

# The effects of proficiency on Spanish L2 learners' strategic communication

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This study investigates the effects of Spanish L2 learners' proficiency levels on their use of communication strategies in face-to-face interactions. Spoken data was elicited by means of a task-based methodology from different level learners in interaction with other learners and Spanish NSs. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to investigate a possible association between the learners' proficiency levels and their communication strategy use. The analysis drew on Dörnyei & Körmös' (1998) taxonomy. Findings indicate a higher strategy use in beginner levels, and their tendency to tackle lexis-related problems, as well as less complex grammatical features of the language. Higher level learners, however, focused more on grammar-related problems, as well as on more complex aspects of the target language.

**Keywords:** communication strategies, proficiency, L2 communication, lexis-related problems, grammar-related problems

## 1. Introduction

The study of communication strategies (CSs hereafter) as mechanisms which aid L2 learners and users in trying to get their message across by making use of the linguistic resources available has been growing across different fields of enquiry. From its origins in the 1970s as part of interlanguage studies (Selinker, 1972) to its subsequent development in second/foreign (L2) language learning (Tarone, 1977; Færch & Kasper, 1983) and teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980) these strategies have been considered vital for L2 language use and learning. Extensive research has been done on CSs since their origins within interlanguage (IL) research where they were considered one of the five central processes involved in L2 learning (Selinker, 1972). Since then there has been a great deal of research in this area, with English being one of the most studied second languages, and lexical CSs have

constituted the main focus of analysis (Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989; Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts, & Poulisse, 1990; Littlemore, 2001; Fernández Dobao, 2001, 2004; Rabab'ah & Bulut, 2007). In addition, factors related to the use of CSs have also been analysed, such as learners' proficiency levels (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Paribakht, 1984; Safont Jordá, 2001), the tasks used for elicitation methods (Poulisse & Schils, 1989; Rabab'ah & Seedhouse, 2004), and the situational context (Williams, Inscoc & Tasker, 1997). A few other studies have also focused on analysing CSs in interactional contexts (Labarca & Khanji, 1986, Fernández Dobao & Palacios Martínez, 2007). However, fewer studies have examined Spanish as L2 and the little research done has been limited to examining these CSs in relation to the learning context only (DeKeyser, 1990; Lafford, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004).

This paper attempts to analyse the CSs used by English L2 Spanish learners with different proficiency levels in face-to-face interactions in order to determine the extent to which proficiency level affects their strategic use of the language. The aim is to provide further evidence on the use of these strategies by examining a wider range of CSs, as a way of expanding the analysis so far carried out on only the lexical problems experienced by learners. It considers the use of CSs by learners of different proficiency levels in face-to-face communication, in addition to focusing on Spanish as L2, a less studied target language. A further exploration of L2 strategic communication in this specific setting may provide further insights into the many difficulties that L2 learners encounter when trying to communicate and the different ways in which they manage to use their own linguistic repertoire. It is expected that this study will not only help to extend the extant body of knowledge about CSs, but will also cast some more light on the intricacies of Spanish as a L2; hence, contributions are expected in the area of L2 communication as well as the learning of Spanish as a second language.

What follows will address the main research objective mentioned above. Section 2 will start by providing some theoretical and empirical evidence regarding the use of CSs. Section 3 will present the methods and procedures followed for the completion of this study as well as the participants involved and the instruments used. Following a discussion of the main findings obtained, this paper will present the study's main conclusions together with the study's contributions and suggestions for further research on the topic under investigation.

## 2. Communication strategies

Because of the complexities involved in L2 communication, various definitions and classifications of CSs have been proposed, most of which have addressed the issues of problematity and consciousness in the strategic use of the language (Váradi,

1973; Tarone, 1977; Færch & Kasper, 1983). This means that learners are seen as aware of the problematic situations they face when trying to convey their message, and thus of their attempts to solve them. In addition, two theoretical frameworks have guided research in this field: the psycholinguistic and interactional perspectives. The former views CSs as a cognitive process and thus considers the learners' internal processes for the identification of these mechanisms (Færch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990; Dörnyei & Körmös, 1998). The latter is concerned with the learners' performance and their cooperation when solving problems in actual communication (Tarone, 1981; Yule & Tarone, 1997; Wagner & Firth, 1997). Some studies have been able to incorporate both approaches through the broadening of analytical frameworks, which include those mechanisms involving problems in the learner's own performance and in the interlocutor's output (Dörnyei & Scott, 1995; Lafford, 2004; Prebianca Vieira, 2009). The implementation of retrospection methods in order to account for those processes which are not observable through the learners' output has also allowed their examination from a more comprehensive perspective (Dörnyei & Körmös, 1998; Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2003; Fernández Dobao, 2004; Uztosun & Erten, 2014).

This study draws on both perspectives by utilising a wider analytical framework that of Dörnyei and Körmös (1998), which covers both mechanisms used for the solution of problems produced in the learners' own output and those triggered by the interlocutor's performance. Additionally, Lafford's defining criteria has been selected, as it also considers a wider conceptual spectrum

strategies used by L2 learners in a conscious attempt to bridge a perceived communication gap either caused by the learners' lack of L2 knowledge (resource deficit), problems with his or her own performance or problems resulting from interaction with an interlocutor. (Lafford, 2004, p. 204)

## 2.1 Empirical considerations

One of the first and most studied factors in relation to CS usage has been the learner's proficiency level. In many cases, this relationship between the learners' competence and the number (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Fernández Dobao 2001, 2004; García Nuñez, 2006; Littlemore, 2001; Paribakht, 1984; Poullisse & Schils, 1989; Poullisse, 1990; Prebianca Vieira, 2009; Safont Jordá, 2001) as well as type of CSs (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Chen, 1990; Fernández Dobao, 2001; Hyde, 1982; Paribakht, 1984) employed by learners has proven to be certain.

What most research has shown is that learners at an early stage of their learning process, due to their more limited knowledge of the L2, will tend to use a higher number of CSs, and to choose those which are more related to their L1,

such as code-switching and foreignising as well as paralinguistic strategies. They have also been found to rely more on stalling mechanisms, such as, repetition or pauses in order to gain time to think of the appropriate language item. On the other hand, more proficient learners have been shown to use fewer CSs and, as they possess more linguistic resources in the L2, are more likely to employ more L2-based CSs, which are said to be more cognitively demanding, such as approximation, self-repairs, own-accuracy checks, amongst others. Even though the degree of correspondence between these factors has not always shown to be directly related, learners' preferences for certain CSs have helped to demonstrate the effects of their proficiency level as the studies below show.

