

TASK EFFECTS ON EFL LEARNERS' PRODUCTION OF SUGGESTIONS: A FOCUS ON ELICITED PHONE MESSAGES AND EMAILS*

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1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence has been regarded as a fundamental element in different models analysing communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). Placing this component of pragmatic competence in the field of second language acquisition, increasing attention has been paid to studies about interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) over the last few years (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996; Kasper and Rose, 1999, 2002; Kasper and Roever, 2005). Within those studies, most researchers have examined learners' ability to produce different speech acts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). In order to conduct this type of research and analyse learners' speech act behaviour, insights into research methodology have been developed (Kasper and Dahl, 1991; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper, 2000; Kasper and Rose, 2002), although there is a need to further investigate this area by widening the types of data collection instruments created, as well as including learners from distinct linguistic backgrounds.

Within this framework, the aim of this paper is to examine the task effects on two production instruments specifically designed for this investigation (i.e. phone messages and email tasks) on learners' production of suggestions in a foreign language context. To this end, we will first provide a detailed theoretical background on data collection instruments employed in ILP by differentiating

between oral and written production data. Additionally, the studies that have been conducted with the aim of comparing both oral and written production data will also be described. Then, we will present our particular study with a focus on the explanation of how the two production tasks of phone messages and emails were elaborated. Finally, concluding remarks on the present study will be made, and pedagogical implications concerning the use of the tasks to collect learners' pragmatic data in the foreign language setting will be proposed.

2. Theoretical background on data production collection instruments in ILP

Kasper and Rose (2002) have examined the main methodological approaches that have been employed to analyse how target language pragmatics is learnt. The authors divide the data collection instruments used in ILP into three groups, namely those examining spoken discourse, those concerning different types of questionnaires, and those involving oral and written forms of self-report. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the most typical ones employed to collect learners' production data. A distinction has been made between oral and written data collection instruments.

2.1. Oral production data

Among the different methodologies that have been used to collect learners' oral production data in ILP research (i.e. examining authentic discourse, analysing elicited conversation, preparing role-plays), the use of the role-play has been widely employed to examine learners' use of a variety of pragmatic features. Role-play has been defined as a type of instrument that provides learners with a detailed description of a situation they are required to perform (Kasper and Dahl, 1991). Depending on the extent of the interaction (i.e. amount and variety of production involved), a distinction has been made between closed and open role-plays. In closed role-plays, learners have to respond to the description of a situation that involves specific instructions, and the interlocutors may also have suggestions with regard to the way they should respond. In contrast, learners engaged in open role-plays are only presented with the situation and asked to perform it without any further guidelines. Thus, open role-plays may involve as many turns and discourse phases as the interlocutors need in order to maintain their interaction. Furthermore, assigning different roles may allow researchers to observe how the sociopragmatic factors of power, distance and degree of imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987) may influence learners' selection of particular pragmalinguistic forms to express the communicative act involved in the role-play performance.

In addition to all these positive characteristics, namely those of representing oral production, operating the turn-taking mechanism and the fact that they involve opportunities for interaction/negotiation, the use of role-plays to collect learners' oral production also entails certain limitations. As Golato (2003) points out, the roles learners may be asked to perform are often fictitious or imagined, and this fact may influence their production when they have to act roles they have never played in real life. In addition, this author also mentions that performing role-plays, in contrast to authentic conversations, does not imply any consequences for the learners and, therefore, not only *what* is said but *how* it is said may not reflect real speech. Another aspect that should also be taken into account is the number of participants that this oral task may involve: it may not be possible to arrange the appropriate conditions for a large number of pairs to perform the role-plays and the subsequent transcription of the long conversations may be very time-consuming for the researcher. In spite of these limitations, role-plays have still been regarded as more ethnographic and similar to authentic language use than written production techniques, which are described below.

