

¡Estás de buen ver! Teaching Topic Appropriateness

Jingyi Guo & Enrique Rodríguez

Indiana University Bloomington

Abstract

The present teaching activity explores ways to improve the intercultural competence of Spanish learners in a foreign language (FL) classroom. It aims to develop learners' knowledge, attitude, and discovery and interaction skills on topic appropriateness in Spanish-speaking cultures. We focused on teaching the appropriateness of talking about someone's physical appearance in small talk. The activity consists of a survey and a discussion to raise pragmatic awareness, pragmatic input in the form of a joke and an intercultural conversation, a discussion and reflection on the input, and an introduction to relevant pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic resources. Both cross-cultural and intracultural variation are emphasized. Assessment activities are designed to evaluate learners' development of intercultural competence. The activity was piloted with four sections of intermediate learners in a foreign language learning environment. It could be easily adapted to lower or higher levels of learners, as well as to study abroad learners.

Keywords: topic appropriateness, L2 pragmatics, intercultural competence, pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics

Level: Second-Year College Spanish (Intermediate Low/Intermediate Mid, ACTFL, or A2/A2 nearing B1, CEFR)

Suggested Time: 25-30 minutes

Materials: PowerPoint slides, and audio recordings

Target grammatical structures: Copula and exclamatory sentences

Goal: to develop intercultural competence in topic choice in small talk

1 Introduction

While the communicative approach has been widely adopted in language classes (Mitchell, 2002), the incorporation of intercultural competence in language teaching is still developing. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to achieve communicative goals effectively and appropriately in communications with speakers from different cultures (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). The present teaching activity aims to explore ways to develop Spanish learners' intercultural competence in an existing curriculum. We adopted the Intercultural Competence Model of Byram (1997, 2009) because this model views culture as a dynamic system with internal variation rather than static stereotypes. Also, as commented by Arasaratnam-Smith (2017), the model of Byram places an emphasis on language, which aligns with the existing curriculum. The model is based on foreign language teaching (Byram, 2009) and divides the intercultural competence into five subcomponents (Byram, 1997, 2009): knowledge (“[the learner] knows about conventions of communication and interaction”), attitude (“actively seeks the other’s perspectives and evaluations of phenomenon”), interpreting and relating skills (“can identify causes of misunderstanding . . . and dysfunctions”), discovery and interaction skills (“can use a range of questioning techniques”), and critical cultural awareness (“reflect critically on the values, beliefs, and behaviors” of their own culture and the culture of others). Three of the five subcomponents, knowledge, attitude, and discovery and interaction skills, are reflected in the present teaching activity. The target population is intermediate learners of Spanish as a foreign language in a formal classroom. The focus of this activity is topic appropriateness in small talk in Spanish-speaking cultures, more specifically, the appropriateness of talking about someone’s physical appearance. Small talk refers to “non-obligatory talk in terms of task requirement” (McCarthy, 2000, p.84), such as talking about the weather and past weekend at the beginning of a conversation.

Following Byram (1997)'s Intercultural Competence Model, the main goals of this activity are to expand students' knowledge on what topics are appropriate in small talk in Spanish-speaking cultures and in their own culture (knowledge), to encourage an open attitude to cultural differences in topic appropriateness and the willingness to suspend stereotypical beliefs on it (attitude), and to develop relevant pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence to successfully interact in small talk about one's physical appearance (discovery and interaction skills) in the target language.

2 Context

The activity is designed for students enrolled in second-year college Spanish, whose Spanish proficiency is Intermediate Low/Intermediate Mid (ACTFL) or A2/A2 nearing B1 (CEFR). The target students are learning Spanish as a foreign language in a formal classroom. The design of this activity took into consideration the characteristics of online teaching due to the online teaching mode during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it could be easily adapted to in-person teaching as well. The existing curriculum takes a communicative language teaching approach and focuses mainly on vocabulary and grammar learning. In the textbook (Blitt et al., 2020), there are readings targeting some aspects of intercultural competence, but they remain superficial.

This activity centers on the topic of someone's physical appearance in small talk in Spanish-speaking cultures. Some examples of small talk are talking about the weather and past weekend before starting the "real talk". It is "a prime means of nurturing relations" and helps "build solidarity and rapport" (Pullin, 2010).