In an early study, Paribakht (1984) analysed the effects of Persian L2 English learners' proficiency levels (low and high) on the frequency and type of lexical CSs used, among other factors studied. The data was elicited by means of a concept identification task carried out between a learner and a NS. The analytical framework used was partly based on the data obtained and was classified into four main categories: linguistic, contextual, conceptual, and mime. Main findings indicated that the learners' proficiency levels were related to their use of CSs as reflected in a higher use of linguistic CSs (e.g. synonyms, antonyms) by the more proficient learners; and of conceptual, or world knowledge CSs, (e.g. metonymy, exemplification) as well as mime by lower level learners. In relation to the type of CSs used, it was found that the more proficient learners were the only ones who made use of target language idioms and proverbs, an L2-based mechanism, while the lower level learners needed to resort to idiomatic transfer, an L1-based device. Paribakht concluded that the learners' knowledge of the target language mainly affects the "surface realization of their CS" (p. 41) which concurrently helped to demonstrate that learners' overall strategic behaviour seemed to be transitional and dynamic – just as the nature of their IL – in that lower level learners resorted to the few L2 linguistic resources available to them by making more use of their world and paralinguistic knowledge. The higher level learners, having already developed their IL, were more likely to exploit their existing linguistic repertoire.

Chen (1990) also focused on analysing how learners' proficiency levels – Chinese English L2 learners with low and high proficiency – influenced their lexical strategic behaviour. The learners were also asked to carry out a concept-identification task with a NS. The taxonomy adopted in Chen's study was partly based on previous studies (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Færch & Kasper, 1983) and on the researcher's own data. A positive relationship between the learners' proficiency and the number and type of CSs was observed. Lower levels resorted to more CSs than higher levels and each group showed preference for certain types of CSs. As in Paribakht's study, the less proficient learners favoured knowledge-based CSs while more proficient learners opted for linguistic-based CSs.

Drawing on a different analytical framework, Fernández Dobao (2001) attempted to analyse the lexical CSs used by different level learners of English as L2. By following early taxonomies (Tarone, 1977; Corder, 1978 as cited in Færch & Kasper, 1983) she classified the CSs used into achievement and reduction/avoidance mechanisms. As she was also interested in analysing task factors, three tasks were used: a description and a picture story performed by the learners individually, and a conversation activity carried out with the researcher as the interlocutor. Results in relation to the proficiency factor also concurred with previous studies in that lower levels favoured reduction/avoidance CSs while the more proficient learners made more use of achievement CSs (more related to the L2). A methodological aspect which proved to be useful in this study was the use of retrospective methods for the confirmation of the learners' strategic behaviour.

Mei and Nathalang (2010) aimed to analyse the effects of proficiency, task type and the learners' academic major on the learners' CS usage. For this, 117 Chinese L2 English undergraduate students belonging to low and high proficiency levels participated in the study. By drawing on the literature, the researchers adopted their own taxonomy for eliciting intra-individual CSs: that is, mechanisms used by the own speaker in order to convey meaning (e.g. paraphrase, language switch) and inter-individual CSs, which require an interlocutor (e.g. negotiation of meaning CSs). The students had to perform a concept-identification task with a NS and a role-play task with another student of the same level. Results regarding the proficiency factor showed its relationship with the learners' strategic behaviour as also reflected in the high proficiency learners' frequent use of IL-based CSs (paraphrase, restructure) as opposed to lower level learners who used more avoidance CSs.

In a more recent study, Uztosun and Erten (2014) also attempted to confirm the proficiency effects on the strategic communication of Turkish L2 English learners. An interaction-based methodology was used and introspection methods were also included to confirm the learners' strategic behaviour. The data elicitation involved the realisation of a narration task by paired students. Seventeen dyads were formed between low/high proficiency learners (story tellers) and high proficiency learners (interlocutors). The analytical framework used was based on Dörnyei & Scott's (1997) taxonomy, which classifies mechanisms into direct (resource deficit-related), interactional (e.g. appeals for help, guessing) and indirect (repetitions, feigning understanding). Overall, no significant relationship between the learners' proficiency levels and their CS use was observed; in fact, it was found that the more proficient learners used more CSs than the lower level learners. However, statistical differences were found in the use of specific CSs, which as occurred in previous studies showed a higher use of message reduction and topic avoidance by the less proficient learners. Uztosun and Erten interpreted these results as in fact reflecting the learners' proficiency levels in that the lower level students tended to

avoid engaging in interactions and instead of narrating in detail the task assigned limited their output to summarising main events. The higher level learners, by contrast, attempted to describe the story in detail, behaviour which explained their higher use of CSs.

The empirical evidence reviewed above supports this study's contention that learners' proficiency levels affect their strategic communication. It seems; however, that this factor influences more their choice than just the frequency of CS usage (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Hyde, 1982; Paribakht, 1984; Chen, 1990; Fernández Dobao, 2001; Uztosun & Erten, 2014). As evidenced above, most studies have focused on lexical CSs, and there is little research targeting interactional settings for the elicitation of data. In most cases, the analysis has been based on artificial settings in which learners carry out a task, which does not simulate a more natural, everyday type of communication, either individually or with a NS – who in most cases acts as interviewer rather than interactant. Finally, a lack of research regarding proficiency and strategy use is evident in relation to Spanish as L2 which will be the focus of analysis in this study.

### 3. The study

The current study forms part of a larger one which attempted to determine possible associations between three variables – proficiency level, type of task and interlocutor – and the learners' use of CSs. The focus of the present paper is on the effects of the learners' proficiency level on their strategic behaviour. This study followed a descriptive and cross-sectional design by means of qualitative-quantitative methods, and the data was collected through a task-based methodology.

The following questions guided the current study:

1. What CSs are used by English L2 Spanish learners with varying proficiency levels in face-to-face interactions?
2. To what extent do the learners' proficiency levels affect their CS usage in face-to-face interactions?

#### 3.1 Participants

To recruit volunteers, undergraduate students of the Hispanic and Latin American Studies Programme were contacted through the Head of the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies (SOCLAS) at the University of Liverpool. This school comprises a range of disciplines within the study of languages, cultures and places, and the Hispanic and Latin American Studies Centre, in particular, specialises in

Castilian and Latin American Spanish, apart from other languages such as Basque, Catalan and Portuguese. In addition, I attended several Spanish classes in this programme and explained the purpose of my study. To those students interested in participating in the project, I asked them to fill in a questionnaire so as to obtain some personal as well as language-related information (see procedures below). Next, all the students willing to participate were contacted via e-mail to proceed with the data collection sessions. A total of 24 English L2 learners of Spanish formed part of the study. As the main project involved the analysis of two different types of dyads (NNS-NNS/NNS-NS), it was also necessary to recruit native speakers of Spanish. For this, some Erasmus students who were studying at the University of Liverpool at the time were contacted, in addition to two other non-student Spanish participants.