2.2. Written production data

Regarding the collection of learners' written production data, the discourse completion test (DCT), which according to Kasper and Rose (2002) falls under the type of questionnaires, has been one of the most commonly used in ILP research. This instrument involves a written description of a situation followed by a short dialogue with a gap that has to be filled in by the learner. The context specified in the situation is designed in such a way that the particular pragmatic aspect under study is elicited (Kasper and Dahl, 1991). One of the advantages attributed to this instrument is that it allows control over the contextual variables that appear in the situational description and which may affect learners' choice of particular forms when writing their responses. Moreover, the use of DCTs allows the researcher to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short period of time (Houck and Gass, 1996). However, as noted by Kasper and Rose (2002), the fact that they can be administered faster than other data collection instruments does not mean that this is always the easiest instrument to employ. As these authors argue, designing the DCT is best suited to the goals of the study and the evaluation process that takes time to develop (see also Bardovi-Harlig, 1999 on this point).

In addition to this consideration, this research method has also been criticised for being too artificial, as it presents short written segments rather than real-life extracts (Rose, 1994) and, as a pen and paper instrument, it has also been claimed to resemble a test-like method (Sasaki, 1998). This is because, although responses are thought of as being oral, learners are asked to respond in a written mode what they

think they would say in a particular situation, which may not exactly correspond to what they would actually say in the same setting under real circumstances (Golato, 2003). Although using a DCT may involve all the previously mentioned limitations, Kasper and Rose (2002) point out that this instrument still indicates which particular forms and strategies learners choose to employ in a given situation. Thus, the authors claim that although not comparable to face-to-face interaction, it can provide pertinent information regarding learners' pragmalinguistic and metapragmatic knowledge on the specific pragmatic feature under study.

Given that the two most typical instruments used to collect learners' production data in ILP research (i.e. role-plays and DCTs) present advantages and limitations, research has been conducted to find out whether the use of one instrument rather than the other influences the results of the study. A review of this research is provided in the next subsection.

2.3. Studies comparing oral and written production data

One of the first studies comparing data from a written DCT with oral data from authentic interactions, in this case from telephone conversations between two native speakers (NSs), was conducted by Beebe and Cummings (1985, later published in 1996). By comparing the refusals employed by the NSs in these two types of production data, the authors observed that the amount of data obtained in the oral responses was not only greater but also more repetitive and elaborate than in the written one. Moreover, the telephone conversations also provided the participants with opportunities to cooperate and, consequently, negotiate their refusal exchanges. However, the authors also found that although the oral data showed a better representation of authentic talk, the DCT could still be validated, since the contents of semantic formulae were similar in the two instruments. Similar findings were observed in Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1992) research, which also dealt with authentic production data. In particular, the authors contrasted the use of rejections by native and non-native speakers (NNSs) of English in a written DCT and in an authentic encounter, namely that of an academic advising session, and differences were observed in both the frequency and the type of rejection strategies employed. These authentic encounters revealed not only a narrower use of semantic formulae and downgraders in the production questionnaire than in the oral conversations, but also longer exchanges containing instances of turn-taking and negotiation strategies. This fact was also noted by Margalef-Boada's (1993) study on the speech act of refusals, which compared an open role-play and a written DCT. Although the results showed that the same content and range of semantic formulae for refusals appeared in both types of techniques, as occurred in Beebe and Cummings's (1985) study, the oral data revealed longer and more complex

interventions than the written data due to the interactive nature of the role-play. Similarly, Houck and Gass (1996) found that the data from the videotaped role-play employed in their study also implied longer responses and negotiation segments than the DCT. Finally, in the study conducted by Golato (2003) on compliment responses, the author also contrasted naturally occurring talk with a DCT. More specifically, the author compared data from a corpus of 6 hours of telephone and 25 hours of face-to-face conversations with a DCT consisting of seven situations that appeared frequently in the natural data. Results showed important differences between the two types of data, since none of the participants filling out the DCT chose to ignore a compliment in any of the situations and the way in which they claimed to agree with compliments was also different from real discourse.

In contrast to the findings observed in the studies described above, Rintell and Mitchell (1989) found no significant differences in the responses obtained from both a DCT and a closed role-play. The authors compared the use of requests and apologies by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and English NSs in these two methods, claiming that the language elicited was very similar in both tasks. These results may have been due to the fact that the closed type of role-play did not involve any interaction between two or more participants, since only one turn was allowed. In a comparison of data-gathering methods (i.e. written DCTs, oral DCTs, field notes and natural conversations), Yuan (2001) examined the production of compliment and compliment responses and also observed that providing participants with only one turn in the oral and written DCTs did not generate the interaction that is observed in role-plays and natural conversations. Nevertheless, in terms of amount of data, results showed that responses from the oral DCT still included a higher number of features typical of natural speech.

