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# The effect of explicit instruction and task repetition on Colombian EFL students' use of politeness strategies during disagreements

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## ABSTRACT

Research has confirmed the benefits of pragmatics instruction for a variety of speech acts, including suggestions and requests. However, less is known about the effectiveness of instruction for disagreements, which are face-threatening acts that establish a point of view counter to the interlocutor. Therefore, the current study explored the effect of explicit instruction with different forms of practice on Colombian EFL learners' ( $N = 31$ ) use of politeness strategies when disagreeing. Over a two-week period, a comparison class ( $n = 8$ ) received explicit instruction only, while two experimental classes received both explicit instruction and practice through task repetition. Whereas the procedural repetition class ( $n = 12$ ), repeated the same task procedure four times with new content, the content repetition group ( $n = 11$ ) repeated the same content with different task procedures. The participants carried out a pretest, immediate and delayed posttests, which consisted of discourse completion and role play tasks. The results indicated that the procedural repetition group used significantly more politeness strategies in both the discourse completion tasks and role plays. Implications for L2 instruction in EFL setting and pragmatics research are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Pragmatics instruction; disagreements; politeness strategies; task repetition; EFL learners

## Introduction

In the field of pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies have been central for understanding how speech acts are performed. Although research has shed light on the use of politeness strategies for requests (Blum-Kulka 1987), apologies (Olshtain and Cohen 1983), and refusals (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz 1990), less is known about the use of politeness strategies for disagreements. Disagreements have been defined by Sornig (1977: 364) as follows: 'a speaker S disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition P uttered or presumed to be espoused by an addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is *Not P*'. In other words, disagreements state personal opinions which go against the interests of another speaker, which presents a threat to that speaker's face. Disagreements have been classified as collegial (without intention to attack the speaker), personal challenges (confrontational questions), and personal attacks (direct statements), which vary in the degree to which they threaten a speaker's face (Scott 2002).

Because disagreements are face-threatening acts (Sifianou 2012; Tannen and Kakava 1992), speakers use politeness strategies to mitigate face damage when disagreeing (Locher, 2004; Pomerantz 1984). Previous research has shown that L1 speakers use strategies such as hedging, token agreement and partial agreement (Holtgraves 1997), and are able to recognise social contexts that allow direct disagreements (Rees-Miller 2000). In contrast to L1 speakers, L2 speakers may lack

awareness of the types of mitigation devices that can be deployed when disagreeing in the target language (Beebe and Takahashi 1989). For example, Garcia (1989) reported that English L1 speakers used multiple stylistic devices to mitigate the disagreement during role play tasks, while English L2 speakers used more confrontational strategies. Using the framework of desirable and non-desirable disagreement strategies shown in Table 1, Kreutel (2007) reported that English L2 speakers used significantly fewer desirable strategies and more non-desirable strategies than L1 speakers when completing discourse completion tasks (DCTs).

If L2 speakers use non-desirable politeness strategies when expressing disagreement, they may be perceived as rude or aggressive (Malamed 2010). However, simple exposure to the target language may be insufficient for L2 speakers to acquire pragmatic competence (Rose 2005), as even advanced L2 speakers continue to experience difficulty expressing pragmatically appropriate language (Cohen 2005). Consequently, researchers have argued that instructors should target pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms (Gilabert and Barón, 2013; Murray 2010). Several studies have shown that L2 speakers benefit from pragmatics instruction for requests and suggestions, especially explicit instruction (Alcón-Soler 2005; Gu 2011; Halenko and Jones 2011; Koike and Pearson 2005; Martínez-Flor and Fukuya 2005). Despite the general consensus that instruction is necessary to facilitate L2 acquisition of politeness strategies, research on the effectiveness of instruction about disagreements is surprisingly scarce. However, Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, and Vellenga (2015) recently reported that explicit instruction helped L2 speakers acquire formulaic expressions of disagreement during academic discussions, specifically the desirable strategies of token agreement (*yeah but* and *okay but*) and clarification requests.

