

Improving Spanish-speaking students' pragmatic competence through SCMC: a proposal

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Abstract. Due to the scarcity of studies analysing Spanish-speaking students' acquisition of pragmatic competence in English, this paper focuses on the preliminary stage of a longitudinal study on the impact that Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) has on the use of apologies and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. In other words, this paper presents the type of explicit instruction that students from Spain need in order to improve their ability to express apologies, and how interaction with English-speaking students through Skype will help them to acquire the strategies that L1 speakers use in everyday conversations. Spanish-speaking students will complete a pre- and post-test questionnaire to measure their level of pragmatic knowledge before and after the interaction with English-speaking students. Additionally, a control group will carry out the task via face-to-face interaction. It is envisaged that after the telecollaborative exchanges, Spanish students in the experimental group will experience greater improvement in the performance of apologies than those in the control group and, subsequently, in their pragmatic competence.

Keywords: synchronous computer-mediated communication, telecollaboration, pragmatic competence, speech act.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the first aim of a longitudinal study on the impact that SCMC has on the use of apologies and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence in students from Spain. In other words, this paper presents the type of explicit instruction that Spanish students need in order to improve their ability to express apologies and how interaction with English-speaking students through

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How to cite: Di Sarno García, S. (2020). Improving Spanish-speaking students' pragmatic competence through SCMC: a proposal. In K.-M. Frederiksen, S. Larsen, L. Bradley & S. Thouéšny (Eds), *CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020* (pp. 52-56). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.1164>

Skype will help them to acquire the strategies that L1 speakers use in everyday conversations.

2. Theoretical background

In the past 20 years, researchers have analysed the use of SCMC for teaching and researching pragmatics. [Taguchi and Sykes \(2013\)](#) observe that one of the advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in second language acquisition is that authentic communicative environments that allow language learners to participate in computerised dialogues with L1 speakers can be created, which implies exposure to the target language and chances for feedback and support that are not usually accessible in foreign language teaching environments. Although small in number, some studies have analysed the use of CMC in the field of pragmatics.

[Sykes \(2005\)](#) examined the effects of SCMC on the acquisition of refusals through three different modalities: written chat, oral chat, and face-to-face discussion. The results showed that, although an improvement was observed in the three groups, those conducting the task through written chat “outperformed the other two groups in terms of complexity and variety” ([Sykes, 2005](#), p. 420).

Also, [González-Lloret \(2008\)](#) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the use of SCMC in order to improve addressivity through interaction with L1 speakers. In particular, she referred to a case-study whose findings demonstrated that students collaborated to create meaning and accomplish project-based tasks in the SCMC environment, and that not only did they improve their sociopragmatic knowledge of addressivity, but they also progressed in their pragmalinguistic competence.

[Sykes \(2009\)](#) also created a game-based environment called *Croquelandia* where Spanish language students could improve their pragmatic ability to make requests and apologies. Despite showing little change from pre- to post-test, the results revealed an increase in pragmatic awareness in the case of requests, while in that of apologies findings showed evidence that there was a “moderate change from speaker-oriented strategies to the preferred hearer-oriented apologies, but little change in the choice of external modifiers” ([Taguchi & Sykes, 2013](#), p. 14).

Additionally, [Cohen and Ishihara \(2005\)](#) created a website where Japanese language students could practise speech acts. On that website, students had access to audiovisual material related to those speech acts. After that, [Sykes and Cohen](#)

(2006) developed a more extensive Spanish website for practising ten different speech acts, which included audiovisual input as well.

Etae, Krish, and Hussin (2017) examined the use of Thai and Western politeness strategies and speech acts in CMC amongst a group of Thai students and their English-speaking teacher. The results showed that Thai students used more Western politeness strategies than Thai strategies, although some of them made use of a mixture of Western and Thai strategies (Etae et al., 2017).

As can be observed through this short literature review, few studies have been carried out with Spanish-speaking students of English and, in particular, on their development of pragmatic competence.

3. Purpose of the present study

This longitudinal study aims to observe the effect that telecollaborative exchanges have on the acquisition of the speech act of apology, taking into consideration Leech's (2014) taxonomy. Leech (2014) classifies strategies used by English speakers to apologise as (1) expressions of regret; (2) asking somebody for pardon (or forgiveness); and (3) using a performative utterance. According to Leech (2014), the most common strategy amongst L1 speakers of English is the first of these.

4. Method

The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate how telecollaborative exchanges can enhance the production of apologies. Actually, previous studies, such as Sykes (2005), corroborate that video chat allows students to progress in the production of speech acts. This section will give an account on how the research will be carried out.

4.1. Setting and participants

The study will be carried out between the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) in Spain, and an English-speaking university, so that Spanish learners of English will interact with those who have English as their L1. Furthermore, it will be conducted over two semesters, allowing the research team to have a control group separate from the one engaged in the telecollaborative project. Each

semester, there will be a different class of students at UPV studying English, and, subsequently, the class in the first semester will be the control group, while that in the second semester will be the experimental group.

The Spanish-speaking students that will be part of the control group will be third year students of Aerospace Engineering from the UPV enrolled in an English subject whose Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level is B2. Data from students that will participate in the telecollaboration cannot be provided yet.

4.2. Instruments and materials

First, students will accomplish a questionnaire as pre-test. It will be carried out through Google Forms and will consist of three questions aimed at gathering demographical information, and ten multiple choice questions about the use of apologies. The test will be identical at the beginning (as pre-test) and at the end of the semester (as post-test).

Second, we will provide Spanish students with explicit instruction on pragmatics before the realisation of the activities, and we will use audiovisual material for this. The intent is that students will have the opportunity to observe the use of apologies in real contexts. We will also provide them with a handout with the most common strategies employed. The end of the explicit instruction will consist of reading a prepared text based on the article *An Exploration of the Structure of Effective Apologies* (Lewicki, Polin, & Lount, 2016), and writing a summary in pairs.

Third, students will perform six different role plays in dyads composed of a Spanish-speaking student and an English-speaking student, in order to elicit the use of apologies. However, based on Taguchi (2007), students will also be asked to perform another speech act in addition to the target one, in order “to divert their attention away from the particular speech act under study” (Taguchi, 2007, p. 120). In particular, the tasks include promises, refusals, and congratulations. They will use Skype for their interactions, so that they will also be able to record their interaction, and the research team will be able to transcribe the dialogues for subsequent analysis. Students will complete the post-test after that.

Our hypothesis is that, after the telecollaborative project, the results of the post-test will reveal an improvement in the pragmatic competence of Spanish students in the experimental group.

5. Conclusion

As the theoretical background has revealed, there are no studies of the way SCMC could help Spanish-speaking students of English in their use of apologies. Besides, we believe that further research should be carried out in order to demonstrate how CMC can foster language students' pragmatic competence. Therefore, this study could shed some light on an under-researched area in CALL.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020
Edited by Karen-Margrete Frederiksen, Sanne Larsen, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Publication date: 2020/12/14

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-81-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2020.