

Teaching Responses to Invitations in Intermediate Level Courses through Face-To-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract

While it is known that increasing learner awareness of pragmatics can lead to cross cultural communication, and that pedagogical intervention can improve learners' cultural awareness of pragmatics, there remains little explicit instruction on formulaic pragmatic expressions in Spanish. The present unit of instruction provides teachers and learners with an activity to teach acceptances and refusals in Spanish through the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). It utilizes Scollon and Scollon's (2001) model of politeness which incorporates the notion of 'self' when teaching acceptances and refusals to invitations.

Keywords: L2/FL Spanish, speech acts, instructed pragmatics, acceptances, refusals, CMC

Level: Second-Year Spanish (Novice High/Intermediate Low/Intermediate High, ACTFL; A2-B2, CEFR)

Suggested Time: 25-30 minutes

Materials: PowerPoint presentation, examples of acceptances and refusals to email invitations, audio recordings and transcripts, course textbook, audio transcription, sample email messages, and exercises.

Target Grammatical Structures: Future and conditional, copula *ser/estar*, present subjunctive

Goal: To teach Spanish learners how to accept and refuse invitations in Spanish

1 Introduction

This activity aims to improve one aspect of the learner's pragmatic competence, particularly as it relates to the ability to understand and produce acceptances and refusals to invitations. Pragmatic ability is the capacity of a learner to both understand and produce pragmatic knowledge (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014, p. 75). In this sense, pragmatic ability regarding acceptances and refusals is the ability of an L2 learner of Spanish to both understand the appropriate language to accept/reject an invitation as well as to use this knowledge in context. The activity aims to teach acceptances and refusals in Spanish incorporating practice and feedback through the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). CMC is broadly defined as communication between humans via any type of digital communication device (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). The present unit involves the CMC context of email communication between instructors and students. Previous studies have investigated acceptance and refusal strategies in L2 learners, but few have done so within the CMC context. García (1996) investigated the teaching of speech acts to decline and refuse invitations in a face-to-face context. Félix-Brasdefer (2006, 2019), investigated teaching refusals in face-to-face contexts too, but neither of these studies investigating invitation refusals contained a CMC component. As mentioned in Bou-Franch (2021), while research in CMC has in general increased in the last few decades in the field of linguistics, it has only happened very recently that CMC approaches and methods have been applied to the study of pragmatics. Bou-Franch (2011) analyzed pragmatics within academic emails, but did not include a teaching component. In the present activity, we combine Bou-Franch's (2011) approach to the study of pragmatics and CMC, and address the existing gap, i.e., teaching the pragmatics of acceptances and refusals through CMC methods.

The target audience for this activity unit are instructors of intermediate Spanish. Due to Covid-19, the conclusion and agenda for classroom use includes detailed recommendations for

how to present the activity in either a face-to-face classroom with a CMC component or in an entirely virtual or CMC context, as per recommendations of Ziegler (2016) for technology-mediated task-based teaching, and Baralt and Morcillo Gómez (2017).

2 Context

The present teaching unit focuses on teaching the speech acts of acceptances and refusals to invitations to intermediate level English speaking learners of Spanish in a foreign language classroom context. In her article on technology-mediated task-based language teaching, Ziegler (2016) mentions the critical importance of not just teaching language skills during language tasks in a CMC context, but also the value in teaching technological skills (e.g., email writing). The present activity focuses on email use and includes strategies and materials that instructors can adopt to teach acceptances and refusals to invitations in the target language, both in the foreign language classroom context and through CMC with explicit instruction and delayed explicit feedback. This section details the speech acts of acceptances and refusals as operationalized by Searle (1969) and describes the specific CMC context for the present activity unit. The speech acts of acceptances and refusals fall within the speech act category of commissives (Searle, 1969) since they commit the speaker to perform (or not perform) an act. The speech acts of acceptances and refusals are important to both pragmatics and sociolinguistics in that they are shaped and impacted by social variables such as gender, age, and social status (Levinson, 1987).

In previous research in the field of second language acquisition, Schmidt (1990) proposed the Noticing Hypothesis as a potentially important factor. The Noticing Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of noticing both the linguistic form and function of a particular L2 structure in order for acquisition to happen. Furthermore, this hypothesis assumes that input must be noticed by an L2 learner in order for it to change from *input* to *intake* to be used in acquisition.

