Teaching Spanish Grammar: Effective Contextual Strategies
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Abstract: To increase the accuracy of writing and speaking skills, students need to understand how to use the language by learning the basic parts of speech and observing grammatical structures in a meaningful context. This article illustrates how proverbs, poetry, and songs provide practical ways for teachers of Spanish to showcase the language in action and constitute a source of lively, thought-provoking discussions in the classroom, as students also acquire new vocabulary.

Key Words: grammar, poetry, proverbs, songs, speaking, teaching, translation, vocabulary acquisition, writing

While passing by the library photocopy machine last December in the college where I teach Spanish, I overheard two Spanish instructors talking.

“Do you know what Santa calls his little helpers?” one of them asked.
“Mom and Dad?” the other said.
“Subordinate clauses,” was the reply.

While watching winter snows melt to gentle greens, I have reflected many times on that brief exchange, confident that students taking a foreign language are among a privileged few who have ever heard of subordinate clauses. Foreign-language students are part of the minority who understand the linguistic significance of article, mood, number, person, tense, and other such common grammatical concepts.

Evidently little time is spent in our day on grammar in English classes, both in high schools and colleges, emphasizing equally important material such as vocabulary acquisition, reading, and expository writing practice. Knowing the system by which a language functions leads to a natural understanding of good writing and speaking skills. Yet students are learning thoroughly the essentials of English grammar and the eight basic parts of speech in foreign-language classes, because grateful students admit this to me each semester. Most of us who teach 100-level Spanish in college as a core requirement have had the uncomfortable and somewhat disturbing experience of asking students to define a noun and then waiting for one tentative, shaky hand to appear. And asking students to define a pronoun or an adverb brings alarmed silence as students try desperately not to meet my eye in the hope of not being asked. Apparently the only students with solid backgrounds in grammar are those who have taken foreign language in high school. Most other students have never heard of the subjunctive mood and learn with surprise that it also exists in English, although they use it all the time.1

The teaching of grammar has become an increasingly important function of the foreign-language teacher, a function undertaken because we realize that the ability to write and speak correctly is critical to the future job success of our students and are aware that through the teaching of grammar, students learn how to create new sentences out of old ones. When I teach the indicative perfect tenses, for example, it is not uncommon for students, even naturally bright ones, to translate erroneously he corrido as “I have ran” or he ido as “I have went.” At a job
interview, such grammatical mistakes in English could come at a very high price indeed. So teaching the perfect tenses in Spanish must rely heavily on translation; I also emphasize how in both Spanish and English the perfect tenses express time relationships. Having students discuss hypothetically what they have done to prepare for my surprise party usually brings some interesting replies but consequently students understand how this tense exists in time. In learning language acquisition, meaningfulness derives from context. Similarly, students understand clearly that sentences containing subordinate clauses beginning with si necessitate the use of the imperfect subjunctive when the main-clause verb is in the conditional if they themselves have to create sentences about what they would do if they were rich. The accuracy of student translations and willingness to speak in Spanish will increase when students have a specific context in which to use grammatical structures.

Given their linguistic lacunas, however, many beginning students find themselves initially nonplussed at such grammatical abbreviations as adv., adj., s., v. following the pronunciation of main-entry words in their English-Spanish dictionaries. Until students can better grasp grammar and can use a dictionary properly, they often translate literally, sometimes quite humorously, when writing compositions. My students have produced compositions with overly literal gems glittering with lexical and grammatical originality. Culled from an endless list are examples below, accompanied by my liberal translations:

1. Estoy buena.... Estoy multa. (I’m well.... I’m fine.)
2. Soy un ventilador de los Mets. Yo reloj los partidos con mis relativos .... Mi favorito presente para mi cumpleaños de nueve años es un murciélago de béisbol. (I’m a fan of the Mets. I watch the games with my relatives.... My favorite birthday present when I turned nine years old was a baseball bat.)
3. Mi deporte es huellas. (My sport is track.)
4. El árbol de Navidad mira muy bueno en la sala de vida. (The Christmas tree looks very good in the living room.)
5. La rotura de primavera.... (Spring break....)
6. Nos vestimos para arriba. (We dress up.)
7. Mis padres tienen tres cabritos. (My parents have three kids.)
8. Mi padre tiene problemas con su secretaria. Pero es bien porque mi padre está encima de ella. (My father has problems with his secretary. But it’s okay because my father is on top of it.)

