A NEW LOOK AT TEACHING THE SPANISH SUBJUNCTIVE

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The Spanish subjunctive is usually taught during the last quarter or semester of the first year and reviewed during the second. In spite of the fact that it is essentially taught twice and used in third-year advanced composition and conversation courses it continues to be a problem for students. The subjunctive has always been a rather difficult concept to teach. The problem is compounded by the approach used by most popular grammar books which present lists of words and expressions accompanied by rather vague prescriptive rules to explain how and when the subjunctive mode is to be used. Most beginning texts still tend to present a set of prescriptive rules about norms of usage which are divided into categories by generalizations designed to make memorization easier.

The essential problem one encounters with most texts is that the generalizations concerning the use of the subjunctive are often quite vague and deal with categories into which students must classify verbs of desire, approval, possibility, doubt, indefiniteness, and so on. The end result is that many teachers dread teaching the subjunctive and students find that the categories of expressions and the vagueness of the prescriptive generalizations they must commit to memory are simply overwhelming.

The approach to the subjunctive presented here has proven highly successful in beginning as well as advanced classes. This approach has been well received by students because it minimizes the amount of rote memorization they must engage in and explains the nature of the subjunctive-indicative contrast in very simple terms. It is not based upon normative-prescriptive categorization but rather, it is based upon sound linguistic theory. The approach can be adapted to most popular texts by simply reorganizing the order of presentation and substituting a few new concepts for numerous old “rules.”

This approach to teaching the subjunctive rests heavily upon the linguistic insights of two well-known students and teachers of language, Samuel Gili y Gaya and William E. Bull. While there are some important theoretical and pedagogical differences between the approach presented here and some of the observations and theories of the above-mentioned authors they will not be discussed here. In the presentation which follows every effort has been made to avoid difficult linguistic terminology. The amount of class time used in actual grammar presentations is actually less than that used when a more traditional approach is employed. The basic assumption made in the development of this approach to the subjunctive is that insights to how the subjunctive-indicative contrast functions make it easier to learn and to teach.

The Approach

By the time students are introduced to the subjunctive they have already learned the essential indicative verbs as well as the imperative-subjunctive verb forms. Most texts do a reasonably good job in their presentation and drilling of the present subjunctive forms. The approach presented here is designed for use in a first-year course although with some modifications it may be used in more advanced courses. Most first-year texts present the essential subjunctive concepts along with the forms for the present subjunctive before introducing the imperfect subjunctive forms. Thus the examples we shall use to illustrate this approach will make use of present tense verbs.

Another essential feature of this approach is that it involves organizing the subjunctive presentation into three specific areas: the noun clause, the adjectival clause and the adverbial clause. The approach is designed this way in order to make it adaptable for use with many popular texts which organize their presentation of the subjunctive in much the same manner. Because of the way in which the
approach is organized many if not all of most text-book drills and exercises may be utilized with it. The only essential change required is that most of the "rules" and generalizations concerning the subjunctive be modified or replaced by a few new concepts. The first concept to be introduced is the principle of cause and effect in the noun clause.  

**Cause and Effect in the Noun Clause**

Rather than teach students that the subjunctive is used in the noun clause if the main verb "expresses or implies a wish, an order, permission, advice, prohibition, supplication, doubt, uncertainty, disbelief, a vehement expression or exclamation of desire" it is preferable that they understand why it is used and avoid requiring that they decide whether the verb in the main clause falls into any of the above categories. This principle of cause and effect may be stated simply in this manner: any desire, direct or perceived, to influence the action of the verb in the subordinate clause will signal the subjunctive.

It is useful to begin with a series of sentences to illustrate this principle:

A. The teacher insists that Carlos take the exams.  
B. The teacher insists that Carlos takes the exams.  
C. orders take  
D. demands take  
E. knows takes

The teacher may use the question-answer method to elicit responses from the class. Regardless of the method employed, students readily perceive that the principle of cause and effect cues the subjunctive in sentences A, C, and D. Sentences B and E are simply reports in which information is being given. The attempt to influence in the main clause may run the full gamut from an order to a wish, from a demand to a silent prayer said in a closet. The principle still applies. A wide variety of sentences may be devised for in-class use or as take-home exercises to drill this principle of cause and effect, for example:

He told us he was leaving school.  
He told us to leave school.  
The teacher required them to work.  
I hope you will get a good grade.  
I want them to go.  
I want to go.

Cause and effect is an extremely easy principle to learn and it is pedagogically sound. As in these last examples it is advisable to illustrate at this point that when there is no change of subject the subjunctive does not occur. Sentences such as the following are effective exercises. Students are required to write out the correct form of the underlined infinitive:

Desco que mis amigos aprender mucho.  
Diga que venir mañana.  
Quiero que Ud. me decir la verdad.  
Sé que ellos estar an casa.  
Maria quiere salir ahora.  
Maria quiere que él salir.