The activity outlined here incorporates aspects of the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) by explicitly teaching the form of acceptances and refusals in emails using a pre-task (delivered via PowerPoint) as well as an inductive task to raise students' awareness (Houck & Fujimori, 2010) in which learners had to read an entire text and identify acceptances and refusals.

This lesson is designed to be carried out in class, during a short period of time, and as a supplement to other intermediate level materials, since it can be easily integrated at any point in the curriculum. However, we recommend having some specific content covered in class prior to the activity, such as the use of the subjunctive to express feelings, emotions, uncertainty, and doubts. The teaching materials will build upon the oral activities already present in the textbook and incorporate additional written activities through CMC. Formulaic expressions, sequences, and turn taking that pertain to accepting and refusing invitations are taught. Often students do not receive authentic input (i.e., in the target language and/or from native speakers of Spanish) or explicit instruction regarding how to respond to invitations via CMC. Many basic language courses focus on speaking, listening, and writing, but rarely do they focus on communication through CMC modes. Since students frequently receive invitations via text, Facebook, email, and additional computer-mediated modes, teaching responses to invitations during formal instruction and through CMC is especially relevant. In our activity, during instruction, students will receive authentic input in Spanish both aural and written form. Two native speakers were recorded in a conversation to provide examples of acceptance of and refusal to an invitation. This activity was piloted with learners of Spanish from two sections of second year Spanish at Indiana University during the Spring 2018 semester.

3 Curriculum, Tasks, and Materials

The primary goal of this instructional unit is two-fold: 1) to teach students pragmatic acceptances and refusals when responding to invitations in Spanish, and 2) to teach students appropriate email etiquette in Spanish. The entire activity is carried out in the target language, and takes approximately 20-25 minutes in class with a post-task designed to take between 10-15 minutes outside of class if conducted in a face-to-face classroom. If instructors wish to carry out this activity in a virtual or technology-mediated context, it is recommended to have the students carry out the initial portion of the instructional unit (i.e., the initial 20-25 minutes) asynchronously and the post-task (i.e., the last 10-15 minutes) synchronously in class (see conclusion section for specific technology-mediated recommendations). The learners who participated in the pilot of this instructional unit reported that they had never received explicit instruction on acceptances and refusals to invitations nor on CMC etiquette in Spanish. While this activity was developed prior to Covid-19, it is now more relevant than ever due to increased CMC use for both leisure and work-/study-related purposes. The four phases in which the present activity is subdivided are detailed in the following sections: 3.1 Introduction to acceptances and refusals, 3.2 Instructions on writing emails in Spanish, 3.3 Raising awareness, and 3.4 Oral role-plays.

3.1 Introduction to acceptances and refusals

The introduction to acceptances and refusals involves drawing learners' attention to the linguistic form. First, the instructor takes approximately five minutes to review formulaic expressions from the course textbook (Heining-Boynton, 2010, p. 134-135) and native speaker norms for turn-taking in Spanish. For example, the instructor may begin by reviewing the formulaic expressions for accepting invitations (e.g., *Me encantaría* 'I would love to', *¡Claro!* 'Sure!', *¡Por supuesto!* 'Of course!', *¡Sí, me parece bien!* 'Yes, I agree!', *¡Suena muy bien!* 'Sounds very good!') or the

formulaic expressions for declining invitations (e.g., *Me da mucha pena, pero...* ‘I feel bad, but...’, *Lo siento pero no puedo* ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t’, *Tengo otro compromiso* ‘I have other plans’, *Me encantaría, pero...* ‘I would love to, but...’, *Lástima, pero...* ‘I’m sorry, but...’) (See Appendix F for more examples). Explicit forms of teaching pragmatics, grounded in an awareness-raising approach (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Chapter 6) and in the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), are recommended for the present unit. For this reason, we recommend that expressions be taught explicitly by drawing learners’ attention to the form, rather than simply following an implicit teaching method through more subtle examples of the expressions in use.