Such student translators clearly fail to distinguish between adjectives, adverbs, nouns, and verbs. Those beginning students who use computer software to translate from English to Spanish are easily recognized by translations that vary from quite sophisticated at times to a literal and meaningless hodgepodge of the original English.

To reinforce grammar and vocabulary presented in a lesson, many otherwise good Spanish textbooks require students to translate sentences or little dialogs that are as dry as the Atacama Desert, such as the following:

“Are you going to take us to the movies, Miss Martel?”
“Yes, I always take you to the movies on Saturdays.”
“But you seem very tired...”
“Yes, I am.”

When I used to concentrate for days on grammar and translation, there would inevitably be that brave (or incredulous) soul who would finally ask me, with a frown, “Do they [Spanish people] really talk like this?” What that student was actually asking was whether Spanish speakers express themselves in such a stilted, precise, and boring way? Because some undergraduates take only one language class as their majors don’t permit more during their tight four-year schedule,
foreign-language teachers know that we have a limited time to prove the worth and expressive beauty of the Spanish language.

As teachers of Spanish, we realize that we must seek that very delicate balance between teaching the structure of the language and making it so alien, so foreign, so disconnected from tangible reality that students lose interest. By focusing too rigidly on grammar and translation without providing context, learning Spanish becomes as meaningless to some students as drawing up blueprints for a magnificent home built in a vacuum. Obviously, many middle and high schools as well as colleges and universities lack state-of-the-art language laboratories complete with sophisticated computers as study aids that provide grammar and speaking practice capable of connecting students to Spanish speakers around the globe. However, other ways to provide a meaningful context for students are just as effective. Indeed, our often computer-sawy students who have been members of the latch-key generation may actually prefer that we rather than a machine engage them.

Proverbs, poetry, and popular songs provide an excellent context for students of all ages in which to reinforce the teaching of grammar. They showcase grammar in a memorable form that facilitates student learning and also furnish numerous opportunities for meaningful discussion. Both the grammar method and the spoken method are effective in language-learning but the two in combination seem to work best. Derived appropriately from the Latin lingua, sometimes the hardest part of our job is actually to get students to use their tongues, to speak Spanish which is crucial if they are actually to absorb the language. Incorporating proverbs, poetry, and songs into daily lessons helps in coaxing students to speak Spanish by engaging the students’ attention intellectually and emotionally. Another advantage of using proverbs, poems, and songs with beginning and even intermediate students—besides the almost effortless acquisition of new vocabulary—is that the wisdom, ideas, themes, passion and artistry enclosed in those words humanize the teacher in the students’ eyes. The teacher no longer seems so removed from the problems, concerns, and attitudes of human beings generally. Furthermore, students of Hispanic background (although not all speak Spanish fluently) often connect culturally with the content and offer valuable insights from personal experience.

Anyone who has taught Spanish for a few years can anticipate the grammatical pitfalls for beginning students including verb conjugations, uses of the definite article, possessive adjectives, object pronouns, ser vs. estar, the preterit vs. the imperfect, the subjunctive vs. the indicative, appropriate structures to make comparisons and so on. Since the best chance of capturing and focusing students’ attention is at the beginning of the class, my technique is to begin by writing a proverb or a few lines from a poem or song on the board. Together the class repeats after me for pronunciation practice. Then as we translate, we examine the grammar. Next, in his or her own words a student explains the meaning, which is sometimes figurative. Lastly we discuss together related topics suggested by the proverb, poem or song. This process typically lasts eight to ten minutes and effectively shifts the students’ minds from the English-speaking world to that of Spanish. Assiduously, the students copy down the new lines into their notebooks. Some teachers may offer extra points to students who memorize a certain number of proverbs, poems or songs for a test. Some proverbs used successfully in my classes include:

1. El tiempo vuela. **Vocabulary:** volar. **Grammar:** definite article used with abstract noun; stem-changing verb (o-ue)—students can provide other examples of stem-changing verbs. **Conversation topics:** ¿Quién tiene un reloj de caja en su casa que dice “Tempus fugit”? Comparen la puntualidad en este país y en otros.

2. Ver es creer. **Vocabulary:** ver. **Grammar:** infinitive used as noun; use of verb ser. **Conversation Topics:** ¿Quieren Uds. siempre ver sus exámenes o se fían de la profesora? ¿En quiénes creemos?