Regarding this pragmatic target, there exists cross-cultural variation between American culture and Spanish-speaking cultures, as well as pragmatic and sociolinguistic variation within Spanish-speaking cultures. In general, talking about someone's physical appearance is considered as more common and appropriate in Spanish-speaking cultures than in the American culture. In

addition, its appropriateness in Spanish-speaking cultures depends on various sociocultural factors, such as context formality and relationship between interlocutors. Therefore, in order to avoid possible misunderstanding, to communicate more effectively and appropriately in small talk, and to build better interpersonal relationships, it is necessary for English-speaking learners of Spanish to be aware of this cultural variation, understand the cultural values behind this variation, and have the pragmalinguistic resources (i.e., linguistic resources used in small talk) and sociopragmatic ability (i.e., sociocultural variation and appropriateness in small talk) to interpret and participate appropriately in small talk on this topic in the target language. In addition, we introduce this pragmatic target by means of a joke in the target language, because the ability to interpret and make language-specific and culture-appropriate jokes is also an important competence in intercultural communication.

We intended to teach this activity along with Chapter 2 of the S200/S250 textbook (Blitt et al., 2020): *Costumbres, tradiciones y valores* ‘Customs, traditions, and values’. In the culture section of this unit, there is a reading on cultural values and a reflection question that asks if students have observed any cultural difference between the English and the Spanish language. The current activity could serve as an example of such cultural difference and a reasonable extension of this reading activity.

We adopted Schmidt’s noticing model (1990) to design this activity. The noticing model maintains that noticing is necessary and sufficient to internalize input into intake, which is acquired subsequently. Following this model of second language acquisition, we direct learners’ attention to the cultural and pragmatic aspects of the input that we provide, with the aim of guiding them to notice and be aware of the variation of topic choice between cultures as well as within culture, depending on different sociocultural factors. The input is provided both aurally and visually

accompanied by a photo of the context (See Section 3). The data of the practice activity (role-play) is experimental (See Section 4). The activity was piloted with two sections of Second Year Spanish I, and two sections of Second Year Spanish II at Indiana University Bloomington during the Fall 2020 semester, in order to test its feasibility. This activity was originally designed for a face-to-face class. However, due to the time and logistic limitations of the online teaching mode in Fall 2020, in the pilot we were not able to include the intercultural conversation and the assessment component.

3 Curriculum, tasks, and materials

The primary goal of this activity is to expose students enrolled in Second-Year college Spanish to the different sociocultural norms that dictate how and why Spanish-speaking cultures find it appropriate to talk about topics such as someone's physical appearance in various settings and with different interlocutors. While Anglophone cultures might find it odd and/or unacceptable to mention and comment on someone's physical appearance, this kind of behavior is rather common among Spanish speakers. Learners of Spanish, therefore, need to be aware of such intercultural differences between their L1 and L2 in order to be able to navigate such interactions with ease. This activity, envisioned as a supplement to Chapter 2 of the textbook, as already mentioned, is supposed to take between 25-30 minutes of class time. There is no input from the textbook or extra written exercises that could accompany this pedagogical activity, that is, all the materials were carefully designed and created for this particular intercultural intervention.

3.1 Raising awareness

The pre-assessment activity includes a Qualtrics questionnaire (see Appendix I) distributed among the students enrolled in the targeted sections of Second-Year Spanish I and II and should be completed prior to the class meeting in which they are going to cover the discussion of cultural

differences. The Qualtrics questionnaire includes questions such as ‘*What topics do you usually talk about with you friends/family/strangers in the US?*’ and ‘*Do you think these topics might be different in Spanish-speaking countries? Why/why not?*’ in order to direct the students’ attention to the fact that conversational topics might differ among cultures. Students are asked to provide their answers in Spanish, since most common topics can be expressed by the vocabulary they have learnt. In case that they do not know the words they would like to use, they are encouraged to use a dictionary or ask the instructor for help.

