¿Qué me recomiendas? Teaching the Pragmatics of Recommendations

## Matthew Pollock & Nicholas M. Blaker

## Indiana University Bloomington

## Abstract

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has demonstrated that pragmatics is a difficult area for L2 learners to navigate without explicit and/or implicit instructional intervention (Taguchi and Roever, 2017). Thus, the present instructional unit provides foreign language (FL) instructors of Spanish with a variety of activities designed to aid learners of Spanish in the process of acquiring the speech act of recommendations. This speech act requires both knowledge of pragmalinguistic (e.g., subjunctive conjugations) and sociopragmatic (e.g., formal vs. informal social contexts) strategies, and therefore, the current unit begins with metapragmatic instruction (i.e., awareness raising) through identification of recommendation strategies and culminates in role-plays of varying situations along the informal to formal scale that require use and knowledge of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic strategies in Spanish. Suggestions for assessment and extension of the unit are discussed and encouraged for implementation into the Spanish FL classroom.

Keywords: L2/FL Spanish, pragmatics, FL instruction, speech acts, recommendations

Level: Second-Year Spanish (Intermediate low/mid, ACTFL; A2-B2, CEFR).

Suggested Time: Two 50-min sessions.

**Materials:** Recommendation strategies guide, cross-linguistic dialogue transcript, dialogue transcript, situation cards, instructional PowerPoint, audio recording.

**Target Grammatical Structures:** Present/Imperfect Subjunctive, Conditional, Modal verbs, "If" clauses.

**Goal:** To instruct intermediate learners of Spanish in the foreign language classroom on appropriate use and production of recommendations.

## **1** Introduction

Research in the area of second language (L2) pragmatics has provided evidence that instruction of target-like pragmatic norms is beneficial for L2 learners (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). When studying in an immersive foreign language (FL) context, learners have direct access to pragmatic activity (i.e., through day-to-day interactions); however, in the FL classroom, instructors often serve as learners' only source of providing pragmatic instruction (Sessarego, 2021). Furthermore, researchers like Taguchi and Roever (2017) underscore the importance of both explicit and implicit instructional techniques, as the former provides intentional learning of the target language while the latter permits the learner to engage in subconscious processing. Using both an explicit and implicit framework, we herein provide a linguistically motivated pedagogical intervention to contribute to the teaching of Spanish recommendations in the FL context.

The objective of this lesson is to provide FL learners of Spanish with an understanding of pragmatic tendencies of recommendations, with a particular focus on the usage of subjunctive conjugations and intermediate clausal constructions (i.e., *si* 'if' clauses). Across four scaffolded stages of instruction, learners first receive metapragmatic instruction that focuses on raising their awareness of forms, followed by a set of activities where they must identify suggestion tools and create their own dialogues. This lesson can be taught when students are learning recommendation-relevant grammar structures, for example, the present/imperfect subjunctive and conditional clauses in Spanish.

#### 2 Context

According to Martínez-Flor (2005), recommendations are classified as one of Searle's (1969) directive speech acts because speakers attempt to get their hearer to commit to or complete a future action. Although recommendations are typically conveyed using direct speech acts, it is

possible for indirect or conventionalized expressions to be used in place of direct acts. Recommendations are part of Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness: by imposing on the negative face of the hearer to perform a specific act, a speaker presents a face-threatening act. To avoid such an act, speakers must consider issues such as social distance and power relative to their interlocutor before giving recommendations (Martínez-Flor, 2005).

It is important to highlight that recommendations have not been studied as extensively as other speech acts (i.e., requests, compliments), but they are nonetheless employed often in daily interactions between friends, co-workers, students-teachers, etc. Due to its widespread use, the recommendation constitutes an act deserving attention in the FL classroom to ensure that L2 learners are equipped with the appropriate strategies to make recommendations in the target-language context. More specifically, in the area of teaching Spanish as a FL, Koike (1995) has highlighted the need for English-speaking L2/FL learners of Spanish to be exposed to the pragmalinguistic strategies necessary for making recommendations in Spanish, given that Spanish speakers employ strategies that differ from English norms.

