si porque te das cuenta como realmente es una plática con una nativa como dicen algunas veces hay que vivir el idioma y siento que si es el objetivo de estas actividades.

Yes, for the same thing that I say, although the characters moved very little, they gave me an idea of what the situations might be like. The situations are realistic, there was one, the situation of changing the presentation, it is something that we experience daily, well not daily, but in the school. Yes, you realise what it is like to have a real conversation with a native speaker. As they say sometimes, you have to experience the language and I feel this is the objective of these activities.

(Participant 7)

Pues, siento que son entretenidos y pues aparte de que son muy útiles porque no siempre podemos estar en contacto con algún nativo o con personas que dominen el 100 por ciento del idioma. Entonces siento que igual son como muy útiles porque hay nativos que los hacen.

Well, I feel they are entertaining and apart from that they are very useful because we cannot always be in contact with a native speaker or with people who dominate 100 per cent of the language. So, I feel like they are very useful because they were made by native speakers.

5

Concluding remarks

The two aims of this study were to examine the effectiveness of instruction on learners' oral production of refusals and disagreements in English (facilitated by online teaching activities and assessment tools) and learners' perceptions of using these tools. The study suggests that explicit instruction is effective, though this was more apparent for refusals than disagreements. Specifically, participants showed improvements in using mitigation strategies in refusals – a feature which was underdeveloped before instruction. Although there was a lack of improvement in the use of disagreements strategies, there was, however, some evidence of improved sociopragmatic awareness for the experimental group. The interview data shed little light on possible explanations for these differences in learners' improvements in refusals and disagreements, beyond some responses which suggested the input on refusals was more memorable. This may point to the degree of learnability of particular speech acts, which has been reported in other studies (e.g. Johnson and deHaan, 2013; Sykes, 2009; 2013), but needs future investigation. Another feature of this study is the provision of practical online classroom activities for practitioners to help learners raise their pragmatic awareness. Here, we have been able to demonstrate that the use of a variety of online software can facilitate pragmatics instruction well, and is successful in supporting learners to notice and develop their productive pragmatics skills.

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