Of the 24 volunteers who were recruited, twelve of them were enrolled in a second year 'ex-beginners' class,<sup>1</sup> while the other twelve were enrolled in a second year 'advanced' class,<sup>2</sup> with the exception of one participant who was in first year 'advanced'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, following the learners' distribution in the courses they were enrolled in, 12 students were preliminarily assessed as belonging to elementary oral proficiency levels, and the other 12 students as being of either pre-intermediate or intermediate levels. This information was later corroborated by an assessment of their oral production (see procedures section below), which set the learners' final level of proficiency for the data analysis. The preliminary information regarding the learners' oral production level was necessary in order to pair participants for the data collection sessions.

There were 21 female and 3 male students and their ages ranged from 18 to 26. Learners' L1 was English with the exception of only one student who was Polish-English bilingual. In addition, three students had some basic knowledge of another language apart from Spanish. Concerning the Spanish speaking participants, as mentioned above, five of them were Erasmus undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Liverpool as exchange students. There were four female and one male student and their ages ranged between 20 and 25 years. The other two native speakers were two females working in Liverpool, and their ages ranged from 25 to 35 years.

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1. This classification meant that these students had no language requirements to take this course.

2. This meant that these students were required to have A-level qualification to take this course.

3. Students were also required to have A-level qualification.



### 3.2 Data elicitation tasks

Two types of tasks were selected from the literature, one closed (i.e. with a fixed outcome), and one open (Ellis, 2003). A jigsaw and a free-conversation activity were used for each type of task. For methodological reasons, two ‘jigsaw’ activities were used (Klippel, 1984, p. 150; Anonymous, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Each activity consisted of one picture story divided in two parts; one half of the story was given to each participant, and together they had to determine the original story sequence (see Appendix A). For this, they had to describe their pictures to each other, and try to interpret the main character’s actions. The ‘free-conversation’ activity required the learners to ‘talk about someone who had influenced them’, and about ‘their best holidays’. As part of their instructions, they were told to speak freely about the topic provided by using Spanish, and by trying to interact, as much as possible, asking questions when necessary.

### 3.3 Procedures

A questionnaire was first administered to prospective participants in order to obtain some language-related information (see Appendix B). The main purpose of the questionnaire was to ascertain the participants’ oral proficiency in Spanish from their own perspective, so as to have some an additional factor with which to compare the records of their marks in the oral language classes in which they were enrolled. This information was later confirmed by teaching staff, on the basis of students’ final oral assessment marks from their previous academic term. This assessment process enabled the pairing of students according to a similar level for the data collection sessions and facilitated the subsequent analysis of the data. Hence, no explicit method was used to determine the proficiency level of the participants; it was determined solely by the level of the course in which each participant was enrolled and corroborated by both information gathered from the students’ own perspective and from their course marks. Afterwards, participants were asked to attend data elicitation sessions.

These sessions were organised in a way that would also allow the testing of two other variables (task and interlocutor). In each session, the participants were instructed on what to do and on the organisation of the activities, and they were given a practice task when necessary. The interactions of the different dyads (NNS-NNS and NNS-NS) were video and audio recorded. Participants were required to sit facing each other in order to carry out each task, and a time limit of 10 minutes

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4. Two tasks of the same type were used in each session so that the NS – who would interact in two sessions with different learners – would not be required to perform the same activity twice.



was given. I sat near them so as to take note of problem indicators or 'signals' – hesitation, drawls, repetitions – which could be noticed during each conversation, and which might anticipate or evidence communication problems (Færch & Kasper, 1983). Immediately after the tasks had been performed, the NNSs were interviewed, following 'stimulated recall methodology' (Gass & Mackey, 2000). For this, the videos were used to stimulate the learners' comments on their own performance together with the notes taken. The participants were asked to reflect on the problems they thought they had had in communicating while doing the tasks, and to ask me to pause the video each time they felt they had had some difficulties, to comment on the type of problem and, if possible, to explain what they did to try to solve that problem. For doing this, questions such as the following were used: *Did you have any difficulties when communicating to your partner? If so, what was the problem? Did you solve that problem? How? If not, what did you do?* This activity was done in the learners' L1 to help them to feel more comfortable and be able to reflect on and explain their linguistic behaviour.

Finally, the learners' oral proficiency levels, as initially assessed, were corroborated by evaluating their oral production through the videos of their interactions. I carried this out by applying the oral evaluation criteria stipulated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching, especially designed for Spanish as a Foreign Language. Afterwards, a Spanish teacher from the Hispanics Department was asked to do the same so as to confirm this evaluation. This allowed me to group the learners – originally divided into elementary and pre-intermediate/intermediate levels – into two of the main levels proposed in this framework, level A: Basic learner and level B: Independent learner. These are the levels used for the subsequent presentation and analysis of the data.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The tasks carried out by the participants were transcribed by using the software programme Transana (Woods & Fassnacht, 2010). In addition, the post-interviews were transcribed for the subsequent identification and confirmation of the learners' CS use. Preliminary identification of learners' CSs made use of Dörnyei & Körmös' (1998) framework, which helped me to decide on my own defining criteria for the CSs, and to make the necessary adaptations. For the formal analysis, the software programme UAM Corpus Tool was used (O'Donnell, 2008). Finally, a one-to-one inter-rater reliability test was conducted to assess and validate results and reduce the researcher's bias.

Descriptive procedures were applied in order to present and describe findings. Inferential statistics, by means of the Chi-square test, were also used to identify any association between the learners' proficiency and their CS usage. Additionally,

a qualitative examination of the data and the learners’ retrospective comments was carried out. This analysis made it possible to thoroughly examine the learners’ strategic behaviour – a phenomenon not directly observable – so as to confirm the quantitative results obtained and to identify the variable effects which were primarily perceivable through qualitative means.

3.4.1 *Analytical framework used for the identification of the CSs*

The framework used for the data analysis was based on Dörnyei and Körmös’ (1998) taxonomy and adapted according to the data analysed here, which allowed me to categorise and account for most of the phenomena encountered. For the present study; however, only those categories which were more frequently by learners at both proficiency levels will be considered as presented in Figure 1.