Many traditional grammars prescribe the use of the subjunctive after "verbs of emotion." This is a category of verbs which need not be memorized since the principle of cause and effect is operative in these cases as well. This can be illustrated through a series of practical examples:

A. Siento que Ud. no hable bien.  
B. Temo que sea dificil.  
C. Me alegro que hayan venido.

In the sentences previously examined, the causal element was to be found in the main clause. In these examples the causal element is to be found in the subordinate clause. This is merely a simple corollary to the principle of cause and effect. In sentence A, the fact that Ud. does not speak well causes an emotional reaction in the speaker just as in B, the fact that something may prove to be difficult causes the emotion of fear. In C, the fact that some people have arrived causes the speaker to experience happiness. The principle applies to more complex sentences as well: "Considero extraño que no des cuenta de ello." "Es una gran sorpresa para mí que haya aquí tanta pobreza." If cause and effect exists then the subjunctive appears; it is not necessary to isolate a category of vocabulary items to be memorized.

**Cause and Effect and the "Impersonal Expressions"**

The principle of cause and effect also determines the use of the subjunctive with a series of impersonal expressions as in the sentences: "Es necesario que todo efecto
tenga una causa” or “Es necesario que me escuches.” In the classroom the principle may be easily illustrated through the use of some practical examples such as the following:

A. We need you to go.
B. It is necessary that you go.
C. I require that you study.
D. It is required that you study.

Sentences A and C illustrate the cause and effect principle quite clearly. While B and D do not name a person in need or who requires that something be done, nevertheless a need and a requirement still exist which bear upon the action of the subject in the subordinate clause. It is this causal situation which requires the subjunctive be used. Impersonal expressions such as es bueno, es imposible, es mejor, es importante, es probable, and so forth require the subjunctive for the same reason. They indicate that a depersonalized objective causal relationship exists.

In devising sentences for practice it is advisable to include sentences in which the dependent verb has no expressed subject to contrast the subordinate clause structure with the infinitive. In addition expressions such as es cierto, es evidente, es verdad, and es claro should be included to illustrate that not all impersonal expressions imply a cause and effect relationship:

A. Se dice que estudian.
B. Es cierto que estudian.
C. Es necesario que estudien.
D. Es evidente que estudian.

In sentences B and D, the speaker is reporting a fact rather than perceiving a cause. There is no indication that the event of studying is being influenced in any way. In sentence C, the speaker, by contrast, clearly perceives a causal element which influences the verb in the subordinate clause. If an objective need exists, studying will be influenced. This is not the case in the other sentences. Once these expressions have been introduced and drilled, students readily perceive the distinction we have described. Rather than memorize that a given set or sets of expressions take the subjunctive or the indicative they need only apply a single principle and enjoy the luxury of understanding why it applies or does not apply.

There are a number of other expressions which may be mentioned here. These are impersonal expressions related to emotions or emotional reactions such as: es una lástima, es triste, es sorprendente, es extraño, se teme and so on. As we pointed out in our discussion of the so-called “verbs of emotion” the causal factor in these instances resides in the subordinate clause. An event or state described in the subordinate clause causes a climate of emotion perceived by the speaker.

Because of its simplicity, the principle of cause and effect and its application to all the cases we have described is quickly grasped by students. It is extremely easy to use and reinforce in the classroom. Depending upon the manner in which the given text book presentation of the subjunctive is organized, it may be advisable to teach the personal and impersonal expressions together rather than dividing them as we have done here. One important group of expressions has been omitted from our discussion of the subjunctive in the noun clause. This is the group of expressions categorized by text books as “expressions of doubt or denial.” We shall examine these presently after discussing the second principle which governs the use of the subjunctive, the concept of “Experience-Non-Experience.”

Experience-Non-Experience

The indicative is used to speak of verbal events “acciones indicadas” which actually take place, they exist in an objective sense. In other words, the indicative is used to speak of events and describe events and entities which belong to the world of experience. The subjunctive, on the other hand, is utilized when speaking about or describing events and entities which do not belong to objective experience. This is the second principle which governs the use of the subjunctive and it is a concept easily understood by students. Now let us look at those expressions commonly referred to as “expressions of doubt or denial” in terms of this concept of experience-non-experience in order to complete our
discussion of the noun clause:

Positive Judgments = Experience
Negative Judgments = Non-Experience

Most of the grammar books surveyed deal with such expressions as creer and no creer, and no dudar in the early chapters dealing with the noun clause. It is again useful to deal initially with a series of contrasting sentences to illustrate the principle of experience-non-experience relative to these expressions.