Students are then divided in groups of three in breakout rooms in Zoom and have five minutes to discuss their answers to the warm-up questionnaire with their peers. Students are also instructed to come up with a list of two or three topics that would be appropriate for each situation (among friends/family/strangers in the US and in Spanish-speaking cultures). Their answers are then compared as a group. This activity is planned to take between 10 to 15 minutes of class time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pilot study was carried out through Zoom, though this activity is originally conceptualized to be taught in face-to-face settings. Therefore, the mode of delivery might have altered some of its central components, given the infeasibility of administering it in person. First, virtual teaching and learning might feel less personal to both the teacher and the students, who may not engage with the material in the same way they would do in in-person instruction. This limited our pilot in that we could not foster an open discussion with our students since participation was not deemed as an important element of virtual classrooms in the course curriculum. It is expected that the class discussion of the pre-assessment questionnaire would be developed more in-depth in face-to-face settings. Second, online S200/S250 courses only met once per week during the Fall 2020 semester, which left very limited time for the piloting of this activity.

With face-to-face courses meeting for 50 minutes three times per week, it is expected that this will allow more time to conceptualize and teach this activity in a more effective way.

In our pilot, once the students' answers were collected and skimmed for common themes, we quickly realized that several patterns emerged from their intuitions. First, most students mentioned that they in fact talk about different topics with friends and family, but not so much with strangers, with whom they would only engage in small talk. Some students also hinted at the possibility that Spanish speakers might find it appropriate to talk about other topics due to the cultural reasons, but others did not think there would be much variation between the U.S. and Spanish-speaking countries. These disparities among students were expected, as one of the main goals of intercultural competence is to move beyond stereotypes and appreciate the differences in attitudes and behaviors between two or more cultures (Wagner et al., 2017).

3.2. Introducing topic appropriateness

Following this warm-up activity, the instructor presents the students with a picture of a doctor's office that shows a doctor and a patient having a conversation (Adapted from García Viñolo, 2019, p.27; see Appendix II). The instructor asks students what kind of topics and comments would be appropriate in such a setting. In our pilot, their answers were fairly homogeneous, and they all seemed to agree on the fact that only topics such as the patient's health, medical suggestions, and small talk would be expected between a doctor and a patient. After this brief discussion, the instructor then plays the audio recording that shows an interaction between the two interlocutors. The audio recording is about fifteen seconds long and was recorded by a native speaker of Peninsular Spanish (the doctor) and an advanced learner of L2 Spanish (the patient) in order to better represent the reality of intercultural speakers in such contexts. A transcription of this audio file is provided below (Adapted from García Viñolo, 2019, p.27):

– Patient: *Últimamente me veo más gordo y más feo. ¿Qué tengo?* (‘Lately I think I’m fatter and uglier. What do I have?’)

– Doctor: *Mucha razón, señor.* (‘You are quite right, sir’)

This brief interaction shows a patient coming into a doctor’s office and presenting his current concerns about his health (having gained weight and looking more tired and unattractive than usual). The literal translation of the doctor’s response is ‘(You have) A lot of reason, sir’. In Spanish, the conventionalized expression ‘You have a lot of reason’ means ‘You’re quite right’, with which the doctor expresses his agreement with the patient on the negative comments on his physical appearance. However, the patient is expecting the doctor to explain to him what physical problems he has. Therefore, this interaction has humorous undertones and is supposed to be interpreted as a joke. Nevertheless, it does open the door to talk about whether the doctor’s response might be perceived as funny, and then expand the discussion to the subject of topic appropriateness between North American and Spanish-speaking cultures. This activity is planned to take 5 minutes of class time.

3.3. Discussion of topic appropriateness

After the audio recording is played three times, the instructor asks the students whether they think it was a humorous/funny situation, and why that might be the case. This introduces the reflection part of the activity (described in detail in Section 5), where the instructor asks students more questions regarding the speakers’ attitudes, feelings and emotions associated with what was happening, possible communicative goals that each speaker had prior to engaging in that interaction, and whether such a comment would be appropriate had the exchange occurred between speakers of Anglophone culture. While some students might be confused by the doctor’s response, others should be quick to pinpoint what the issue in this interaction is – it is inappropriate for a doctor to talk to patients about their weight and physical appearance that way. The time allotted

for this activity may vary according to the level of engagement shown by the students (10-15 minutes).