3. Mientras en casa estoy, rey soy. **Vocabulary:** mientras. **Grammar:** use of ser and estar; use of preposition. **Conversation Topics:** ¿Quién es el rey (o la reina) en su casa? ¿La idea de ser rey de la propia casa ha sido verdad siempre en España o en los países
hispanoamericanos?

4.  *Es más bueno que el pan.* **Vocabulary:** pan. **Grammar:** comparison of inequality; verb *ser*; definite article with noun used in general sense. **Conversation Topics:** ¿A quién aplicaría Ud. este dicho? Describa las cualidades de esta persona.

5.  *Es mejor perder un minuto en la vida que la vida en un minuto.* **Vocabulary:** perder; la vida. **Grammar:** the comparative; indefinite article; definite article used with abstract noun. **Conversation Topics:** ¿Siempre piensan los estudiantes en lo que hacen cuando conducen, especialmente cuando hay otras personas en el coche? ¿Hay alguien aquí que haya tenido alguna experiencia peligrosa en un coche?

6.  *A Dios rogando, y con el mazo dando.* **Vocabulary:** rogar and mazo. **Grammar:** formation and use of the present participle; definite article with noun used in a general sense. **Conversation Topics:** ¿Está Ud. de acuerdo con la idea que se expresa aquí? ¿Es la paz mundial un sueño idealista? ¿Por qué? ¿Hay cabida para Dios en las escuelas públicas?

7.  *Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres.* **Vocabulary:** andar. **Grammar:** verbs: command, present, future; placement of indirect object pronouns in relation to verbs; use of preposition; accent marks for implied question. **Conversation topics:** ¿Puede dar un ejemplo de la vida real o del cine? Piensa en la sobrina de “Uncle Buck” y sus amigos, por ejemplo. ¿Cómo pueden los jóvenes evitar las malas influencias de sus compañeros?

8.  *Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda.* **Vocabulary:** mona, vestirse, quedarse. **Grammar:** subjunctive formation and use with adverbial conjunctions; reflexive verbs. **Conversation Topics:** ¿Conoce Ud. a alguien así? ¿Puede Ud. pensar en algún actor o personaje público que es así? ¿Juzgamos a las personas por la ropa que llevan? ¿Importa cómo se vistan las personas? ¿Qué cualidades son importantes en una persona?

In addition to proverbs, excerpts of poems beginning with a brief introduction in Spanish on the life of the author intrigue the students, as does pointing out the author’s country of origin on a map. Most foreign-language teachers are well acquainted with students’ lack of awareness of geography—another area in which foreign-language instructors can contribute to the general education of the student. Poetry also reveals the musicality of the language, the rhymes and rhythms, and allows teaching simple poetic devices like alliteration.

Among poems used effectively with my students is Gabriela Mistral’s *Meciendo*. The brief opening stanza of this very beautiful poem appears below:

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El mar sus millares de olas
   mece, divino.
Oyendo a los mares amantes
   mezo a mi niño. (153)
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**Vocabulary:** mar; millares, olas; mecer; divino; amantes. **Grammar:** definite article used with noun in a general sense; possessive adjectives; adjectives; *mecer* and irregular *vo* form; present participle; personal a. **Conversation Topics:** *Hablen de la familia norteamericana y de la familia en otros países. ¿Son iguales o diferentes? Hablen del mar. ¿Cómo ven Uds. el mar? ¿Qué significa el mar para Uds.?*

Following is the first stanza of Bécquer’s *Rima XXX*:

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Asomaba a sus ojos una lágrima
   y a mi labio una frase de perdón;
habló el orgullo y se enjugó su llanto,
   y la frase en mis labios expiró. (458)
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**Vocabulary:** asomar; lágrima; labio; orgullo; enjugarse; llanto; expirar. **Grammar:** the imperfect
Vocabulary: cuadrados; ángulos; enfiladas; alma; fila; espalda; verter. Grammar: adjectives; use of articles including with alma (feminine singular nouns that begin with a) take masculine definite article when first syllable is stressed (common examples discussed: el águila, el agua...); present perfect. Conversation Topics: ¿Por qué tienen algunas escuelas uniformes? ¿Son para hacer a todos cuadrados o sea iguales? ¿Por qué andamos en fila en las escuelas? ¿Hay otros ejemplos de la conformidad en la sociedad? Hablen del concepto del individuo aquí y en latinoamérica. ¿Qué pensaban los Incas? ¿Existía la individualidad para ellos?

