Intercultural Communication in the Online Spanish Classroom: A Study on Invitations

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Abstract: The *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication* (2017) task educators with helping students better recognize "obviously inappropriate behaviors in familiar everyday situations" (p.15), yet today's L2 classroom rarely includes pragmatic speech acts in curriculum, especially with regard to online language learning. To this end, in the fall 2018 semester at two community colleges, intercultural/pragmatic lessons on invitation sequences were implemented in both online and on-ground Spanish One classes involving both written and spoken conversations with native speakers as to determine if pragmatics can be acquired online. Control groups were also established. Preliminary data suggest that online students can acquire pragmatic competence thanks to online interventions; however, more complex intercultural strategies may require more exposure to the language or on-ground components. Methodology, lessons, and pedagogical implications are included.

Keywords: Culture, Intercultural Communication, Pragmatic Instruction, Technology, Online Learning, World Languages

With the recent inclusion of intercultural communication in the NCSSFL-ACTFL (2017) "Can-Do Statements," foreign language educators are finally starting to look beyond grammar and vocabulary instruction in the classroom and are beginning to analyze the ways in which they teach culture (Bachelor & Barros García, 2019). These new statements not only support the inclusion of the "3 Ps" of culture (products, practices, and perspectives), but they also emphasize culturally appropriate *behavior* in target language interactions. According to these "Can-Do" statements, students must be able to "avoid major social blunders" and "transition smoothly from formal to informal styles of behavior" (p. 15-16), among others, which is where intercultural pragmatic instruction comes into play. Unfortunately, foreign language teachers fear that they are not prepared to teach pragmatics or interculturality to their students (Vellenga, 2011). This puts their students at a disadvantage because research suggests that intercultural and pragmatic errors are viewed as more severe by native speakers than grammar errors (Wolfe, Shanmugaraj, & Sipe, 2016).

Addressing this challenge becomes even more complicated for the online teacher. The changing role of technology in higher education has been the source of much discussion and debate, particularly with regard to online learning (Orosz, 2016). Nationwide in the United States, the last decade has seen a steady increase in the number of colleges offering online courses. In recent years, while higher education has experienced a general decline in enrollment, enrollment in virtual courses has continued to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2016). As a result, more courses are being considered for potential online delivery. This includes foreign language courses. As such, teachers must find a way to meet all national and local standards, including the NCSSFL-ACTFL "Can-Do Statements" on intercultural communication, in the online classroom.

In an attempt to help students "avoid major social blunders," the teacher must equip them with strategies for employing some of the most commonly used speech acts. For this current study, invitations were chosen, as they are among the most widely used speech acts in Spanish (Langer, 2011). Additionally, lessons on invitations in the Spanish classroom support many "Can-Do Statements" on intercultural communication being established by high schools across the country, such as "I can usually accept and refuse invitations in a culturally appropriate way" (Bellevue School District, 2015, p. 4).

While research exists on teaching and learning pragmatic speech acts in the traditional on-ground classroom, investigations in the online classroom are scarce (Chun, 2011). For these reasons, the present study sought to analyze pragmatic competency in relation to invitation sequences of novice level Spanish students in an online setting by designing virtual pragmatic interventions on invitations and comparing pragmatic performance between control and experimental groups of both online and on-ground students. The results from this analysis will provide teachers with the evidence that they need to support online language learning with regard to intercultural and pragmatic competencies.

Literature Review

Pragmatics, speech acts, and invitations in English and Spanish

Until recently, foreign language teachers have mostly ignored pragmatic and intercultural outcomes in their classes (Bachelor, 2015). However, with the arrival of the NCSSFL-ACTFL "Can-Do Statements" on intercultural communication, educators are discovering that there is much more to the language classroom than vocabulary and grammar lessons (Bachelor, 2016; Bachelor & Barnard Bachelor, 2016). According to Ishihara (2010), "pragmatics deals with meaning in context that is the meaning conveyed often indirectly beyond what is literally communicated" (p.938). Oftentimes, pragmatic instruction in the classroom has sought to prepare students to engage in speech acts (Langer, 2011).