3.2 Writing practice

To introduce techniques to write academic emails in Spanish, the instructor should guide students through examples of various components of an email, and show examples of authentic texts in the target language. We suggest beginning with informal contexts with various interlocutors in order to illustrate informal email practices, later moving to formal contexts. Students should be given brief instructions on how to write and respond to emails in Spanish with examples of appropriate openings, closings, and formal vs. informal language. An example of an appropriate opening to an email would start with a greeting (e.g., *Estimado profesor* ‘Dear Professor’) and then a sentence to introduce what the email is about. During this portion of the lesson the instructor draws attention to appropriate pronouns and forms of address (*usted* ‘You-formal’), openings, how to introduce the message, and closings (See Appendix G). Next, the instructor may have students practice formal and informal language (e.g., the use of *tú* ‘you informal’ vs. *usted* ‘You-formal’) depending on the context of the interaction and recipient of the email. Lastly, the instructor may use a sample email in Spanish, and have students practice writing their own email. This task is intended to allow students to familiarize with the techniques for writing emails (both formal and informal) in Spanish.

The following phases will focus on teaching the specific speech acts associated with acceptances and refusals within email.

3.3 Raising awareness

Guided by the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) and Ishihara and Cohen's (2014) finding that explicit instruction tends to raise learners' awareness of speech acts which facilitates acquisition, the third portion of this activity includes authentic materials designed to raise learners' awareness of how to appropriately express acceptances and refusals to an invitation in Spanish. Additionally, since current recommended teaching methods include metapragmatic instruction (Kasper, 1997), which combines both explicit teaching and awareness raising activities, the third task in this unit combines these two components. In this portion of the lesson, which may take approximately five minutes, students will listen to two audio files (see appended zip file). The students will first be instructed to listen to the recording focusing on content, whereas, the second time, they will be invited to listen to the audio file focusing on the pragmatic sequences and expressions. Lastly, students will receive the audio transcript and will be asked to underline or circle opening and closing sequences, the invitation, and the expressions of acceptance or refusal. To conclude this part of the activity, the instructor may ask students to share with the class the words or phrases they underlined and to explain why. Instructors may also decide to give feedback at this time.

3.4 Oral role-play

Once students are familiar with speech acts and writing emails, they will practice an oral production activity, included in their textbook, in which they are presented with a scenario such as, *"You have been invited to a Salsa dance party, but do not know how to dance. How would you respond?"* Through this role-play, students may practice their capacity to adjust their speech according to the different social contexts (i.e., formal and informal). Furthermore, instructors may have learners

spontaneously produce output, which is beneficial to learning in that it provides the instructor with an additional opportunity to correct learners' utterances and offer different pragmatic strategies. Students will be given approximately five minutes to create a dialogue with their partner and to practice the strategies and sequences learned in an oral role-play. During this phase, the instructor may want to walk around the room (or the breakout rooms if the activity is conducted virtually on Zoom) to provide students with explicit feedback on their oral production of acceptances and refusals to invitations.

4 Assessment

Research in the assessment of pragmatics in natural interactions has moved away from evaluating isolated speech acts in a descriptive manner to examining speech acts within a specific discourse context (Cohen, 2019). Ishihara and Cohen (2014; Chapter 15) suggests that during assessments, instructors should encourage students not only to perform a task but also to reflect on the meaning and intentions of their utterance within the context of the task. In addition to evaluating the linguistic aspects of learners' production, Ishihara and Cohen (2014; Chapter 15) also recommend that instructors assess learners' abilities to analyze the L2 pragmatics, thereby providing them with skills to continue learning pragmatics beyond the foreign language classroom context.

The assessment portion of this activity takes into account Cohen's (2019) and Ishihara and Cohen's (2014) recommendations, and assesses students' pragmalinguistic abilities related to invitation acceptances and refusals, as well as their CMC performance in the target language, by providing students with explicit feedback on their production of these speech acts within the CMC context. At the end of the 20-minute lesson, students are told that they will receive two different email invitations with instructions to refuse one and to accept the other (see Appendix D for an example of a student's email). Upon receiving the students' responses to the emails, the instructor

provides students with explicit correction of their CMC etiquette (e.g., lack of a formal address form such as *Estimado/a profesor/a* ‘Dear Professor’ in the email opening), as well as explicit feedback on the pragmatic appropriateness of their acceptance or refusal to the invitation (see Appendix E for an example of a student’s email with grammar corrections bolded and speech act/CMC feedback italicized).

