

**A comparison of heritage learners and L2 learners of Spanish: A study on  
compliment sequences in the classroom**

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**Abstract:** The present study sought to evaluate the pragmatic competence of heritage learners of Spanish in regard to compliment sequences and the impact that pragmatic lessons would have on these students. To this end, pre and post tests to assess pragmatic recognition in regard to Spanish compliments were designed by the researchers and completed by the participants before and after a series of pragmatic interventions. Control and experimental groups were established in order to evaluate other potential variables involved. Additionally, the same lessons were implemented in two beginner L2 Spanish groups (one control and one experimental) as to determine whether or not the lessons were more suited for this demographic of students. Preliminary data suggest that the heritage groups of students already have high pragmatic competence in regard to compliments and that lessons do not have an impact on this type of learner. On the other hand, the beginner L2 Spanish students greatly benefited from the interventions and experienced statistically significant growth in the experimental group. The effect size was also calculated and found that the interventions had little to no impact on the heritage experimental group and a very large impact on the L2 experimental group. The conclusions of the study suggest that it may not be necessary to teach pragmatic norms to heritage language learners. Design, lessons, pedagogical interventions, and recommendations for future study are included.

**Keywords:** pragmatic competence, compliments, Spanish as a heritage language, Spanish as a foreign language, pragmatic lessons

## **Introduction**

According to Gironzetti and Koike (2016), studies on the peculiarities of heritage learners' acquisition of a language are scarce, with most studies focusing on this group's phonetic variances (Ronquest, 2013), grammatical competence (Montrul, 2004), and language maintenance (Rivera-Mills, 2012). Likewise, investigations into the intercultural and pragmatic competencies of heritage learners are almost nonexistent, with the exception of an analysis by Barros and Bachelor (2018) that determined that heritage learners already employed appropriate pragmatic strategies with regard to requests. With so little evidence available, Gironzetti and Koike (2016) have called on investigators to address this gap in research and beg the question, "should we attempt to teach heritage language learners ... pragmatics?" (p. 91).

Outside of the field of heritage learner research, second language acquisition specialists have long noticed a lack of awareness by foreign language teachers to include pragmatic lessons in their curriculum (Vellenga, 2011). This discovery is grave considering researchers have determined that a lack of pragmatic awareness has a negative impact on a student's ability to communicate effectively in the target language (Bachelor, 2016; V.G. & Rajan, 2012). Leading students toward communicating effectively in the target language has become the main goal of language teachers in recent years (Bachelor, 2015; Barnard Bachelor, 2017); as such, it is important to also analyze the pragmatic competence of heritage learners of a language as well.

Compliments were chosen for three main reasons. First of all, their realization varies greatly from culture to culture. Barros García (2018) explains that "different cultures make different uses of compliments, not only in the devices used to formulate them but also on their frequency of appearance, the contexts where they are considered appropriate, the responses of the complimentees, the recognition of an utterance as a compliment, and the functions performed by the speech act" (p. 148). Second,

compliments are among the most widely used speech acts in Spanish for establishing and/or consolidating interpersonal relationships, especially in informal Spanish (Barros García, 2011). Additionally, they are rarely included in curriculum, even by teachers who purport to teach pragmatics to L2 learners (Smith, 2009). As Yousefvand, Yousofi, and Abasi (2014) explain, “speakers need to know when and how it is appropriate to give [someone] a compliment or respond to the received compliment” as to not be considered “ill-cultured while communicating in a foreign language” (p. 182).

The goal of this paper is to expand upon the research by Barros García and Bachelor (2018) in an attempt to further answer the question posed by Gironzetti and Koike (2016). Rather than requests, we will look at compliment sequences among heritage learners and L2 learners of Spanish to determine whether or not 1) pragmatic lessons on compliments are necessary for heritage learners, 2) pragmatic lessons on compliments positively impact heritage learners, and 3) pragmatic lessons on compliments positively impact L2 learners.