3.4. Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic strategies for topic appropriateness

After the reflection activity, the instructor presents the students with pragmalinguistic resources to talk about someone's weight during small talk or as a lighthearted compliment following a greeting, and the sociopragmatic variables behind them (i.e., degree of familiarity between speakers, context, and differences between jokes and compliments). In order to do so, the instructor plays a recording of a short dialogue between two friends who run into each other while walking on the street and briefly engage in small talk (Appendix III). This conversation depicts two instances of pragmalinguistic strategies to compliment someone's weight appropriately in small talk between friends. While these pragmalinguistic resources can vary according to the student population or the teacher's variety of Spanish, some of the suggested expressions from Peninsular Spanish are "*¡Qué bien te veo!*" ('I see that you're doing well!'), "*Estás de buen ver*" ('You're looking good'), "*Estás de buen año*" (Lit: 'You're having a good year'), or "*Estás hermoso/a*" ('You're looking healthy'), among many others. The instructor should make sure that students understand the context in which these expressions are appropriate (i.e., among friends or family, and during a greeting sequence) and how they differ in meaning from more traditional compliments. Using the short conversation as a starting point, instructors can encourage students to reflect on why these pragmalinguistic strategies were well received by their interlocutor, and how this might have changed had the speakers used more explicit comments on each other's weight (e.g., "*Has puesto peso*" 'You've gained weight'). During this activity, students would also benefit from some reflection on how they would mention someone's weight loss/gain in casual conversation in English among friends and family, and what linguistic strategies they would need

to employ in such contexts. In this regard, instructors should mention the differences between how these comments are made in each culture, since American English shows a preference for more indirect compliments such as “You look good/great” while Peninsular Spanish (and others) might use more direct ones targeting a specific aspect of someone’s appearance such as “You look fat” or “You’ve gained weight”. This activity is planned to take around 10 minutes.

4 Assessment

Following Deardoff (2017), the assessment component of this activity aims to present students with concrete ways to increase their long-term understanding of this specific aspect of intercultural competence and their critical skills to develop intercultural thinking. In this study, the assessment process addresses the intercultural resources that are relevant to this specific activity, that is, the development of intercultural awareness in terms of topic appropriateness and pragmalinguistic strategies to comment on interlocutors’ physical appearance during small talk. The assessment model used for this teaching activity is based on Fantini’s (2019) modes of assessment strategies. On the one hand, it is discrete, as it focuses on speech acts and discourse strategies during small talk. On the other hand, it is direct, since learners will be required to complete a task at a designated time to test their intercultural competence. The instrument chosen as assessment measure for this activity is an interactive role-play (Appendix IV) in which students will be asked to work in pairs and engage in small talk and comment on their interlocutor’s physical appearance by using the appropriate pragmalinguistic resources. Before beginning the activity, the students receive one card each with the instructions for their interaction and are told to talk for about 2-3 minutes. The scenarios are described in Spanish.

The pedagogical goal of this role-play activity is twofold. First, it gives the student an opportunity to develop their intercultural and interactive practices in a controlled environment, the

foreign language classroom. Second, it provides the learners with situations in which they can later reflect on in terms of interaction, feelings, metapragmatic concepts, and perceived common ground between interlocutors, as suggested by McConachy (2018). The assessment for this particular activity is, therefore, formative as it will be conducted at the end of this particular mini-unit on intercultural pragmatics and will make use of a flexible and individualized approach to provide feedback to each student (Fantini, 2019). Finally, students will also be asked to self-evaluate their role-play performance and learning outcomes on a Likert scale (Appendix V), based on the goals and objectives outlined in Section 1 (Introduction). Using a quantitative instrument to measure their learning outcomes allows students to get a sense of what they have accomplished throughout this particular unit as well as a chance to verbalize their metapragmatic awareness and goals.

Overall, the goal of this pedagogical activity is to bring attention to the fact that talking about someone's physical appearance is more acceptable in Spanish-speaking cultures than in Anglophone cultures, such as the U.S. and, therefore, students need to be ready to navigate these topics from an intercultural viewpoint, keeping in mind the two sociocultural realities. This activity also provides students with pragmalinguistic resources and sociopragmatic information regarding compliments and jokes about someone's physical appearance during small talk.

