

Observed Learner Behavior, Reported Use, and Evaluation of a Website for Learning Spanish Pragmatics

Julie M. Sykes and Andrew D. Cohen
University of New Mexico and University of Minnesota

1. Introduction

In recent decades, second language pragmatics acquisition has received an increasing level of attention from researchers and, even more recently, practitioners. Nevertheless, the inclusion of pragmatic instruction in the classroom is still fairly limited (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Felix-Brasdefer, 2002; Rose, 2005; LoCastro, 2003). Furthermore, even when pragmatic features are addressed, relevant sociocultural aspects tend to be ignored and the focus tends to remain on linguistic forms (Félix-Brasdefer, 2002, 2008). One challenging aspect of pragmatics to address in the language classroom is the high level of individual, social, and dialectal variation present in communication. While effective classroom instruction calls for the acceptance of individual variation and personality differences in pragmatic performance, there is benefit in explicit teaching of second language (L2)¹ pragmatics and in familiarizing learners with strategies for enhancing their pragmatic ability (Cohen, 2005).

Research has shown that instruction in the learning and use of speech acts and other pragmatic features helps learners to be more pragmatically appropriate in communicative situations (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper and Rose, 2002). Furthermore, the combination of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) technologies and a learner-focused, strategy-based approach to pragmatics (Cohen, 2005) offers teachers a convenient way to convey even complex pragmatic information to learners. These new technologies not only aid in the creation of online materials for students in the learning of pragmatics (CLEAR, 2005; Cohen and Ishihara, 2005; Cohen and Sykes, 2006; Sykes, 2008), but also provide a valuable environment for practice and interaction (Furstenberg et al, 2001; Belz, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Sykes, 2005, 2008). Nonetheless, teachers' attention to pragmatics in the classroom and the existence of innovative materials and practice environments do not, in and of themselves, ensure that learners will derive significant benefit from this new thrust. One must also consider what learners do when interacting with the online materials as well as how these materials are perceived by the learners themselves.

With the intention of sparking additional research and discussion in this area, this paper reports on one component of an in-depth, qualitative research project to find out what language learners do when they visit a self-access website dedicated to Spanish pragmatics as well as how they perceive that experience. Ten advanced learners of Spanish participated in a one hour, face-to-face introductory lesson, engaged in various instructional activities using a Spanish pragmatics website, and completed retrospective interviews about their experience. They also completed a pretest, an immediate posttest, and a delayed posttest using an online virtual assessment environment. In this environment, they were required to interact with native speakers and were permitted to use strategies they were provided on the

¹ For the purpose of this paper, L2 refers both to second language and to foreign language contexts, although, in principle, there is a potential difference between the learning of pragmatics in the speech community where the language is used regularly, as opposed to learning it in a context removed from that speech community.

website that were specific to the performance of requests, service encounters, and apologies. The results of this analysis give preliminary insight into what learners did with the online pragmatics materials as well as how they perceived that learning experience. Results of this small-scale study are presented with the intention of sparking additional research projects in this area. Furthermore, implications for pedagogy are presented to help L2 practitioners expand their own knowledge of student strategies in online environments in order to tailor their own materials and lessons.

2. Relevant Background Knowledge

Prior to a description of the study itself, it is essential to establish the perspective from which we examined pragmatics for the purposes of this project. This section first addresses important terminology relevant to the project. It then briefly explores some of the applicable approaches to learning pragmatics as well as the contribution of CALL research to the arena of interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) development.

Due to the wide variety of contexts in which it is used, it is especially important to delineate what is meant by the term *pragmatics*. For our purposes, pragmatic ability can be defined as the ability to deal with “meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener...and [to be able to interpret] people’s intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals...” (Yule, 1996, p. 3-4).² Yule’s definition is important because it establishes the position meaning carries as a central component of interaction. Moreover, it introduces the essential roles both expression and interpretation play in the transfer of meaning. Taken one step further, *interlanguage pragmatics* (ILP), defined by Kasper and Schmidt (1996) as “the development and use of strategies for linguistic action by nonnative speakers” (p. 150), specifically refers to pragmatics in an L2.