## **Literature Review**

### *Pragmatics and Compliment Sequences in Spanish*

Pragmatic competence is “the ability to use language appropriately in a social context” (Taguchi, 2009, p. 1). Many researchers have determined that pragmatic competence is key to second language acquisition and in overall communicative competence (Grossi, 2009). A lack of pragmatic knowledge can lead to miscommunications, which may result in the speaker being unintentionally labeled “insensitive, rude, or inept” (Tello Rueda, 2006). In fact, native speakers consistently rate pragmatic errors as more severe than other types of errors (grammatical, phonetic or lexical) (Wolfe, Shanmugaraj & Sipe, 2016). Unfortunately, Vellenga (2011) explains that pragmatic lessons are not often included in L2 curriculum, and that many teachers assume that pragmatic norms are the same in both the L1 and the L2. This leads the L2 student to make pragmatic mistakes due to negative transfer,

that is, when the L2 learner transfers “first language (L1) pragmatic rules into second language (L2) domains” (Grossi, 2009, p. 53).

For those teachers who do attempt to implement and create pragmatic lessons in their classrooms, much of the focus is on improving a student’s ability to produce and understand speech acts (Langer, 2011). Speech acts are expressions that carry out a communicative task, such as requests, invitations, refusals, and compliments. Their production requires not only knowledge of the language but cultural knowledge as well (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition [CARLA], 2016).

Specifically, compliments are “expressions of positive evaluation that commonly occur in everyday conversational encounters among interlocutors” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2011, para 1). The goal of a compliment and its response is derived from a general social objective that consists of creating or maintaining an atmosphere of kindness, expressing solidarity and appreciation, as well as establishing an interactional context that facilitates collaboration between the interlocutors (Torío Sánchez, 2004). In addition, Torío Sánchez (2004) observed that most compliments fall into two categories: (1) appearance or possession, such as clothing, haircut, house, car, and (2) skills in general or the achievement of a particular act.

As mentioned before, the production of a speech act may differ significantly from culture to culture, as well as the responses to that particular speech act. In the case of compliments, Smith (2009) found that “Spanish speakers are more likely [than speakers of other languages] to utilize strategies like refusing, downgrading, and questioning in responding to compliments” (p. 106). In fact, rejection or mitigation of the compliment is frequent in Spanish and speakers rarely accept a compliment with a simple “thank you” (Barros García, 2018; Maíz-Arévalo, 2010; Ramajo, 2012). In sum, unlike their English counterparts who often accept a compliment with a simple “thank you,” Spanish speakers typically reject a compliment, downgrade a compliment, attribute a compliment to someone else, or question or doubt a

compliment (Barros García, 2018; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Maíz-Arévalo, 2010; Ramajo, 2012; Smith, 2009).

#### *Teaching and Learning Pragmatics*

There are many arguments in support of teaching pragmatics to L2 learners and for including pragmatics in curriculum (Vellenga, 2011). In fact, there are “many aspects of L2 pragmatics that are not acquired without the benefit of instruction” (Tello Rueda, 2006, p. 171). Likewise, research suggests that grammatical competence does not necessarily lead to pragmatic competence in L2 students when performing speech acts and that pragmatics should be taught (Bachelor, 2016). However, there is much debate about the best way to acquire pragmatic competence; as Murillo Medrano (2004) explains, it is evident that L2 learners have more than one way to acquire or learn pragmatic concepts: on the one hand, students may acquire pragmatic knowledge via daily contact with native speakers, which has been called a non-interventionist approach and, on the other, there is a possibility that these concepts can be taught in the classroom (interventionist approach).

Kasper and Rose (2002) evaluated years worth of research regarding the teaching of pragmatics to L2 students and determined that “there is considerable evidence indicating that a range of features of second language pragmatics are teachable ... Second, it appears that learners who receive instruction fare better than those who do not” (p. 269).

#### *Heritage Learners and Pragmatics*

Heritage language learners within the United States have been defined as students of a language who are “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speak or merely understand the heritage language, and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdés, 2000, p. 1). Spanish Heritage Learners (SHL) share some language learning traits with L2 learners; according to Correa (2011, p. 128), “neither of them are monolinguals of Spanish, both groups usually fail to develop full linguistic ability in the target language and end up with

similar grammars.” However, SHL “may require substantially less instructional time than FL learners to develop the same skills” (p. 128).