<b>Problem-solving mechanisms (PSM) related to L2 resource deficit</b>
<i>Lexical PSM</i>
Content reduction: Message abandonment
Substitution: code-switching
Substitution plus: sub-approximation
<i>Grammatical PSM –L2 RD</i>
Grammatical reduction
Grammatical substitution
<i>Phonological-articulatory PSM – L2 RD</i>
Lexical tip of the tongue
Morphological tip of the tongue
<b>PSM related to own output problems</b>
<i>Self-correction</i>
Error-repair

Figure 1. Analytical framework observed in the data

4. Results

In order to answer the research questions set for the study the overall results obtained will be presented and analysed. For this, the total normalised frequency of

CSs employed by the two levels will be first provided and examined, followed by an analysis of the CSs more frequently observed in each of the main categories.

**Table 1.** Frequency of CS use by proficiency level

Level	Language production	CSs	CSs/ 1000 words
Level A	6552	1762	268.9
Level B	10142	1840	181.4

Table 1 shows the amount of language produced by the learners of each level, with Level B learners (the more proficient group) showing greater language production. It can be seen that the difference in the total number of CSs employed between the groups is quite low. However, the normalised frequency of CSs for each level shows a proportionally higher frequency by the Level A learners. This finding corresponds with most studies regarding the influence of the proficiency level on the use of CSs, in that the less proficient learners tend to use a higher number of CSs than more proficient subjects (Bialystok & Fröhlich, 1980; Poulisse, 1987, 1990; Safont Jordá, 2001; Fernández Dobao, 2001). The rationale offered for this is that lower levels encounter more problems in communicating due to their more limited command of the L2 and thus require a higher use of strategies. However, as also evidenced in other studies, it seems likely that the learners' proficiency affects more their choice than just the frequency of CS usage (Paribakht, 1984; Chen, 1990; Fernández Dobao, 2001). In order to have a clearer view of this possible relationship between the learners' proficiency level and their selection of CSs, the following table presents the distribution of the various CS categories according to level and normalised frequencies (in parentheses). The names of the categories which comprise the analytical framework are the following: (C1) Problem-solving mechanisms (PSM) related to L2 resource deficit (RD), (C2) PSM related to processing time pressure, (C3) PSM related to learner's own output problems, (C4) PSM related to other performance problems, (C5) interactional and paralinguistic CSs.

**Table 2.** Main CS categories by proficiency level (frequency per 1000 words)

Level	CS categories					Total
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	
A	740 (112.9)	557 (85.0)	185 (28.2)	65 (9.9)	215 (32.8)	1762
B	782 (77.1)	564 (64.5)	260 (25.6)	50 (4.9)	184 (18.1)	1840
<b>Total</b>	<b>1522</b>	<b>1121</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>3602</b>

Overall, results in Table 2 show that the differences in the patterns of distribution are statistically significant ( $df = 4$ ,  $\chi^2 = 16.527$ ,  $p = .003$ ) indicating differential use of the various CS resources by the two groups. Furthermore, from the normalised frequencies it is clear that Level A learners use all the CS categories noticeably more often than Level B learners. The only difference, when looking at the profiles of the two groups (reading across the table), is that for Level A the third most frequently used category concerns ‘PSM related to interactional-paralinguistic CSs’, whereas for Level B it is ‘PSM related to own output’.

In order to elucidate the possible effects of this variable on the learners’ choice of CSs those mechanisms most frequently employed by both groups will now be analysed and discussed.

#### 4.1 Distribution of CS usage

This section presents an account of those CSs most often used by both levels (frequencies have been highlighted in *italics*). The totals of the CSs used in each sub-category have been included in Table 3 to allow for comparisons of the learners’ strategic behaviour in both groups. The subsequent section presents the analysis and discussion of these mechanisms together with their definitions and some excerpts from the learners’ interactions. Figure 2 provides the conventions which were used in the transcription of the data.

[ ]	square brackets indicate overlapping speech
(word)	word in parenthesis indicates that the word was not clearly heard
{ }	curly brackets show the researcher’s comments based on the videos
(( ))	double parentheses indicate inaudible speech
↑	upwards arrow indicates rising intonation
wa-ter	hyphens in between syllables mean that the word was slowly uttered
(0.2)	pauses are shown in seconds and placed in between parentheses
<i>italics</i>	words in italics show the English translation of each utterance
<b>bold</b>	words in bold are my notation of relevant non-linguistic features, such as ‘risa’ /‘laugh’, and gestures.

Figure 2. Conventions used in the transcription of data

**Table 3.** Distribution of the CSs most frequently used

Lexical PSM-L2 RD	Level A	CSs/1000 words	Level B	CSs/1000 words
<i>Content Reduction</i>	36	5.5	35	3.4
message abandonment	21	3.2	14	1.4
<i>Substitution</i>	116	17.7	100	9.9
code-switching	47	7.2	24	2.4
<i>macro-conceptualisation</i>	26	4	62	6.1
Restructure	26	4	62	6.1
<b>Grammatical PSM-L2 RD</b>				
<i>Totals</i>	347	53	342	33.7
grammatical reduction	190	29	145	14.3
Grammatical substitution	76	11.6	106	10.5
<b>Phonological-articulatory PSM-L2 RD</b>				
<i>Totals</i>	86	13.1	104	10.3
morphological tip-of-the-tongue	34	5.2	41	11.99
lexical tip-of-the-tongue	45	6.9	48	4.7
<b>PSM related to Own output problems</b>				
<i>self-correction</i>	98	15	142	14
error-repair	82	12.5	127	12.5

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Lexical PSM-L2 resource deficit

#### 5.1.1 *Message abandonment*

This is an avoidance mechanism in which the speaker gives up attempting to express his/her meaning by leaving the message unfinished, and is a CS which was used relatively more by the Level A learners. This seems to reflect the fewer linguistic resources available to learners at this level, which renders them unable to express everything they want, and forces them to stop their message, as they are not always able to overcome a communication problem. This can be seen in (1), where NNS6, after some hesitation and pausing, just stops the message and laughs, as highlighted (underlined). Her behaviour is confirmed in her comments, where she indicates that she did not know how to continue her message.

- (1) NNS6A: *para mi es el mismo pero eh no eh no hizo mi trabajo uhm después el día antes de-risa-de debo eh darlo y eh (0.4) sí-risa*  
 “for me it’s the same but eh I doesn’t eh doesn’t do my work uhm after the the day before mu-laugh-mu I must eh give it and eh (0.4) yes-laugh”

Retrospective comments NNS6: ...I was trying to think of a different way of expressing my ideas but still put across the same message. And then I didn’t know what else to say and I didn’t think I made any sense-laugh.