As can be observed, a common characteristic shared by all previous studies concerns the fact that all were conducted in second language contexts. This fact is important, since as Sasaki (1998) argues, most of the situations described in the instruments designed to elicit participants' responses may not be appropriate in a foreign language setting because participants may not be familiar with them. Taking this consideration into account, Sasaki (1998) compared a written production questionnaire with role-plays specifically designed for a group of Japanese learners studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Results obtained from this comparison were in line with previous research, since responses from the role-plays were longer and showed a greater variety of strategies than those found in the written questionnaire. Also focusing on an EFL setting, Safont (2005) contrasted learners' production on requests in a DCT with role-play data and found that the oral task revealed longer responses, involving more than one turn, than the written questionnaire. However, its author reported that statistically the learners produced

more appropriate responses in the DCT than in the oral research method. Safont (2005) claimed that these results might have been due to the fact that the written task was carried out individually with no time constraints, whereas the oral role-play involved an interlocutor and it was tape-recorded.

After reviewing the previous studies comparing results from oral and written production data, several significant aspects emerge. Findings from most of the studies showed that, given the interactive nature of role-plays and authentic discourse, participants' responses in these oral tasks were longer and more elaborate than those elicited in written form. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind, as Sasaki (1998) noted, that the majority of these studies were conducted in second language contexts. This fact may have important implications when designing and administering different research methods, since the context in which a language is learnt affects the chances learners may have of developing their pragmatic competence (Safont, 2005). For this reason, the opportunities for being exposed to and being able to use the target language are likely to be more restricted in a foreign language context, where these chances are limited to the classroom. Thus, taking into account Safont's (2005) results quoted above into account, which showed that learners produced more requests in the DCT than in role-play, we believe that production data elicited by DCTs, when created in an accurate way, allows the researcher to examine how learners activate their pragmatic knowledge. Moreover, learners engaged in a written production task are allowed more time to think and reflect about different strategies for a particular situation, in contrast to oral production research, which makes greater cognitive demands on the learners. In spite of all these observations, a written questionnaire should never be regarded as a substitute for natural data, but in view of the limitations observed in a foreign language setting, the instruments that should be created and implemented are those best suited to the goals of the study in question and the participants involved in it (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002).

Within the framework of the above mentioned assumptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses involved in typical oral and written types of data collection instruments on the one hand, and the importance of paying attention to the setting where the study takes place on the other, the purpose of the present study is to examine the task effects on two production instruments specifically designed for this research (i.e. phone messages and email tasks) on learners' production of suggestions in an EFL context. To that end, the following research question was posed:

- Does learners' production of suggestions vary depending on the task they are performing, that is, either an oral or a written production task (i.e. phone messages versus email responses)?

Task effects on EFL learners' production of suggestions

On the basis of this research question and findings from previous ILP research comparing oral and written production data, we formulated the following hypothesis:

The production task, that is, an oral (i.e. phone messages) or a written (i.e. email responses) task, will affect learners' production of suggestions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants for the study consisted of 81 students (69 males and 12 females) who were enrolled in computer science degree courses at Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain). Their ages ranged between 19 and 25, the average age being 20.69 years old. The length of time spent learning English varied as follows: from 7 to 10 years, 68%; from 2 to 6 years, 25%; more than 10 years, only 7%. Participants did not differ with regard to their ethnicity or academic background, and shared an intermediate proficiency level of English that was evaluated on the basis of their performance in the Department of English Studies placement test carried out prior to the study.

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3.2. Pragmatic feature examined

The pragmatic feature addressed in this study was that of suggestions, a directive speech act which involves an utterance in which the speaker asks the hearer to do something that will benefit the hearer (Searle, 1976; Rintell, 1979). In order to deal with the wide range of suggestion expressions available in English, a taxonomy was designed on the basis of different theoretical frameworks (i.e. speech act theory and politeness theory), previous literature in the ILP field, and data concerning suggestions identified in NSs' oral and written production (see Martínez-Flor, 2005, for a detailed explanation of the making of such a taxonomy). However, among the different pragmalinguistic forms that were identified in this taxonomy and that can be employed to perform the head act of the speech act of suggestions, we just focused on a selection of twelve linguistic realisations as the target items. Moreover, the selected target forms were distributed into two groups depending on the sociopragmatic factor of status proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their politeness theory, as can be seen below:

- a) *Equal status*: Why don't you...?; Have you tried...?; You can just...; You might want to...; Perhaps you should...; I think you need...

