LA PERCEPCIÓN PRAGMÁTICA DEL ACTO DEL HABLA AL SOLICITAR: EL CASO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE LA ULA

PRAGMATICS PERCEPTION IN REQUESTS: THE CASE OF ULA STUDENTS.

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to explore how the speech act of requesting is perceived by students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at ULA University. The author describes how students find a group of utterances in terms of appropriateness when requesting something; and also, tries to understand how the social context is reflected in the ULA students' choices of requests. From the methodological point of view, it follows a mixed-method approach where 7 students volunteered to provide their insights regarding the (in) appropriateness of a group of requests situations. The instrument to collect data was an open-ended questionnaire that follow a Likert scale from 1 (very inappropriate) to 5 (very appropriate), and where the students were able to justify their answers. Among the conclusions, it was found that students tend to be very formal when requesting something from professors and very neutral or bossy when talking to their pairs.

Keywords: requests, Pragmatics, speech acts, effective communication, appropriateness.

RESUMEN

La presente investigación tiene como objetivo explorar cómo los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) de la Universidad ULA perciben el acto de habla al solicitar. El autor describe el sentido en que los estudiantes encuentran un grupo de enunciados en términos de idoneidad al solicitar algo; y además, intenta comprender cómo el contexto social se refleja en sus elecciones. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, sigue un enfoque mixto en el que 7 estudiantes se ofrecieron voluntariamente para brindar sus ideas sobre la idoneidad o no idoneidad de un grupo de situaciones de solicitud. El instrumento para recolectar datos fue un cuestionario abierto que siguió una escala de Lickert de 1 (muy inadecuado) a 5 (muy apropiado), y donde los estudiantes pudieron justificar sus respuestas. Entre las conclusiones se encuentra que: los estudiantes tienden a ser muy formales al solicitar algo a los profesores, y muy neutrales o arbitrarios al hablar con sus pares.

Palabras Claves: peticiones, Pragmática, actos del habla, comunicación efectiva, idoneidad.

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INTRODUCTION

Applied Linguistics (AL) is using what is known about language, how it is learned, and how it is used, in order to achieve some purposes or solve some problems in the real world (Schmitt, 2002). In this way, a Linguistics study is basically AL that seeks out language problems which linguists responds to be idealized and then analyzed to give a solution. In doing so, AL covers different areas: the social context of language, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, what are the different attitudes on language use, and second language learning and acquisition.

In this way, Pragmatics is the brand of AL that focuses on the relationship between language use and context, that is, how features of the external, real-world context are reflected in language (Roeven, 2018). In this way, L2 speakers, besides having linguistic competence that allows them to speak clearly and coherently, must understand the social contexts in which those utterances of L2 are expressed to avoid misunderstanding. For this reason, this study aims to explore how the speech act of requesting is perceived by students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at ULA University.

THE PROBLEM

Language has two important functions: it is used to represent the world, and it is used to communicate. Communication has to be effective, that is, listeners need to comprehend the real intentions and meanings behind the speaker's utterances. Nevertheless, when talking about speakers of L2, this is not always the case. According to Multib (2013), misunderstanding occurs when "a hearer (H) fails to understand correctly the proposition (p) with a speaker (S) expresses in an utterance (x)" (p. 740). That is, learners of foreign languages, like English in Venezuela, may find appropriate to use some words or expressions when requesting something from their professors or classmates, but those expressions may not be well-understood.

This fact inspires this research that bears in mind the following questions: How do students of EFL perceive requests utterances in terms of social appropriateness at ULA? How the social circumstances influence their choices of utterances when requesting something? Therefore, its main purpose is to explore how the speech act of requesting is perceived by

students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at ULA University. And also, to describe the social circumstances behind the phenomenon identifying patterns of formality, politeness, and appropriateness in different social hierarchies (e.g., professor-student vs. peer-peer interactions). The study will be conducted with seven EFL students who wanted to participate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pragmatics:

Studies in Pragmatics traditionally "focus on the relationship between language use and context, that is, how features of the external, real-world context are reflected in the language" (Roeven, 2018, p. 295). That is, it takes into consideration that language is primarily a social practice, and that speakers are going to use words, phrases, or expressions according to their level of formality, power, and proximity they have with others. In this sense, it is necessary to understand how this approach from AL enhances communication in EFL.