Although research has demonstrated that instruction, particularly explicit instruction, facilitates the acquisition of pragmatic competence, it is not clear what types of instructional activities are most effective at providing L2 speakers with opportunities to apply their knowledge. In general, previous instructional interventions have presented videos that participants watch and discuss, after which the new pragmatic information is practised through explicit awareness-raising activities, such as reading video scripts and answering specific questions about the target speech act, or creating new dialogues that require the speech act. Role-plays are also frequently used to practise the target speech acts. However, it was beyond the scope of prior studies to compare the effectiveness of the various instructional activities that were incorporated into explicit instruction. In order to shed light on whether some types of activities are particularly effective at helping learners deploy the metalinguistic knowledge they gain through explicit instruction, the current study focuses on task repetition.

Task repetition may be an effective pedagogical technique that instructors can employ to help students deploy the pragmatic knowledge they obtain through explicit instruction and build automatic procedures for accessing that knowledge during real time communication. Task repetition may be beneficial because as familiarity with a task builds, students may shift their attention from the content of the message to the use of appropriate linguistic resources (Bygate 1999). During the repeated, subsequent performance of a task, some processing resources are available to be used to foster the development of form-meaning mappings (Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013). Task repetition has been shown to facilitate the development of oral skills (Ahmadian and Tavakoli 2011;

**Table 1.** Disagreement expressions adapted from Kreutel (2007).

Desirable strategies	Non-desirable strategies
Token agreement: <i>Yes, but ... ; okay, but ...</i>	Total lack of mitigation: <i>Are you crazy? That's wrong!</i>
Hedges: <i>Maybe, I think, well, just</i>	Use of the performative: <i>I disagree</i>
Requests for clarifications: <i>What do you mean? Really?</i>	Use of the performative negation: <i>I don't agree</i>
Expressions of regret: <i>I'm sorry but ...</i>	Use of the bare exclamation: <i>no</i>
Positive remarks: <i>That's a good point but ...</i>	Blunt statement of the opposite
Explanations	<i>A: It looks good on you</i>
<i>A: It's your turn to clean</i>	<i>B: It does not</i>
<i>B: I did it last time</i>	Message abandonment

Fukuta 2015), morphosyntax and lexical sophistication (Gass et al. 1999), and pronunciation (Trofimovich and Gatbonton 2006).

Within task repetition research, recent studies have compared the effectiveness of different types of repetition, specifically task, procedural, and content repetition (Kim 2013; Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013; Patanasorn 2010). Whereas task repetition is repeating the identical task multiple times, procedural repetition involves carrying out the same task procedures with new content. For example, students might be asked to complete several debate tasks, but each one targets a different topic. In contrast, content repetition involves tasks with the same content, but with new procedures. In other words, students might carry out several tasks related to the topic of vacations, but differ in terms of their instructions, such as role play, debate, and information-gap tasks. These studies have found that procedural repetition facilitated the acquisition of past tense and syntactic complexity and led to more frequent discussions about language form during task performance, while content repetition led to greater fluency. Furthermore, task repetition research about pragmatics specifically (Takimoto 2012) found that task repetition and procedural repetition were effective for helping Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) students' complete DCT and acceptability judgment tasks targeting the use of politeness in requests.

To summarise, despite previous cross-cultural research that has shown differences in L1 and L2 speakers' ability to express disagreement, and the abundance of research that has investigated instruction in other speech acts, few studies have examined whether pragmatics instruction helps L2 speakers express disagreements politely. Furthermore, although research has shown that explicit instruction is particularly effective for facilitating pragmatic competence, little attention has been devoted to the role of tasks in the overall instructional sequence. For this reason, the current study compares the effects of procedural and content repetition on EFL students' use of desirable politeness strategies (Kreutel 2007) when disagreeing. The research question was: what are the effects of explicit instruction and task repetition on EFL learners' use of politeness strategies when disagreeing?

## Method

### Participants

The participants were Spanish L1 speakers ( $N = 31$ ) enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes at Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Colombia. They had a mean age of 21.3 years ( $SD = 2.3$ ). In terms of their prior English study, the majority of the participants (28/31) had taken EFL classes in primary and secondary schools, while a few (3/31) had attended bilingual English-Spanish schools. In terms of their proficiency, the students had never taken any international standardised tests, but based on the university placement exam, the students were equivalent to B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference. Most of the students had never had the opportunity to use English while travelling to English-speaking countries, but six students reported stays of less than one month. The students were enrolled in three classes of an EFL course that consisted of two, 100-minute classes per week which were taught by the same instructor. The validation information provided with the students' course textbook (*Touchstone 4*; McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford, 2009), which was designed for B1 level learners, indicated that the textbook was appropriate for students with IELTS scores of 4.0–5.0.

### Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental, mixed design. The between-groups variable was task repetition, and the EFL classes were randomly assigned to three levels: procedural repetition ( $n = 12$ ), content repetition ( $n = 11$ ), and no repetition ( $n = 8$ ). Whereas all three groups received explicit instruction about disagreements, only the procedural and content repetition groups received

additional tasks to practise producing disagreements. Following previous research (Patanasorn 2010) procedural repetition was operationalised as repeating the same task procedure with different content, while content repetition was operationalised as repeating the same task content with different procedures. The within-groups factor was time, which had three levels: pretest, immediate posttest, and delayed posttest. The dependent variable was the students' ability to express disagreements appropriately, which was operationalised as the use of desirable politeness strategies use during DCTs and role play tasks.

## **Materials**

The materials consisted of testing materials, explicit instructional materials, and tasks for the two task repetition groups. The testing materials were DCTs and role plays, which are frequently used in pragmatics research with the former measuring the participants' pragmatic knowledge and the latter evaluating their ability to deploy that knowledge during interaction (Félix-Brasdefer 2010). Three DCTs and six role plays were created, with one DCT and two role plays per test. In order to elicit a variety of politeness strategies, the scenarios targeted in the DCTs included situations where the interlocutors had equal status (e.g. student/student) or different status (e.g. professor/student). Each DCT contained eight situations in English (adapted from Kreutel 2007 and Walkinshaw 2007) that elicited disagreements, and the participants' task was to write what they would say in each situation. The role plays tested the participants' ability to produce disagreements during real-time, interactive communication. Each role play test contained two scenarios, one that involved interlocutors of the same status (e.g. friends or siblings) and one with different status (e.g. employer/employee and parent/child). The tests were pilot tested with EFL students and reviewed by instructors at the same university. Based on the pilot tests and instructor feedback, the test instructions were modified by adding textual enhancement to key words in the instructions and providing Spanish glosses (examples provided in the [appendix](#)).

Participants in all three groups received the same explicit instruction, which consisted of four consciousness-raising activities that aligned with the topic of the students' EFL textbook, which was *Material World* (i.e. possessions and money). The first consciousness-raising activity consisted of a table with examples of desirable and non-desirable strategies that the instructor reviewed, followed by written dialogues with pragmatically inappropriate dialogues that the students repaired. For the second activity, the instructor narrated a problem he had when paying a telephone bill and the disagreement strategies he had used, and engaged the students in a whole-class discussion about the consequences of using non-desirable strategies. Six short video clips (30 seconds to 1 minute) from popular TV shows were used in the third activity to illustrate the use of desirable and non-desirable strategies during disagreements. Students were given transcripts of the videos to identify all the politeness strategies and to repair the non-desirable ones. The final consciousness-raising activity consisted of audio-recordings of two job interviews carried out by English L1 speakers that differed in terms of the use of desirable and non-desirable strategies. After listening, the participants received the transcripts and discussed ways to repair the non-desirable strategies. After each consciousness-raising activity was finished, the explicit instruction group continued with their regular class about the textbook topic, and their activities focused on lexical and grammatical features rather than pragmatics, disagreements, or politeness strategies. For the task repetition groups, however, each consciousness-raising activity was followed by a practice task that targeted the use of politeness strategies during disagreements.

The content repetition group carried out four different task types, a ranking task, a decision-making task, a categorising task, and a debate, all of which targeted the same content, which was the textbook theme of *Material Possessions*. For the ranking task, students were presented with a list of household objects that they individually ranked in importance. After sharing ideas with their peers, they had to reach consensus about the five most important objects. The decision-making task was based on the scenario that students were family members who had a large sum of

money from a TV show. Individually they were given a choice for spending the money, after which they persuaded their family members to purchase the item. The categorisation task asked students to classify 10 objects as being the most important for either a film maker or a designer (i.e. five objects for each job). After individually classifying the objects by career, students worked together to create unique lists for each career. Finally, for the debate task, pairs of students discussed the importance of three objects and brainstormed reasons for why one object was the most important. After joining with another pair, the students presented arguments and counter-arguments for their chosen objects. In contrast, the procedural repetition group carried out four ranking tasks that targeted different topics: the most important possession, the best way of spending money, the best moment to take a picture, and the most difficult job. For each task, students were presented with a list of options that they ranked individually in order of importance. They then worked in groups to share ideas and reach consensus about a final ranking for the group.