A central component of this meaning is the language function, or speech act (e.g., request, apology, service encounter) being communicated. In order to get their message across, speakers must not only know what to say, but how and when to say it, in relation to whom they are speaking. That is, interlocutors must have a sense of both the *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic* norms of the speech community in order to successfully perform the language function.³ Pragmalinguistic norms encompass the linguistic forms that are used to carry out language functions. For example, when making a request, a speaker needs to select from a set of linguistic structures that are appropriate for the given context (e.g., command: *Pásame el café*. [Pass me the coffee.] vs. the use of a conventionally indirect conditional form: *¿Me podrías pasar el café?* [Could you pass me the coffee?]). In order to be sociopragmatically appropriate, the speaker needs to access knowledge about when, why, and with whom to use the various forms. This involves, for example, considerations of social class, age, gender, role within the interaction, and the cultural assumptions relevant to the interaction. In the case of a request, for example, this would be the knowledge of whether or not it is even appropriate to ask the person to pass the coffee. The knowledge and skills needed to successfully perform each of these components is quite complex.

Given the complexities associated with ILP development, it is essential to utilize a multifaceted approach to the instruction and learning of pragmatics. Instead of advocating the memorization by learners of specific patterns and tendencies in isolation, it is important to encourage them to develop strategies for using language in a pragmatically-appropriate way by using examples from the target language pragmatic system. This approach is especially critical for the acquisition of sociopragmatic skills. In an exploration of contextual knowledge as related to language study, Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet (1992) confirm the complexity of understanding the context of interaction:

² It is important to point out that numerous conceptualizations of pragmatics exist. The use of the current definition is not meant to ignore additional definitions, but rather establish common ground for understanding the theoretical conceptualization of pragmatics. For additional exploration of this area see LoCastro (2003) and Crystal (1997).

³ Beebe and Waring (2001) and Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2005) both note the difficulty in separating *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic* aspects of language. The terms are used here to refer to potential distinctions between components of a speech act, not factors which are mutually exclusive.

Sociocultural contexts cannot be reduced to an inventory to be “mastered”...they are not only too rich and various but also in constant flux as people reshape them through speaking and other forms of social interaction. Yet students can come to understand the centrality of context to linguistic communication and can develop some ethnographic skills to help them better understand the relevant contexts for their own uses of the target language. (p. 5)

In addition, the authors advocate imparting to learners a set of skills that will enable them to better deal with the constantly dynamic variable of context. The advantage of this type of approach is that it prepares learners for a wide variety of encounters. Two researchers in this area have proposed models for addressing these skills as related to pragmatics. The first places the emphasis on what teachers need to do to assist learners in gaining skills for dealing with pragmatics, while the second provides a taxonomy of strategies for learners to assist them in their development of pragmatic skills. Judd (1999) presents three approaches to teaching pragmatics in the classroom: cognitive awareness, receptive skill development, and productive use. These can be used in combination, or separately, as a means to isolate specific pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of the speech act under investigation. Ideally, a learner would be exposed to all three types of instruction in order to improve various aspects of their speech act performance. While Judd’s approach tends to overemphasize pragmalinguistic skills, the model could also apply to sociopragmatic awareness.

The other more recent approach to learning pragmatics central to this study is a strategies-based approach, introduced by Cohen (2005). Distinct from strategies that teachers use for instructional purposes as well as strategies learners might deploy in order to deal with a given website, Cohen offers a taxonomy of strategies intended specifically for the learning and performance of L2 pragmatics. This taxonomy includes three types of strategies:

- (1) strategies for the initial learning of speech acts,
- (2) strategies for using the speech act material that has already been learned to some extent, and
- (3) learners’ metapragmatic considerations regarding the deployment of these strategies.

The combination of these strategies recognizes learning pragmatics as a skill set necessary for effective communication that moves beyond the specific speech act or appropriate semantic formulae used in realizing that speech act.⁴ By developing the strategies necessary for dealing with speech acts in communication, learners will be prepared to handle a wide variety of contextual situations, as opposed to being restricted just to those they have encountered previously. Empirical research is still needed to confirm if this approach is effective and helpful for ILP development. This qualitative case study is the first step in empirically evaluating the strategies-based approach to learning pragmatics. The design of the instructional materials for this L2 pragmatics study (to be described in detail below) drew extensively on a strategies-based approach utilizing the taxonomy proposed by Cohen (2005). Through and examination of what learners did when interacting with the online materials as well as their own perceptions of that experience, it is possible to gain preliminary insight into the ways in which self-access online learning materials can be used and improved for future development projects.