According to Langer (2011), a speech act is a statement or utterance that plays a role in communication such as compliments, requests, or invitations. Invitations ask for something from the listener, typically the privilege of the other person's company. Langer explained that when someone is invited to do something, the listener is expected to accept or decline the invitation. Depending on the relationship between the speaker and the listener, there are many ways to invite someone, and this can be direct or indirect, individual, or collective/suggestive (Table 1). Therefore, as with other speech acts, a specific culture may require different formulations of an invite.

There is some overlap in the use of invitations in both English and Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2018). In both languages, the formulation of an invitation depends, ultimately, on the listener's own needs or wishes. In other words, the speaker asks what s/he thinks the listener wants. However, Langer (2011) explains that in Spanish the most common forms of inviting tend to be more direct than in English. This type of invitation is initiated individually by the speaker (*te invito a tomar un café* [I'm inviting you for a coffee]). Since in Spanish, *invitar* [to invite] also implies that the inviter is paying, this individual and direct form of inviting makes it less likely that the listener will deny the invitation, because the speaker is showing his/her generosity through the invitation. If the speaker is not comfortable using a direct invitation, the next most common invitation strategy is to use a suggestive form (*¿tomamos un café?* [shall we have a coffee?]). In García's (2008) study on invitations in Spanish, she found that beyond the initial invite itself, a full invitation sequence consists of the following: invitation-response, insistence-response, and wrap-up. During the initial invitation, García discovered that Spanish speakers often reject an

invitation or hesitate to accept, which leads to the insistence phase in which the invitee seeks to determine how sincere the invitation is, based on how much the inviter insists. To demonstrate sincerity in the invite, the inviter often dismisses the excuse, subjects the invitee to an emotional appeal, or expresses sorrow before extending the invitation again (Félix-Brasdefer, 2018).

Table 1
The most commonly used invitation strategies in Spanish (Langer, 2011, p. 92)

Form	Expression	English translation
Individual		
	Te invito a tomar un café	I am inviting you for a coffee
Suggestive		
	¿Tomamos un café?	Shall we have a coffee?
	¿Vamos a tomar un café?	Let's go drink a coffee?
	¿Tomemos un café?	Let's drink a coffee?
	¿Qué tal si tomamos un café?	How about if we go drink a coffee?
	¿Por qué no tomamos un café?	Why don't we go drink a coffee?
	¿Qué te parece si tomamos un café?	What do you think about getting a coffee?

Teaching pragmatic speech acts

It is becoming more accepted that pragmatics can be taught and learned in the language classroom (Vellenga, 2011). According to Kasper and Rose (2002), "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). However, much debate exists as to the best way in which pragmatics should be taught.

One of the main areas of study has been the hypothesis of the acquisition and function of input in instructional pragmatics (Bardovi-Härlig & Griffin, 2005). There has been some debate as to whether students should learn pragmatics via implicit or explicit lessons (Alcón Soler, 2005; Krashen, 1994). Researchers are divided between those who believe that there is an "interface" between implicit and explicit processes (DeKeyser, 1995), and those who believe that there is none at all (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1982; 1985). In the context of learning Spanish, Mir (2001) explained that although it is likely that implicit instruction of pragmatics works, the student would have to be in constant contact with a community of Spanish speakers or spend hours in the classroom to develop a high level of pragmatics implicitly. The author proposed the implementation of a more active and explicit pragmatic instruction so that students can internalize rules and actively incorporate them into their use of the language. Langer (2011) agreed on the importance of explicit pragmatic instruction in the language classroom, since the pragmatic competence of his students improved significantly in all areas after his explicit interventions.

Teaching pragmatic speech acts online

A number of studies support the idea of teaching a foreign language online (Moneypenny & Aldrich, 2016; Jabeen & Thomas, 2015; Herrera Díaz & González Miy, 2017). Technology now allows a teacher to provide instruction online through recorded lectures, e-texts with embedded audio and videos, online workbooks, and live chats through video and audio-conferencing software (Bachelor, 2017). These technologies have only rarely been used to aid in the development of students' pragmatic competence (Yang, 2017; Taguchi & Sykes, 2013), with some exceptions.