Pragmatics and EFL:

There is one thing that has always intrigued linguists, and that is, how is it possible for a person to speak different languages?'. Ortega (2013) points out that "Second Language acquisition (SLA) is the scholarly field of inquiry that investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first one, during late childhood, adolescence or adulthood, and once the first one has been acquired". (p. 35).

A good approach to SLA is based on three different areas: description' where it is taken language according to its different levels (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and **pragmatics**); 'evolution' which focuses on the phylogenies or origins of language; and 'acquisition' which looks at the ontogenesis of language.

Regarding how pragmatics operates as an approach for research in AL, it is significant to say that this area is "mostly concerned with the relationship between language use on the one hand and the social and interpersonal context of interaction on the other" (Roeven, 2018, p. 296). As linguistics is the scientific study of language, applied linguistics focuses on understanding how the knowledge of the social and interpersonal use of it may contribute to enhance a better human interaction.

In the case of EFL, it is necessary to stress that the research of pragmatics is directly related to teaching coherence within specific contexts that help students to be more assertive when speaking to others. That is, it is not the same to ask your professor of English to allow you to go into the classroom, as asking your classmates to give you permission. In both cases, the words and the ways of asking the same thing will change dramatically because of the social bonds.

On the other hand, pragmatics helps teachers and students to engage in conversation analyses. This means that they may understand better what they listen, read, or say when analyzing the speech. In a classroom, the words and manners of talking used by a professor will change from those used when having a party. Of course, they are not going to be that formal in an informal party, and here the conversation needs to be analyzed as part of the context.

Pragmatics also contributes to ELT and ESL testing because it requires the evaluator to be careful in using the language to assess people according to their age, sex, gender, location, social position, etc. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that this brand of Linguistics includes the study of how the interpretation of language depends on the knowledge of the world because it is in the way people construe the world that they express themselves. It might also be understood from the point of view of the speaker's understanding of the meanings of the utterances, and how language is influenced by the kinds of relationships that exist between speakers and hearers.

On the other hand, there are two kinds of research in pragmatics: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Interlanguage Pragmatics. Cross-cultural pragmatics addresses the differences in language use based on first language backgrounds (L1) while interlanguage pragmatics investigates how learners develop their knowledge in L2 Pragmatics for communicating effectively in the target langue. From what was said, it is understandable that interlanguage research is more related to EFL contexts, and thus to this research.

Paltridge and Wang (2018), are going to shed some light on the understanding of pragmatics research: "pragmatics, thus, is interested in what people mean by what they say rather than what words or phrases might, in their most literals sense, mean by themselves" (p. 162). In this sense, it differs from semantics because rather than looking at the meaning of the words and what speakers understand by them, the researcher will be focused on the purpose, intentions, and courtesy manners that direct the speaker in the selection of utterances when communicating.

Researching Pragmatics

According to Roeven (2018), there are four stages for researching pragmatics. The first stage is where the researcher answers the question: Which aspects of pragmatics are to be investigated? And the general focus has been placed on 'speech acts' that are requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and compliments responses; suggestions-advises, agreement, disagreements, complaints, criticism, and some others. Politeness is also being investigated without regard to speech acts. Implicature is part of the new interest because it highlights the use of implied language in social contexts.

In the second stage, the researcher will give an answer to the question: what independent variables are to be investigated? And usually, they have two groups of evaluation design L1 and L2 assigning specific characteristics that make them independent variables. In the third stage, the answer will be given to the question: what research instrument is to be used? And in Pragmatics, it is so common the Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), the role plays, the interviews, observations, and the collection of natural data. And the final stage answers the question: How will data be analyzed? And generally, the answer is: 'by using the CCSARP method'. CCSARP stands for Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act realization Patters.

