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Professor Fischer

FL 598

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Grammar Mapping: The Spanish¹ Conditional Tense as Presented in *Personajes*.

The book that I have chosen for this assignment is *Personajes*. *Personajes*, published in 1992, was the text used in my second year post-secondary Spanish class in 1993. I feel it important to point out to the reader the year of publication because much has changed, for the better, in the field of foreign language instruction. I should refrain from making an early judgment of the text in this assignment, however, I cannot help but to say that those familiar with the ACTFL guidelines would undoubtedly be horrified at even a quick glance through *Personajes*. I will explain the origins of this horror below as we examine how the conditional tense is presented in the text.

Before examining where the Spanish conditional tense maps onto the ACTFL guidelines and where it is presented in *Personajes*, one must take a closer look at the tense itself. We must determine if conditional expressions in Spanish are limited to explicit use of the conditional tense—the -ía endings added to the infinitive; hablaría, viviría, pondría—or if other less explicit ways of expressing the conditional exist and, if so, are they all mastered or acquired at the same level? Indeed, expression of the conditional in Spanish is not limited to use of the conditional verb tense but also includes conditional sentences. When one thinks of conditional sentences one typically thinks of the “si” clause. Si-clauses are composed of two parts: the condition containing the si, and the consequence. Si-clauses, however, require compound tenses and often

¹ Because of the reader’s known familiarity with the Spanish language, I am purposely omitting Spanish-English translations.

thanks.
Flattery will
get you
somewhere, tho
not everywhere

use both the present and past subjunctive. Even those unfamiliar with ACTFL studies should recognize that acquisition of conditional sentences might occur at a higher level than conditional verb form acquisition due to their complex construction. The conditional is also used when softening requests—*me gustaría un café con leche, podría pasarme la sal?* Here, we might expect the new speaker of Spanish to be able to use softened requests but such use of conditional verb forms most likely results from memorized structures. Such use of memorized structures do not necessarily indicate an understanding or mastery of the grammar feature.

So, what do the ACTFL guidelines have to say about the conditional? Before this question is answered, we must establish some reference points whereby we may compare the mapped grammar feature against the second year text and the students who use it. We will assume that the average student who enters second year Spanish has an ACTFL rating of intermediate-mid and will have by year's end achieved a proficiency rating of advanced, possibly advanced plus. We should expect, then, that the material presented in the text gradually moves from an IM level to an A+ level. Furthermore, and taking into consideration Krashen's ideas of $i + 1$, we should also not be surprised to find some material corresponding to the ACTFL superior level logically presented in the second half of the text.

probably not

According to ACTFL, the advanced student “can communicate facts . . . and can explain points of view, in an uncomplicated fashion” on concrete subjects “but cannot conjecture or coherently support an opinion” (ACTFL²). They are able to “narrate, describe, and explain in past, present, and future time” and “can link sentences together in limited discourse by using conjunctions and subordinate clauses” although many mistakes should be expected (ACTFL). From this description, we can place the acquisition of conditional sentences in the superior category where the superior speaker can use all compound tenses, a requirement of correct use or

² I will use “ACTFL” to indicate citations from the ACTFL guidelines.

understanding of the the si-clause. Regular and correct use of the si-clause implies the student can hypothesize, speak about abstract topics, and has a strong control of grammar—all characteristic of the superior rating. Accurate use of the conditional verb tense, then, most likely occurs at the Advanced level where the student's discourse is marked by paragraphs, not simple sentences, but lacks the sophistication required to successfully and regularly use the more complicated conditional sentence. Complete mastery of the conditional verb as exemplified in softened requests also falls in the advanced category. The oral interviewer must not be fooled by the clever interviewee who may frequently use expressions such as "me gustaría ir a la playa" or even "quisiera comprarme una coca-cola" which uses not the conditional verb tense but the imperfect subjunctive. Such expressions employed by the intermediate speaker fall under the content of "minimum courtesy requirements" which do not necessarily imply understanding and mastery of the grammar feature.

The fact that *Personajes* presents all three manifestations of the conditional does not pose a problem. That they are all presented exclusively on two pages in the middle of the book, perhaps, does. By about the middle of the book we would hope that the student is at or near the beginning of the advanced level. Using Krashen's $i + 1$ method we can expect to see features of the superior level but we certainly would have to question the value of grouping so much information together and then failing to follow up with appropriate activities. In *Personajes*, the student is given one activity after two pages of presentation on the conditional. The activity consists of converting ten sentences given in the infinitive into si-clause sentences. It is hardly worth our time to attempt to find some sort of pedagogical value in this section of *Personajes* given what we now know about language acquisition and instruction techniques.

This led me to dig deeper into the book to see how it presents other topics typical of the superior level. I needed no more than to turn to the previous page where *Personajes* presents the imperfect subjunctive and helps the student further by explaining both the -ra and the -se forms of this tense. It appears that *Personajes* presents its material in grammatical chunks rather than contextually. This is something we might expect to find in a textbook published in 1992 prior to publication of the ACTFL guidelines. Further analysis of the book led me to discover that quite early, page 53 in fact, *Personajes* explains the differences between ser and estar, and on page 88, the differences between the imperfect and preterit past tenses. Mastery of these distinctions does not happen until much later in the L2 student's acquisition so I must argue as to the validity of their early placement in this text and that in a non-contextual manner.

My last observation of *Personajes* is of the realia contained therein. Realia at the beginning levels of language acquisition has been proven to be of great use. The "realia," however, contained in this text are composed of some very high quality color photographs placed between each of the ten units as well as computer drawings and digital stick figures that have little to do with the contexts in which they are presented. Some of the pictures do not match their descriptions. On page 209, for example, one finds a photograph of an indigenous wedding in Peru portrays several native Peruvians. The caption, however, reads "boda en la localidad de Chincha Alta, Perú, donde la mayoría de la población es de *ascendencia africana*" (emphasis mine). With magnifying glass, I have yet to find a person in the photo that comes close to having the appearance of having African ancestry.

Clearly, *Personajes* does not follow the ACTFL guidelines (of course we must take into consideration the date of publication) nor ACTFL methodology. Both text books and second language instruction as well as our understanding of SLA have improved greatly over the past

decade. I am thankful for this for its application can only facilitate the acquisition of second languages. It would be interesting to see if *Personajes* is still in publication and to see if and how they have adapted to ACTFL suggestions. I am grateful for having completed this assignment as I feel it has significantly increased my awareness to the importance not only of the ACTFL guidelines but to their proper application to classrooms and classroom materials.