- b) *Higher status*: I would probably suggest that...; Personally, I would recommend that...; Maybe you could...; It would be helpful if you...; I think it might be better to...; I'm not sure, but I think a good idea would be...

The reason for selecting these twelve pragmalinguistic forms in particular was made on the basis that they were the most frequently employed by the NSs that participated in our study at the stage of designing the instructional materials and the production tasks used to measure learners' use of such forms in different situations that varied according to the sociopragmatic factor of status. Specifically, we had to choose a limited number of pragmalinguistic forms for suggestions, since learners received different types of instruction (i.e. explicit versus implicit) on how to use this speech act appropriately depending on whether the situations involved an equal or a higher status relationship between the interlocutors (see Martínez-Flor, 2006, for a detailed explanation of the instructional treatment they received). However, in the present study we were only interested in examining whether appropriate learner production of these target realisations for suggestions depended on the production task they were involved in.

3.3. Data collection procedure

In order to collect our data, two particular instruments were created on the basis of Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) assumptions regarding methods of data collection. According to this author, the best research methods in ILP are the ones that fit the research questions of the particular study, so she suggests that the researcher should carefully create his/her tasks according to what is already known in the field (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). Therefore, our participants were required to perform two different production tasks that involved making phone calls (i.e. oral production task) and sending emails (i.e. written production task). In order to design these production tasks, which consisted of eight different situations each, we took previous research in the field of ILP into account. First, all situations varied according to the sociopragmatic factor of status (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and, consequently, two levels of status were considered: equal (i.e. student to student) and higher (i.e. student to teacher). Second, given the fact that all our participants were University students, we followed the guidelines developed by Hudson et al. (1995) and set all the situations at the University, as a context familiar to our participants. In this way, the participants had to make suggestions playing the role of students, that is, they were asked to be themselves and perform as they thought they actually would actually under the same circumstances (Trosborg, 1995). Finally, another important aspect that we also considered was the fact that each situation was made in such a way that learners had to make only one suggestion, thus avoiding alternative suggestions for the same situation.

When it came to devising the oral production task, we decided to create one which only elicited the learners' production of suggestions. In other words, if we had made use of a role-play, we would have had to examine not only how to make a suggestion but also the response made by the interlocutor when either accepting or rejecting the suggestion made. In this sense, we should have considered the speech act of suggestion as a set that consists of an adjacency pair (Koester, 2002), but this went beyond the scope of the present study. Thus, the focus of attention was the learners' spontaneous oral responses to the situations presented when making the telephone call. In order to conduct this oral production task, the learners came individually to the teacher's office and after reading the eight situations, they had to make a telephone call and leave a message (see Appendix A for an example of one of the situations employed in the oral production task). For each situation the answering machine was activated and learners heard the person they were calling say that he/she was not at home. And then the learners had to leave a message (i.e. make a suggestion) on the answering machine. All phone calls were tape-recorded and transcribed.

When it came to setting up the written production task, we designed one which took into account some of the limitations attributed to the DCT, such as its artificiality in presenting short written segments rather than real-life extracts (Rose, 1994) or its resemblance to a test-like method in being a pen and paper instrument (Sasaki, 1998). Thus, we decided to collect participants' written data by using electronic messages, since the use of new technologies to collect learners' pragmatic output has increased over the last few years, a variety of techniques being available (Kinginger, 2000; Belz and Kinginger, 2002; Belz and Thorne, 2006). We considered the use of email responses to be an authentic and readily available task that allows written data collection. In order to conduct this written production task, the learners were brought to a computer lab where they were requested to read the eight situations and send an email to the email addresses provided (see Appendix B for an example of one of the situations employed in the written production task). All the emails were printed for subsequent analysis.

3.4. Coding and statistical analysis

In order to analyse the data, we counted all the suggestions employed by the learners in the two production tasks, which made a total of 1296 responses (81 students x 2 tasks x 16 situations). However, we only codified those twelve pragmalinguistic forms that had been selected as the target forms, since the learners had received instruction on their appropriate use depending on which situations they employed. Consequently, it was only when learners employed the target pragmatic forms to express the suggestions in appropriate contexts (i.e. equal or

higher status situations) that the response was considered pragmatically appropriate and assigned a score.