As Laughlin, Wain, and Schmidgall (2015) argue, the ability to use and comprehend speech acts is a crucial part in the development of pragmatic competence for L2 learners. The current instructional unit focuses on teaching the speech act of recommendations to Englishspeaking L2 learners of Spanish at the intermediate level in the FL context. The construction of the current instructional unit is grounded in previous research that has examined the principle linguistic features present in the production of the speech act of recommendations in both Spanish and English. In addition, given its importance in L2 acquisition theory, we take into account Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which argues that learners must "notice" both the linguistic form and function of L2 structures in order to successfully navigate acquisition, and also, that input must be noticed by the learner in order for it to become intake and aid in acquisition.

Recommendation strategies serve an important pragmatic role in daily speech (e.g., teacher-student or doctor-patient interactions) and, in a language like Spanish with an overt subjunctive mood system, this speech act provides a level of grammatical complexity that is suitable for intermediate language learners. Both conditional clauses and subjunctive conjugations are necessary for students to control and increase their perceived politeness, which allows learners to produce speech acts that can guide them in employing recommendations while avoiding overt directiveness and social face threats, as discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Previous research, e.g., Sessarego (2020), has shown that pragmalinguistic competence is often difficult for learners to acquire and can lead learners to confusion. Glide (2016) and Placencia (2012) have both examined the production of recommendations in computer-mediated contexts (CMC) like Reddit, where users answer strangers' questions. These contexts can be applied to pedagogy by helping provide a model for native-like social face management and recommendations that can be used in the FL classroom.

This teaching unit serves not only to contextualize the use of recommendations in Spanish for learners of Spanish, but also to focus learners' attention on strategies available to them to appropriately produce this speech act. In order to reflect the tenets of Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, our intervention includes activities that explicitly give learners specific pragmalinguistic forms for producing Spanish recommendations.

The taxonomy of acts developed by Martínez-Flor (2005) for the production of recommendations – including direct, conventionalized, and indirect sub-types – has been adapted for our pragmatic intervention. Examples of strategies associated with the three act types are

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provided in Appendix A. The direct and indirect acts can be taught to lower intermediate learners learning the present subjunctive tense, while the conventionalized forms featuring conditionals and modals can be taught at the high-intermediate level while studying the imperfect subjunctive tense and conditional clauses.

#### **3** Curriculum, tasks and materials

We developed a table of communicative strategies for making recommendations, including how to suggest alternative options and express disbelief. This material, as well as previous pragmatic research on Spanish recommendations (Glide, 2016; Hernández-Flores, 1999; Placencia, 2012), served as a basis for the learner strategy handout (Appendix A). Overall, the instructional unit is divided into four steps: the first two are teacher-directed, while the last two are student-guided. First, students are introduced to Spanish norms through computer-mediated contexts, such as "Yahoo Answers" posts. They then receive a written dialogue in both English and Spanish. Thereafter, they receive three recommendation scenarios in which they identify strategies and pragmatic tools they have learned. Finally, they listen to an audio clip of two Spanish native speakers engaging in recommendations, while they take note of how pragmalinguistic tools (i.e., strategies) are applied, working in groups to implement these tools in prepared dialogues.

### 3.1 Introduction through computer-mediated examples

This first activity introduces learners by way of explicit instruction to expressions that are common in giving recommendations in Spanish. The instructor provides the learners with a list of expressions containing contextualized examples that are to be referenced during the remainder of the unit. To help learners understand how to employ these strategies in the real world, a user dialogue from Yahoo Answers is shown to students in the presentation of the lesson, demonstrating a request for help and recommendations using pragmalinguistic strategies (Appendix E).

*Procedure* (10 min): The instructor presents learners with the list of expressions that are used to make recommendations in Spanish, explains the expressions, and asks learners to read the contextualized sentences from Yahoo Answers aloud. It is important that the instructor highlight the use of the subjunctive in these forms and the use of formal vs. informal forms in Spanish (i.e.,  $t\hat{u}$  'you (informal)' vs. *usted* 'you (formal)'). After detailing the expressions, the instructor asks the learners if they have doubts or questions regarding usage of the expressions. Appendix A provides a list of the pragmatic expressions used throughout the instructional unit.