The use of an online, self-access website for strategy instruction also aided in overcoming many of the difficulties of pragmatic education. A complete description of the benefits of the use of computer-mediated technologies for ILP development is beyond the scope of this work;⁵ however, it is important to point out the central function that CALL technologies play in creating interactive

⁴ *Semantic formulae* refer to the speech act-specific strategies which alone, or in combination with other strategies, serve to constitute the speech act (e.g., the strategies of acknowledging responsibility or offering a repair in the speech act of apologizing).

⁵ Additional exploration of the role of CALL technologies in the facilitation of pragmatic development demonstrate that it can be a positive and beneficial tool for effective communication and ILP development (e.g., Furstenberg et al, 2001; Payne and Whitney, 2002; Belz, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007; Payne and Ross, 2005; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Sykes, 2005, 2008).

materials with a wide variety of strategies and learning formats. In addition, the use of digital technologies for ILP development allows for the creation of a unique, beneficial assessment tool in a synthetic immersive environment (described in detail below).

In order to add preliminary evidence to the body of empirical work surrounding the use of a strategies-based website for ILP development, this study asked the following three research questions:

1. What is the observed behavior of learners when using a Spanish pragmatics website?
2. How do learners characterize their use of a website for learning Spanish pragmatics?
3. How do learners evaluate their use of the website?

3. Methodology

In order to answer these questions, an in-depth, qualitative case study with a varied participant group (N=10) was undertaken. The intention of this study was to gather preliminary data that would help to inform large-scale, empirical research in this area as well as provide practical pedagogical guidelines.

3.1 Participants

The participants consisted of a group of ten volunteers (N=5 females, N=5 males) who were the first to indicate interest in the study.⁶ Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the sample group.

Name	Gender	Age	Other Languages	Experience Learning Spanish
Henry	M	19	No	High school and university courses; one-month study abroad program in Argentina
Ronaldo	M	25	Portuguese, French	High school and university courses only
Abril	F	20	No	High school and university courses only
Paco	M	25	No	Immersion school since kindergarten; 3 ½-month study abroad program in Ecuador
Veronica	F	19	No	High school and university courses only
Susana	F	37	No	High school and university courses; personal travel; married to a native Spanish speaker; one-year study abroad program in Ecuador
Javier	M	19	Yes, Mandarin	High school and university courses
Danger	F	19	No	Elementary school, high school, and university courses; 2-month study abroad program in Mexico
Wiffleball	M	NR ⁷	No	University courses only
Callie	F	21	No	University courses only

Table 1. Demographic Information about the Participant Group

⁶ Approximately 50 students volunteered for the study, indicating a strong interest in the subject matter as well as the project, but the budget allowed for payment of just 10.

⁷ NR: Not reported by the participant.

Pseudonyms (self-selected by the participants) were used to protect identities. As can be seen in Table 1, the participants represented Spanish learners from ages 19 to 37 ($M=22.66$ years, $SD=5.91$) and came from a variety of language learning contexts. All were enrolled in upper-division Spanish courses at a large mid-western university, were native speakers of English, and had an average reported GPA in Spanish of 3.63. Four of the students had studied abroad prior to participating in the study, and two of the participants that had not previously studied abroad were planning to do so the following semester. It is important to bear in mind that the learner group accessing the website and utilizing the materials for learning Spanish pragmatics, although small, was relatively diverse.

3.2 Instrumentation

The instructional website used in this study (i.e., *Dancing with Words: Strategies for Learning Pragmatics in Spanish*) played an important role in content delivery and was the only means of explicit pragmatic instruction available to the learners. The *Dancing with Words* website is a content site (<http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts>; Cohen and Sykes, 2006), developed over eleven months and launched in August of 2006. It consists of an introductory module as well as eight additional modules: (1) Compliments, (2) Gratitude and Leave Taking, (3) Requests, (4) Apologies, (5) Invitations, (6) Service Encounters, (7) Advice, Suggestions, Disagreements, Complaints, and Reprimands, and (8) Considerations for Pragmatic Performance. It includes unscripted video interchanges between native speakers of various regional varieties of Spanish and utilizes activities with varying levels of difficulty for the purpose of addressing the learners' varying levels of language/pragmatic ability. All instructional material is in English with the examples, transcripts, and activities being completed in Spanish.

