Does participating in a telecollaborative project foster the acquisition of apologies? Insights from the English for specific purposes context

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Abstract. The aim of the study was to investigate whether telecollaboration is a suitable environment for the acquisition of the speech act of apologies. Participants were aerospace engineering students from the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain) who performed six open role-plays to elicit apologies. The Control Group (CG, n=17) carried out the task in pairs with their Spanish classmates in a Face-To-Face (FTF) setting, while the Experimental Group (EG, n=7) conducted the task with first language (L1) or highly proficient speakers of English from the University of Bath (UK) through synchronous Zoom sessions. The results of the descriptive analysis revealed a higher tendency of improvement in the EG, which also used a higher number of strategies compared to the CG. Findings from the quantitative analysis carried out through an Eta coefficient revealed a significant correlation (r=.71) between the number of strategies used and the modality where they were performed.

Keywords: synchronous computer-mediated communication, telecollaboration, cyberpragmatics, speech acts, apologies, English for specific purposes.

1. Introduction

Since Yus (2011) coined the term cyberpragmatics to describe "the online focus of pragmatics" (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018, p. 26), the interest in analysing the pragmatic implications of online encounters has increased, although the field of second language (L2) pragmatics in Computer-Assisted Language Learning

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(CALL) is still under-researched (Blyth & Sykes, 2020). Nevertheless, cyberpragmatics plays a crucial role in telecollaboration, and for that reason students in higher education should be trained on that to become global citizens (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, telecollaboration can be beneficial for the teaching and learning of L2 pragmatics because it fosters learners' exposure to L2 pragmatic features (Belz, 2007; González-Lloret, 2021; Rafieyan et al., 2014).

Following the recommendation made by Blyth and Sykes (2020), this paper focuses on L2 pragmatics and digitally-mediated interaction through video conference sessions. Specifically, we focused on the speech act of apologies, which are a characteristic of English-speaking societies (Leech, 2014). In fact, according to Halenko (2021),

> "research shows producing pragmatically appropriate language in a British context may be particularly problematic for international students from positive politeness cultures (Brown & Levinson, 1987) such as Spain" (p. 6).

Moreover, it should be highlighted that, while grammatical errors can be tolerated, pragmatic mistakes can cause cultural misunderstandings (González-Lloret, 2021), and can take place despite the high linguistic proficiency of the learner (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The next section will explore the methodology followed to conduct the study.

2. Method

This paper focuses on the improvement of Spanish students' use of apologies. For that reason, we will compare the results obtained from a CG and an EG.

Participants of the CG were 17 Spanish-speaking students from the Universitat Politècnica de València, while those in the EG were seven Spanish students from the same university who participated in a telecollaboration project with highly proficient or L1 speakers of English from the University of Bath. They were enrolled in an optional third-year B2 level (CEFR) English for specific purposes subject in the aerospace engineering degree. All participants completed a questionnaire as a pre-test before receiving the treatment, which consisted of explicit instruction on pragmatics and apology performance by means of a PowerPoint presentation and audiovisual input. Afterwards, participants were expected to carry out six open

role-plays (one per week) whose main aim was to elicit apologies. The difference between the CG and the EG lies in the fact that the former carried out the task with their Spanish classmates in a traditional FTF setting, while the latter performed the role-plays in synchronous video conference sessions with their partners from Bath. At the end of the project, students from both groups completed the same questionnaire as a post-test. The survey was composed of ten multiple choice questions aimed at gathering information about the participants' use of apologies before and after the treatment.

The role-plays were recorded and transcribed. The strategies used to apologise were coded following a taxonomy based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Leech (2014), and Martínez-Flor (2016), and its frequency was calculated by means of a quantitative content analysis. Furthermore, the descriptive statistics of the responses from the pre- and post-test for each group were compared. Finally, the Eta coefficient was calculated to see if there was any relation between the number of strategies used by the members of each group and the modality where they were performed (i.e. FTF or telecollaboration).