Fernández Dobao (2001) found similar results in that lower levels used a higher number of avoidance mechanisms when faced with lexical difficulties. This type of behaviour seems to be favoured by lower levels since it is an “easy way out” for those learners who are still not able to express the desired message because of lexical difficulties (Palmberg, 1983, p. 153).

### 5.1.2 Restructure

This ‘achievement or compensatory’ strategy refers to an expansion mechanism which is employed in order to compensate for the original (necessary) structures with alternative ones (Færch & Kasper, 1983). From what was observed in this study, this expansion of the learners’ L2 resources seems to be more likely to be accomplished by the more proficient subjects, emphasising therefore the relevance of the proficiency variable. As also observed in other studies, it seems that Level B learners are equipped with more knowledge of the target language and thus possess more resources to draw upon when communicating, hence being able to *restructure* their message more often than the less proficient learners, who instead opted for *abandoning their message* (Fernández Dobao, 2004; García Nuñez, 2006; Prebianca Vieira, 2009). The analysis revealed that some learners signalled that they were experiencing problems in communicating their original meaning by means of *pauses* or *repetitions*; which helped them to gain time to think of an alternative message. Others did not signal problems, and thus did not stop their original message. For instance, NNS23 in (2) compensates for her original message ‘estoy muy’ (‘I am very’) with an immediate alternative ‘tengo muchas ganas’. She originally wanted to say ‘I am really overwhelmed by it’, but as she could not find those words, she decided to replace them with a structure she was probably more acquainted with, thus being able to employ and expand her own resources to communicate her message.

- (2) NNS23B: ...*es que ahora hoy estoy muy tengo muchas ganas hoy pero...*  
 “...now today I am very I am very excited today but...”

Retrospective comments NNS23B: I was trying to say like ‘I’m really kind of overwhelmed by it’ but I couldn’t think of the vocabulary so I just said ‘I’m excited’ so I changed what I was saying.

### 5.1.3 Code-switching

This consists of “including L1 or L3 words with L1 or L3 pronunciation in L2 speech” (Dörnyei & Körmös, 1998, p. 359). Level A learners relied on their L1 more often in their attempts to communicate mostly lexical items (nouns) and thus avoid a communication breakdown, which again appears to be a reflection of their lack of L2 linguistic repertoire.

- (3) NNS12A: *sí en un costume-risa-negro*  
 “Yes in a costume-laugh-black”
- (4) NNS5A: *es un eh eh en un es una hombre que es caminando a la estación de police↑*  
 “it’s a eh eh in a it’s a man who is walking to the police station”

Retrospective comments NNS5A: I was trying to say ‘police station’.

- (5) NNS3A: *...fui eh a la casa de mis abuelos y eh eh (0.2) eh eh ví eh ví↑ ví↑ eh mucho eh muchos pinturas y muchos art y oh me encanta y ahora eh hacer art mucho mucho...*  
 “...I went eh to my grandparents’ and eh eh (0.2) eh eh saw eh saw↑ saw↑ eh much eh much paintings and much art and oh I love it and now eh do art much much ...”

Retrospective comments NNS3A: I wanted to say ‘there are many paintings there, drawings and pictures on the walls, but-**laugh**- I just couldn’t think of the words. Then, I wanted to say ‘now I do art everyday because of them’.

These results correspond with other studies in that lower levels tend to make more use of L1- based, or ‘transfer,’ CSs because of their restricted L2 knowledge (Poulisse & Schils, 1989; Wannaruk, 2003; Fernández Dobao, 2004; García Nuñez, 2006). This strategic behaviour on the part of the less proficient learners not only suggests that their mother tongue is nearer the surface, as they attempt to use the L2, but also that lexis may be more salient for them. This corresponds with studies in SLA which indicate that L2 learners are more concerned about lexis in their early stages of interlanguage and then gradually move to structuring/restructuring grammatical patterns (Peters, 1983; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).

## 5.2 Grammatical PSM-L2 RD

### 5.2.1 Grammatical reduction

This CS is marked by the usage of intentionally simplified grammar in order to avoid a communication break. This mechanism was markedly more often em-



ployed by lower level learners, representing the main difference between groups within grammatical PSM.

The analysis revealed that the learners used simplified grammar which involved: leaving out grammatical words (prepositions, articles, auxiliaries), an overuse of 'es' in contexts where 'está' should have been used, and the use of infinitives and present tense instead of the correct conjugated verb forms. As observed below, NNS15 reduces her output by omitting certain grammatical items when producing, 'tu es número dos' instead of the appropriate one: 'el tuyo/la tuya es (el/la) número dos'. This reduction is also reflected in her less fluent and less comprehensible speech, which was more characteristic of this level. In Example 7, NNS16 intentionally opts for the use of the verb in its infinitive form, because she does not feel capable of conjugating it appropriately. These learners' concerns about lexis are again observed in that they try to communicate meaning through mainly content words.

- (6) NNS15A: *entonces \*ahora es en su casa y luego eh bajo las escaleras a afuera so eh eh entonces eh tu tu eh tu es número dos?*  
 "so now he is in his house and then eh down the stairs out outside so eh eh so eh you you eh you is number two?"

Retrospective comments NNS15A: I think I was trying to say 'he's down the stairs outside so yours must be the second one'. Basically I was saying 'you are two' but what I meant was 'so your picture is number two'. I think it was so hard because I didn't know that actual word yet. (So what were you thinking?) 'Yours is two'-**laugh**. I know what I am saying is not right but I knew that she would understand. The whole idea was 'so after he was in his room he went downstairs and went outside. (OK, so what do you think of what you actually said?) I know there's a lot missing but I didn't know how to say it, it's not right in Spanish that's why I am not confident in saying it.

- (7) NNS16A: *eh tengo una (cuadro↑) cuando el hombre salir↑ su casa↑ También*  
 "eh I have a (picture↑) when the man to go out↑ his house↑ too"

Retrospective comments NNS16A: I was trying to say 'he leaves the house,' but I wasn't sure of how to say in that person so I just said 'salir', the verb in its infinitive.

This finding corresponds with other studies, where lower level learners, due to their restricted L2 competence, have been found to reduce their output more often than the more proficient learners in order to avoid problems (García Nuñez, 2006; Yang & Gai, 2010) and facilitate communication (Færch & Kasper, 1983). They tend to do this because even though they know that their speech may not be

correct, they are more concerned with communicative appropriateness (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). In the particular case of English learners of Spanish, it has been found that in their early stages of learning they tend to simplify their output, particularly when producing the Spanish copula 'ser/estar' (as in 6), by simplifying its use to one verb only – the copula 'ser' – as in English (VanPatten, 1985). This helps learners to keep the flow of the conversation and to progress towards more complex grammar structures (Guntermann, 1992a; Marsden & David, 2008). Thus, it seems that these learners' strategic behaviour reflects their proficiency level in that they still opt for communicating through mainly lexical items through which they are more likely to express meaning, yet in a rudimentary form. In addition, this lexis-oriented L2 production coincides with learners' early developmental stage.

