USING AN ONLINE FORUM TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF SPANISH GRAMMAR AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study presents e-learning methods for learning grammar that can provide more contextualization and meaning than explanations in traditional textbook, thus enhancing second language students' active and interactive learning of Spanish grammar. An online forum shared among students in a class is used to share interview reports with native speakers and to respond to the reports of the classmates using the target grammar -infinitival complements in Spanish- as a second language.

KEYWORDS

Second Language, Spanish, Grammar Learning, Online Forum, Infinitival Complement, Guided Induction Model

1. INTRODUCTION

To many instructors and students, learning grammar in a traditional second language classroom setting often means understanding the textbook explanations and memorizing the rules presented in them in order to produce grammatically correct sentences. Even with the incorporation of technology along with communicative approaches into the classroom, many instructors still rely heavily on the explanations of textbooks and the activities presented in them to teach grammar. Textbooks alone, however, often do not provide enough input and clear explanations about a second language (L2) grammar (Frantzen 2013; Yoon 2018). Students often feel that real communication ability in L2 can be acquired through authentic content-based input such as interaction with speakers who speak L2 as a native tongue in authentic cultural settings.

One part of Spanish grammar that often causes confusion among native speakers of English learning Spanish as L2 is infinitival complements (*María evita comer carne* 'Mary avoids eating meat'). Students often produce ungrammatical sentences such as **María evita comiendo carne* 'Mary avoids eating meat' in which a gerundial complement is used just like in English. The confusion mainly stems from the syntactic transfer from their own first language, but also textbooks are also to be blamed for the insufficient and sometimes unclear explanations of the grammatical concepts along with the lack of contextualized grammar activities. In order to help students to understand and correctly use this particular grammar structure, this pilot study created interactive activities via an online forum (available in Blackboard learning, for example) which incorporate interviews, guided writing, and written discussion. The grammatical concept of the infinitival complement was not explicitly explained, but it was presented through the gradual process of learning examples and using them in authentic cultural settings (See Cerezo et al. 2016 for the 'guided induction model'). A pilot study of college students participating in a study abroad program in Costa Rica will be presented to show how the e-learning methods can be used to teach grammar.

2. METHODS

A pilot study was conducted as part of the study abroad context in Costa Rica with college students from U.S. taking an advanced undergraduate Spanish conversation course. Fifteen students participated in this pilot study while taking this course for four weeks. The instruction of the infinitival complement construction in Spanish

was not formally given to the students, but rather, this grammatical concept was introduced via various examples and models of sentences containing this construction in given activities. The purpose of this approach was to introduce the grammar topic through an inductive way rather than explicitly explaining the concepts. The activities include oral interviews with native speakers of Spanish, guided writing tasks summarizing the oral interviews which are shared through online forums with the classmates, reading classmates' online reports, and writing guided reactions to them (using the required infinitival complement forms). The purpose of these interactive activities was to promote the actual language use not only in authentic contexts but also within a virtual environment rather than just memorizing and applying the grammar rules presented in textbooks.

Phase 1: During the second week of their stay abroad, students were asked to interview native speakers (in particular, their host moms or dads) about their preferred activities and type of food they would like to have on their birthdays, as part of the lesson of the chapter they were learning. This task was completed outside the classroom. Then they were asked to write the interview responses using the infinitival complement construction in the shared online forum, so that other peer students could see what they have written. Students were required to use at least four of the infinitival complement constructions from the given list (*preferir* 'to prefer', *creer* 'to think', *decidir* 'to decide', *odiar* 'to hate', *lamentar* 'to regret', *pensar* 'to plan', *necesitar* 'to need'), and a sample interview question was provided (e.g., *¿Qué tipo de comida prefiere comer en su cumpleaños?* 'What kind of food does she/he prefer to eat on her/his birthday?').

Phase 2: During the third week of their stay abroad, students had to write their reactions to two classmates' written survey responses of their choice, using the infinitival complement construction again. They were asked to write some similarities and differences they found between their host mom and their classmates' host moms regarding their food/activity preferences. Once again, students were offered an inductive guide about the infinitival complement in the instruction: they were required to use at least three of the infinitival complement-taking verbs from the list (*temer* 'to be afraid of', *odiar* 'to hate', *negar* 'to deny', *esperar* 'to hope', *lamentar* 'to regret', and *aceptar* 'to accept/admit'). The purpose of these activities was to enhance their communication skills through the exchange of the meaningful messages, but more importantly, to induce the target grammatical form and usage through interactions with native speakers and also with their classmates in a virtual space. The online forum, in this case, was vital to help them to incorporate authentic information gathered from native speakers of Spanish, and also to interact with their peers.