Based on Glide (2016) and Placencia's (2012) work in CMC, this context provides naturalistic recommendations that give students insights into native-speaker strategies in an informal and familiar digital forum.

### 3.2 Cross-linguistic comparison

This activity provides learners with the opportunity to compare and contrast recommendation strategies found in both English and Spanish. Students receive a printed copy of a single dialogue in both Spanish and English about an individual seeking recommendation for an upcoming trip to Spain (Appendix B). Learners are encouraged to notice the use of recommendation strategies in everyday conversation. Instructors can emphasize the particular strategies that work in both languages and point out structures in Spanish that diverge from English.

*Procedure* (15 min): Using the strategies presented in the first activity, the instructor lets learners work in pairs or groups, depending on the number of students, to analyze the English and Spanish dialogues. Learners read both dialogues while using the provided handout (Appendix B) to indicate recommendation strategies. After learners have read both texts, instructors can lead a discussion about the strategies observed across languages, pointing out similarities and differences. Based on the tenets of Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, this activity is intended to draw learners' attention to key strategies discussed in the previous activity. By observing strategies featured in a written text, they can become more familiar with how recommendations are structured and how they differ crosslinguistically.

### 3.3 Recognition and written production

In this activity, learners listen to a dialogue between two friends, in which one speaker is asking for restaurant recommendations. Learners should identify the strategies used to make recommendations, considering both forms learned in the first activity and Spanish norms discussed in the second activity.

*Procedure* (15 min): The instructor will first play the recorded dialogue twice. After hearing the dialogue for the first time, learners receive a written transcript of the dialogue, permitting them to follow along while listening to the dialogue for the second time and taking notes. Learners will then converse with their partner(s), noting the target expressions they heard in the dialogue. Instructors can briefly discuss the strategies used to express Spanish recommendations and compare the results from the previous activities. See Appendix C for the dialogue transcript.

Pragmatic observation is a necessary predecessor to application, as discussed by Schmidt (1990) in the Noticing Hypothesis. One way to encourage this type of fruitful observation in the classroom is through reflection on the pragmatic strategies and acquisitional tendencies that students experience, which can be guided by instructors, as Ishihara and Cohen (2010) describe. The metacognitive activity discussed in this section prompts reflection and observation by encouraging learners to be aware of the explicit learning they have done and to begin analyzing this knowledge with peers.

### 3.4 Oral role-play

This final activity allows learners to practice giving recommendations in Spanish. Learner groups are presented with situation cards and take turns reading a situation and responding with an appropriate recommendation. This encourages both the production of recommendation strategies and the acknowledgement of varying social roles that have different levels of formality (e.g., teacher-student, friend-friend).

*Procedure* (10 min): The instructor will pass out situation cards to groups of two to three students. One learner will begin by reading a situation to the other group member(s) who, in turn, will respond with a recommendation, using one of the strategies learned previously. Learners will rotate roles after each turn so that all group members have the opportunity to produce a Spanish recommendation. Instructors can encourage learners to create their own situations as well, or to creatively complicate or alter the situations on the cards provided in Appendix D.

In this final activity, pragmatic knowledge is applied to on-line oral expression. Given that learners have been made aware of the necessary pragmatic forms in the previous activities, they are encouraged in this exercise to apply them within conversation. This serves as an early form of assessment of how much they have learned and their awareness of cross-linguistic differences between Spanish and English. Multiple researchers (Cohen, 2019; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) pointed to the need for this type of assessment, as well as follow-up activities that continue to draw on the learned skill later on, ensuring that "noticed" forms become accessible pragmalinguistic tools that remain in use long after the initial lesson.

### 4 Assessment

There is a fundamental divide between the instruction of pragmatic forms and their acquisition. As Cohen (2019) discusses, even selecting useful forms can be difficult: learners need to understand the value and usefulness of the forms they are taught in order to pay increased attention and know to retain them for long term usage. Furthermore, he points out that although there exist a wide range of assessment methods for gauging natural pragmatic tendencies (e.g., Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), role-plays, and Likert scales ratings), criteria for classroom assessment are more scattershot. Cohen (2019: 198) points out that some authors suggest "one-shot" methods that assess the acquisition of isolated forms, while others use an extended series of tools, including "reflective writing, rubrics, role plays, and self/peer assessment." Taguchi and Roever (2017) also point to the lack of pragmatic assessment in major national and international foreign language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview.