After codifying all the responses, we contrasted their use in both the oral and written production tasks to ascertain whether there was a greater number of appropriate responses in one of the tasks than in the other. In order to discern whether the differences in the two tasks were significant or not, we employed a Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks test. This nonparametric statistical procedure was chosen after applying a normality test to the data (i.e. the Kolmogorov-Smirnov z) and finding that the data were evenly distributed.

4. Results and discussion

The aim of the present study was to compare the two production tasks (i.e. phone and email tasks) in order to ascertain whether there are task effects on learners' use of suggestions. In order to examine this issue of task effects, and within the framework of findings from previous research on this aspect, we formulated our hypothesis, which predicted that the production task learners were engaged in would influence their use of appropriate suggestions. Thus, we analysed the effect of the oral production task and the written production task in the learners' use of suggestions. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, it seems that learners made almost the same use of suggestions in the phone task (44%) as in the email task (56%), their use being slightly higher in the latter, that is, in the written production task.

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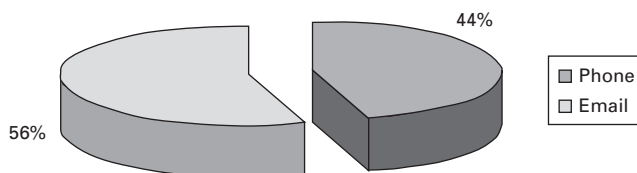


FIGURE 1: Overall use of the targeted forms for suggestions in the phone and email tasks

In order to examine whether this difference is statistically significant, we applied a Wilcoxon test that compared learners' performance in two different but related measures (i.e. phone and email tasks). The results from applying this test, which are illustrated in Table 1, reveal that the difference observed between learners' use of suggestions in the phone task and the email task is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Task effects on EFL learners' production of suggestions

| TASK | DF | MEAN RANK | MEAN | MEDIAN | SIG. |
|-------|----|-----------|------|--------|-------|
| Phone | 81 | 35.40 | 2.27 | 2.50 | .005* |
| Email | | 26.09 | 2.85 | 3.00 | |

* Sig. at $p < 0.01$ level

TABLE 1: Differences as regards the overall use of target forms for suggestions in the phone and email tasks

In view of these results, we may therefore claim that the production task learners are engaged in exerts an influence on their use of suggestions. This fact supports previous research that highlighted significant task effects when comparing the oral and written production of different speech acts (Margalef-Boada, 1993; Beebe and Cummings, 1996; Houck and Gass, 1996; Sasaki, 1998). Findings from these studies illustrated that the oral tasks involved a greater amount of data than the written production tasks. Results from our study, in contrast, have shown that a greater number of pragmalinguistic forms for suggestions were found in the written production task, in line with Safont (2005). Possible explanations for these outcomes may be related to the fact that the instruments used to collect data were different, as we employed phone messages and email tasks instead of the methods employed in those studies (i.e. natural conversations or role-plays and written DCTs). Thus, the fact that learners were tape-recorded when leaving the oral message after hearing an answering machine may have exerted some pressure on them. Moreover, they were not engaged in a conversation in which they could interact with an interlocutor and, consequently, produce a wider amount of data. In fact, the oral task our learners participated in allowed them only one turn, which may have seemed to resemble more closely a type of closed role-play (Rintell and Mitchell, 1989) than an open role-play, which involves more than one turn. For these reasons, learners' performance in this type of oral task may have differed from the participants' behaviour in the above-quoted studies. The following is an example illustrating our learners' responses in one situation from the oral production task (i.e. phone).

Example (1)¹

Phone:

One of the professors you know from the Business Administration Department asks you to help him to organise a summer course on the use of PowerPoint. As part of the course, he would like to invite a professor from your Computer Science Department for a practical presentation of this programme. When you arrive home, the names of some professors from your department who could participate in this course suddenly occur to you. Call the professor in charge of the course and suggest a good professor for this PowerPoint presentation:

Hello... I'm Manolo... I call for suggest you... eh... one professor for the summer course of PowerPoint... I think a good idea would be... eh... to call Oscar Belmonte... because he is a good professor in the department of computer science...