Graphic Nº1 Research Stages in Pragmatics
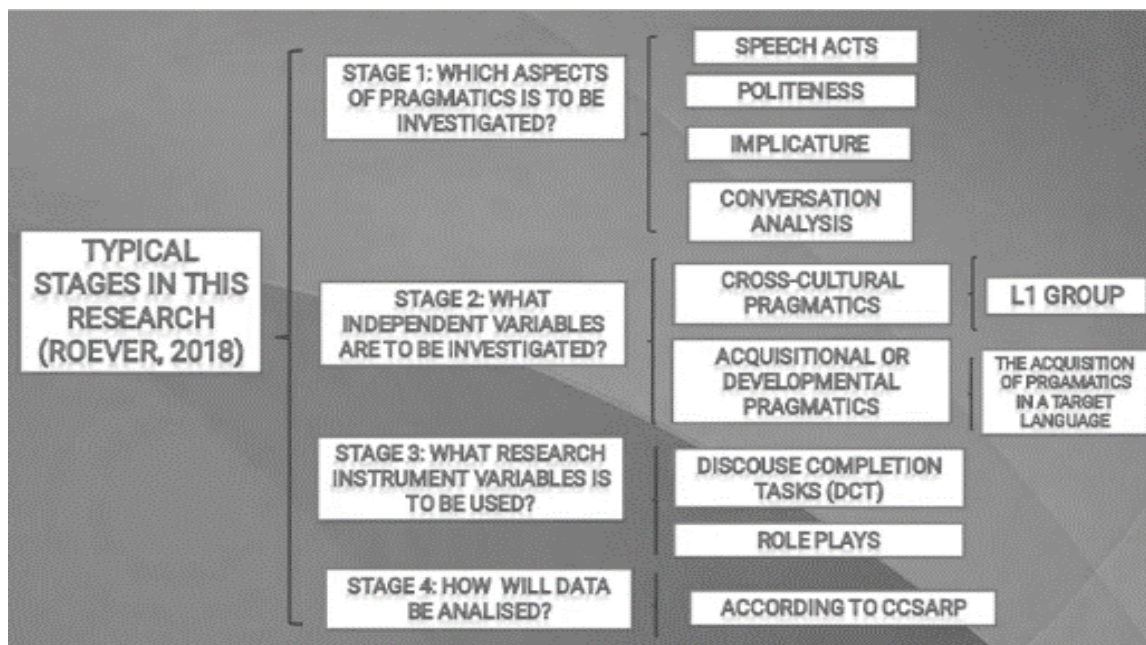
Source: Roever, 2018.

In the current research for **Stage 1**, it was chosen to work on speech acts. According to Yule (1996), "speech acts is action which is performed via utterances" (p. 47). And within the speech acts, it was decided to work on requests. Requests are those illocutionary acts belonging to Searle's category of directives. Requests are "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They may be very modest attempts as when I invite you to do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (Safon, 2008, p. 13). That is the speaker is going to use language to move others to action.

For **Stage 2**, it was necessary to choose between cross-cultural pragmatics and acquisitional or developmental pragmatics. That is, to look at how learners of L2 get familiar with the social context of language, and since this paper is working with students of EFL that is the case.

For **Stage 3,** is, to choose the instruments to gather information. It was chosen to work with a pragmatics awareness questionnaire. (**See Appendix A**)

For **Stage 4** which requires explaining how the information will be analyzed; it was decided to apply frequency tables and emergent themes.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Among those authors who have studied the development of Pragmatics competencies in L2, it could be mentioned: Rahimi and Hashemian (2014), with their research paper titled "Pragmatic Awareness of the Request Speech Act in English as an Additional Language: Monolinguals or Bilinguals?" which attempted to investigate the effect of bilingualism on pragmatic awareness and development among Iranian Turkish/Persian EFL learners. The data were collected through a personal profile questionnaire with questions about the participants' language background in 5 situations to determine the extent to which the bilinguals demonstrated their pragmatic awareness of requests. Students were asked to read the situations and assess whether they realized the (in) appropriateness of the speech acts. For inappropriateness, they were also asked to explain their selections and provide appropriate alternatives. Responses were analyzed according to 3 social factors of power, distance, and degree of imposition with the assumption that the more references to these factors, the more pragmatically aware the participants. Failure in communication may be due to their lack of cultural awareness, literary skills, and insufficient L2/L3 pragmatic input. This study relates to the present research in which it tries to understand how L2 learners perceive their requests acts and which social circumstances may influence them.

Hydaya (2016), in his investigation called "Speech Acts: Force Behind Words" establishes that the speech act is a part of Pragmatics where there are certain aims beyond the words or phrases when a speaker says something. Speech acts are acts that refer to the action performed by produced utterances. People can perform an action by saying something. Through speech acts, the speaker can convey physical action merely through words and phrases. The conveyed utterances are paramount to the actions performed. In regard to English as a foreign language, there are things to consider. It is easy for the speakers or listeners to determine the intended meaning of utterances if they are spoken in the mother tongue. Factors such as idiomatic expressions and cultural norms are not function as barriers to determining the intended meaning. This research is related to the present investigation in which it tries to understand requests as speech acts as a whole.