Studies on the acquisition of pragmatics among heritage learners are scarce (Taguchi, Zhang, & Li, 2017). Among those completed, Pinto and Raschio (2007) compared request production between heritage learners and L2 learners of Spanish with native speakers. They found many instances of heritage speakers using English-like pragmatic structures in Spanish, and also discovered that they were less direct than their native Spanish counterparts. This is not unheard of, as there are also cases of L1 speakers employing L2 pragmatic norms in their L1 after having lived in the L2 culture for an extended period of time; this phenomenon is referred to as “backward pragmatic transfer” (Cao, 2016, p. 1846). As such, it is very possible that heritage learners of Spanish who have lived all or the majority of their lives in the United States may take on American English pragmatic norms when speaking in Spanish.

However, this is not always the case. With regard to a study that compared heritage learners of Chinese to L2 learners of Chinese, Taguchi, Zhang, and Li (2017) discovered that the heritage group outperformed the L2 group in both comprehension and production of pragmatic expressions, and displayed native-like pragmatic norms. Similarly, Barros García and Bachelor (2018) gave speaking and written tests on request strategies to a group of SHL speakers, and discovered that they too displayed native-like pragmatic norms. As such, these studies are in conflict with that by Pinto and Raschio (2007).

While comparative studies are rare, even more scarce are studies regarding the impact pragmatic lessons may have on heritage learners. Barros García and Bachelor (2018) attempted to create pragmatic lessons regarding request strategies for SHL. Not only did the pragmatic lessons not help the SHL’s competency, but the opposite occurred, as many speakers in this group actually experienced a slight decrease on their written and oral DCTs after the intervention.

As such, the present study hopes to expand on the studies by Barros García and Bachelor (2018), Taguchi, Zhang, and Li (2017), and Pinto and Raschio (2007) to help close the gap in research on heritage learners' pragmatic competence and the impact pragmatic lessons have on it.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Questions*

In order to address the above mentioned goals, the following research questions were selected:

1. What effect does prolonged contact with North American English have on the ability of SHL to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner (according to the notions of pragmatic appropriateness established by previous research)?

2. What effect do pragmatic classroom interventions have on the ability of SHL to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner (according to the notions of pragmatic appropriateness established by previous research)?

3. What effect do pragmatic classroom interventions have on the ability of L2 Spanish speakers to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner (according to the notions of pragmatic appropriateness established by previous research)?

### *Participants and Environment*

The present study took place during the 2017-2018 academic year for one semester at two separate institutions of higher education (site one and site two). According to U.S. News & World Report (2014), site one is a public institution of higher education with 5,215 students. The ethnicity of the institution is primarily White at approximately 75% of students. Black students encompass 10% of the total population. The average student age is 24, of whom 54% are female and 46% are male. Site one's location is metropolitan, located approximately 130-160 miles from two megacities in the Midwestern section of the United States. Several connecting

small towns, along with this mid-size city, compose the student population. Students from the L2 control and experimental groups attended site one for the duration of the study and were enrolled in a beginner Spanish course. The demographic information mentioned is representative of the students who participated in the study.

Site two is a private institution of higher education that is located in a megacity in the Midwestern region of the United States with 3,896 students, of whom 41% are White, 38% are Hispanic, and 12% are Black. A majority of students are considered “traditional” in that they are between the ages of 18 and 21. Females outrank males at site two and account for 67% of the school population (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Students from the heritage control and experimental groups attended site two for the duration of the study. The demographic information mentioned is representative of the study participants, except that 100% of them identified as Hispanic and 78% identified as female in a pre-intervention survey.

Overall, 62 students participated in the study. Of those, 23 L2 students from site one agreed to participate, 15 in the L2 experimental group and 8 in the L2 control group. From site two, 39 heritage group students agreed to participate in study, 18 in the heritage experimental group and 21 in the heritage control group. Students were identified as SHL based on additional information provided in the pre-intervention survey.