Towards the end of the program (around the fourth week), students were tested on their knowledge of this grammar by writing a mini-composition about health, including five sentences containing infinitival complements from the given list (*evitar* 'to avoid', *pensar* 'intend', *odiar* 'to hate', *preferir* 'to prefer', *lamentar* 'to regret'). In addition, students took a pre-test and a post-test about the infinitival complements in which they had to choose the correct form of the complement type between an infinitive and a gerund (e.g., *No puedo imaginar [tener / teniendo] un novio tan talentoso como el tuyo* 'I can't imagine having such a talented boyfriend like yours').

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students engaged themselves actively in writing the interview reports in the online discussion forum and they also reacted to their peers' reports online using the infinitival complement appropriately in most cases. Samples responses and reactions to the peers' reports are presented in (1) and (2):

- (1) Interview report: *Mi mamá tica prefiere comer arroz con pollo en su cumpleaños, con queque de churchill. Ella dice que este queque es frío como el helado, y es muy delicioso. Ella cree tener invitados en su casa es mejor que ir a un restaurante. Generalmente ella invita a la familia y a cuatro amigas. Si mi mamá tica decide ir a un restaurante, iría a Antojitos, porque a ella le gusta su comida mexicana. Si hizo algo más especial para su cumpleaños, piensa ir a la playa con sus amigos para celebrar.*
- (2) Reaction: *Hola! A mi mama tica también le encanta comer postre, ella espera poder comer mucho postre la noche de su cumpleaños. A tu mama tica le gustaría tener familia en casa pero mi mama tica odia tener que cocinar la noche su cumpleaños así que ella prefiere salir a un restaurante. [...]*

Towards the end of the program, students wrote a mini-composition about health using the required infinitival complements, and they overall performed well in this final production task and assessment. An example of paragraph is presented in (3) and the summary of the score is presented in Table 1:

- (3) *Yo prefiero tomar agua normalmente, pero en Costa Rica, es más difícil encontrar. [...] Lamento decir que no he tomado mucho aquí. Odio pedir cosas que son inconvenientes a otras personas. [...]*

Table 1. Student score distributions of the five sentences with infinitival complements in a mini-composition

Scores (out of 5)	5	4	3	2	1
Number of students (N = 15)	7	6	2	-	-

In summary, the data show that students were learning the usage and the form through online discussion forums in an engaging manner and they were overall able to use the form appropriately and correctly in the final mini composition task as shown in Table 1. The form-focused tests, however, show that the actual learning of the form seemed to still be in progress without showing much difference between the pre-test and the post-test scores (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of the pre-test and post-test results for infinitival complement constructions

Pre-test average	Post-test average
7.0 (out of 10 points)	7.4 (out of 10 points)

The outcome of the quantitative comparison between the pre-test and the post-test does not clearly show the immediate significant improvement in terms of the test scores (pre-test score 7.0 vs. post-test score 7.4). The reason for about the same scores between the two tests may be due to the fact that the test format itself (that is, choosing between the infinitival complement vs. the gerundial complement) was focusing on the form without requiring students to understand the content or the context in which it was used. In addition, the period between the two tests was not long enough for the students to fully grasp the inductive meaning of the grammar exposed through the two activities facilitated online. There was clearly a limitation for the time and the amount of input the students were able to receive in order for them to perform better on the post-test, especially when the explicit grammar explanations were not given to them. Nonetheless, the communicative ability and the overall accuracy of the form observed in their final mini-compositions clearly showed that the incorporation of the interviews with native speakers into learning L2 via online discussion forums did indeed seem to help them develop the ability to use this particular grammar construction in a meaningful way.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has presented a pilot study applying e-learning activities in learning the infinitival complement constructions in Spanish as L2 and involving local native speakers through students' oral interviews. The virtually shared online space among students helped students enhance their comprehension and the appropriate use of the target grammar in an authentic setting, but knowing the long-term learning effect requires further investigation.

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