This inconsistency in criteria for the assessment of pragmatic acquisition means that there is a serious difficulty in determining whether pragmatic interventions –such as those that we advocate here for the learning of Spanish recommendations– are acquired in a meaningful and holistic way by language learners. Taguchi and Roever (2017) emphasize the importance of considering situational context when assessing pragmatic productions, and Cohen (2019) urges increased assessment not just of learners' pragmalinguistic ability to produce necessary forms, but also their sociopragmatic competence in knowing the correct forms that should be used in a variety of contexts. The assessment of pragmatic knowledge, as Cohen (2019) argues, can only improve overall pragmatic awareness: students become more aware of the importance of these forms, and pay more attention to issues of pragmatics than if these issues were to remain a secondary concern. Given the current state of pragmatic assessment, we recommend that instructors develop an instrument (or instruments) that can be used to test the understanding and continued retention of recommendation strategies once this unit has concluded. Taguchi and Roever (2017) provide useful examples of meta-pragmatic

judgments, multi-turn DCTs, and dialogue choice tasks that instructors can adopt in their own classrooms to help learners recall and hone tools for making recommendations.

### 5 Reflection as a means for learning

This instructional unit provides learners of Spanish with the opportunity to practice recommendations through both written and oral activities in Spanish. Pragmatic instruction is often not a part of Spanish pedagogy due to the primary focus on developing grammatical and lexical competence in many L2 curricula. As such, our intervention serves as part of a larger effort to encourage Spanish instructors to teach speech acts in FL classrooms while simultaneously making an attempt to expose learners to target language grammar and vocabulary.

Researchers such as McConachy and Spencer-Oatey (2020) emphasize the importance of Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis in pragmatic acquisition, with awareness of forms and sociopragmatic norms leading to cognitive retention and the learning of pragmatic rules. An additional way to augment student noticing is to make clear the stakes of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence (or a lack thereof) in real-world language contexts. While the goal of students may not always be to match the sociopragmatic behaviors of native speakers, understanding how forms reflect social issues such as the relative power of speakers and the imposition of the act (e.g., lending a friend a pencil versus a car), may help students to focus on the pragmatic situation in a way that further develops their awareness of pragmatic norms. As pertaining to the interventions outlined in this article, reflective post-intervention activities may encourage students to think back on what was effective and what skills they may have acquired in these activities that can apply beyond recommendations to situations of real-life L2 interaction.

Given that this pragmatic intervention provides learners with naturalistic and specific contexts in which to produce pragmatically appropriate structures, it may be useful to employ reflection-based activities in the classroom and individual as instructors, as Ishihara and Cohen (2010) suggest, in order to document when instruction is most effective and how students best learn and acquire forms. As opposed to the typically generalized or decontextualized situations of language textbook activities, the activities proposed here open the door to working with specific language contexts in which formality, register, and related phenomena play a role in determining appropriate productions. Instructor note-taking may serve as a useful means of developing further curricular interventions by facilitating reflection on the effectiveness of the activities implemented through both observation of in-class instruction and a close reading of student reflections. As Ishihara and Cohen (2010) describe, reflecting on the FL context can be a useful means of determining what pragmatic abilities learners of a given FL need to acquire and how to best help them to develop such skills.

### 6 Conclusion and extensions

Our instructional unit has described several methods for teaching recommendations in the FL classroom, while also opening the door to future discussion of pragmatic instructional methods by drawing increased attention to the way learners use language to carry out speech goals. Recommendation are common speech acts that both early and advanced learners will have reason to use regularly in naturalistic L2 contexts and thus they deserve greater attention in FL instruction. Among other benefits, this helps to ensure that learners are aware that native and target-language strategies differ (e.g., Koike,1995). In our intervention, we provided instructors with a framework that moves in a scaffolded way from instructor- to student-led activities which encourage increased awareness and contact with the pragmatics of recommendations in the L2

classroom. We also discussed the importance of assessment, both to show learners that pragmatic acquisition is as important as lexical or grammatical knowledge, and to gauge the effectiveness and longevity of instruction. Finally, we discussed both student- and instructor-oriented reflection as a means of encouraging learners to notice and focus on pragmatic instruction as well as a way for instructors to determine how successful the intervention was for learners and how to increase future engagement.