3. Results and discussion

A total number of 81 role-plays were transcribed and analysed. Table 1 illustrates the results obtained from the classification of apologies strategies. An extra category was added for those strategies which did not belong to any of the established categories, but which we believed were the result of participants' L1 transfer. In terms of frequency, the EG used a slightly wider range of strategies compared to the CG. In fact, even though the EG was smaller than the CG, it used almost the same number of strategies. The main categories used by the CG are expressions of the Speaker's (S) regret such as *I am sorry*, explanations of why the fault occurred, and using a performative utterance such as *I apologise*. Conversely, apart from those strategies, the EG used much more apology intensifications such as *truly (sorry),* showing concern for the Hearer (H), and promises of forbearance.

Table 2 summarises the findings from the descriptive analysis of the CG. The mean (M) revealed that there was a slight improvement only in Items 2, 3, 8, and 10. Conversely, in the case of the EG the improvement was observed in the M of Items 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9, while Items 4, 5, and 10 showed no variation (Table 3). A regression was observed only in Item 2, while different items of the CG showed a slight regression.

Table 1. Frequency of strategies used to apologise

Strategy	**Type**	**CG**		**EG**	
		n	**%**	**n**	**%**
Head act	Expression of S's regret	74	38.54	49	26.77
	Asking H's pardon or forgiveness	1	0.52	3	1.64
	Using a performative utterance	11	5.73	5	2.73
Expression of responsibility	Explicit self-blame	7	3.65	4	2.19
	Denial of fault	1	0.52	1	0.55
Explanation of why the fault occurred		41	21.35	28	15.30
Offer of repair		15	7.81	17	9.29
Promise of forbearance		8	4.17	16	8.74
Apology intensification	Concern for the H	4	2.08	12	6.56
	Intensifier/modifier	26	13.54	38	20.77
L1 transfer		4	2.08	10	5.46
TOTAL N of strategies used		**192**		**184**	
TOTAL N of role-plays		**50**		**31**	

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the CG

		M	**SD**
Item 1	Pre-test	2.762	0.539
	Post-test	2.647	0.786
Item 2	Pre-test	2.810	0.512
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 3	Pre-test	2.048	1.024
	Post-test	2.294	0.985
Item 4	Pre-test	2.810	0.402
	Post-test	2.824	0.393
Item 5	Pre-test	2.905	0.436
	Post-test	2.882	0.485
Item 6	Pre-test	2.524	0.750
	Post-test	2.353	0.931
Item 7	Pre-test	2.952	0.218
	Post-test	2.824	0.529
Item 8	Pre-test	2.667	0.577
	Post-test	2.706	0.588
Item 9	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	2.941	0.243
Item 10	Pre-test	1.952	0.740
	Post-test	2.235	0.664

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the EG

		M	SD
Item 1	Pre-test	2.857	0.378
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 2	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	2.714	0.756
Item 3	Pre-test	2.143	1.069
	Post-test	2.429	0.976
Item 4	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 5	Pre-test	3.000	0.000
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 6	Pre-test	2.143	0.690
	Post-test	2.571	0.787
Item 7	Pre-test	2.857	0.378
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 8	Pre-test	2.857	0.378
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 9	Pre-test	2.857	0.378
	Post-test	3.000	0.000
Item 10	Pre-test	2.000	0.577
	Post-test	2.000	1.000

Finally, the results of the Eta coefficient showed a statistically significant correlation between the number of strategies used to apologise by each student and the work modality as r =.71, which means that those students who participated in the telecollaboration used a higher number of strategies to apologise.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study shed light on the effect that telecollaboration can have on the acquisition of the speech act of apologies. Although the main limitation is the small sample size, they showed that there is a relation between the number of strategies used to apologise during role-plays and participating or not in a telecollaboration. Moreover, the findings from the pre- and post-test revealed a higher tendency of improvement in the case of the EG. The study will be replicated to corroborate these results. In the light of the results obtained, future research should investigate the effects of telecollaboration on the acquisition of speech acts.

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