### 5.2.2 Grammatical substitution

This CS has been defined as "changing certain grammatical specifications of the lemma through transfer or overgeneralisation" (Dörnyei & Körmös, 1998, p. 361). The qualitative analysis revealed that the only marked difference between groups has to do with an overgeneralisation of gender on the part of Level A. These learners opted for the masculine for nouns which do not have a natural gender, which made it more difficult for them to assign the appropriate gender as shown below.

- (8) NNS4A: *los navi ah navidades pasadas*  
 "the past christ ah Christmas"

- (9) NNS6A: *Sí porque eh no no quiere que los ami los amigos eh piensen que eh*  
 (0.2) *tú tienes el mismo opinión*  
 "yes because eh I don't don't want my frien my friends eh to think  
 that eh (0.2) you have the same opinion"

- (10) NNS9A: *sí, sí-risas-eh tengo un foto donde el hombre es sobre una eh*  
 (0.3) *-gestos*  
 "yes, yes-laugh-eh I have a picture where the man is on a eh  
 (0.3) *-gestures*"

Retrospective comments NNS9A: I kept changing between 'un foto' and 'una foto' as I couldn't remember if it was feminine or masculine. And because she wasn't saying 'photo' so I couldn't copy it-laugh- so I kept changing so eventually I was going to get it right or remember.

The problem arose especially with nouns that have an ending that might be related to the grammatical gender masculine 'o' as in 'foto/razón/explosión' or which end with 'e(s)' as in 'imagen/partes/navidades', a form which does not show unambiguously that they are feminine nouns. In such cases, the learners tended to opt for overgeneralising masculine over feminine. This evidence finds support in

studies related to the acquisition of Spanish gender. Tight (2006) observed that L1 English speakers learning Spanish tended to assign grammatical gender according to the word's perceived gender connotation. So, when this connotation was not easily observed, it was difficult for learners to assign gender appropriately. In the current study, this was particularly observed in those instances where the learners related the masculine grammatical gender to words perceived as masculine because of their ending in '-o' or in '-e/-es' which probably caused them confusion. This finding demonstrates again the influence, though less noticeable, of the proficiency factor as well as the learners' IL stage. Even though very few learners provided comments about this behaviour in particular, it seems that lower level learners still encounter problems which may be categorised as less complex in comparison with, for example, verbal inflections, which are considered more complex structures within the study of Spanish grammar (Oliva, Ignacio, Del Castillo, & Iglesias, 2010).

### 5.3 Phonological-articulatory PSM-L2 RD

#### 5.3.1 *Lexical tip of the tongue*

This retrieval mechanism is used "in an attempt to retrieve and articulate an item, saying a series of incomplete or wrong structures before reaching the optimal form" (Dörnyei & Körmös, 1998, p. 361). It was observed that the Level B learners resorted more frequently to the *morphological tip-of-the-tongue* phenomenon, while the Level A learners employed more often the same CS, but its *lexical* counterpart. As evidenced in (11) lower level learners attempted to find the correct lexical item by repeating parts of the intended meaning, and also through checking whether the word uttered was correct by means of *own accuracy checks*.

- (11) NNS15A: *en el en el su suro suroeste*↑ *En el suroeste de Francia*  
 "In the in the su south southeast↑ in the southeast of France"

According to the few studies which have examined this phenomenon, the low production of these types of mechanisms has not made it possible to draw any firm conclusions (Prebianca Vieira, 2009; García Nuñez, 2006). Based on what has been analysed here, it seems that the more restricted L2 knowledge, which still governs the output of the less proficient learners, causes those learners to feel more concerned about lexis, through which they may be more able to communicate their ideas at this early stage.

#### 5.3.2 *Morphological tip of the tongue*

This phenomenon was included in this study due to the type of data found in the analysis. In addition to lexical forms most learners had difficulties when trying to

retrieve verb forms as in (12), where NNS7B tries to retrieve the appropriate verb form, although unsuccessfully.

- (12) NNS7B: *y creo que tengo cuatro por si cuando el lle llegas a llega llegara↑ (0.2) llegaba a a su casa con su maleta*  
 “and I think that I have four for yes when he arri arrive to arrives  
will arrive↑ (0.2) arrived to to his house with his suitcase”

Retrospective comments NNS7B: I was thinking how to say ‘he arrived’ ‘he was arriving’.

This CS use by the more proficient subjects also appears to demonstrate their developing stage of interlanguage. It seems that, as opposed to lower level learners, they are more concerned about grammar (verb forms) in that they still need to retrieve a series of incorrect forms until reaching an optimal construction which may help them to get their message across. This CS usage may have also been intensified by the difficulties that the Spanish verb forms present especially to English speakers making them feel more doubtful about their appropriate use (Salaberry, 1999; Ruiz-Debbe, 2005).

#### 5.4 PSM related to own output problems

##### 5.4.1 *Error-repair*

This category refers to those mechanisms related to deficiencies in one's own output, and whose main function has to do with the learners' ability to monitor their own L2 speech. Interestingly, *error repair*, a CS considered more cognitively demanding and as such expected to be more often used by higher levels, showed equal frequencies in both levels. The only difference between groups had to do with a slightly more frequent production of successful *repairs* by the more proficient learners. It seems that higher levels are more cognitively prepared to monitor their own L2 performance since, as pointed out by Poulisse (1997), lower levels are restrained in their correction of errors because their speech production already takes up a great deal of their attentional resources (Poulisse, 1997, p. 61).

The analysis also revealed a tendency for both groups to favour the correction of certain aspects of their utterance over others. Although the evidence is not enough to draw any definite conclusions in this respect, it seems that the learners, depending on their proficiency level, prefer to correct problematic instances that they feel are more or less important in order to communicate their message. Some of the more proficient learners tended to correct problems related to verb forms (in 13 & 14), suggesting their concern for repairing more complex structures, which for them may compromise more of their communication. The less proficient

subjects, on the other hand, tried to repair instances related to gender (in 15); an aspect which may be seen as less complex and, therefore, easier to repair for the less proficient learners. Similar evidence was observed in the use of *grammatical substitution*, where the only noticeable difference between groups appeared in its relatively higher use for solving gender-related instances by the lower level.