5 Reflection as a means for learning

Reflection on intercultural experiences and settings, as well as their experiences in their own L1, has been discussed to be a highly beneficial pedagogical resource in intercultural competence learning and teaching (McConachy, 2018). By reflecting on their L1 and L2 sociocultural norms, students are able to evaluate and frame different elements of a given culture, and position themselves in relation to said set of (inter)cultural behaviors and beliefs (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016). Encouraging students to reflect on and analyze the different strategies and feelings

associated to specific intercultural speakers and contexts might also lead to the development of metapragmatic awareness, which allows learners to verbalize the set of sociocultural norms that govern intercultural interactions (McConachy, 2018; McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020).

In this particular activity, metapragmatic awareness is developed by reflecting on the use of humor and topic appropriateness in one specific setting (a doctor's office), but it can be extended to other contexts and interlocutors should the instructor deem it necessary. For example, the dialogue could be expanded to incorporate other speech acts or a negotiation of meaning in this emergent context for upper-level classes. During the implementation of this activity in Second-year Spanish classes, students were engaged with the material and many volunteered to provide answers during the reflection part. However, students found it challenging to understand the reasons why the doctor's response was funny, which suggests that they could benefit from some prior explicit instruction on different strategies to create humor in Spanish to better comprehend the context of the activity. At the end of the activity, however, students were able to grasp the nuances regarding the appropriateness of topic selection in Spanish-speaking countries, and how they are different from their U.S.-centric point of view. While this is simply a short introduction to this intercultural difference between the U.S. and Spanish-speaking countries, instructors should continue to explore this issue more in-depth with additional activities and examples of authentic interactions (e.g., videos from YouTube, clips from TV shows or movies, etc.) that show how other pragmatic variables such as social distance, power, gender, and familiarity between speakers might affect topic selection.

6 Conclusion and extensions

The present teaching activity set out to foster learners of Spanish's intercultural competence by raising awareness of topic appropriateness and discussing pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatics

resources for small talk in Spanish-speaking countries. While this activity was designed for low-intermediate learners, it could also be adapted to lower and higher levels of proficiency as needed in order to make this lesson relevant to different learner populations. For example, the conversation between the doctor and the patient could be very easily extended to show the patient's uptake of the doctor's joke, adding more context for learners to reflect upon this intercultural interaction in the workplace. Similarly, instructors might opt for creating other scenarios that include comparable interactions among speakers in different settings for learners to contrast and analyze (i.e., a customer-cashier interaction at a supermarket). Finally, in study abroad contexts, this activity could very easily be implemented by asking students to do ethnographic work and document all types of topics and discourse strategies that native speakers from that specific region use to initiate and maintain small-talk in different settings. Given that topic selection as well as pragmalinguistic and discourse strategies might be dependent on factors such as gender, social distance, degree of familiarity among speakers, or setting, this type of ethnographic work would provide learners with valuable insight into the cultural beliefs and norms of native speakers from a given region or area, thus fostering their intercultural and pragmatic awareness of topic appropriateness in L2 Spanish.

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Appendix I

Pre-assessment Qualtrics questionnaire

Q1 ¿Cuál es tu clase de español?

‘What’s your Spanish class?’

S200

S250

Q2 ¿De qué temas (*topics*) hablas con tus amigos en Estados Unidos?

‘What topics do you talk about with your friends in the United States?’

Q3 ¿De qué temas (*topics*) hablas con tu familia en Estados Unidos?

‘What topics do you talk about with your family in the United States?’

Q4 ¿De qué temas (*topics*) hablas con extraños o desconocidos en Estados Unidos?

‘What topics do you talk about with strangers in the United States?’

Q5 ¿Crees que en países de habla hispana (*Spanish speaking countries*) los temas para hablar son diferentes? ¿Por qué/¿Por qué no?

‘Do you think the topics of conversation are different in Spanish-speaking countries? Why or why not?’

Appendix II

PowerPoint slide and transcription

(Adapted from García Viñolo, 2019, p.27)

Un joven americano fue a la consulta del médico en España...