For instance, Waugh (2013) had her online English Language Learners listen to and read transcripts of native speakers' interactions; they were then asked to explain in discussion forums the language forms used by these speakers to perform the studied speech act. Her results suggested that this strategy worked well with her students. Others (Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013) had their students engage in online blogging with each other and with native Japanese speakers to improve their pragmatic abilities. While successful in enhancing pragmatic competence, it is important to note that these studies, along with others (Gonzales, 2013; Sykes, 2005; Tudini, 2007), have taken place with intermediate high and advanced language students rather than with students in their initial phases of language learning.

While these studies may support the learning of pragmatics using online tools, there is not a consensus on how to best teach pragmatics in an online environment, and we have no evidence as to their effectiveness with novice students. It also appears that authentic data collection has been an issue with these studies, as role plays and naturalistic conversations tend to be more appropriate ways to assess pragmatic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010); however, the abovementioned studies mostly analyzed student written responses.

As previously mentioned, it is extremely important to find an effective way to increase students' pragmatic competence in the online classroom for a number of reasons, but namely to avoid offending the hearer, as pragmatic errors are often perceived as more severe than other mistakes (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Schauer, 2006). To this end, lessons were developed for online Spanish classes on invitation sequences for novice students, as outlined in the forthcoming sections.

Methodology

Population and sample

The present study took place at two community colleges across four sections of Spanish One, a course that assumes no prior knowledge of Spanish. The same curriculum is covered at both sites, as they administer the same final exam, and both community colleges are within driving distance of each other and share very similar student demographics. For comparative purposes, control and experimental groups were created, along with on-ground traditional groups as to determine if the interventions worked better online or in-person.

According to U.S. News & World Report (2014), Site A is a community college whose ethnicity is primarily White, at approximately 75% of students, followed by Black students who encompass 10% of the total population. The average student age is 24, of whom 54% are female and 46% are male. Site B is also a community college with the following demographic information: 76% White, 11% Black, with the average student age being 23, of whom 57.5% are female and 42.4% are male. The location of both Site A and Site B is metropolitan, located approximately 130-160 miles from two megacities in the Midwestern section of the United States. The student sampling for this study is representative of both Sites' demographics.

The classroom teachers taught a total of four sections of Spanish One in the fall 2018 semester, two online and two on-ground. On the onset of the study and prior to having enrollment and demographic information, the researcher created four student groups, one for each section: Group 1 (online experimental), Group 2 (online control), Group 3 (on-ground experimental), and Group 4 (on-ground control). A total of 59 students across all groups chose to participate: 14 students from Group 1; 16 students from Group 2; 15 students from Group 3; 14 students from Group 4.

Design

Permission was granted by both Institutional Review Boards and consent was obtained from all parties involved before the study began. This is primarily a quantitative study, as the qualitative student conversations were assigned numerical data. Spanish One is a typical first semester college-level course intended for those with little or no knowledge of the language and covers all forms of the present tense through the present progressive. Both course teachers adhere to the communicative language teaching approach and integrate relevant culture and vocabulary.

Three pragmatic interventions took place during the semester in Groups 1 and 3. The first intervention consisted of a *YouTube* video link (https://youtu.be/XlZtiHmbXcE) posted to the discussion forum of Group 1 and played in class for Group 3. In this video, students are presented with a text messaging conversation between Pablo and Elena in which Pablo repeatedly invites Elena to multiple events and locations only to be turned down. After much insistence, Elena is the one who finally invites Pablo to her family dinner and the invitation is accepted. For Group 1, students were asked to share their thoughts in the discussion forum. Specifically, students were asked to think about factors that played a role in how Pablo invited Elena, such as age or relationship. Comprehension questions included, "Did Elena initially accept the invite or did she turn it down? How did she turn down the initial invite? Did Pablo insist a lot? Did they eventually reach an agreement?" Such questions, along with a question on social factors attempted to heighten student awareness of invitation sequences in informal Spanish among young people without explicitly teaching formulas or cultural practices. For Group 3, such questions were posed to the entire class in person. The teacher did not participate in either discussion.