- (13) NNS17B: ...y después eh tengo eh lo mismo eh hombre ah está eh no ha eh ha abierto eh un botella de cham(pagne)  
 "... and after eh I have eh the same eh man ah is eh no he has eh has opened eh a bottle of cham(pagne)"

Retrospective comments NNS17B: I was trying to say 'he's just opening the bottle' but then I was unsure if I could use the continuous, so I said 'he has opened'. So I just corrected it, I thought it was gonna be wrong.

- (14) NNS19B: Sí en personalidad, entonces cuando tengo una problema un problema eh le contar le contó↑ Eh (0.2) yyyy tiene muy buen consejos y tal, y tú?  
 "yes in personality, so when I have a problema a problema eh I tell I told ↑ eh (0.2) aaand he's got very good advice and so, and you?"

Retrospective comments NNS19B: I was gonna say 'le contaré' and then I said 'te cuento', 'le cuento' so as to correct myself, I should have said 'le cuento' but I said 'le contó' - **laugh**, which makes no sense-**laugh**

- (15) NNS2A: ah en la en el cuatro imagen el hombre es (0.4) hay muchas personas y (0.2) y (0.2) pienso que (0.2) comprar algo y ess una mujer eh que es el ven vendedor, vendedora ah (0.4) y...  
 "ah in the in the fourth image the man is (0.4) there is a lot of people and (0.2) I think that (0.2) to buy something and iss a woman eh that is the sales salesman saleswoman ah (0.4) and ..."

Retrospective comments NNS2A: I wanted to say 'the fourth picture' so I was trying to correct myself there because I kept thinking 'imagen' was the right word for 'picture'. He used it but I wasn't sure it was quite right. Then, I wanted to say 'he's buying something from a lady who's like the shopkeeper. But I was struggling to say so then said 'there is a lady who's the shopkeeper but as I was struggling to say 'shopkeeper' so I said 'vendedor' and as I knew it was a she I said 'vendedora' but was hesitant because I didn't know if it was the right word, so I was correcting myself because she was female.

A possible rationale for this is that learners put a higher degree of effort into repairing their output based on the importance of their goals. They tend to focus

more on repairing those errors which they consider may impede communication than those which may be seen as inappropriate (Poulisse, 1997, p. 60). This implies therefore that learners favour the repairing of structures whose degree of complexity corresponds with their proficiency level. Hence, according to the L2 resources available, learners will be more prone to correcting those structures that they feel are more necessary to communicate meaning, and will be less concerned with those which do not hinder communication, demonstrating again the learners' progress towards the development of the L2.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study has extended knowledge on the effects of Spanish L2 learners' proficiency level on their use of communication CSs. From the quantitative analysis a significant association between the learners' proficiency levels and their CS usage was observed. The qualitative examination of the data confirmed this and provided further evidence on the influence of the learners' competence on their selection of CSs. Each group employed the CSs necessary to tackle the type of problem most salient for each level: lexis-related aspects were the main problematic area for the less proficient learners, whilst the more proficient subjects were more inclined to solving grammar-related problems, particularly to do with verbal constructions. This finding helped to further confirm learners' L2 developmental stages in that the less competent learners are still focused on lexis (to express meaning) and are just starting to progress towards the use of less complex grammatical items. The more proficient subjects, on the other hand, appear to be more aware of grammatical structures, particularly verbal constructions, reflecting their transition to the use of more complex aspects of the language. This progression on the part of higher level learners was also tentatively observed in their successful *repairs* which seemed to indicate a higher cognitive awareness on their part.

This study contributes to the area of Second Language Acquisition by corroborating the early stages of development L2 learners go through that is, from the use of primarily lexical items, less complex, and reduced (less coherent) structures, to more complex structures (Guntermann, 1992a, 1992b; Dussias, 2003; Marsden & David, 2008). More importantly, it shows that this developmental process applies to Spanish as L2 just as with other languages. In fact, the specific difficulties that have been found for Spanish L2 learners were also evidenced here, with verb inflections and gender being the more problematic aspects for L1 English speakers (Deveau 1998). Although to date research in this area keeps growing (Kaivanpanah, Yamouty & Karami, 2012; Chuanchaisit & Prapphal, 2009; Uztosun & Erten, 2014), interest in the study of Spanish as L2 remains scarce particularly in relation to the

learners' proficiency effects. This is why the difficulties faced and reflected on by these Spanish L2 learners may also provide insight into the teaching and learning of this language. Oral language tutors may benefit from the evidence presented here in order to implement learning strategies which may facilitate learners' L2 development. In addition, introspective methods such as the one adopted in this study may aid learners in monitoring their own learning by raising awareness of the cognitive processes involved in L2 communication. Sharing their experiences when using the language (failures and achievements) may reassure them and/or build up their self-confidence, thus aiding them in their interlanguage transition.

Although the results of this study cannot be generalised because of the small number of participants, the in-depth analysis of Spanish L2 learners' interactions in a less artificial context together with the learners' retrospective reflections on their own performance expands and enriches the existing literature on communication strategies.

Future research may focus on analysing a broader variety of proficiency levels in order to further confirm the effects of this variable and the extent to which learners' CS usage does in fact reflect their IL transition. Longitudinal studies may be more beneficial in this respect, as they may enable researchers to investigate CS usage over time according to different as well as more marked proficiency levels.