### *Instruments*

The instruments used for this study included a Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test (MCDCT) and three pragmatic lessons. The MCDCT is an original instrument that assessed both compliments and compliment responses (see Appendix) and consisted of ten questions, five compliments and five compliment responses; of those, five were formal situations, and five were informal situations. For each question, the student was presented with a scenario and had to choose the most appropriate response. MCDCTs have been used with success in pragmatic

research with students in a number of experimental studies (Bachelor, 2016; Bachelor, 2015; Jianda, 2006; Liu, 2007; Roever, 2006; Roever, 2005). As such, the researchers felt that it was a reliable tool for assessing student knowledge and pragmatic recognition. The “correct” answers on the MCDCT were real answers that were provided by ten native Spanish speakers who were given a DCT of the same scenarios before the study began. The researchers selected one real answer for each scenario that they interpreted to meet pragmatic norms, as evidenced in research by Smith (2009), Maíz-Arévalo (2010), Lorenzo-Dus (2001), and Ramajo (2012), who found that Spanish speakers often reject a compliment, downgrade a compliment, attribute a compliment to someone else, or question or doubt a compliment. The other answers represent atypical compliment strategies for Spanish, such as providing a simple thank you in informal situations or ignoring the compliment (Smith, 2009).

The first lesson was original and explained the basics of compliment sequences in Spanish in an explicit way followed by examples. Students were given the opportunity to fill out exercises that allowed them to practice the forms from the lesson and to think critically about why a certain compliment was more appropriate than another one.

The second lesson was also original and contained several video clips from throughout the Spanish-speaking world that contained compliment sequences. After watching the videos two to three times, the classroom teacher asked students to identify the compliments and their responses, the relationship between the speakers, and the purpose of the compliments.

The third lesson was a modified version of CARLA’s lesson on compliment sequences in Spanish (2006). The lesson was condensed and video clips were used to provide context. The nature of the lesson was an explicit explanation of compliments in Spanish followed by video examples.

All three lessons lasted for approximately 15 minutes each and as such made up 45 minutes of total class time during the semester.

### *Procedures and Design*

The present study employed a quantitative data analysis consisting of pre and post tests via the MCDCT and three interventions in the two experimental groups consisting of compliment sequence lessons. As previously mentioned, the study took place during one semester in the 2017-2018 academic year. There were four groups involved in the study: an L2 experimental group, an L2 control group, a heritage experimental group, and a heritage control group. Institutional Review Board authorization was granted at both sites and students provided consent before the onset of the study. The pre test (the MCDCT) was given to all consenting students in all groups two months into the semester. The pre test was not given sooner since the L2 students had no prior Spanish experience; as such, a pre test would have been rendered meaningless. After the pre test, the three mentioned pragmatic lessons took place, one occurring every three weeks, approximately. After the final classroom lesson and just before the end of the semester, all participants took a post test (the same MCDCT) as to determine potential growth between the pre and post tests.

### **Results**

Before comparing data from the pre and post tests, unpaired *t* tests were conducted to determine whether or not the control and experimental groups entered the study on equal footing. Data from the pre tests were compared to make this determination.

There was not a significant difference in the pre test scores from the L2 control group ( $M=30$ ,  $SD=19.15$ ) and the L2 experimental group ( $M=33.33$ ,  $SD=20.59$ );  $t(0.36)=20$ ,  $p=0.72$ . Likewise, no significant difference was found between the pre test scores from the heritage control group ( $M=74.29$ ,  $SD=16.3$ ) and the heritage experimental group ( $M=80.56$ ,  $SD=12.59$ );  $t(37)=1.33$ ,  $p=0.19$ .

For the purpose of answering the research question, each one will be repeated and answered in order.

1. *What effect does prolonged contact with North American English have on the ability of SHL to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner?*

In order to answer this question, pre test results were calculated in both the control and experimental heritage groups. The control group mean score was 74.29 while the experimental group mean score was 79.05. According to Ross (2008), students in Language Arts are considered proficient in the area being measured when they receive a score of 70% or higher. As such, heritage learners in both groups met the proficiency threshold.