The intention is for learners to access all material individually with no interaction from an instructor. Speech acts are dealt with sequentially: first as a core, then in interaction, and then as a naturally occurring sequence. As previously mentioned, one important feature of this site that makes it especially useful for this project is the extensive strategies overlay for the materials (Cohen, 2005).⁸ For a complete list of these strategies see Appendix A. Activities on the website are similar in each of the modules and include short-answer, multiple-choice, and listening activities. The activities are targeted at developing learners' strategies for learning and performing L2 pragmatics in general and specific speech acts as well, and for evaluating their performance. As part of these activities, written transcripts of each of the video clips are available and feedback is given to the learners in the form of suggested responses that can be viewed at any time. The use of three modules – (1) Requests, (2) Apologies, and (3) Service Encounters – were the focus of this study. Each module contains the same resources and includes the same structure described above.

In addition to the instructional materials, two primary data collection instruments were used in this analysis. These were recorded participant observation and in-depth, retrospective, one-on-one interviews with the researchers. First, in order to better understand learner behavior when interacting with the website, all online activity was recorded using *Camtasia Screen Capture* (<http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp>) software. The screen recordings allowed for observation and analysis of the participants' interaction with the website. In addition, learner responses to each of the online activities were recorded for future analysis. The second primary instrument entailed detailed, one-on-one interviews with one of the researchers.⁹ Each interview was audio-recorded and consisted of questions addressing learners' evaluation, reported behavior, and suggestions for improvement of each of the website modules. Specific questions were tailored to the specific content of each of the learners; however, a basic set of questions was used to ensure consistency among participants. A sampling of these questions follows:

⁸ For additional background information on the website see:

http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/for_researchers.html

⁹ In order to maintain consistency, the same researcher completed all of the interviews.

- *What did you think of the experience as a whole?*
- *Which module did you like the most? Why? Is there something that specifically stuck out to you?*
- *Have you learned anything about pragmatics previously? If so, tell me about that experience?*
- *Tell me what you did when interacting with the website?*
- *Are there some activities you liked better than others? Which ones? Were there activities you didn't like?*
- *Did you like the videos in each of the modules? How did you use them? Did you use the transcripts? How?*
- *Do you think you will use the other modules in the future?*
- *Do you feel like the website helped you be more strategic when addressing pragmatics in Spanish?*
- *What did you learn from using the website? Anything specific?*
- *What do you feel like you improved on the most?*
- *Did you like talking to the native speakers in the virtual world?*
- *Would you recommend this website to others? Who?*
- *How would you improve the website?*

In addition to these primary instruments used for the data set included in this analysis, participants also completed an entrance survey as well as a pretest, immediate posttest, and delayed posttest. The survey was designed to obtain important demographic information about each of the participants. This included collecting data concerning the types of learning and performance strategies learners perceived themselves to already be using (based on Cohen, 2005).¹⁰ The pretest and posttests took approximately one hour to complete and consisted of two components – (1) a written multiple-rejoinder *discourse completion task* (DCT),¹¹ with five situations based on material from the instructional website, *Dancing with Words: Strategies for Learning Pragmatics in Spanish*, calling for two requests, two apologies, and a service encounter, and (2) a three-part role-play in a synthetic immersive environment assessment (SIEA). An SIEA is a 3-dimensional, immersive, online environment that is created specifically for assessment purposes. The DCTs were utilized in conjunction with the virtual roleplay scenarios in order to triangulate the assessment data. Although the outcome results are not reported here (see Cohen and Sykes, 2007), it is important to note that the SIEA is an important overall contribution of this project because it allowed for authentic interaction to occur between a native speaker and the participants in a realistic and three-dimensional interactive space (see Figure 1).

Utilizing much of the content from the instructional materials, we created the SIEA for the purpose of assessing Spanish pragmatics. This new virtual space allows for assessment of both speech act performance as well as students' use of the resources within the virtual space for successful interaction. The SIEA tool was an adaptation of one component of an online virtual world named *Croquelandia* that is currently being designed by Sykes and a team of designers and programmers as part of a larger project at the University of Minnesota (Sykes, 2008). In the SIEA, learners were able to move their avatar throughout the environment and talk with a native speaker via a controlled avatar.¹² The creation of this SIEA space provided a virtually authentic space for interaction and shows promising possibilities for future pragmatics research and instruction.

¹⁰ For additional information on the results of perceived strategy development see Sykes and Cohen (forthcoming).