### **Procedure**

The study was carried out over a four-month period, with the researcher first training the instructor in the use of the instructional materials from weeks one to three. The pretest DCT and role plays were administered in week four. In weeks six and seven the participants in all three groups received explicit instruction in the form of the consciousness-raising activities in four class periods, with each activity lasting from 12 to 15 minutes. Following the consciousness-raising activities, the task repetition groups carried out the tasks to practice the use of politeness strategies while disagreeing, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The explicit instruction only group carried out different tasks that took the same amount of time, but their activities did not focus on pragmatic aspects of language use. In weeks 8 and 15, the participants took the immediate and delayed posttests, respectively. Across all three test administrations, the participants received the same instructions and had the same amount of time to complete the tasks. The order of the tests was counterbalanced in order to avoid possible test effects. Although the instructor implemented the activities, the first researcher was present during all research tasks to take field notes and complete observation checklists to ensure treatment fidelity. The students' interaction while carrying out the role play tests was recorded using portable, digital audio-recorders.

### **Data coding**

The audio-recordings were transcribed by the first researcher and verified by research assistants. First, the participants' responses to the DCT items and the role play transcripts were analysed by identifying all disagreements. Next, following Kreutel (2007) the strategies the participants produced as part of those disagreements were classified as desirable or non-desirable. However, four additional coding strategies emerged in the data that corresponded to coding categories used in Garcia's study of disagreements (1989), which included two desirable strategies, *downtoned suggestions* and *willingness to cooperate*, and two undesirable strategies, *orders* and *refusal to cooperate*. The complete list of strategies used to code the data along with examples from the DCT data are provided in Table 2 (examples appear without editing). To address variation in the amount of language produced by each participant, the number of strategies used by each participant was summed, and a proportion score was obtained by dividing the number of desirable strategies by the total number of strategies.

A subset of the DCTs and role play transcripts (25%) was coded for desirable and non-desirable strategies by an independent rater trained by the first researcher. Interrater reliability was obtained using Pearson correlations ( $r$ ): Desirable strategies  $r = .88$ , and Non-desirable strategies  $r = .84$ , for the DCTs; and for the role plays, Desirable strategies  $r = .91$ , and Non-desirable strategies  $r = .86$ . Alpha was set at .05.

**Table 2.** Disagreement strategies and examples.

Desirable strategies	Non-desirable strategies
Token agreement: <i>Oh! You got a point there, but maybe there is a best way</i>	Total lack of mitigation: <i>No, are you crazy, it's stupid this sofa the colours are terrible</i>
Hedges: <i>I think that they are just 50 states, but maybe I'm wrong. I'm not sure.</i>	Use of the performative: <i>I disagree; No I disagree because I learning a lot</i>
Requests for clarifications: <i>Really? Did you like it?</i>	Use of the performative negation: <i>I don't agree; No Ronald, I'm not agree with Karen I don't like it</i>
Expressions of regret: <i>Excuse me boss, but I think that you can review other possibilities.</i>	Use of the bare exclamation: <i>No; No, that's not true. I cleaned last week.</i>
Positive remarks: <i>It's really great, but don't you think that it would change the idea of the project?</i>	Blunt statement of the opposite: <i>No mom, you are wrong, this bus don't stop in the Jimenez (Avenue)</i>
Explanations: <i>I made some research and US has 50 states</i>	Order: <i>Teacher I think you have to check again your desk because I gave you my essay</i>
Downtoned suggestions: <i>Are you sure? Maybe we should try other things first.</i>	Refusal to cooperate: <i>You can go shopping alone, I prefer walk to the beach</i>
Willingness to cooperate: <i>I'm not sure, let me find another one and you can compare which one you like the most</i>	Message abandonment

## Results

### DCT data

The research question asked about the effects of explicit instruction with task repetition on EFL learner's use of politeness strategies when disagreeing. The participants' use of desirable strategies over time for the DCT tests is provided in Table 3. The explicit instruction and procedural repetition groups had similar scores at the pretests and produced more desirable strategies on both posttests. The content repetition group had higher scores than the other groups at the pretest. Whereas they used more desirable strategies on the immediate posttest, their production fell below pretest levels on the delayed posttest.