2. *What effect do pragmatic classroom interventions have on the ability of SHL to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner?*

In order to answer this question, paired *t* tests were conducted in order to determine whether or not statistically significant growth occurred between the pre and post tests. These tests were conducted in both the experimental and control heritage groups as to discard other possible variables.

For the heritage control group, there was not a significant difference in the pre test scores ( $M=74.29$ ,  $SD=16.3$ ) and the post test scores ( $M=79.05$ ,  $SD=12.21$ );  $t(20)=1.27$ ,  $p=0.22$ . Likewise, no significant difference was found in the heritage experimental group between the pre test scores ( $M=80.56$ ,  $SD=12.59$ ) and the post test scores ( $M=82.78$ ,  $SD=16.02$ );  $t(17)=0.54$ ,  $p=0.59$ .

Additionally, an unpaired *t* test was employed to measure the statistical difference between the post test scores of the heritage control and experimental groups. No significant difference was found between the post test scores from the heritage control group ( $M=79.05$ ,  $SD=12.21$ ) and the heritage experimental group ( $M=82.78$ ,  $SD=16.02$ );  $t(37)=0.82$ ,  $p=0.42$ . However, a Cohen's *d* effect size was also calculated to determine the extent of the intervention's effect on the experimental group. As

calculated, Cohen's  $d=(82.78-79.05) / 14.242972=0.26$ . As such, an effect size of .2 is considered to be a "small effect." Additionally, according to Coe (2002), an effect size of this magnitude indicates that 58 percent of the control group would be below the average person in experimental group.

3. *What effect do pragmatic classroom interventions have on the ability of L2 Spanish speakers to identify compliments in Spanish in a pragmatically appropriate manner?*

As with the heritage groups, paired  $t$  tests were also conducted in the L2 groups to determine statistical growth between the pre and post tests.

For the L2 control group, there was not a significant difference in the pre test scores ( $M=30$ ,  $SD=19.15$ ) and the post test scores ( $M=34.29$ ,  $SD=19.02$ );  $t(6)=1.44$ ,  $p=0.199$ . However, a statistically significant difference was found in the L2 experimental group between the pre test scores ( $M=33.33$ ,  $SD=20.59$ ) and the post test scores ( $M=63.33$ ,  $SD=17.18$ );  $t(14)=6.40$ ,  $p=0.0001$ .

An unpaired  $t$  test also found a very statistically significant difference between the L2 control group post test scores ( $M=34.29$ ,  $SD=19.02$ ) and L2 experimental group post test scores ( $M=63.33$ ,  $SD=17.18$ );  $t(20)=3.57$ ,  $p=0.0019$ . Similarly, a Cohen's  $d$  effect size was also calculated to determine the extent of the intervention's effect on the experimental group. As calculated, Cohen's  $d=(63.33-34.29) / 18.123366=1.6$ . As such, an effect size of 1.6 is considered to be a "very large effect." Additionally, according to Coe (2002), an effect size of this magnitude indicates that 95 percent of the control group would be below the average person in experimental group.

### **Conclusions, Pedagogical Implications, Recommendations**

As demonstrated in the results, the findings from this study reject Pinto and Raschio's (2007) conclusions and concur with those by Barros García and Bachelor (2018) and Taguchi, Zhang, and Li (2017), in that the heritage learners in both the control and experimental groups entered the study with a high pragmatic competence with regard to their recognition of appropriate compliment strategies in

Spanish. This contributes to answering the final question posed by Barros García and Bachelor (2018): is there a need to teach pragmatic norms to heritage learners? We hesitantly conclude that no, these lessons may not be necessary for SHL enrolled in Spanish 200-level courses or above (the level of our student sampling).

In support of this conclusion, the results from the pre and post tests in the heritage experimental group did not undergo a statistically significant increase; as such, the lessons seemed to have a minimal to no impact on these learners. Additionally, the post test comparison between the control and experimental heritage groups also found no statistically significant difference. As such, it may be very difficult to improve the pragmatic competency of heritage learners. However, as previously mentioned, this may not be necessary.