¹¹ A DCT is a paper-pencil task in which participants receive a context and then one, or more, turns of the conversation. They are then asked to fill in what they would say in each of the blanks. Different formats (e.g., open-ended vs. close-ended, multiple rejoinder possibilities) have been designed with the intention of eliciting data more like natural speech.

¹² While the interlocutors (i.e., the learner and the native speaker) only saw each other virtually, they were able to interact with one another via voice chat and written chat.



Figure 1. Sample Virtual Settings in SIEA Space

3.3 Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

This study entailed a variety of steps. First, all subjects attended a general descriptive session about the project and completed the informational survey. This session lasted 30 minutes. Approximately one week after completing the informational survey, participants completed the pretest designed to evaluate their level of pragmatic knowledge. After completing the pretest, participants then participated in a content orientation session which consisted of a one-hour introduction to pragmatics as well as the strategies taxonomy (Cohen, 2005). Following the content orientation session, participants then completed three online modules from the *Dancing with Words* website (i.e., requests, apologies, and service encounters). Each was completed in a laboratory setting within a two-week period in an order selected by each individual student. All of the participants completed one module per session at a self-selected time. The requests and apologies modules each took approximately 90 minutes to complete and the service encounter module took the participants 1 hour.

Upon completion of the final module, all participants took part in the reflective interview with the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes and was recorded and transcribed for future analysis. When answering the questions, learners were asked to respond based on what they remembered and were not required to access the website or recorded material as part of their interview experience. No more than 48 hours after completing the last module, participants completed the immediate posttest, similar to the pretest, but with varied situations and contexts in the SIEA. Finally, a delayed posttest, which was the same as the pretest.

In order to answer each of the research questions, data from the *Camtasia* screen recordings (RQ#1) and interviews (RQ#2 and RQ#3) were analyzed. Regarding the first research question, we examined three elements of the learners' website experiences utilizing the screen capture videos. This included the use of embedded videos and transcripts, the use of feedback, and the completion of online activities. In answering the last two research questions, the most salient categories in the interview data were categorized. This included an analysis of the learners' own description of their online behavior as well as their overall perception of the website. The following section reports the findings from this analysis.

4. Results

4.1 What is the observed behavior of learners when using the Spanish pragmatics website?

In order to answer the first research question, we examined three elements of the online experience of the learners (i.e., use of videos and transcripts, use of feedback, and completion of the activities). The data from the screen capture recordings of the modules indicated evidence of individual variety in use of the online modules, even for this small group of ten learners.

In terms of the use of videos and transcripts, all participants watched the videos embedded in the website as a central component of their online activities. In cases where video excerpts were used to highlight certain pragmatic features, all learners watched these excerpts in addition to the entire conversations, even if this meant repetition of the same interaction. While it would have been possible to complete the activities without repeating the excerpts as well, the ten participants accessed all videos in all three modules. Furthermore, in terms of the use of the written transcripts on the website, all 10 participants used them in some way or another. Two out of 10 used the transcripts to answer questions. For example, they would open the transcript and copy and paste specific semantic formulae as part of their answer in the text box. Six out of 10 used the transcripts for comprehension of video clips (i.e., following along with the transcripts as the video was played). Finally, 2 out of 10 demonstrated a varied approach to their use of the transcripts (i.e., answering questions, understanding videos, and, as a substitution for watching a video).

A similar varied approach is found in the data regarding the use of feedback built into the website as part of the activities. For each of the questions learners were asked to answer, feedback (i.e., a suggested idea of what the correct answer might be) was available. This feedback was used by learners in different ways. Two out of 10 took advantage of the feedback as additional instructional material prior to completing the activities. In this case, they would traditionally view the video, read the question to be answered, and then go directly to the feedback prior to entering their own response. Interestingly, the answers given by these learners were not identical to the feedback, indicating it was viewed not simply as the right answer, but also as supporting material to aid learners in their own analysis. The majority of the group (8 out of 10) used the feedback to “check answers.” In this case, they would read the feedback after completing their own answer. After reading the suggested answers, they would often return to their own responses and improve their answers after reading the suggested answers, even though they knew the responses would not be graded.¹³

Overall, the findings suggest that learners took their responses and time in the modules seriously. All participants completed all of the activities, and spent the necessary time revising their answers in instances where they felt improvement could be made. None of the participants skipped sections or only utilized the instructional materials without giving their own responses. While we recognize this could be attributed to the participation in the research project, the interview data also suggest learners’ positive perception of their own experience went beyond merely completing the activities which were part of the study itself.