To answer the research question, a repeated-measures ANOVA with time as the repeated factor and repetition group as a between-groups factor was carried out on the proportion scores. There was a significant main effect for time [ $F(2, 56) = 6.54, p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .19$ ], but no main effect for group [ $F(2, 28) = 1.12, p = .340$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ ]. However, there was a significant time by group interaction:  $F(4, 56) = 4.01, p = .006$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Because the significant main effect for time was subsumed in the interaction effect, post-hoc comparisons were carried out within in each group by time. For the control group, there were no significant differences in the scores from pretest to immediate posttest ( $p = .211$ ) or from pretest to delayed posttest ( $p = .258$ ). The same pattern was found for the content group, with no significant changes from the pretest to the immediate ( $p = 1.00$ ) or delayed ( $p = .603$ ) posttests. However, the procedural repetition group had a significant increase in their use of desirable politeness strategies at both the immediate ( $p = .001$ ) and delayed ( $p = .007$ ) posttests.

For the procedural repetition group, all types of desirable strategies were used more frequently on the posttests, but hedges, clarification requests, and suggestions showed the greatest increases. For example, the participant in (1) did not use any hedging during the pretests; however, she used eight hedging expressions across the two posttests.

**Table 3.** Use of desirable strategies in DCT data by group and time.

	Explicit instruction only ( $n = 8$ )		Procedural repetition ( $n = 12$ )		Content repetition ( $n = 11$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pretest	.43	.21	.46	.18	.61	.21
Immediate posttest	.58	.17	.72	.17	.70	.16
Delayed posttest	.61	.21	.61	.20	.52	.13

- (1) Use of hedging in DCTs
- Pretest: I already did the cleaning, it's your turn. Stop being so lazy
  - Immediate posttest: *Well*, you're *maybe* right but I *think* that we should look for other possibilities
  - Delayed posttest: *Well, I don't know*, we should look around for other options. *In my opinion* it's not the best choice.

Similar patterns were found for clarification requests. The participant in (2) did not employ any clarification requests during the pretest, but he requested clarification five times during the posttests.

- (2) Clarification requests in DCTs
- Pretest: No teacher, I handed in my homework, I promise.
  - Immediate posttest: *Are you sure?* When I moved here there aren't curtains.
  - Delayed posttest: *Sorry?* I pay the rent last week.

To summarise the findings for the DCT data, only the procedural repetition group showed a significant increase in their use of desirable politeness strategies over time. Even though their use of all of the desirable strategies increased, the largest gains were seen for hedges, clarification requests, and suggestions.

### Role play data

As shown in Table 4, all three groups had similar proportion scores at the pretest with higher scores on the immediate post-test. However, whereas the procedural and content repetition groups' scores on the delayed posttest remained higher than their pretest scores, the explicit instruction group showed a decrease in their use of desirable strategies.

The repeated-measures ANOVA with group as a between-groups factor indicated that there was a significant main effect for time using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction [ $F(1.58, 41.10) = 3.91$ ,  $p = .026$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .13$ ] and for group [ $F(2, 26) = 4.91$ ,  $p = .016$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .27$ ]. However, both main effects were subsumed by a significant interaction effect:  $F(3.16, 41.10) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .022$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .19$ . Post-hoc comparisons were carried out within in each group by time. For the control group, there were no significant changes in their use of desirable strategies from pretest to immediate post-test ( $p = 1.00$ ) or from pretest to delayed posttest ( $p = 1.00$ ). The same pattern was found for the content repetition group, with no significant change from the pretest to the immediate ( $p = 1.00$ ) or delayed ( $p = .067$ ) posttests. However, the procedural repetition group had a significant increase in the use of desirable politeness strategies at the immediate posttest ( $p = .023$ ), but it did not persist to the delayed posttest ( $p = .135$ ). In terms of group differences, although there were no group differences at the pretest, the procedural group had significantly higher scores than both the content repetition group ( $p = .011$ ) and the explicit instruction group ( $p = .031$ ) at the immediate posttest. At the delayed posttest, both the procedural ( $p = .001$ ) and content ( $p = .001$ )