Transcription:

Joven: Doctor, últimamente estoy más gordo y más feo. ¿Qué tengo?

Médico: Mucha razón, señor.

Appendix III

Sample intercultural conversation

Elisa: ¡Felipe! ¡Tanto tiempo sin verte! ¿Cómo estás?

Felipe: ¿Elisa? ¡Qué casualidad! Estoy bien. ¿Y tú?

Elisa: Bien, bien. Cambiaste muchísimo. ¡Estás de buen ver!

Felipe: Jaja, muchas gracias. ¡Yo también te veo muy bien! Y dime, ¿qué haces por Barcelona?

Elisa: Empecé a trabajar aquí en una empresa de exportación hace unos meses. ¿Y tú? ¿Ya terminas tu maestría en Derecho?

Felipe: No, todavía me queda un semestre. Perdón, Elisa, me tengo que ir, que tengo una reunión en media hora y llego tarde. ¡Qué bien que te has mudado a Barcelona! ¿Por qué no tomamos una taza de café juntos este fin de semana?

Elisa: ¡Estupendo! Estoy muy contenta de poder verte otra vez en Barcelona. Nos vemos pronto.

Felipe: Yo también. ¡Hasta luego!

English translation:

Elisa: Felipe! So long no see! How've you been?

Felipe: Elisa? What are the chances! I'm doing well, how about you?

Elisa: I've been doing well. You've changed a lot! You're looking good!

Felipe: [Laughs] Thank you! I see that you're also looking good! So, what are you doing in Barcelona?

Elisa: I started working at an export company a few months ago. What about you? Did you finish your Masters in Law yet?

Felipe: I still have one semester to go. I'm sorry, Elisa, I need to go, I have a meeting in thirty minutes and I'm already late. I'm so excited about you moving to Barcelona! Why don't we grab a coffee sometime this weekend?

Elisa: That sounds great! I'm very happy to be able to see you again here in Barcelona. See you soon!

Felipe: Me too. See you later!

Appendix IV

Role play to be used during the assessment component

Estudiante A

En la siguiente situación, imagina que te encuentras por la calle con un amigo a quien hace algunos meses que no ves. Hablas con él de cosas superficiales (el tiempo, su nuevo trabajo, su familia...). Además, notas que su apariencia física ha cambiado visiblemente y quieres hacer un comentario sobre eso antes de terminar la conversación.

Estudiante B

En la siguiente situación, imagina que te encuentras por la calle con un amigo a quien hace algunos meses que no ves. Hablas con él de cosas superficiales (el tiempo, su nuevo trabajo, su familia...). En los últimos meses, has practicado poco ejercicio y comido una dieta menos saludable, así que tu apariencia física ha cambiado ligeramente desde la última vez que viste a tu amigo.

English translations

Student A

For the next situation, imagine that you run into a friend who you haven't seen in a while on the street. You engage in small talk with them (weather, job updates, family...), but you also notice that their physical appearance has changed since last time you saw them, so you want to make a comment about it.

Student B

For the next situation, imagine that you run into a friend who you haven't seen in a while on the street. You engage in small talk with them (weather, job updates, family...). However, you haven't been going to the gym or eating healthy in the last few months, so your physical appearance has drastically changed since the last time you saw them.

Appendix V

Likert scale to be used during the assessment component

Instructions: Evaluate your learning outcomes by checking the appropriate evaluation in the following table.

	Excellent	Good	Need more work	Notes
I know different ways of and attitudes towards talking about someone's physical appearance in American culture and Spanish-speaking cultures.				
I developed an open attitude to cultural differences in topic appropriateness.				
I am willing to suspend stereotypical beliefs that there's no cultural difference in this regard: it is always appropriate to talk about one's physical appearance in Spanish-speaking cultures; it is always inappropriate in American culture.				
I am able to interpret appropriately the talking about one's physical appearance in Spanish-speaking cultures and relate it to my own culture and experience.				

<p>I am able to interact appropriately and effectively in role-play in Spanish that involves the talking of one's physical appearance.</p>				
<p>I am able to analyze critically the cultural motivation (e.g., cultural-specific beliefs, values, etc.) behind the differences in topic choice in different cultures.</p>				