4.2 How do learners characterize their use of a website for learning Spanish pragmatics?

Interview data relating to learners’ characterizations of their use of the website yielded a number of insights. First, the findings indicate that learners were cognizant of the strategies they needed/wanted to learn (based on strategies overlay of the website described above; Cohen, 2005) in order to perform L2 pragmatics. Furthermore, they were adept at applying various strategies to their own individual language learning context.¹⁴ In general, when reporting on what they learned in the website, learners tended to characterize their learning behavior in one of two ways. Either they focused on the learning of specific pragmalinguistic (language) factors directly related to each speech act (e.g., *Ronaldo: Now I can memorize what language to use in different situations.*) or they focused on sociopragmatic (sociocultural) factors (e.g., *Abril: I may not know exactly what to say, but I am more aware of what is going on...*). Approximately half of the group chose each approach.¹⁵

For the half that indicated a focus on specific pragmalinguistic factors, many cited using the examples provided (see Example 1 below) and indicated they would like to have a summary list of

¹³ This could be a consequence of the research project in that all respondents knew their responses would be analyzed by the researcher.

¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the website users’ ability to harness the necessary metacognitive strategies in order to benefit from the website in general; however, this is also an important area for consideration. See, for example, White (1999) and Hurd (2000).

¹⁵ For further information on the reported use of specific strategies see Sykes and Cohen (forthcoming).

what to say when. These five learners also took the most extensive handwritten notes as they were completing the modules.

(1)

Veronica: *It's helpful to have a lot of examples rather than a lot of text. We're seeing a lot of examples rather than reading about how it is supposed to work.*

The half of the group that tended to indicate a focus on the sociopragmatic factors and the importance of understanding the general principles of the various speech acts, tended to focus on greater awareness of pragmatic issues as they addressed various situations in Spanish. The following example gives a sample characterization from one of the learners in this group.

(2)

Callie: *I think that when I go into a situation, I'll think more instead of just going into it I'll think more about what to say instead of just trying to wing it. I'll have some idea and it won't be so awkward.*

Interestingly, none of the students in this study combined the two perspectives.

In addition to specifically characterizing their overall approach, the participants also indicated an understanding of the importance of pragmatics specific to their own language learning context. For example, when asked what she liked best about the materials, Veronica indicated the portion of the materials most relevant to her own context. Her response can be seen in the example below.

(3)

Interviewer: *What did you like about the materials?*

Veronica: *The one on Ecuador stood out. That's where I want to go.*

This is interesting because the portion of the materials addressing Ecuador was very limited in comparison to the rest of the other materials. Nevertheless, since Veronica was hoping to study abroad in Ecuador the following semester, she isolated the portions that were most relevant to her own use of Spanish. This specific relation to learners' individual contexts was not unique to Veronica's case and is found in the interview data of 8 out of the 10 learners.

The findings for learners' own characterization of the use of the *Dancing with Words* website for learning Spanish pragmatics, indicate that learners tend to focus either on specific linguistic forms or general contextual knowledge. However, the learners in this group did not make the important connections between the two (i.e., pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics). Also, the interview data suggest that learners are adept at isolating content specifically relevant to their individual L2 context, and tend to comment on relevant elements as part of their overall description of their experience with the website.

4.3 How do learners evaluate their use of the website?

In general, based on patterns from the interview data, it can be concluded that interaction with the strategies-based materials was perceived positively by the participants in the study. All ten participants indicated that they had never before systematically studied pragmatics and that they were likely to continue working with the materials to improve their pragmatic abilities in Spanish. The following observation from Paco actually speaks for the group as a whole in terms of how the materials were perceived:

(4)

...what you are getting at with the program is really, really positive because I really don't think there is enough emphasis on real world application....what I am always super, super frustrated with is you always end up with a class full of people who can write A+ papers and perfect grammar, and they can't speak it to save their lives...the fact that you're emphasizing a lot more

on real world situations than on grammar is something that the Spanish curriculum desperately needs. – Paco

All ten participants also indicated that they would enjoy exploring and learning about pragmatics in their language classes as well. Six of 10 indicated they enjoyed watching the native speaker interactions as opposed to reading about pragmatics materials in a textbook or an article.