**Table 4.** Use of desirable strategies in role-play data by group and time.

	Explicit instruction only (n = 8)		Procedural repetition (n = 10)		Content repetition (n = 11)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Pretest	.50	.30	.51	.19	.51	.45
Immediate posttest	.59	.28	.87	.11	.57	.24
Delayed posttest	.40	.15	.77	.16	.80	.17

groups scored significantly higher than the control group, but there was no significant difference between the two task repetition groups ( $p = 1.00$ ).

A closer examination of the types of disagreement strategies used by the participants in the task repetition groups indicated that some strategies were preferred more than others. For example, participants in the procedural and content repetition groups never used expressions of regret or positive remarks when disagreeing during the role plays. In the case of the procedural repetition group, the desirable strategies that increased over time included token agreement and hedging, as illustrated in examples (3) and (4). Participant B in example (3) employed only one token agreement strategy in the pretest, but produced two during the immediate posttest, and four in the delayed posttest. Regarding hedging, participant B in example (4) performed one instance of hedging during the pretest, but employed eight in the immediate posttest, and eight during the delayed posttest.

### (3) Token agreement in procedural group during role plays

- Pretest: A: But I think that he won the prize in 1982  
B: Yes but I don't remember
- Immediate posttest: A: Airplane is more expensive and I think that this way you can enjoy the landscape and see the way and the [naturaleza]  
B: Okay I think that yes it's cute is beautiful but I think that uh if travel in car pass more time in car and not in Cartagena.
- Delayed posttest: A: No, come on let's go to the *Corral* it's so better  
B: Yes I understand the Corral is so better but Presto is more cheaper and closer

### (4) Hedging in procedural group during role plays

- Pretest: A: Yeah, when I was at the school I, I know that and I learnt that was 'A hundred years of solitude' that was the book from the Nobel of Garcia Marquez  
B: I'm pretty sure that was 'No one writes to the colonel' also I think that the prize was gave it to him in ninety eighty-one
- Immediate posttest: A: uh all right let me see it uh are you sure? I think maybe it's like too dark don't you think?  
B: uh I don't know I really thought it would be a really great picture for the poster and maybe would be a better explanation for everything so I don't know I really love it we should put it in the poster
- Delayed posttest: A: I agree maybe a hamburger could be the best choice but uh I think that Corral is the best the best way – the best place to eat a hamburger because uh I don't know maybe the hamburgers are good and they are the best from Bogota but is a little far but what do you think? Maybe  
B: uh I don't know I think that maybe Corral is kind of far and we are tired so I don't know maybe we should go to Presto I think it's a better choice it is closer it is cheaper and I think the hamburgers are more delicious than Corral I don't like Corral hamburgers

In the content repetition group, however, the only desirable strategy that was used more frequently during the posttests was hedging. For example, participant B in (5) produced two instances

of hedging during the interaction in the pretest; however, the same participant used hedging in six opportunities during the immediate posttest and seven during the delayed posttest.

#### (5) Hedging in content repetition group during role plays

- Pretest: A: ... I really want to eat uh in the Corral because today was a, a long day at the university and I'm very uh I'm very I don't know how do you say [cansado]?  
 B: *Well* I want to eat hamburger too but I *think* that the Corral is really really far and we don't have to go to the Corral what do you think if we go to Presto?
- Immediate posttest: A: ... the actors are so good uh the girl in the movie uh he – if he hadn't other weapon maybe uh he – uh she couldn't won to the to the war  
 B: *okay I think* that you are okay but *in my opinion* the movie was terrible *you know* the song and the specially effects was – were really really bad and also the actors.
- Delayed posttest: A: I don't know okay so we have to prepare a poster presentation together so I think that this is a good photo for our poster  
 B: okay let me see uh *I don't know* uh *I think* that that is a little bit dark *I don't know maybe* uh doesn't have many colors uh and the picture uh *I think* that is not related with the with the topic that we we have to work of the poster.