If this activity is conducted virtually, instructors may choose to have students share their screens and may provide feedback both orally and via CMC chat to make feedback more salient for learners, as previous research has found that providing feedback both in oral and written form may make it more salient to the learners (Baralt & Morcillo Gómez, 2017). In order to encourage learners to analyze their L2 pragmatic abilities, it is recommended that instructors also include a post-task featuring metapragmatic activities (such as a reflection on what they meant in a specific part of the email and on their language choice). This post-task, meant to increase metapragmatic awareness, could be as simple as discussion questions in the target language, that allow learners to reflect on their reasons for selecting specific phrases and expressions (e.g., Why did you choose *lástima* “it’s a shame” as a response to this particular invitation?).

5 Reflection as a means for learning

The present activity is grounded in both Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1997) and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), and it contains pedagogic recommendations for interaction in a CMC context (Baralt & Morcillo Gómez, 2017). Ishihara and Cohen (2014) provide the foundation for the organization of the present activity. Empirical studies such as Hinkel (2010) and Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017) contribute evidence regarding the benefits and importance of teaching L2 pragmatics which increase students’ awareness. Additionally, McConachy and Spencer-Oatey (2020) mention that learners’ cognitive retention of pragmatic rules may be enhanced by increasing their

awareness of pragmatic forms and sociopragmatic context. The tasks in this unit, i.e., the explicit instruction of writing emails, the explicit instruction on formulaic expressions, the inductive activity with sample emails, and the guided reflection on pragmatic use, are aimed to increase learners' awareness of pragmatic forms and their use of acceptances of and refusals to invitations within a specific CMC context.

The politeness framework used in the present activity for teaching acceptances and refusals was adapted from Scollon and Scollon (2001), and includes three aspects of politeness: deference, solidarity, and hierarchy. Scollon and Scollon's (2001) model of politeness was selected for the present activity since it encompasses politeness norms used in collectivistic societies related to membership, such as family, friends, and/or working groups. As mentioned by Félix-Brasdefer (2008), Scollon and Scollon's approach, rather than Brown and Levinson's (1987) traditional model of politeness, may be a better fit for Spanish-speaking cultures since they tend to be more collectivist. Furthermore, the teaching of pragmatics goes hand in hand with the teaching of grammar, culture, and dialectal variation. Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017) illustrated that pedagogical intervention and the teaching of pragmatics can not only improve students' cultural awareness but can also lead to higher frequency of native-like communication strategies in L2 Spanish. It is our hope, that the present pedagogical activity accomplishes this goal.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, much of instruction has moved online and as a result students and professors are learning and connecting almost exclusively in a virtual online context, often through email. As mentioned by Bou-Franch (2011), emails, as a component of the CMC context, require their own set of pragmatic norms and etiquette. The present activity brings together instruction and assessment in L2 pragmatics and CMC, meeting the immediate pedagogical need to increase pragmatic instruction and awareness in the L2 within a CMC context.

This instructional unit highlights the benefits that come from using naturalistic materials in the foreign language classroom and the integration of all four proficiency skills into one activity (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), as well as the benefits of teaching L2 pragmatics through CMC. The use of samples recorded by two native speakers from Spain provides students with naturalistic input and authentic strategies for accepting and rejecting invitations that they may not have received otherwise. Through the use of audio files, transcriptions, an oral production activity, and the integration of CMC, learners have the chance to use and develop both pragmatic and CMC-related skills. Lastly, the use of CMC methods of production during this activity gives the learners an opportunity to produce written work, to practice their formal register in Spanish, and provides a quick and efficient avenue for instructors to give students feedback on their expression of acceptances and refusals in Spanish.