Intervention two consisted of an explicit lesson on invitations in Spanish. A document was linked to the learning management system (LMS) for Group 1, and students were given a printed copy in class for Group 3. The document was a modified version of the lesson by Aventa Learning (2005) that tasked students to learn that the verb *invitar* [to invite] implies that the person inviting is paying. They were then exposed to conditional conjugations with *gustar*, followed by sample invites in Spanish using *gustaría* [would like], *puedes* [can you], and *quieres* [do you want], accompanied by acceptances such as *¡claro que sí!* [of course so!]. The worksheet proceeded to explain that when declining an invite, Spanish speakers often provide an excuse or postpone the invite, and saw several examples, such as *Tal vez otro día. Tengo que visitar a mis abuelos* [Maybe another day. I have to visit my grandparents]. Finally, students were presented with eight invitations and had to respond in writing, accepting four and rejecting four, using strategies presented in the lesson. For Group 1, students had to submit the completed document as an assignment via the LMS and received all points for completion, regardless of the answers provided, whereas Group 3 students completed it in class, but did not turn it in.

The final intervention consisted of a 10-minute one-on-one video chat with a native speaker of Spanish via *TalkAbroad*. Group 1 students completed the live chat at their own convenience during a specific window of time. Group 3 students went to the computer lab at the end of class toward the end of the semester and spoke with the native speakers. During this conversation, both participants were instructed to pretend to invite the other to an event. As such, the students in Groups 1 and 3 were able to put the information from interventions one and two into practice and implicitly learn from the native speaker based on how s/he chose to formulate the invitation and how s/he responded to the invitation.

The excerpt below (1) provides an example of an excuse provided by one of the native speakers in response to a student invitation from Group 3. As such, this particular student was exposed to one of the more common refusal strategies in Spanish.

(1) Native speaker (NS) and Student (S)

1. S: *¿Te gustaría salir a comer después del partido?* [Would you like to go out to eat after the game?]
2. NS: *Eh, no, creo que no puedo ir a comer; tengo que volver a mi casa temprano* [Um, no, I think I can't go out to eat; I have to return home early]

Overall, the three interventions were designed for a beginner Spanish student. As such, the focus was on the formulas required for inviting in Spanish rather than on some of the more complex strategies that are sometimes employed by Spanish-speakers.

A week after the final intervention concluded in the experimental groups, students in all four groups had to perform a role-play in pairs as part of their final oral exam that lasted approximately five minutes. While the role-play was somewhat open ended, students were instructed that at some point in the conversation, both students had to invite the other student to go somewhere. One of the invitations had to be accepted, and the other had to be declined. Groups 1 and 2 performed the role-play using video chat software via *MySpanishLab* so that the course teacher could review the clips, and Groups 3 and 4 performed them in front of the teacher as they were tape recorded.

Research questions and data analysis procedures

The study was designed in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What effect, if any, do pragmatic lessons regarding invitation sequences have on L2 Spanish students' ability to invite/respond appropriately (according to accepted pragmatic norms)?
2. In what ways, if any, does the effect of pragmatic lessons regarding invitation sequences in Spanish differ between online or on-ground students?

In order to respond to these questions, certain analytical procedures were put into place. Before answering the research questions, the data from the final oral exam role-plays were analyzed using criteria based off of investigations by Langer (2011), Félix-Brasdefer (2018), and García (2008) as to determine what was considered a pragmatically appropriate invitation and response for informal situations in standard Spanish[1]. Drawing on insights from these studies, the researcher looked for one or more of the following strategies when extending an invitation:

- Direct invitation
- Suggestive invitation
- Collective invitation
- The speaker asks what the hearer wants
- Downplaying inconvenience
- Insistence (after initial rejection)

The researchers also looked to assess the rejection portion of the response based on the following criteria informed by the same studies:

- Indirect (followed by one or more of the below strategies)
- Excuse or explanation provided
- Promise to make plans in the future
- Statement of regret (accompanied with one or more of the above strategies)

Other characteristics, such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary mistakes that did not hinder comprehension were not taken into account when analyzing the conversations. The

[1] Limitations regarding these criteria and what Langer (2011), Félix-Brasdefer (2018), and García (2008) constitute "standard Spanish" are later discussed (see Discussion, Implications, and Limitations).

researchers listened to each 5-minute conversation from all groups involved, transcribed the invitation sequences, and marked them as either "adheres" or "does not adhere" to pragmatic norms based on the previously mentioned criteria. Answers were then given 100 points for an answer that "adhered," and 0 points for an answer that did "not adhere," as to assign quantitative value to the data.