Finally, Yunus (2019), in his research paper called "The Speech Act of Request in the ESL Classroom" is going to identify the types of request strategies employed by the participants in making requests and explore the factors influencing their choice of strategies. The participants of the study are students and two language teachers of a rural secondary school in Kedah. Data collection was done by first recording naturally occurring data in the classroom. The data is then analyzed based on Blum-Kulka and Olshstain's (1984) CCSARP framework and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Subsequently, the participants identified are administered the Discourse Completion Tests (DCT). Preliminary findings show that students seem to be less polite when speaking to peers and more polite when speaking to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, speak less politely to students as they have more power. This study provides valuable insights into the study of classroom pragmatics in Malaysia and future research should be conducted in urban school settings to gain more comprehensive data in this area of study. This research is related to the present study by the fact that it sheds light on how to understand students' process of making decisions when requesting in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and method.

This research follows a mix-method approach because it combines quantitative data, and the instrument also provides some qualitative insights (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Here pragmatic

knowledge is controlled and measured, and it pretends to understand the social meaning the students convey by saying that some utterances are appropriate or not.

Universe, population, and sample.

The study was carried out at ULA University, in Táchira Campus, where there are approximately 400 students in foreign language education precisely with students from different semesters. 4 male students and 3 female students from ages ranging between 18 and 27 years decided to participate in the study.

Instruments to collect data.

The instrument to collect data will be an open-ended questionnaire on Pragmatics awareness. Students will be asked about their perception of the appropriateness or inappropriateness concerning 5 request cases, but they will also point out the reason for their answers, and correct the expressions in some cases. This instrument has been chosen because it offers the students, the possibility to express their reasons for their votes.

Procedures:

Following the stages in Pragmatics research, the following procedures were established:

Stage 1. it was chosen to work on speech acts.

Stage 2, it was chosen to work on acquisitional or developmental pragmatics. That is, to look at how learners of L2 get familiar with the social context of language, and since this paper is working with students of EFL that is the case.

Stage 3. It was chosen to apply a pragmatics awareness questionnaire. (**See Appendix A**).

Stage 4. The questionnaire was updated according to the given context, ULA students, and applied to a group of 7 students with B2 English levels.
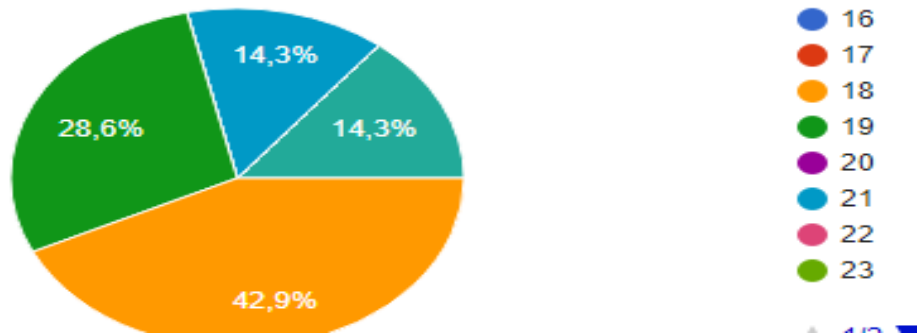
Stage 5. The information was presented in graphics or tables, and emergent themes were raised according to the data collected.
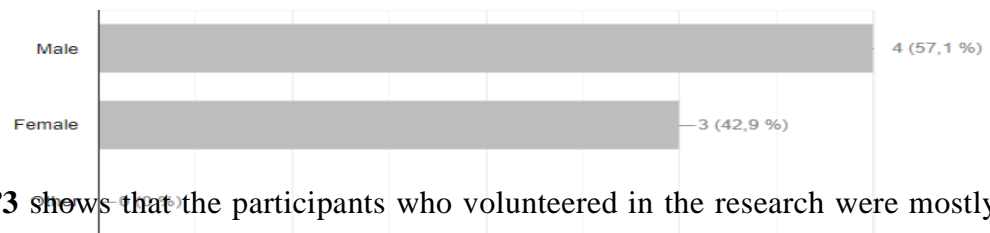
Results. Major Findings.