6 Conclusion and extensions

The main objective of this lesson is to explicitly teach L2 pragmatics in the foreign language context, while incorporating components of CMC. This lesson brings together information from the course textbook, authentic audio files, conversation analysis, and instructions on native-like acceptances and refusals to invitations. The present activity may be adapted to either lower or higher proficiency levels and to different language courses (e.g., Portuguese, French, Italian, etc.). One suggestion for instructors who would like to adapt the present activity to a lower-level course would be either to reduce the quantity and length of input and production tasks, or to apply the same type of activity to a different speech act found in a beginner-level textbook, such as greetings. If a lower-level course were to focus on greetings, the audio could contain authentic samples of different greetings in Spanish (or another language), in addition to transcripts and a required email where learners would

focus on writing appropriate greetings to different people via CMC (e.g., to a friend, a boss, an unknown professor).

The present activity could be adapted to more advanced language courses by scaffolding the activity through the inclusion of multiple types of events and formal/informal situations. In addition, whereas this activity was carried out in a face-to-face classroom, it could be easily adapted for entirely online or hybrid foreign language courses. The strength of this activity is that it provides authentic input, allows students to practice a variety of skills, and thanks to the CMC portion, offers foreign language instructors a quick and efficient way to assess learners' progress and provide feedback. The appendices contain materials, emails sent to students, examples of the responses that the instructors received from their students, and examples of the types of feedback that instructors can give their students.

Another strength of this CMC-related activity is that it may be adapted to a virtual learning context, in which case, it is recommended that all files be uploaded to a shared folder so that students have easy access to them. Additionally, due to an increased cognitive load while performing tasks online, Baralt and Morcillo Gómez (2017) recommend carrying out introductory phases of the pedagogical unit asynchronously. Therefore, the activities included in 3.1 Introduction to acceptances and refusals, 3.2 Instructions on writing emails in Spanish, and 3.3 Raising awareness would be conducted entirely asynchronously (prior to class time) by learners in a virtual classroom context. The role-play could be conducted synchronously (on a virtual platform, such as Zoom) during class time. Lastly, the assessment and explicit feedback could also be given virtually in two modes (both orally and via text) through Zoom screen-sharing between instructors and students. Lastly, if this activity were to be extended to a virtual format, it is also recommended that instructors plan a time to reflect on the activity, CMC etiquette, and targeted speech acts after giving students feedback.

While this activity was originally designed to teach acceptances and refusals in oral and email environments, we would also like to encourage instructors to adapt a similar teaching format to other speech acts (e.g., requests, compliments, recommendations, disinvitations). This type of activity, that bridges pragmatics and language learning while incorporating the use of technology, is innovative and can be particularly useful to learners in the current digital age. We encourage instructors to use this activity as an example (but by no means the only one!) of how to infuse the Spanish language classroom with pragmatic and CMC components. With an increasing number of classes taught online, teachers may also be interested in incorporating additional technological tools such as Google docs (where students may collaborate on email writing/drafting), videos of dialogues, chat rooms (such as the chat feature in Zoom), and discussion board posts (on platforms such as Canvas or Blackboard). Suerte!

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Appendix A

Audio Transcription

Aceptación:

A: ¡Oye, Juanma! Voy a organizar una fiesta latina en mi casa este viernes. ¿Quieres venir?

B: ¿Ah, si? ¡Estupendo! ¡Me encantaría! ¿A qué hora es la fiesta?

A: A las 4 de la tarde.

B: Vale. ¿Hay que ir vestido de alguna manera especial, o...?

A: No, no. Es muy informal.

B: ¿Tengo que llevar comida?

A: No te preocupes, tendremos mucha allí.

B: Ok, perfecto, pues nos vemos entonces.

Rechazo:

A: ¡Oye, Juanma! Voy a organizar una barbacoa en mi casa este domingo. ¿Quieres venir?

B: Mmmm, una barbacoa... Este... ¿Y qué comida va a haber en la barbacoa?

A: Pues principalmente carne.

B: Carne... eh, a ver, suena... Tiene pinta de que va a estar muy guay, pero es que la cosa es que yo soy vegano, y me da mucha pena comer carne. Así que, lo siento. Pasadlo bien, pero, yo lo siento, pero no voy a ir.

A: Vale, no pasa nada.