In addition, the learners found the materials to be interesting and motivating. When asked if they would continue to use the materials, 7 of 10 participants indicated that they would continue to use the modules in the future. The following examples illustrate these responses:

(5)

Interviewer: *Do you think you'll use the other modules?*

Callie: *I think so, yes. Spanish is a big part of my life...I want not just to be able to know the words, but be able to use the same pragmatics as native people would.*

Ronaldo: *Before I would just ramble on, but now I would use the three steps that [I devised]. You can start on one and work on that. Once you get done with that, then move on to the next.*

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate improvements can be made. Even among the small groups of ten participants in this study, it is evident that different types of materials are essential to an effective self-access learning module targeting Spanish pragmatics. As can be seen from the interview quotations below, the participants had very different responses to the same activity.

(6)

Susana: *[The website] kind of puts into written order what you kind of hear on your own, but you don't really know how to order it...it helps to have it all written down and put together.*

Henry: *I'm kind of a fan of interactive things like if they were drop-down boxes.*

Abril: *I don't need like fancy stuff to help me learn, I guess.*

Finally, the learners were accustomed to sophisticated websites and became frustrated when a video did not load properly or when various windows did not open as expected. As noted by Javier, website performance was key to his evaluation of the online experience:

(7)

Javier: *Um, it was pretty good. Um...the audio was pretty clunky especially in the apologies section...like it was hard to pay attention 'cause you're like (ugh) the audio is bothering me. But other than that, it was pretty good.*

While he was able to separate the content from the technological experience, the website performance did affect his overall experience.

In general, the learners' evaluation of the website experience was positive in terms of the content being learned as well as the experience of using online content and native speaker examples to improve pragmatic abilities. Implications of these findings are presented in the following section.

5. Discussion

The analysis of learner behavior and interview data adds insight into what learners do when accessing the online materials for learning Spanish pragmatics as well as their own characterization and perception of that experience. The findings from research question 1 indicated that learners in this study utilized online content (i.e., videos, transcripts, and feedback) in a variety of ways relevant to their own learning context. In addition, the learners in this study displayed different characterizations of their online experience and tended to categorize their own focus on either pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic factors relevant to each of the three speech acts being addressed. Finally, in terms of evaluation, the participants in this group displayed a positive perception of the experience with indications that they would continue to use the website materials in the future. Based on this data, the

findings from this study suggest certain recommendation regarding future use and creation of websites for L2 pragmatic development in general, and for the creation of additional online materials for learning Spanish pragmatics in particular.

1. *Self-access instructional materials must include a variety of activities and ways to interact with the content.*

As can be seen in the findings from the first research question addressing learner behavior when interacting with the online materials, transcripts, feedback, and activities were utilized and perceived differently by the learners themselves. This difference appeared even in this small group of 10. The transcripts and built-in feedback were accessed at different points and utilized for various purposes as learners moved through the three learning modules. In addition, the results of research questions 2 and 3 indicate that learners perceived the materials and activities differently as well. Therefore, a varied approach, both in terms of behavior and perception, supports the inclusion of a variety of types of transcripts, feedback, and activities. Furthermore, it justifies the inclusion of additional materials in order to provide learners an ample array of choices as to what they would like complete. While our concern in website design was not to overload the users with too many options or too much depth, the initial findings here would suggest the benefits of providing complexity in the materials and then letting learners choose where to go from there.

2. *Strategy instruction is an important component of pragmatics instruction; results suggest it be:*
 - *salient and explicit,*
 - *targeted at what the learners want/need/are motivated to know,*
 - *varied to include all types of learning and interactive styles.*

The results of research question 2 indicate that learners tended to focus on pragmatic factors relating to specific linguistic formulae or to those involving a general understanding of the sociocultural context (i.e., “the big picture”). The reality is that learners must develop a repertoire of semantic formulae that can be connected with, and deployed in, a variety of contextual situations. Hence, both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge are essential for appropriate pragmatic performance. The compartmentalization which appeared in this study could have occurred due to the newness and complexity of the materials; it could also be a result of individual learning styles and approaches to the materials. Both behavior and interview data suggest that learners did pay attention to strategies for learning pragmatics and were interested in the development of pragmatic skills.