A. They say that he is reading.
B. They know that he is reading.
C. They think that he is reading.
D. They don't think that he is reading.
E. They doubt that he is coming.
F. They don't doubt that he is coming.
G. They believe that he is coming.
H. They don't believe that he is coming.
I. They deny that he is coming.
J. They are sure.
K. They are not sure.
L. There is doubt.
M. There is no doubt.

These sentences can be presented in Spanish or English. The point here is that while A and B are verbs of reporting, the rest of the sentences are ones in which the subject is making a judgment about an event in the subordinate clause. In sentences C, F, G, J, and M, students can readily perceive that the subject is making a positive judgment about the event in the subordinate clause. In the judgment of the speaker the event belongs to the world of experience and the verb that must be used in the indicative. In sentences D, E, H, I, K, and L, the speaker is making a negative judgment about the event. He is simply saying through the use of the subjunctive in these examples that in his judgment, the event in the subordinate clause does not belong to the world of objective experience. He does not believe, does not think, doubts or denies real existence to the event. This is a basic and pedagogically sound distinction between the subjunctive and the indicative mode. It is particularly useful in teaching because it is unambiguous and has no essential exceptions. The variations on the verb creer are not exceptions to the concept but merely variations in sentence patterns. An examination of these patterns reinforces the concept although it is advisable to present these nuances once the principle has been thoroughly drilled.6

Experience-Non-Experience in Adjectival Clauses

As with the noun clause, it is an easy matter to illustrate to students what an adjectival clause is. The same principle we have been discussing relative to positive and negative judgments applies to adjectival clauses so in teaching these clauses the concept is simply reinforced. Again, it is a good practice to begin with a series of contrastive sentences such as the following:

A. Conozco a un profesor que sabe mucho.
B. No conozco a ningún profesor que sepa mucho.
C. Tengo un libro que es viejo.
D. No tengo ningún libro que sea viejo.
E. Quiero un guía que hable inglés.
F. Tengo un guía que habla inglés.
G. ¿Hay alguien aquí que sepa mucho?
H. Hay alguien aquí que sabe mucho.

In sentences A, C, F, and H the verb in the subordinate clause will be in the indicative because in order to know, to have or to affirm (hay) that something or someone exists it must objectively belong to the world of experience. Thus the clause describing the entity contains an indicative verb. In sentences B, D, and E it is clear that the speaker is referring to something or someone not belonging to the realm of experience and thus must be described with the subjunctive verb. In sentence G the speaker reveals through an interrogative that he has no evidence of the objective existence of the “someone” he seeks and so must use a subjunctive verb in the descriptive clause.

It is useful to point out to students that when the speaker is looking for, wanting to meet, or know, or seeking to affirm the existence of something or someone, he has simply not experienced the sought-after entity. The descriptive event as well as the entity is thus anticipated as in sentence E but does not belong to the world of experience.8 If the existence of the entity in the main clause is denied then it cannot be described by a subordinate clause verb.
in the indicative: “No hay otro tren que sea tan bueno,” “No hay nadie que quiera acompañarnos,” “No existe persona que tenga más dinero que él.” These entities cannot be described with an indicative verb because they simply do not belong to the world of experience.

It is much easier for students to apply and understand the principle of experience-non-experience in these cases than it is for them to memorize and apply prescriptive rules such as the following: “An adjective, or relative, clause is one initiated by a relative pronoun (who, that, which, etc.) that relates to an antecedent. If the applicability of the antecedent is narrowed or restricted by the clause, then the verb of the clause is in the subjunctive.”10 Some texts, on the basis of this kind of generalization, give the impression that the definite article cues the indicative and the indefinite article cues the subjunctive.11 In the sentence: “Conozco a un alumno que habla bien,” the indefinite article is not a cue at all for the use of the subjunctive nor is it a valid cue in the sentence “Tengo una criada que trabaja bien.” In the sentence: “Se lo doy (el premio) al estudiante que conteste primero” the definite article is not a reliable cue since the initial verb may imply a future intention. The reliable cue, the essential explanation of the use of the subjunctive or the indicative in these sentences, is the principle of experience-non-experience which is much easier from students to apply consistently because it embodies the essential linguistic distinction between the subjunctive-indicative modes.

**The Subjunctive in Adverbial Clauses**

As was the case with adjectival clauses, when teaching the use of the subjunctive in the adverbial clause, no new concepts are introduced. Students must simply be given an insight as to how the principle of experience-non-experience applies to these situations. These clauses are usually the most difficult to teach because of the large number of new adverbial expressions to be learned. These expressions may be divided into two categories: those which always require the subjunctive and those which do not. Let us first examine the latter through a series of contrastive sentences:

A. Comemos cuando llega Carlos.
B. Comeremos cuando ligue Carlos.
C. Lo hago como Ud. manda.
D. Lo haré como Ud. mande.
E. María bebe su café después que viene Pepe.
F. María beberá su café después que venga Pepe.
G. No sale hasta que termine el trabajo.
H. No saldrá hasta que termine el trabajo.