Appendix B

Email sent to students

Task 1:

Dear Students,

Please follow the instructions on whether you should accept or reject the invitation. Each email should take no more than 8 minutes to complete. Please send your responses to me by 11p.m. Sunday March 25th. Each email should contain between 30-40 words minimum and should use the strategies for accepting and refusing invitations that we have covered in class. I will be following your email with feedback on appropriate strategies used, appropriate forms of address, as well as grammar corrections. Please write your response and in the subject of each email write:

Subject: Last name, first name, *aceptar* or *rechazar*.

Task 1/email 1:

Subject: Acepta la invitación

Estimado estudiante,

¿Busca un lugar para conversar en español? Venga cada miércoles, de 4:30 a 6 en el "food court" de la IMU (cerca al "Pizza Hut") para conocer a otros hispanohablantes y estudiantes de español en un ambiente relajado, disfrutar un cafecito, y hablar en español. Usted puede venir cuando quiera, pasar unos minutos nada más o quedarse toda la hora.

Espero verle ahí.

Saludos,

Instructora Coulter-Kern

Appendix C

Task 2/email 2:

Dear Students,

Please follow the instructions on whether you should accept or reject the invitation. Each email should take no more than 8 minutes to complete. Please send your responses to me by 11p.m. Sunday March 25th. Each email should contain between 30-40 words minimum and should use the strategies for accepting and refusing invitations that we have covered in class. I will be following your email with feedback on appropriate strategies used, appropriate forms of address, as well as grammar corrections. Please write your response and in the subject of each email write:

Subject: Last name, first name, *aceptar* or *rechazar*.

Subject: Rechaza la invitación

Estimado estudiante,

Vamos a tener un evento de Español y Portugués que se llama Teatro Vida en el GISB este viernes a las 6:30. Usted puede venir cuando quiera y escuchar y disfrutar de la programa.

Espero verle ahí.

Saludos,

Instructora Coulter-Kern

Appendix D

Examples of student email responses:

Example of student rejection to an invitation:

1) Estimado Instructora,

Gracias para la invitación, suena interesante y educativo. Lástima, pero tengo otro compromiso. Yo tengo trabajo a 6:00 este viernes. Ojalá que ustedes tengan un otro evento, porque yo quiero ir.

Lo siento, y muchas gracias,

Student X

Example of a student acceptance to an invitation:

2) Saludos Instructora,

Me suena bien. Yo necesito practicar conversando en español con personas de niveles diferentes. Me encantaría conversar en el “food court” con usted y otros! Tratar de me quedo para toda la hora!

Muchas gracias para la invitación,

Student X

Appendix E

Example of student rejection to an invitation:

1) ~~Estimado~~ Instructora, **Estimada instructora (concordancia de género)**

Gracias ~~para~~ (**por**) la invitación, suena interesante y educativo. Lástima, pero tengo otro compromiso. Yo tengo ~~trabajo~~ **que trabajar** a **las** 6:00 este viernes. Ojalá que ustedes tengan ~~un~~ otro evento, porque yo quiero ir. (*Está muy bien que empieces con un reconocimiento de la invitación, has hecho un buen uso de mitigadores para suavizar el rechazo (e.g., “lástima”). Has explicado correctamente por qué no puedes ir al evento).*

~~Lo siento~~, y muchas gracias, (*como es un rechazo a una invitación en correo formal suena mejor decir “mis disculpas” en vez de lo siento).*

(*Estaría bien que incluyeras una despedida como “saludos cordiales”.*)

Student X

Appendix F

Examples

Accepting invitations:

Me/Nos encantaría...

¡Claro! ¡Por supuesto!

¡Con mucho gusto!

¡Sí! ¡Me parece bien!

¡Suena muy bien!



Refusing invitations:

Me da mucha pena, pero...

Lo siento, pero no puedo en esta ocasión.

Tengo otro compromiso

Me/nos encantaría, pero...

Lástima, pero...



Appendix G

Como escribir un correo electrónico

- 1. Pronombres:
 - Saludos _____
 - Estimado ____ Sr./Sra.
 - Hola _____
- 2. Introducción:
 - Estoy escribiendo porque . . .
- 3. Mensaje:

- Conclusión:
 - Gracias poretc.
 - Saludos cordiales....
 - Nos vemos pronto ...