To summarise the role play data, only the procedural repetition group showed a significant increase in the use of desirable politeness strategies on the immediate posttest. Group comparisons indicated that the procedural group outperformed the other groups at the immediate posttest, while both task repetition groups had higher scores than the explicit instruction group at the delayed posttest. In terms of the specific strategies, both token agreement and hedging increased for the procedural repetition group, while hedging was the only strategy that increased for the content repetition group.

## Discussion

The present study explored whether explicit instruction with task repetition facilitated EFL learners' use of desirable politeness strategies while disagreeing. The results of both the DCT and role play tests indicated that only the procedural repetition group showed a significant increase in their use of desirable politeness strategies over time, which confirms the findings of previous studies that found advantages for procedural repetition (Gass, Mackey, and Feldman 2005; Kim 2013; Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013; Patanasorn 2010; Takimoto 2012). However, unlike studies which found content repetition to be more effective than task repetition or control conditions (Gass et al. 1999; Patanasorn 2010), the content repetition group here did not increase their use of politeness strategies over time, although their scores were higher than the comparison group that received explicit instruction only for the delayed posttest. Differences in the target structure (simple past: Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013; Patanasorn 2010; the verb *ser/estar*: Gass et al. 1999; fluency and accuracy: Bygate 1999, 2001) and data collection tasks (narration: Ahmadian, and Tavakoli 2011; Bygate 1999, 2001; Gass et al. 1999; picture description: Fukuta 2015; Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013; interviews: Bygate 2001) may help account for the differences. Furthermore, although the findings confirm those of Bardovi-Harlig, Mossman, and Vellenga (2015), who reported improved use of disagreement

strategies following instruction, they raise questions about the catalyst for improvement in the current study, as the combination of explicit instruction and procedural repetition was most effective.

An interesting question then, is why procedural repetition, but not content repetition, helped these EFL learners use desirable politeness strategies in both the DCTs and the role plays. The main argument for task repetition is that as L2 learners gain familiarity with the task, more processing space is available to make form – meaning connections (Bygate 1999, 2001; Gass, Mackey, and Feldman 2005; Gass et al. 1999; Kim and Tracy-Ventura 2013; Patanasorn 2010). However, carrying out a variety of tasks that repeated the same topic did not appear to help these EFL learners' develop their pragmatic competence. It is possible that content repetition did not free up attentional resources for language because the learners needed to devote their attention to the task instructions. In contrast, the procedural repetition group was already familiar with the task objective and instructions, which may have allowed them to devote more attention to form-meaning connections.

An additional possibility is that content repetition tasks did not provide learners with enough linguistic diversity. For example, Patanasorn (2010) speculated that procedural repetition facilitated subsequent use of simple past verbs because the learners were 'pushed' to use past tense with a variety of lexical verbs during each task. In other words, the language production opportunities experienced by the procedural repetition group had greater type frequency than the content repetition group. In contrast, content repetition allowed learners to use the same lexical items repeatedly, with token frequency potentially being less useful for driving development (see McDonough and De Vleeschauwer 2012 and McDonough and Kim 2009 for discussions of type and token frequency in structural priming tasks). Because the procedural repetition group had to discuss new content for every treatment task, they had greater opportunities to use a wider variety of desirable strategies with more diverse lexical items than the content repetition group. However, this explanation should be considered speculative as the analysis of the learners' interaction during the tasks was beyond the scope of the present study.

Given the instructional focus of the present study, there are some pedagogical implications for ESL instructors. First, the effectiveness of explicit instruction and procedural task repetition at increasing students' pragmatic competence highlights the benefits of incorporating pragmatics into EFL classrooms. In such contexts, where exposure to the target language outside the classroom is limited, integrating sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic information into the more traditional skill-based and grammar-oriented curricula can help students develop greater awareness and use of politeness strategies. Second, carrying out tasks with procedural repetition may help students' attend to language while also reducing the amount of time needed to explain new task instructions and objectives. Considering the time constraints faced by many instructors, having students carry out tasks whose structure and goals they are familiar with may reduce the amount of class time needed for task performance while simultaneously creating more opportunities for students to focus on language. Finally, it may be helpful if instructors targeted a narrower range of structures. These EFL learners were introduced to eight desirable politeness strategies, but positive remarks and token agreement rarely occurred in the DCTs, while positive remarks and expressions of regret were never used in the role plays. It is possible that the instructional time was insufficient for the students to acquire productive use of all the strategies. It may be more effective to introduce smaller sets of strategies, perhaps beginning with 'easy' strategies such as hedges, and give students time to practice using those before introducing additional strategies that may require more explanation or be more difficult to adopt.