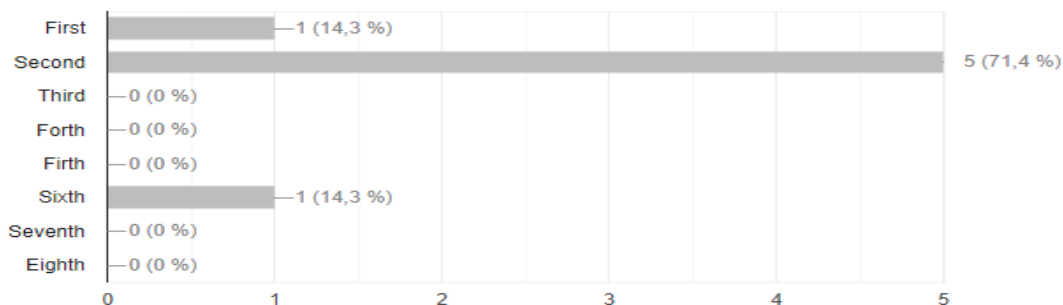**Graphic Nº 2. Age of the participants.**

Graphic Nº 2 shows that 03 of the participants are 23 years old, which is 42, 9% of the sample; two are 19 years old, which is, 28, 6 % of the sample; one is 21 years for 14.3%, and the other is 27 years old for the 14.3%. That represents 100% of the sample.

Graphic Nº 3. Gender

Graphic Nº3 shows that the participants who volunteered in the research were mostly male participants: 4 (57, 7%), but also 3 female participants (42, 9%). For the total of 100%.
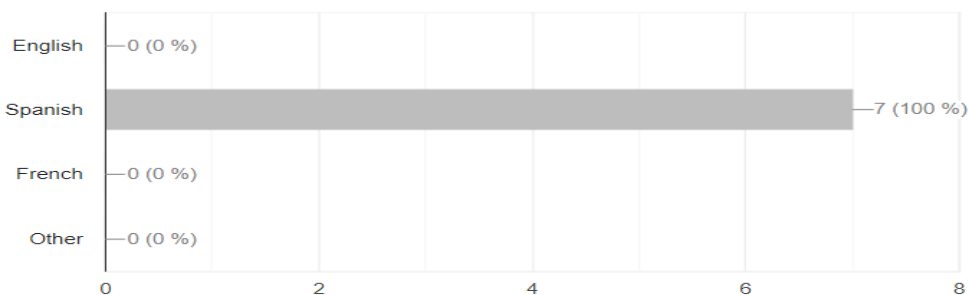
Graphic Nº 4. Semester

Graphic Nº 4 shows that 71.4 % (5 students) of the participants are taking second semester classes, meanwhile 14.3 % (1 student) belongs to the sixth semester, and 14.3% belongs to first semester.

Graphic Nº 5. Participants' mother tongue.

Graphic Nº 5 shows that the 100% of sample (7 students) have Spanish as their mother tongue, that is, they are learning or speak English as a foreign language.

Graphic Nº 6. L2 learning languages at ULA
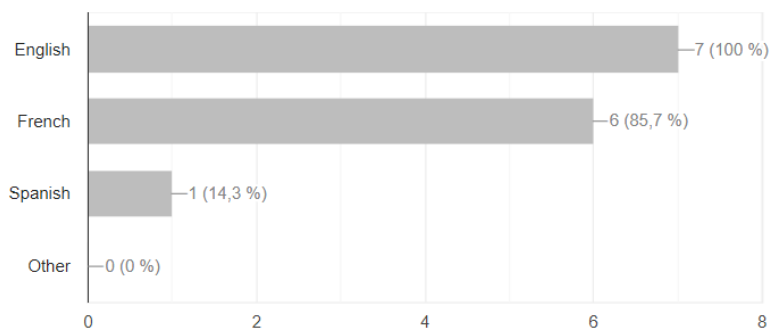
Graphic Nº 6 shows that 100% (7 students) of the participants are learning EFL, 85.7% (6 students) are learning French, and 14.3% (1 student) is learning Spanish.