To answer the research questions, unpaired *t* tests along with effect sizes were employed to determine if statistically significant difference existed among the various groups on their role-play assessments. Finally, the researchers were able to qualitatively discuss why some answers were marked "not adhere."

Results

As mentioned in the prior section, unpaired *t* test and effect size calculations were used to determine the impact the invitation and invitation response lessons had on each group by comparing the results from the role-play pragmatic analysis between the control and experimental groups.

The results from Groups 1 and 2 (online) were processed first. With regard to the extension of an invitation, the unpaired *t* test demonstrated that there was an insignificant statistical difference between invitation extension scores from the online control group (M=12.5, SD=35.36) and the online experimental group (M=50, SD=54.77); $t(12)=1.5$, $p=0.14$. However, according to Coe (2002), calculating the effect size is a much more meaningful method of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups. As such, a Cohen's *d* effect size calculation resulted in $d=(50-12.5)/46.09=0.81$. Such effect size is considered to be a "large effect" and indicates that 79% of students in the control group would perform below the average student in the experimental group in a hypothetical matchup when extending an invitation (Coe, 2002).

Similar calculations were then performed between Groups 1 and 2 (online) with regard to the rejection sequence, and an insignificant difference was found between the online control group (M=100, SD=0) and the online experimental group (M=66.67, SD=51.64); $t(12)=1.85$, $p=0.08$. An effect size was not calculated since the control group performed better (M=100) than the experimental group (M=66.67) when extending an invitation.

In terms of the on-ground students, unpaired *t* test calculations between invitation extension scores from Group 4 (control) (M=0, SD=0) and Group 3 (experimental) (M=62.50, SD=51.75); $t(12)=2.9$, $p=0.01$ indicated a statistically significant difference. Likewise, Cohen's effect size resulted in $d=(62.5-0)/36.59=1.7$, which is a "very large" effect, indicating that 95% of the control group students would perform worse than students in the experimental group when extending an invitation.

An unpaired *t* test was also calculated between Groups 4 (M=60, SD=54.77) and 3 (M=100, SD=0); $t(10)=1.9$, $p=0.07$ with regard to the invitation rejection, which is considered "not quite" statistically significant when considering the "sliding scale" of statistical significance (Heavey, 2018, p. 104). As for the effect size, the calculation resulted in Cohen's $d=(100-60)/38.72=1.03$, which is a "large" effect, suggesting that 84% of control group participants would perform worse than experimental group participants when rejecting an invitation.

Finally, unpaired *t* tests were also calculated between the two experimental groups (online versus on-ground) to determine which group was more impacted by the intervention. Those results indicate insignificant differences between Group 1 (online experimental) (M=50, SD=54.77) and Group 3 (on-ground experimental) (M=62.50, SD=51.75); $t(12)=0.43$, $p=0.67$ for the extension of an invitation. However, the effect size found that 58% of students in the online experimental group would perform worse than participants in the on-ground experimental group when extending an

invitation, which is considered a "small" effect size. With regard to the rejection sequence scores, Group 1 (online experimental) (M=66.67, SD=51.64) and Group 3 (on-ground experimental) (M=100, SD=0); $t(11)=1.7$, $p=0.11$ unpaired t test results suggested an insignificant difference. Nevertheless, the effect size calculation suggests that 82% of the online experimental group participants would score below the average participant in the on-ground experimental group, which is considered a "large" effect: Cohen's $d=(66.67-100)/36.51=0.91$.

In sum, statistical data report that students in the experimental groups (Groups 1 and 3) performed better than control group students when extending an invitation; however, when comparing the experimental groups, the on-ground students (Group 3) outperformed the online students (Group 1).

Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

In response to research question 1, which sought to quantify the effect of pragmatic lessons regarding invitation sequences on L2 Spanish students' ability to invite/respond appropriately in both online and on-ground environments, the effect size calculations indicate that the interventions were effective, especially with regard to the participants' ability to extend an invitation. As indicated in the results, the lessons had a "large effect" on the online experimental students, and a "very large effect" on the on-ground experimental students. When responding to the invitation, the lessons had no effect on the online students; however, the on-ground students experienced a "large effect" in this regard. As such, the lesson interventions had a positive impact on the students, especially on the on-ground group.

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In terms of research question 2, which asks if pragmatic interventions have a greater impact on online or on on-ground students, the results from the unpaired t test indicate that there was no statistical difference between Groups 1 (online experimental) and 3 (on-ground experimental) with regard to both the invitation extension and the response. Effect sizes indicate little to no difference when extending an invitation; however, there was a "large" effect found in favor of the on-ground group when responding to an invitation. Hence, while the pragmatic interventions equally impacted both groups for extending an invitation, the on-ground students outperformed the online students when responding to an invite.

These results demonstrate that pragmatic lessons do work in both online and on-ground settings; however, on-ground students may benefit more from this type of intervention. As noted in the results, both the online and on-ground students outperformed their control group counterparts when extending an invitation. But when it came to responding to the invite, the online students performed similarly to the control group. This may be attributable to the fact that extending an invitation in Spanish is less complex than effectively responding to one (Barros García, 2011), which may indicate that pragmatic lessons dealing with more multifaceted issues, such as the negotiation and insistence that are sometimes involved in an invitation sequence, are better suited for the on-ground environment. Similarly, such responses may require linguistic proficiency that is beyond that of a novice student. This is not to say that more effective lessons for online students could not be developed to work specifically on invitation responses or other complex pragmatic issues.

Regardless, the "large effect" that the lessons had on the online student's ability to extend an invitation is rather noteworthy, as it does demonstrate that pragmatic ideals can be taught online, even at the most elementary of levels in language acquisition. As indicated earlier, past research with online language students (Gonzales, 2013; Sykes, 2005; Tudini, 2007) has involved intermediate high and advanced language students rather than students in their initial phases of language learning. These results will hopefully encourage additional studies into the online acquisition of pragmatic competence in first year language students in high schools, community colleges, and year one university students.

As with any study, certain limitations exist. In terms of the interventions, some of the native speakers on the *TalkAbroad* activity did not fully follow instructions or, according to the researchers' opinion, did not follow pragmatic norms perhaps due to the students' level of Spanish or the nature of an online conversation, such as quickly accepting a refusal and moving on with the conversation. Additionally, there were conversations in all groups in which one or more student simply did not refuse the invite, perhaps due to not understanding it or perhaps due to a decision not to. The latter would be considered a pragmatic "error;" however, the former would not. Regardless, these instances impacted the outcome of the data analysis process. Additional limitations include the length of the study (one semester) and the nature of role plays, which allow for rehearsal and assess pragmatic performance over pragmatic proficiency.

Additionally, the grading criteria for the conversations (see Methodology) and the concept of a "correct" pragmatic response rely on the idea of a "standard Spanish." While there is no consensus regarding what is considered pragmatically appropriate or standard, the researchers relied on the studies by Langer (2011), Félix-Brasdefer (2018), and García (2008) to reach conclusions on what constituted a "correct" response. Future investigations that address these limitations should most definitely be carried out in the near future.

Finally, it is also not the expectation by ACTFL that novice level students be able to produce appropriate pragmatic/intercultural behaviors, but rather "recognize" these behaviors as appropriate or not (2017). As such, future studies assessing the online student's ability to recognize pragmatically appropriate behaviors may be better suited for language beginners.

As stated by Van Houten and Shelton (2018) the journey to Intercultural Communicative Competence is:

> a personal one, with many steps, both backward and forward, and a growing awareness of self and other. Just as the use of the language *Can-Do Statements* has had a positive impact on learning and teaching, the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Communication* are expected to make both learner and educator more mindful of the importance of culture in communication. (p. 38)

These intercultural components are not exclusive to the on-ground student, and teachers should seek to include them in the online classroom as well.

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