There were several limitations in the present study that should be addressed through future research. The sample size was relatively small, so the findings need to be replicated with larger samples. Another important consideration is the taxonomy employed in the present study to classify politeness strategies as being desirable or non-desirable. Contextual factors can influence a speaker's strategy choice, such as the use of *no* being perceived as rude when addressing a professor, but possibly considered acceptable when interacting with a friend. As a result, it is difficult to generalise the designation of a strategy as being desirable or non-desirable across contexts. Although efforts were taken to integrate pragmatics into the existing curriculum, the participants' EFL class was a traditional

grammar class that did not typically address pragmatic language use. Replication studies that incorporate explicit instruction and task repetition into classes where pragmatic aspects of language use play a more prominent role, such as oral communication classes, are needed. Due to instructional constraints, such as the need to follow the standardised class schedule and the priority given to grammar, the amount of time available for the research tasks was limited. Future studies should compare the effectiveness of task repetition in contexts where more instructional time for pragmatics is available. Finally, it was beyond the scope of the current study to examine the participants' use of politeness studies across the four practice tasks. Analysing the students' interaction during the repetition tasks may shed further light on why procedural repetition was more effective than content repetition.

Besides addressing these limitations, future research should also investigate whether planning time impacts the effectiveness of task repetition. It is possible that content repetition would also help students orient to language if they have more planning time. By giving students more time to plan, they may be able to understand the task instructions and procedures before beginning the task, which could free up attentional resources for language during task performance. Future studies might also compare the individual and combined impact of task repetition and instructor feedback, as previous studies have shown the benefits of feedback for pragmatics development (Alcón-Soler 2005). Additionally, future research should take into account contextual or sociopragmatic aspects, which may help students gain a more nuanced understanding of the use of disagreement strategies and avoid overreliance on a few strategies. In order to shed light on the contextually appropriate use of strategies, the taxonomy used in the present study could be tested through corpus studies to determine frequency of occurrence in different contexts and by eliciting proficient speakers' perceptions about the appropriateness of strategy use. Finally, including a qualitative component in future studies would help clarify whether task repetition affects students' motivation. Although some studies have found that students lose motivation when asked to repeat tasks (Kim 2013; Plough & Gass, 1993), other researchers have found no relationship between repetition and motivation (Takimoto 2012).

## Conclusion

The present study has provided additional evidence that procedural repetition may play an important role in helping learners develop their L2 competence, specifically, their use of politeness strategies when disagreeing. The results revealed that procedural repetition may lead to a higher use of desirable politeness strategies when disagreeing, as compared to content repetition or explicit instruction alone. Although the present study found that procedural repetition positively impacts L2 speakers' pragmatic competence, more research is necessary to confirm its effect on the acquisition of politeness strategies as well as additional pragmatic features. Our future research aims to create and validate instructional materials that will help L2 teachers integrate pragmatics into classes where it has traditionally received less attention.

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## Appendix

### Example DCT scenario

Your boss tells you about an idea he has. He thinks that this idea will help increase (*augmentar*) the quality of the company. You think that the idea is not very good.

You say:

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- I wouldn't say anything. Why?

### Example role play scenario

Student A:

You are an apartment administrator. You received several complaints (*quejas*) from other tenants (*residentes*) in the building that student B was listening to rock music loudly all night long, and that apparently it happens every weekend. You are convinced that this is a recurring pattern, so you decide to call student B to talk to about the situation.

Student B:

You pay the rent in an apartment. The building administrator calls you to tell you that some of the other people who live in the building complained (*se quejaron*) about you listening to loud rock music all night long, and that this happens every weekend. However, you usually do work for your classes on the weekends because it is the only time you have free; additionally, you like to listen to classical music while doing homework.