The activities presented in this lesson focus on pragmatic expressions that mid- and highintermediate-level Spanish learners can apply using familiar vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, we encourage adaptation of these materials to allow for instruction across different proficiency levels. For example, instructors of advanced learners can employ complex conditional structures (e.g., *si hubiera sido tú, te habría recomendado*... "If I were you, I would have recommended...'), while those working with low-intermediate or even novice learners could use simple stem-changing verbs, present tense modals, and direct object pronouns (e.g., *recomiendo este color* 'I recommend this color'; *debes estudiar más* 'you should study more'; *lo sugiero* 'I suggest it'). Although we focus on recommendations here, we have also tried to make clear the broad applicability of this framework as a starting point for manifold instructional topics. The four steps we outlined can serve as an entry point to teaching complaints, disagreements, or a variety of other speech acts not frequently taught in FL classrooms. Even outside the L2 Spanish context, we hope that our intervention can serve as a blueprint to inspire instructors of any language to initiate rigorous pragmatic instruction.

As a final note of encouragement to instructors, we would like to remind you that every language classroom is different. While our intervention can serve as a model for future pragmatic instruction, and prove useful for a variety of language levels, we also acknowledge that instructors and learners may vary greatly based on individual differences, and we encourage you to avoid rigidly following our structure. Creativity and adaptation are key in the acquisition and application of pragmatic knowledge – we see no reason why it should be otherwise when teaching it. We hope that both instructors and learners can benefit from these activities, leading to improved communication and sociopragmatic competency in the FL classroom.

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Туре	Strategy	Examples	Course Level			
Direct	Performatives	Te/Le aconsejo Te/Le recomiendo Te/Le sugiero	Second-year Spanish			
Indirect	Impersonal	Es aconsejable Es recomendable	Second-year Spanish			
Conventionalized forms	Conditionals	Yo que tú Si yo fuera tú (Yo) en tu lugar En tú situación, Yo Si,	Second-year Spanish and beyond			
	Modals	Deberías Podrías	Second-year Spanish and beyond			
Adapted from Cowell, Heining-Boynton, & Leloup, 2014:462						

# Appendix A: Pragmalinguistic strategies for Spanish recommendations

## **Appendix B: Cross-cultural dialogue**

Spanish

Marta: Hola, ¡Luis! ¿Cómo estás?

**Luis:** Estoy muy bien. Alberto me dijo que ibas a España por la primera vez durante el verano. ¿Es verdad?

**Marta:** ¡Eso es! Primero, voy a Madrid y después a Barcelona. Tengo muchas ganas de irme, pero no sé qué hacer cuando esté en España.

Luis: Pues, yo en tu lugar, iría al Palacio Real en Madrid y también visitaría el Museo del Prado si te gusta el arte.

**Marta:** ¡Perfecto! Creo que hay muchos bares en Madrid, pero hay algún sitio que sirva tapas.

Luis: Claro qué sí. **Podrías** ir al Tigre del Norte en Chueca. Además, **si yo fuera tú, pediría** una cerveza y tortilla de patatas. La tortilla de patas está muy buena.

Marta: ¿Debería pedir algo más?

**Luis:** Pues, sí. Yo **probaría** también el pulpo a la gallega. Todos dicen que el pulpo es el mejor de toda España.

**Marta:** ¡Perfecto! ¿Me puedes recomendar unos sitios en Barcelona?

**Luis:** Me encanta Barcelona, pero si tienes tiempo, **deberías** visitar la Sagrada Familia, la catedral diseñado por Antoni Gaudí.

**Marta:** Gracias por las recomendaciones, Luis. Me has ayudado mucho.

### English

Melissa: Hey Luke, how are you?