Graphic Nº 7. Situation Number 1

You are trying to study in a classroom and you hear loud music coming from another student in the classroom nearby. You do not know the student, but you decide to ask him to turn the music down. You tell the students:

Excuse me, what's the name of the music? Sounds good, I like it. But, oh, I'm sorry it is not the right place, I'm just doing some important work. Do you mind turning it down? Thanks so much. I wish I have another chance to listen to it, but not now.
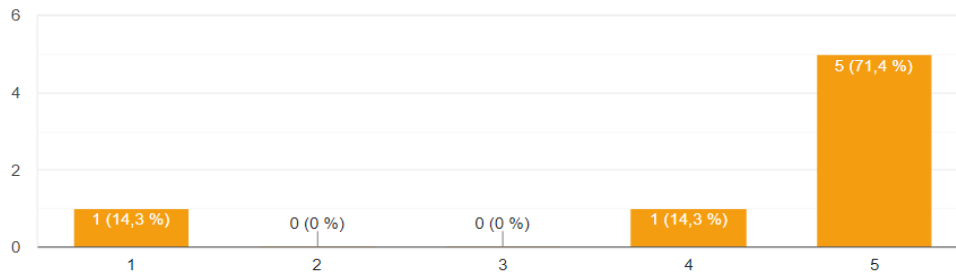
Graphic Nº 7 shows that from a scale of very inappropriate (1) to appropriate (5), 71.4% (5 students) of the participants find the request expressions like "I'm sorry it is not the right place", "Do you mind turn it down?" very appropriate among students you do not know at all, and 14.3% find it almost very appropriate. Among the reasons for this answer, it is possible to point out: "*it is appropriate, you are kind in the way that you ask to them turn the music off*"; "*it is very appropriate because the student who heard the noise is so respectful trying to talk in a good way to the other student about if he may turn down the volume of the song, but the way that was chosen by the first student is so interesting, the first thing that he said was something like: that song is so good, and is a good way to deal with that situation.*"

In the same order of ideas, 14, 3% (1 student) find it very inappropriate, and instead of using this kind of request for this social context, it would rather say: "*Could you turn down the music, please?*"

Graphic Nº 8. Situation Number 2

You want to go to the toilet now. The toilet is not clean, and you do not know the cleaner. When you see the t̶ cleaner, you say:

Lady, I'd like you to clean the toilets. Would you please do that for me?
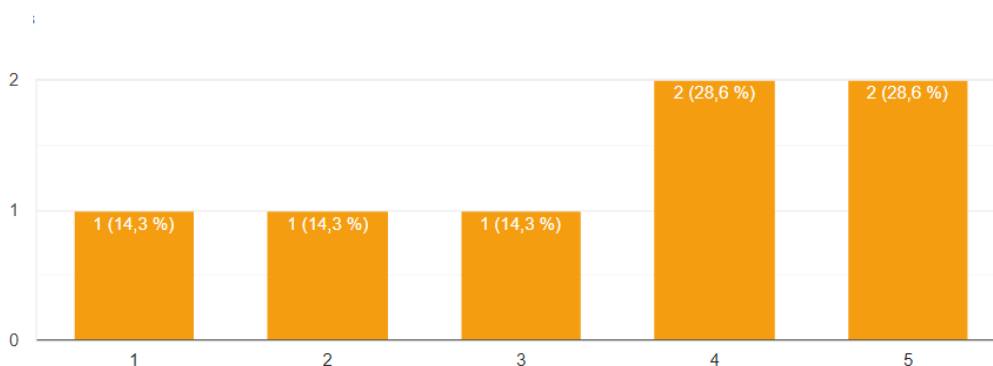
Graphic Nº 8 shows that this situation confronts different opinions regarding appropriateness. 14, 3% (1 student) of the participants find it very inappropriate, and 14, 3% (1 student) find it almost very inappropriate. 14,3% find it neutral, but 28,6% (2 students) find it almost very appropriate, and the last 28.6 % (2 students) find it very appropriate.

In this order of ideas, it would be quite interesting to know the reason for the request "I'd like you to clean the toilets. Would you please do that for me?" They answer: "*Again, in this situation, we're asking politely to do that thing, so it seems appropriate for me*"; "*It is the lady who cleans therefore I think it is her duty to do it*"; "*he was the boy expresses himself is so educated*". It is right to express in this way and in this situation because it is related to the person's job and duty.

Nevertheless, it is found inappropriate for this reason: *I can't find a better way to ask anyone in a situation like that. For example, Girls would you please help me to clean? Or Sorry the bathroom is a little dirty. Can you clean it when you have a chance?* So requests here must be followed by a certain compromise and participation of the students to clean it.