3. *There was motivation to improve pragmatic skills. Harnessing this motivation through a variety of means is feasible with online learning materials.*

Overall, the findings indicate that learners positively evaluated both the content learned on the website as well as the experience interacting with the online materials. While the use of paid volunteers for this research study could have resulted in an overly positive experience, the data themselves also suggest, at a minimum, that the learners enjoyed the experience as they worked through the modules. In addition, at the outset of the project, over 60 participants volunteered to participate. While only 10 could be used for funding reasons, this does suggest an interest in the topic of the study, at a preliminary level.

4. *Synthetic Immersive Environments for Assessment (SIEAs) present promising possibilities for pragmatics instruction and assessment as well as a means of data collection.*

While it was not a primary part of this analysis, an additional contribution of this study was the use of an online 3-dimensional space for assessing pragmatics. The use of the virtual space for the pre- and posttests allowed for the presence of the necessary contextual clues needed to make pragmatic decisions; yet, at the same time, lessened the pragmatic pressure of the experience. While the

interaction was simulated, the authenticity was heightened and additional emotional connections tended to be made with the online virtual space (Gee, 2003, 2005; Sykes, 2008). Future research in this area is an important step for pragmatics research as well as classroom assessment measures. In this project, participants demonstrated a positive perception of the assessment space and indicated they would likely use it for learning in the future, if it were an option for them.

6. Limitations

As with any preliminary study, this analysis included a number of limitations. First, a very small group of volunteer participants participated in the research project. This limits the applicability of the results to a larger population and may have resulted in an overly positive perception of the website experience in an attempt to please the research team. Furthermore, since the first ten volunteers participated as subjects, their enthusiasm as volunteers may have also resulted in overly positive results. In addition, the use of the screen recording software necessitated the use of a laboratory setting for completion of all of the modules. Therefore, the online behavior observed by the learners may not be entirely indicative of what they would do in an offsite setting (i.e., at home, in the library, etc.).

Finally, the use of self-report may not always reveal learner performance. While it is indicative of the participants' perceptions and observations, it may not accurately reflect the full spectrum of learner opinion and use. Despite these limitations, the current study does serve its initial objective of giving preliminary insight into the use of a website for learning Spanish pragmatics and indicates a number of areas which warrant future research.

7. Implications for Future Research and Pedagogy

While the results presented here can only be suggestive of what might happen with a larger group of students, given the small sample size, many of the issues raised in this study signal important catalysts for large-scale empirical research in the area of ILP development. This study would suggest the benefits of further investigations into the use of strategy instruction for learning pragmatics as well as content delivery in an online, self-access format. Future research might address strategic perspectives on pragmatics in order to better understand the respective roles that pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic factors play in pragmatic development.

In terms of pedagogy and content development, the results indicate that there is strong motivation to improve ILP abilities on the part of the learners and that the inclusion of pragmatics materials in curricula and learning materials is beneficial. In addition, in cases where there is not sufficient time for a complete exploration of all information in the classroom setting, self-access materials, such as the *Dancing with Words* site will also likely prove to be useful. Learners could be encouraged to explore materials dealing with L2 pragmatics on their own. These results indicate that, while they are certainly not the only option, online materials are motivating and effective, making them accessible learning sources, even if in-class treatment is not possible.

8. Appendix A

A Taxonomy of Strategies for Learning Speech Acts (Cohen, 2005)

Speech Act Learning Strategies

- Identify the second language speech acts learners want/need to focus on.
- Gather information (through observation, interviews, written materials, movies, radio) on how the speech acts are performed.
- Conduct one's own "cross-cultural" analysis (e.g., identify norms and semantic formulae, determine similarities and differences).
- Observe what native speakers do by noting what they say, how they say it, and their non-verbal behavior.
- Ask native speakers to model performance of the speech act.
- Access published material dealing with speech acts.

Communicative Act Use Strategies

- Devise and utilize a memory aid for retrieving the speech act material that has already been learned.
- Practice! (role plays, imaginary situations, conversations with native speakers)
- Ask native speakers for feedback.
- Learners determine their learning style preferences and try approaches that are consistent with their individual style.
- Use communication strategies to get the message across (e.g., "I'm not sure how to say this right", repair when necessary, attempt to follow native speaker examples).
- Remain true to one's own identity and subjectivity while still being aware of appropriate performance of the speech act.

Metapragmatic Considerations

- Decide on a focus. Performance? Comprehension? Both?
- Be conscious of the necessity for pre-planning.
- Monitor various elements of the communicative act (e.g., level of directness, terms of address, timing, organization, sociocultural factors).

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