IDEA: VOCES: A Mnemonic Device to Cue Mood Selection after Impersonal Expressions
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Abstract: Providing language learners with mnemonic devices assists retention and recall of vocabulary and structural items. This idea provides one such memory device to assist beginning and intermediate students who struggle with mood selection after impersonal expressions.

Key Words: mnemonics, memory, mood, subjunctive, impersonal expressions, classroom techniques, language processing

Many people learn with the help of mnemonic devices, memory games, rhymes and various association techniques (Nyikos 1985; Stickels and Schwartz 1987). Students can benefit from the use of such devices when dealing with vocabulary and structural components of Spanish. The purpose of this mnemonic device is to assist English speaking learners of Spanish with mood selection.

How teachers present mood may make all the difference in the world to the learners. Some of the difficulty they experience when learning the subjunctive may be related to the blurring of mood distinction in American English. Since the indicative/subjunctive distinction has been all but lost for most young people, it may be pointless to contrast English and Spanish mood. Instead, to begin the learning process, it is more effective to present students with authentic, naturally occurring examples of the subjunctive. Quilter’s classification system (1993, 299) which illustrates two fundamental types of subordinate clauses, indicative and subjunctive, is useful. To these I have added a reality spectrum (Figure 1).

For Type I situations, speakers stay much closer to the reality end of the spectrum. Type II situations pull speakers away from reality to varying degrees. At least in the perspective of the speaker, the subjunctive

![Figure 1](image-url)
pective moves us toward “irreality,” all those things that are desired, unknown, only anticipated, and so forth. Textbooks usually arrange the above distinctions in small, more manageable chunks. Whenever the teacher introduces the impersonal constructions—and perhaps this should be early on—students can benefit from knowing that the vast majority take the subjunctive.

The mnemonic device VOÇES assists learners’ mood selection in clauses following impersonal expressions by calling attention to the most common “exceptions,” those calling for the indicative. In the acronym, the “C” is underlined to remind students that two adjectives commonly used in impersonal expressions begin with this letter. Since students already know dozens of adjectives, this is a rich area for developing their understanding of mood (e.g., Es bueno que...; Es importante que...), as in Figure 2.

In essence, the subjunctive serves as the default setting for other impersonal expressions while beginning and intermediate students are grappling with mood selection. Why the subjunctive as default? In most first and second year Spanish programs, nearly all of the other examples students encounter (including the negative forms of VOÇES), require the subjunctive mood, since the speaker is expressing a reaction or opinion about the information being related. By referring to VOÇES as the “voices” of truth and reality, students are able to recall the six adjectives in the chart, and at the same time, are reminded that the indicative affirms truth, belief, facts, experience, and certainty.

Structured-input activities (VanPatten and Cadierno 1993) contrasting other common adjectives (e.g., bueno, interesante, posible) with the VOÇES set, help students develop automaticity with impersonal expressions. By using structured-output activities as well (Lee and VanPatten 1995) we overtly remind learners of two things: 1) To formulate questions and responses within the VOÇES realm, we use the indicative; 2) Most impersonal expressions do not fall in the VOÇES realm, so we use the subjunctive (Figure 3).

It is useful to have a chart-size version of figure 3 in the classroom, and better yet, copies for students on which they list their own personal examples. To help develop their “feel” for mood, the instructor asks where on the reality continuum they would place certain expressions (e.g., “Es impos- sible que” may seem stronger than “Es triste que”). This proves useful when the class moves on to other examples of the subjunctive.

Once students know the VOÇES mnemonic, they can strive for accuracy in tasks requiring the use of impersonal expressions. Their developing understanding and accuracy can then be expanded to other uses of the subjunctive. Of course, in more advanced courses students will learn other impersonal expressions and at that point be ready to review and analyze as they hone their understanding of mood.

**Figure 2**

**IMPERS ONAL EXPRESSIONS CALLING FOR THE INDICATIVE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Es + VOÇES + que</th>
<th>INDICATIVO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verdad</td>
<td>Es verdad que te quiero mucho.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obvio</td>
<td>Es obvio que me quieres también.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es + C ierto/C laro</td>
<td>Es cierto que te quiero más todos los días.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidente</td>
<td>Es evidente que él no te quiere como yo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seguro</td>
<td>Es seguro que nos queremos muchísimo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Nombre: __________________

Mi lista de expresiones impersonales:
“(No) Es ______ que ...

REALIDAD <------------------------------------------- “IRREALIDAD”

V erdad
O bvio
C ierto/ C laro
E vidente
S eguro

mis oraciones:
Es verdad que tenemos mucha tarea.
Es posible que llueva mañana.

Figure 3

■ WORKS CITED