**Luke:** I am good. Sam told me that you are going to Spain for the first time during the summer. Are you excited?

**Melissa:** Yes! First, I am going to Madrid and after I am going to Barcelona. I am really excited about going, but I do not know what to do when I get there.

**Luke:** I think you should go to the Royal Palace and you could visit the art museum if you like art.

**Melissa:** Awesome. I know that Madrid has a lot of bars, but do you know of a place that serves *tapas*?

**Luke:** Of course, you could go to the *Tigre del Norte* in Chueca. Also, if I were you, I would order a beer and the Spanish omelet. The Spanish omelet is the best.

Melissa: Should I order anything else?

**Luke:** Yes. They recommend trying the fried octopus because they say that it is the best in the country.

**Melissa:** Awesome. Do you know of any great places in Barcelona?

**Luke:** I love Barcelona, but if you have time, you should visit the *Sagrada Familia*, the cathedral designed by Antoni Gaudi.

**Melissa:** Thanks so much for the recommendations. You've helped me a lot.

## Appendix C: Listening Dialogue

Mateo:	Hola, ¡Nico! ¿Cómo estás?
Nico:	Estoy bien, Mateo, pero tengo hambre. ¿Me puedes recomendar un sitio para comer?
Mateo:	Claro que sí. Si te gusta pizza, te recomiendo que comas en Telepizza.
Nico:	Perfecto. ¿Cómo es la pizza?
Mateo:	La pizza está muy buena. ¿Qué tipo de pizza prefieres?
Nico:	Este, bueno, me gusta pizza con queso.
Mateo:	Hmm, podrías comer la pizza con, no la pizza de cuatro quesos.
Nico:	Ah, bueno, de hecho, creo, bueno, creo que prefiero pasta. Todo el mundo me recomienda que pruebe la pasta en Olive Garden. ¿Qué piensas?
Mateo:	La pasta sí está muy buena. De hecho, si comes ahí, es recomendable probar un postre como tiramisú o helado.
Nico:	Ah, sí? Todos me dicen que debería probar el helado de chocolate. ¿Me puedes
Mateo:	Pues, sí. Para picar, te aconsejo que pidas la ensalada, porque la ensalada es muy famosa.
Nico:	¡Guay! Tengo muchas ganas de comer. Creo que voy a comer en Olive Garden. ¿Te apetece ir?
Mateo:	Sí, vamos!
Nico:	Perfecto, bien, vamos.

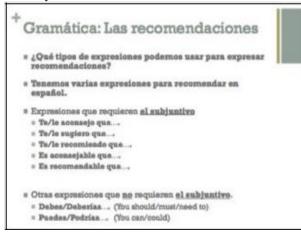
# **Appendix D: Situation Cards**

Tu amigo siempre quiere que le lleves a casa, pero te sientes obligado y no sabes qué hacer Quieres mantener la vida sana, pero no te gusta hacer ejercicio ni comer sana.		Estás resfriado, te duele la cabeza, pero tienes que trabajar y no sabes qué hacer Tu amigo te ha invitado a su fiesta de cumpleaños y no sabes qué regalarle		No quieres salir de fiesta, pero tus amigos quieren que vengas. No sabes qué decirles No te cae bien tu jefe en el trabajo, pero no quieres decirle nada.	

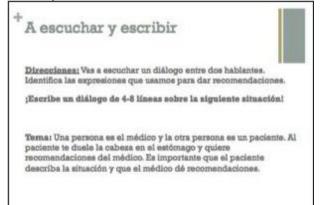
## **Appendix E: Instructional PowerPoint**

## **3rd Semester Materials**

### Activity 1



## Activity 2



## Activity 3

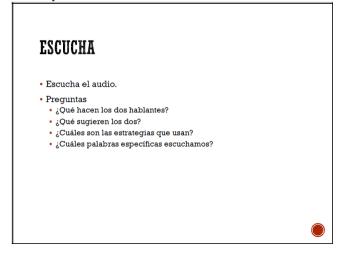


### 4th Semester Materials

### Activity 1



### Activity 2



Activity 3