Graphic Nº 9. Situation Number 3

You are now discussing your assignment with the professor. Your professor speaks very fast. You do not follow what he is saying, so you want to ask him to say it again. You tell you professor:

Sorry, professor, can you repeat that?
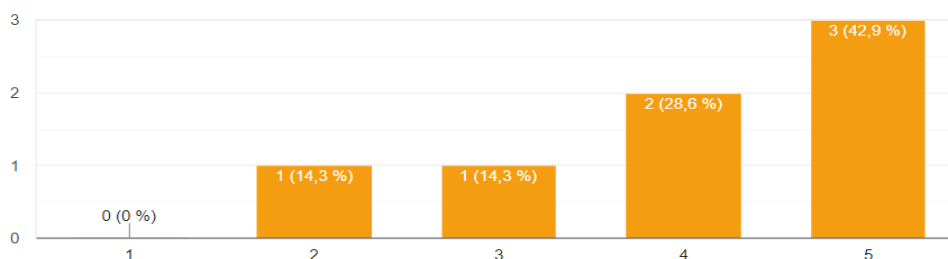
Graphic Nº 9 shows that when asking a professor to repeat something he has just said, expressions like "sorry, professor, can you repeat that?" is: almost very inappropriate (14,3%); neutral (14,3%); almost very appropriate (28.6 %); very appropriate (42, 9%). Among the reasons for finding it very appropriate, it is found: "*it's appropriate because we're asking kindly to the professor, especially in this situation when we really need to know that information!"; "I think it is appropriate because the student does not understand you and is asking you in a nice way repeat it.*" They also point out it is inappropriate because: "*it's better to use the modal could*", and "*We have to be more educated at that momen*t". In this expression respect and admiration play an important role in the request. Participants propose the following requests as fitter for the situation: *Sorry Professor, could you repeat that, please?* Or *Excuse me, professor! I will wait until you finish your class to clear my doubts.*

Graphic Nº 10. Situation Number 4

Your computer is down because of a virus. One of your professors is very skillful in fixing computers. You know he has been very busy recently, but you still want to ask him to fix your computer. You tell your professor:

Good morning, Mr. Smith, I hear you are very skillful at fixing computers. So I hope you can help me. It is a little trouble; it won't take you much time, OK?
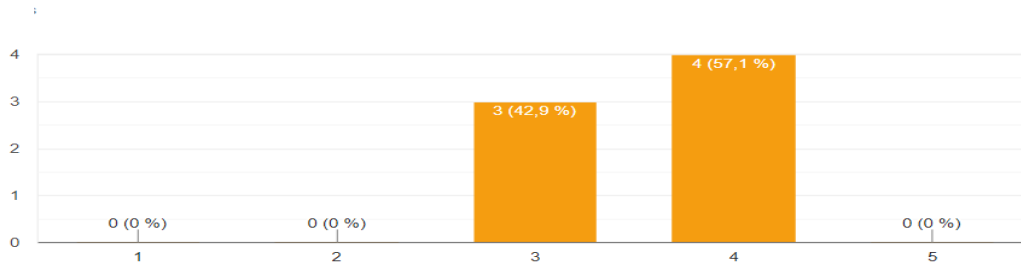

Graphic Nº 9 shows that for 42.9% (3 students) at ULA the way in which the requests were done to the professor is almost very appropriate, and 57,1 % (4 students) believe it is very appropriate. The reasons they have are: *This way to ask him is so good, the professor could be busy and just for it, I'm saying: "it won't take you much time".* Or *I think that is appropriate, they could even come to an agreement to pay for that service if they want to.* On the other hand, participants propose that even though it is an appropriate request it could be improved with phases like *Hello! Professor, I heard that you know how to fix computers, can you check my computer and see if you can fix it, please? Or Teacher my computer has a little problem with the system, I will wait until you have some free time, because I need you to help me with that problem.*

Graphic Nº 11. Situation Number 5

You are in a very extremely important class. In class, the mobile phone of one of your classmates rings. You ask you classmate to turn off his mobile phone. You tell your classmate:

I need to understand this class, please make sure your cellphone is switched off for the rest of the class.
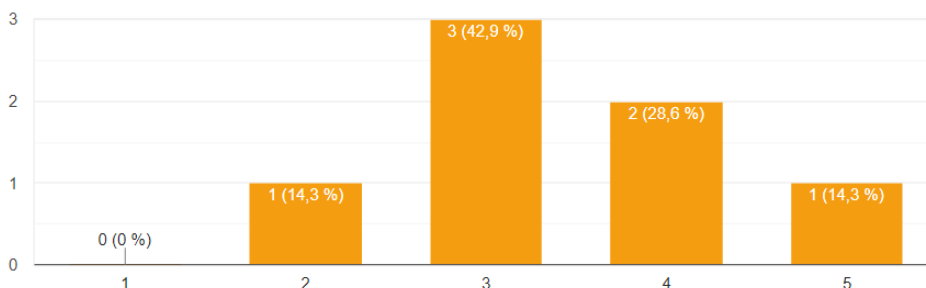
Graphic Nº 10 shows that 14.3% (1 student) of the participants find this request to be almost very inappropriate, 42.9% (3 students) find it neutral; 28.6% (2 students) find it almost very appropriate; and 14.3% (1 student) find it very appropriate. The reason the students were giving not to find it appropriate was: *I understand this situation but I think that we can be more patient because probably he forgets or he has a situation that requires him to be alert on his phone.* Or *I think it sounds like an order, in this case. There are so many ways better than that to ask him if can switch off his cell phone.* The students would improve the requests by saying: *I'm sorry for bothering you, may you turn off your phone, please? This class is important, even for you!*, or *Excuse me, your phone is being loud and I can't pay attention to the class, could you switch off the cellphone? Please.*

Analysis of Data Collection

From the Pragmatics point of view, it is important to say that students at ULA University are so aware of the social context in which requests take place. They want to have effective communication not only by paying attention to the words they say but also using the right register. For this reason, it is perceived in the data collected that when communicating in L2 they want their requests to be very formal or polite most of the time.

Situation numbers 01 and 05 focus on requests among students. Request number 1 shows that from the scale of very inappropriate (1) to appropriate (5), 71.4% (5 students) of the participants find the request expressions like "I'm sorry it is not the right place" to be very appropriate among students. Though they do not know the other person, familiarity with the way things are asked is considered to be very important. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin being sympathetic to the interlocutor.

In situation number 5, students know each other, but one of them is bothering the class. So for the effectiveness of the requests, 14.3% (1 student) of the participants find this request to be almost very inappropriate, 42.9% (3 students) find it neutral; 28.6% (2 students) find it almost very appropriate; and 14.3% (1 student) find it very appropriate. Students find that this person may have an emergency, so that is the reason why they have their cell phone on. Nevertheless, the request could be modified by calling the student's awareness of the importance of the topic, in this way it would be effective: I'm sorry to bother you, may you turn off your phone, please? This class is important, even for you!

In situation number 2, the social context is determined by a conversation between a student and a university worker, in this case, the person in charge of cleaning the toilets. 14, 3% (1 student) of the participants find it very inappropriate to ask the person to clean the toilet by saying: "lady, I'd like to clean the toilet. Would you do that for me please?" 14, 3% (1 student) find it almost very inappropriate. 14, 3% find it neutral, but 28,6% (2 students) find it almost very appropriate, and the last 28.6 % (2 students) find it very appropriate. Participants were saying that this is not a women's job, so they do not agree with a request like this. Others that it would be gentler to tell the cleaner to help you clean. A modification in the request would be: Sorry the bathroom is a little dirty. Can you clean it when you have a chance?

Situations 3 and 4 address requests when talking to professors. It is perceived that students find it very important to be formal when asking for something from them. In the case of asking to repeat something by saying "sorry, professor, can you repeat that?" they find it almost very inappropriate (14,3%); neutral (14,3%); almost very appropriate (28.6 %); very appropriate (42, 9%). The request may be modified following the social respect for university professors: *Sorry Professor, could you repeat that, please?* Or *Excuse me, professor! I will wait until you finish your class to clear my doubts.* Here students want to show that they do not want to sound bossy with what they consider their authorities: their professors.

CONCLUSIONS

Pragmatics cares about the social context behind the use of expressions. Requests -as speech acts- are ways of asking others to perform some actions, but when talking about L2 learners, they do not necessarily have the knowledge of how to address different people, and in accordance with the kind of relationship they have. It is necessary to help students to be aware of the development of the right social meanings.

Students at ULA University hold different kinds of relationships. Among those, they have to communicate with other classmates or professors in the L2 language. From the research, it was found that students tend to be very formal when requesting something from professors and very neutral or bossy when talking to their pairs. It is recommended for professors of different subjects to help students to be aware of others' reality, and to communicate effectively to avoid misunderstandings. Research in this linguistic area would help to propose manuals for effective

communication, or even pedagogical guides to train effectively in requesting things in different situations.

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