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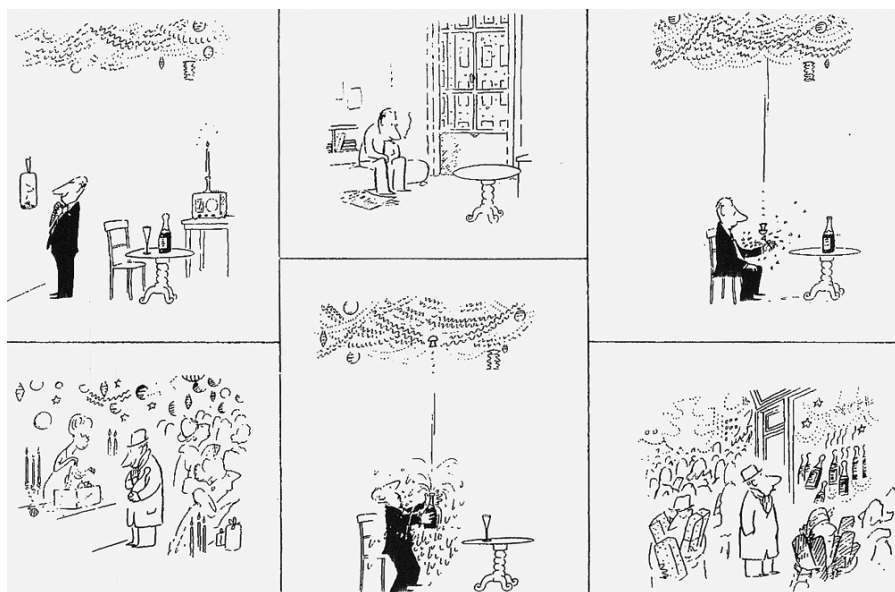
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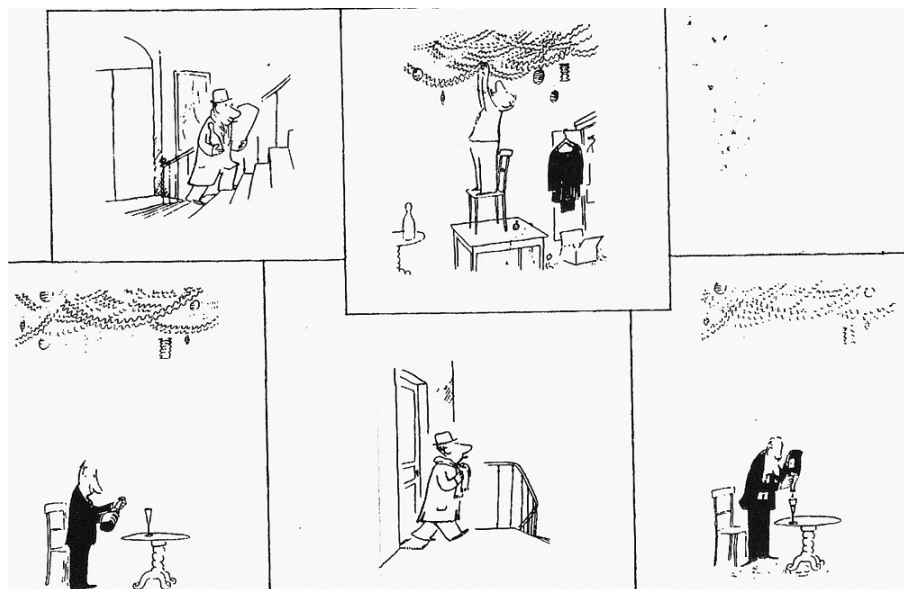
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## Appendix A. Jigsaw task N°1:

Work with your partner: the pictures are in jumbled order. Describe to your partner what is happening and together try to work out the complete story in the correct order (Klippel, 1984: 150).



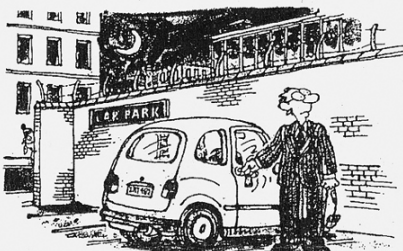
Picture set A



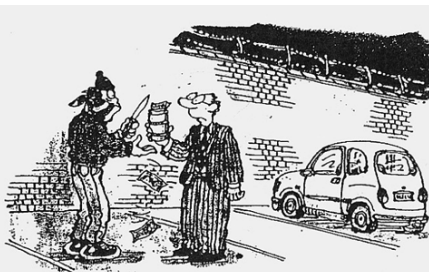
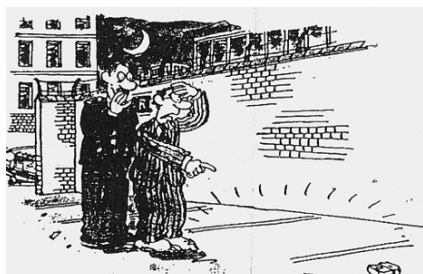
Picture set B



*Jigsaw task N°2:* Work with your partner: the pictures are in jumbled order. Describe to your partner what is happening and together try to work out the complete story in the correct order (Anonymous, 2010).<sup>5</sup>



Picture set A



Picture set B

5. This task was supplied by a teacher who had used it in class and recommended it; however, the original source is unknown.

Appendix B. Language background and proficiency questionnaire

I would like to ask you to help me by answering the following questions concerning foreign language learning. This survey is conducted by ..... PGR student from the School of English, University of Liverpool, and it aims at gathering useful information about possible participants for a research project. The contents of this form are absolutely confidential; information identifying the respondent will not be disclosed under any circumstances.

This is not a test so there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. I am interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answers sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP!

Personal information

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Language background

Please say which is your first language (mother tongue) and list any foreign language/s that you also know:

1st language: \_\_\_\_\_

Other language/s: \_\_\_\_\_

Level of proficiency

1. How confident do you feel when speaking Spanish? Please mark the phrase you feel suits you best.

1 Very confident    2 Confident    3 Fairly confident    4 Not very confident    5 Not confident at all

2. How would you rate your level of proficiency when communicating orally in Spanish? Please mark the sentence you feel represents your level best.

1 I can speak very fluently on most topics	2 I can communicate fairly well	3 I can communicate enough to have a simple conversation	4 I can communicate only basic information	5 I can hardly communicate
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3. Please give any final grade/s from any oral Spanish language exam or Spanish course you have recently taken. If you prefer you can leave this blank.

4. Do you feel that you need more practice to communicate orally in Spanish? Please underline the phrase that suits your needs best.

1 Not at all    2 Not really    3 Some    4 Quite a lot    5 Very much

Now that you have filled in this questionnaire please send it attached to the following e-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about this questionnaire or my research project please feel free to contact me by this e-mail address or by phone: \_\_\_\_\_. You can call me or text me!

## Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar cómo los distintos niveles de competencia de aprendices de español como L2 afectan su uso de estrategias de comunicación en interacciones cara a cara. Mediante una metodología basada en tareas, se recolectó un corpus oral producido por aprendices con distintos niveles de competencia al interactuar con otros aprendices y hablantes nativos del español. Los datos fueron analizados cuantitativa y cualitativamente para investigar una posible asociación entre los diferentes niveles de competencia de estos aprendices y su uso de las estrategias de comunicación. Para dicho análisis se utilizó la taxonomía de Dörnyei y Kőrmös (1998). Los resultados indican diferencias en las estrategias utilizadas por los aprendices de acuerdo a su nivel. El nivel elemental hizo un mayor uso de las estrategias y mostró una tendencia por resolver problemas del tipo léxico, así como problemas del tipo gramatical pero de menor complejidad. En cambio, los aprendices de niveles superiores se enfocaron en problemas de tipo gramatical y en aspectos más complejos de la L2.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias de comunicación, competencia, comunicación en L2, problemas del tipo léxico, problemas del tipo gramatical

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### *Biographical notes*

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