Unsurprisingly, the L2 group of students benefited greatly from the interventions. The statistical significant growth experienced by this group of student is also supported by the post test comparison between the control and experimental groups, in which it was determined that the lessons had a very large effect on the L2 experimental students' ability to identify appropriate compliment strategies. This finding supports previous efforts by researchers to continue encouraging teachers to include pragmatic lessons in the most basic of levels.

As with any study, certain limitations exist. While MCDCTs have been used with success in prior studies (Bachelor, 2016; Bachelor, 2015; Jianda, 2006; Liu, 2007; Roever, 2006; Roever, 2005), the researchers recognize that students are only being assessed on recognition rather than on pragmatic production. There is also some debate even among native speakers as to which answer is the "correct" answer on these types of instruments (Bachelor, 2016); however, we hoped to mitigate this by providing actual answers that were given by the native speakers in the pilot of the instrument. Additionally, the length of the intervention (half of a semester), the number of participants (62), and the idea of "pragmatic correctness" or universal Spanish pragmatics all serve as limitations.

It is our hope that researchers will continue their pragmatic studies into heritage learners of Spanish and other languages in an attempt to better answer Gironzetti and Koike's (2016) question concerning whether or not educators should even attempt to teach pragmatics to this group of students. While the lessons significantly helped the L2 students, the current study does not support the idea of teaching pragmatics to heritage learners, as this group already contains high pragmatic competence and the lessons had no significant impact on them. Future studies should analyze naturalistic data by heritage learners and analyze the impact of pragmatic interventions in the classroom.

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## Appendix

### Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task (MCDCT)

Read each scenario and choose the most culturally appropriate response by selecting A, B, or C. This does not count towards your grade and is for research-purposes only, so please do not use handouts, the textbook, dictionaries, friends, translators, etc.

1) Your best friend has a new haircut (*corte de pelo*) that you really like.

You say:

- A. Me gusta.
- B. Te queda muy bien el corte de pelo.
- C. ¡Buen corte de pelo!

2) You bought new shoes and your sister tells you she really likes them.

You say:

- A. Gracias. Si quieres te los presto.
- B. Gracias.
- C. [*Say nothing and smile*]

3) Your mom made dinner using a new recipe and you really like it.

You say:

- A. ¡Qué rico! ¡Te ha quedado súper bien!
- B. Me gusta mucho.
- C. La cena está muy rica; me gusta.

4) You are going to tutoring for Spanish and your tutor tells you that he's really impressed with your progress.

You say:

- A. Muchas gracias.
- B. Bueno, es mérito del tutor.
- C. ¿A que sí?

5) Your English professor gave a speech (*discurso*) to the campus yesterday and you were really impressed and want to tell her.

You say:

- A. Me gustó mucho.
- B. ¡Qué buen discurso!
- C. Me encantó su discurso. Fue muy motivador.

6) You made cookies for your Spanish class and everyone is telling you that they're the best cookies they've ever tried.

You say:

- A. [*Say nothing and smile*]
- B. Muchas gracias.
- C. Gracias; no tiene nada, la verdad; son muy fáciles de hacer.

7) Your dad just bought a new car (*coche*) and you love it.

You say:

- A. ¡Qué coche más bonito! ¡Me lo tienes que prestar!
- B. ¡Me encanta tu coche!
- C. Es un coche muy bonito.

8) You run into the college president who tells you that he's really impressed with an article that you wrote for the school newspaper.

You say:

- A. [*Say nothing and smile*]
- B. Muchas gracias; es un gusto poder participar en el periódico.
- C. Muchas gracias.

9) One of your coworkers has been really exceeding at work lately and you want to tell her.

You say:

- A. Buen trabajo.
- B. Te felicito por el buen trabajo que has estado haciendo.
- C. Trabajas bien.

10) You bought new furniture for your apartment and your landlord tells you that you should be a designer.

You say:

- A. Gracias.
- B. [*Say nothing and smile*]
- C. ¿Tú crees? Encontré las ideas en una revista de diseño.