Hello... This is María... I heard that you need to know the name of a professor who might help you in organising a course on PowerPoint... eh... I have thought about Gloria because she uses PowerPoint a lot in her classes... so it would be helpful if you contact her and ask her... Bye.

As can be seen from the above example, learners were presented with the situation and asked to call the professor in order to make a suggestion. After they heard the answering machine, they were provided with one turn to make the suggestion, since we were interested in analysing learners' ability to produce this particular speech act spontaneously. However, the fact that they did not hold a conversation with their interlocutor may have prevented them from producing longer responses and, consequently, a greater number of realisations for suggestions. In fact, Safont's (2005) study, which also reported statistically significant differences between the oral (i.e. open role-play) and written (i.e. DCT) tasks employed in her study, demonstrated that participants' responses in the role-play were longer than in the DCT due to the fact that the oral task implied more than one turn. Moreover, the author also found that a greater amount of request linguistic strategies was found in the written task than in the oral activity. In this sense, our results are in line with Safont's (2005) study, in that our learners also produced a higher number of suggestions in the written production task than in the oral one.

Another possible explanation for obtaining more pragmatically appropriate responses in the written task is that, just as we employed a different oral production task (i.e. phone messages), so our written task was designed specifically for the present study (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002). Thus, instead of employing a written DCT, we made use of emails, which seemed to obviate the shortcomings attributed to the typical DCT, namely those of being too artificial (Rose, 1994) or its resembling a test-like method (Sasaki, 1998). In this way, collecting learners' written production data through emails may have contributed to our results, since the task was carried out individually with no time constraints and it appears that learners had more time to think about the different strategies that could be employed to make their suggestions in a particular situation. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the learners' responses in the email tasks were long and elaborate—a finding that was observed in the oral production tasks rather than in the written DCTs employed in previous studies (Houck and Gass, 1996; Sasaki, 1998; Safont, 2005). The following examples illustrate learners' responses in a situation from the written production task (i.e. email) employed in our study.

Task effects on EFL learners' production of suggestions

Example (2)²

Email:

While organising a workshop on the creation of websites for students of non-computer science degrees to be offered during the next academic year, the Director of the Computer Science Department is interested in students' ideas about it. In particular, he would like to know your opinion about the materials that could be employed. Send the director an email suggesting a good book on designing websites that could be employed during this workshop:

Dear Mr. Director:

In order to the course about the creation of websites I have been thinking some ideas. It would be helpful if you use a program called "dream weber". It is very easy to learn, and the participants will not have problems. Maybe you could buy a book that I used in some subjects last year. It is called "Web design for sillies". It describes in a general way the web design, without computer technical words. Besides contains a cd in which you could find a little program to designe a web, and many different examples about this.

Yours fairfully.

Dear director

I would recommend that you use programs and handbooks to explain the students how make a website. There are more programs such as Front Page, Dreamweaver, Composer... I think it might be better to use Front Page because is the most easy. www.handbooks.com is the best page on internet about handbooks, it has good material.

I hope that this information is good for you.

Yours sincerely

As can be observed in Example 2, learners' responses were not written down with a single sentence, as has been found in studies employing a DCT (Sasaki, 1998; Safont, 2005). Instead, the answers were contextualised and followed a discourse-based structure in which further information and various details regarding the situation were provided. As a result we are convinced that employing an email task to collect learners' written production data seems to be a research method with a potential that deserves future research.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The aim of the present study was that of comparing learners' performance when making suggestions in two different tasks: an oral production task (i.e. phone messages) and a written production task (i.e. email). In order to examine this

aspect, our hypothesis predicted the influence of the production task to be performed on learners' use of appropriate suggestions. In testing this hypothesis we compared learners' use of suggestions in the phone messages task with their use in the email task. Results revealed statistically significant differences between learners' performance in the two tasks, which indicates that the production task in which learners are engaged influences their use of suggestions. Drawing on these results, we may claim that our hypothesis was demonstrated, which further confirmed previous studies concerning task effects (Houck and Gass, 1996; Sasaki, 1998). Moreover, our findings were also in line with Safont's (2005) study in that a higher number of appropriate suggestions were found in the written production task than in the oral task. A possible explanation for our findings may have been related to the written instrument we employed, that of emails, which seemed to be more authentic and elicited longer and more contextualised responses than the typical DCT used in other ILP studies.