José Martí’s simple yet profound and moving poem XXXIX from his Versos sencillos appears below:

\[
\text{Cultivo una rosa blanca} \\
\text{en julio como en enero} \\
\text{para el amigo sincero} \\
\text{que me da su mano franca.}
\]

\[
\text{Y para el cruel que me arranca} \\
\text{el corazón con que vivo,} \\
\text{[ni] cardo ni oruga cultivó,} \\
\text{cultivo la rosa blanca. (192)}
\]

Vocabulary: cultivar; sincero; franca; arrancar; corazón; cardo; oruga. I discuss cognates. Grammar: verb conjugation; articles; adjectives; object and relative pronouns. Conversation Topic: El simbolismo y el idealismo representados por la rosa blanca.

Martí’s Versos sencillos (I, V, III, in that order) form the basis of the eloquent and popular song Guantanamera which also provides a rich forum for discussion.

It was a student in my Spanish 102 class who first inspired me to supplement teaching of grammar with proverbs, poems, and songs, generating many wonderful discussions. That young man inquired one day—not rudely, but certainly insistently—why he should learn the Spanish equivalent of words like cuff links and costume jewelry (Garner, Rusch, and Domínguez). To this practical-minded student it seemed a monumental waste of his time. For him and for too many students, Spanish seems only endless conjugations and lists of alphabetized, static vocabulary words crammed into square boxes to memorize for tests which are promptly forgotten as useless. These same people may eventually be members of boards of education and vote down foreign-language programs or college vice-presidents who decimate foreign-language budgets, turning the professors into Don Quixotes charging windmills. Providing a good answer to that student’s question was therefore essential, and fortunately, a text containing the song Muñequita linda included some vocabulary studied in that particular lesson. I wrote the song on the board:

Muñequita linda, de cabellos de oro, 

de dientes de perla y labios de rubí.
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Dime si me quieres, como yo te adoro,
si de mi te acuerdas, como yo de ti.

A veces escucho un eco divino,
que envuelto en la brisa parece decir:
—Yo te quiero mucho, mucho, mucho, mucho,
tanto como entonces, siempre hasta morir. (Resnick, Giuliano, and Golding)

As a class we translated the song, examined the grammar, and discussed the meaning of the song, including the context of señoritas and the traditional serenade (from the Italian sera), explaining that young men traditionally accompanied their evening love songs with the guitar brought by the Moors when they invaded Spain. In Spanish, we discussed examples of the Don Juan prototype and even the Doña Juana as characters in movies the students had seen.

The true object of language is communication both written and oral. The ability to express thoughts with greater precision and sophistication grows as students’ understanding of the language increases by seeing grammatical structures in a clear context. But students require ample opportunities to learn by doing. As they write and speak the language properly, they come naturally to comprehend how Spanish works. In my experience, proverbs, poems, and songs can be an enjoyable and profitable way to help sharpen students’ awareness and comprehension of grammar while simultaneously enhancing their vocabulary and willingness to speak out in class. Students may thus appreciate firsthand the beauty, richness and depth of the Spanish language as they recognize the universality of ideas and emotions that connect us all.

NOTES

1 Students may learn how frequently we use the subjunctive by seeing sentences like these on the board:

A. I wish he were here. (wish)
B. She asked that the students be admitted. (request)
C. It is necessary that we leave today. (urgency)
D. If I were rich, my family would be living in that mansion. (contrary-to-fact situation)


3 Sources for proverbs include The University of Chicago Spanish-English, English-Spanish Dictionary, 4th ed. (Castillos and Bond). The text En Breve, A Concise Review of Spanish Grammar, 5th ed. (Resnick, Giuliano, and Golding) also contains many proverbs, poems, and songs to assist in the teaching of grammar to beginning and intermediate students. Another source for poetry and prose is Aventuras literarias, 6th ed. (Jarvis, Lebredo, and Mena-Ayllón).

4 For an innovative way to teach the proper placement of direct, indirect, and reflexive object pronouns, refer to Ronald Quirk’s article “A Simplified Method of Teaching the Position of Object Pronouns in Spanish” in the December 2002 issue of Hispania.

5 On the first day of class, my beginning students are asked to pronounce this “word”: Supercalofragilisticexpialidoso. I tell them it’s all down hill from there!

6 To help students to remember the names and geographic order of all the countries from México to Panamá, use this sentence, with the first letter of each word representing a different country: “Many big, gray elephants hate not crunching peanuts.”

WORKS CITED

Quirk, Ronald. “A Simplified Method of Teaching the Position of Object Pronouns in Spanish.” Hispania 85