To these conjunctive expressions we could add others but these should suffice for purposes of illustration. Sentences A, C, E and G are statements of fact. They indicate that two events are either simultaneous or sequential. “We eat when Carlos arrives,” implies that this is what usually happens in the normal course of events. If the sentences were in the past tense the same could be true. In sentences B, D, F and H the verb in the main clause is in the future. The events in the subordinate clause are therefore anticipated, they have not occurred and thus are not acciones indicadas or events which belong to objective reality. Carlos has not arrived, Ud. has not yet actually given any order. Pepe has not come and the end of the work has not been realized. The speaker must use the subjunctive because he wishes to show that none of these events is “real” in an objective sense. Sentences such as, “I will believe it when I see it” or “Voy a hacerlo cuando pueda,” can be devised easily for exercise sheets so that students may practice applying the concept. Most texts provide the student with a generalization without ever explaining why the subjunctive is used. For example, “The subjunctive is used in time clauses that refer to the future. The indicative is used when the reference is to the actual events, in the present or past time.”12

On the basis of such prescriptive generalizations students fail to perceive language-wide principles which explain the subjunctive-indicative contrast. The result is that the sheer number of generalizations, in modern parlance, “turn the students off.” Let us now turn our attention to those conjunctive expressions which always seem to cause problems. This is the
group of adverbial expressions which always require the subjunctive. It includes para que, a fin de que, sin que, con tal (de) que, a menos que, antes de que, and en caso de que, among others. These are those introduced in most first-year grammar books. More advanced books introduce others which are semantic equivalents to these.

It is useful to point out to students that these expressions require the subjunctive because of the same two principles they have already learned. Para que means in order that and specifies a cause and effect relationship between two events just as a fin de que. The causal relationship is as clearly marked here as in the noun clauses we have seen. A menos que also indicates a causal relationship between two events. This expression makes the occurrence of one event contingent upon the occurrence of another just as con tal que. En caso (de) que refers to a hypothetical event anticipated at the moment of speaking which has no objective reality. Sin que negates the occurrence of the event it precedes relegating it to the realm of non-experience while antes (de) que implies basically the same thing. While we can apply the two concepts outlined to these cases it may be advisable, depending upon the nature of the students being taught, to require that the subjunctive expressions which always take the subjunctive be memorized. The teacher in the classroom is always the best qualified to decide what is pedagogically most appropriate. What is essential to point out to students is that the first group of expressions examined in this section require the subjunctive because the concept of experience-non-experience is operative. This leaves the troublesome group of expressions as the only series of expressions which must be memorized in the entire approach we have outlined.

Conclusion

The approach outlined here is organized for use with most text books for a first-year course. The concepts involved can be readily used with the past tenses as well as with the present tenses as we have illustrated. We have not attempted to discuss here every possible use of the subjunctive because of the obvious limitations of space. It should be emphasized, however, that the principles governing the subjunctive in the cases discussed can be applied with equal efficacy to subjunctive grammar concepts in more advanced courses.

In order to make use of the approach presented here it is necessary that exercises be prepared to supplement the text and that the organization of the subjunctive presentation be slightly modified. The approach has the advantage of making the learning process much simpler because the principles involved do not require that a student memorize endless categories of generalizations and lists of words and expressions. Once the principles of cause and effect and experience-non-experience have been applied to the noun clause they are reinforced when applied to adjectival and adverbial clauses. When students understand the principles that govern the use of the subjunctive it ceases to be a mysterious, subjective phenomenon and learning it can become a pleasurable experience.

NOTES

1 A partial list of the more popular texts surveyed is provided at the end of this paper.


3 This approach has been used by the author at Indiana University, Bloomington Campus, the University of Wisconsin, Madison Campus, and at Montana State University.


5 See Gili y Gaya, pp. 139-41 and Bull, pp. 184-89 for a detailed discussion of this concept.


7 See Bull, p. 177-83, Gili y Gaya's discussion relative to this concept centers around what he calls: "verbos de duda o desconocimiento," pp. 134-46.
The verbs *ignorar* and *saber* have not been discussed here. Neither takes the subjunctive. The reason is that neither expresses a judgment. They simply indicate that the speaker does or does not possess knowledge of an event or state described. The objective existence of the event is not called into question.

10See Bull's discussion, p. 18.


A PARTIAL LIST OF TEXTBOOKS SURVEYED

Those marked with an asterisk have organized the subjunctive presentation into noun, adjectival and adverbial clauses.


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