In the light of this finding, there would seem to be certain pedagogical implications concerning the use of the tasks employed to collect learners' pragmatic data in the foreign language context. Drawing on previous studies related to research methodology (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002), we specifically designed two production tasks for the present study. In so doing, we took into account our learners' field of studies (i.e. computer science), the setting where they were studying (i.e. University) as well as the people among whom they may interact (i.e. other classmates and professors). Bearing these aspects in mind, we created the contextualised settings that appeared in the tasks in an attempt to make learners feel identified with those situations. Thus, although the tasks designed for this study were employed in order to collect learners' pragmatic data regarding their production, they also have an important pedagogical value. In fact, they could be implemented as oral and written tasks in different ways with the aim of making learners reflect on their own production, and guiding them in their process of acquiring pragmatic knowledge in the foreign language setting. On the one hand, the oral production task we designed consisted of different situations in which learners had to make a telephone call and then suggest a particular aspect. After being tape-recorded, learners might listen to their own phone messages and discuss the appropriateness of their pragmatic use on the basis of politeness issues, such as the relationship between the participants, their status and the degree of imposition involved in the situation, as well as other contextual factors. On the other hand, the written production task created for this study, that is to say email, also involved a number of situations in which learners had to send an email with a particular suggestion. After the task had been completed, the teacher could bring learners' written emails to the class and make them work in pairs to compare the different pragmatological forms employed when suggesting in each situation on the basis

of sociopragmatic aspects affecting the appropriate use of those suggestions. Specifically, we find that the use of this particular method has great potential in the foreign language classroom, since the teacher may organise activities and projects in which learners can interact with students from all over the world in a real way (Kasper, 2000). Hence, integrating this task, as well as others included in the area of computer-mediated communication, such as on-line discussions, telecollaboration or group journals, as part of the current curricula could provide learners with opportunities to practise pragmatic aspects of the target language in authentic situations. In the context of these issues, then, future research might fruitfully examine the extent to which the implementation of these tasks with a focus on their practical implications succeed in eliciting learners' pragmatic ability for appropriate language use.

Finally, we should also mention a limitation that may be attributed to the present study, since none of the instruments designed to collect our learners' pragmatic production elicited interactional data. Although it was not our purpose to analyse an interlocutor's possible reaction to learners' suggestions (ie. accepting or rejecting the suggestion being made), we think that it would be interesting to explore this kind of data in future investigations. In fact, by means of employing other research methods, such as the role-play, that involve the contribution of at least two participants, the speech act of suggestions could be examined in future studies as an adjacency pair (Koester, 2002; LoCastro, 2003). Moreover, it would also be advisable to incorporate other types of instruments that elicit learners' self-report data, such as introspective interviews. By employing this sort of methods, the researcher may examine the learners' pragmatic development by paying attention to their planning and thought processes when assessing or producing a particular pragmatic feature (Tateyama, 2001).

To sum up, and despite the above limitation, it is our belief that the present study has contributed to the field of ILP by offering a number of fresh insights into research methodology through the designing and use of different production data collection instruments. Thus, the results obtained in this study, although tentative, may expand the scope of enquiry in the ILP area as well as open several lines of investigation to be examined in future research.

Appendix A

Situation from the oral production task (i.e. phone)

One of your new classmates in this course has told you that she is thinking about changing to another degree (from Technical Engineering in Computer Systems to Computer Science Engineering) that she thinks will be more interesting. You think about what this classmate has told you and, when you arrive home, you realise that Technical Engineering in Computer Systems has some more benefits. Call this classmate and suggest a good reason for not changing from Technical Engineering in Computer Systems to Computer Science Engineering:

Telephone number: 964-728542

Appendix B

Situation from the written production task (i.e. email)

Your brother has a friend (younger than you) who wants to study computer science, just like you. He would like to know which subjects to take the first year and something about their content. Send him an email and suggest that he take a particular subject that you found very interesting last year:

To: lasuperbestia@yahoo.es

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Notes

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1. Learners' responses have been transcribed verbatim, without alteration.

2. Learners' responses have been transcribed as originally written by them.

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