

Attention to Audience in the Writing and Speaking of Spanish Fluent Speakers

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Introduction

“Why do Spanish speakers take Spanish if they already speak it?” This is one of the most frequently asked questions of students who study Spanish. My favorite and most frequent response to this question is the same answer given by many Spanish speakers educators, including Fabian Samaniego and Cecilia Pino, authors of an article published in *Professional Development Series Handbook for Teachers K-16*. Spanish speakers need to continue to refine their language skills. In addition, they need “to probe into their rich cultural and literary heritage.”

As an educator of Spanish speakers for over ten years, my question is different: How do I teach some Spanish speakers students to distinguish between different registers?

My question began in recent years. Presently, I teach the third level of Spanish for Fluent Speakers, as it is called at Annandale High School. This is a class of 22 students. I noticed a discrepancy and/or inability to perceive or switch to a more appropriate mode of address according to the person the students were addressing. First of all, in the Spanish language/culture there are two ways of addressing a person. For example, if you are speaking in an informal/familiar setting, the form of address used is the, *tu* form. This is used with friends, younger siblings, or after you have been given the permission to do so by the person you are speaking with. On the other hand, when speaking with elders, teachers, or any other person in a formal situation the appropriate form of address is *usted*.

Why is this Important?

Learning the more sophisticated aspects of one’s native language is an important issue because this is not only a grammatical point that most non-native speakers learn, but it is an important aspect of their culture that needs refinement. I have noticed that the students who don’t use the correct form of address are the students born here in the United States or those who left their Spanish-speaking homeland at an early age. When I pointed out to the class that this was my concern and it would be one of the main focus for some of them, the class showed enthusiasm.

Most of the students, native speakers who have studied in Spanish speaking countries were very happy. Evidently, the lack of distinction between formal and informal also bothered them.

For example, Samantha and Frederick both came to the United States after a few years of studies in their native Spanish speaking country. However, Allie did not study Spanish formally in her heritage country.

Samantha said, "When they do that (use the *tu* form) it is so rude. I could never speak to my teachers or anyone older like that."

Allie, "Yes, but when you speak to someone like that it sounds so cold. I only use that form when I'm upset with my mom."

Samantha, "I still think it's rude."

Frederick, "This happens in my house too. I would never speak to an elder that way either, but my younger sister doesn't seem to care."

Review the Pertinent Literature

I was happy to see and hear their involvement in the discussion. I asked them if they thought it should be worked on. Someone asked for a show of hands and the majority felt it was necessary to be trained. The activities suggested for oral practice by the *Series Handbook* included role-playing, debates, and speeches. It also recommended viewing videotaped segments where students could be given the opportunity to hear formal setting dialogues.

Data Collection

We began viewing the news, and talk shows on Spanish television. As homework assignments students were to observe, record, and report the use of the formal type. Later they were to become the news reporters for the class. To avoid overlap, each student was given a different topic to write and report back to class the next class. These were done for two weeks, and the final reports were videotaped. Many came dressed for the part of television reporters and asked to be given extra credit. Another added bonus was that while viewing their performance, the ones elegantly dressed showed more confidence and made fewer errors.

Another activity I practiced with this was the same I used last year for the first time. After a reading assignment, the Socratic method was used not only for reading comprehension, but this time for practice in the formal address. Students while seated in a circle, are asked to address their classmates in the formal way. The instructions were:

1. Address each other with the proper title based on the gender.
2. Use the last name only (which many did not know).
3. Maintain formality throughout the exercise.

When debates were used, which was another suggested activity they were unable to maintain the use of formal address. I asked them why they felt this happened. Their response was that when they got comfortable, they forgot to use the *usted*. The students with this mistake admitted that it required too much thinking. They felt their focus was not on form, but on what they were trying to get across.

Writing is another skill in which to practice familiar and formal forms. Even though *tu* and *usted* are not used in everyday writing, knowing when to use a more formal address is also important. As mentioned above, the students began writing the news before they presented orally. Another writing activity I used for the students to practice formal writing was essays. During this process they were not allowed to use any personal pronouns, other than the third person. In addition, they were asked to use the *se impersonal* where a more general tone is used. It is the equivalent of the *usted* used when speaking. Since the reader of the essay is impersonal, he or she is a stranger; therefore there cannot be any familiarity between writer and reader.

Another activity was writing letters to the editors of newsstand magazines. First, the students were asked to read samples of other letters written to the editors of magazines. Next, copies of magazines were distributed and students read. Later, they were to choose an article to write about. Finally, only two of the ones chosen by vote were to be mailed.

The last written activity for this particular inquiry was an essay-writing contest. I recently received an email from the Fairfax County Foreign Language office. The letter was a yearly contest offered by a local Spanish television station. The contestants were to write an essay about their ethnicity. Unfortunately, not too many were interested in entering the contest. I decided that entry into the contest would be voluntary, but everyone would receive credit for writing the essay.

Data Analysis

When I began teaching Native Spanish speakers a few years ago, most of the students had studied in the native foreign country. Therefore, the issue I am dealing with today was not prevalent. Two very important remarks by Samaniego and Pino that I strongly agree with are:

1) "... these students may not be aware that they are using or need to use different registers in these interactions."

2) "... they are not comfortable using their Spanish in certain social situations because they have never been exposed to the registers that are appropriate for those settings. What they consider 'bad'... may be completely appropriate in some of their everyday social situations while totally inappropriate in others."

A third observation that I noticed is that some students are choosing not to use the more formal mode because they perceive it to be cold and unfriendly. They don't see the reason one should wait for someone to give them the permission to *tutear* when they see one as a friend or have known someone for a while. They feel they (the speaker) should choose when to use it, not the person addressed.

Fourth, what may be perceived as rude or uncaring could really mean the opposite. This is proven by the remark Allie made when she said that she only uses this form when she is "upset" with her mother. Or when another student stated that when she gets "emotional" as in a debate, she doesn't want to be concerned with form, but her concern is to be heard and understood.

Finally, I noticed that students made fewer errors between formal/informal addresses in their writing. Using the appropriate register was used more accurately.

Implications

You may ask, “So what if they are not using the appropriate register, as long as they know it and that it exists?” It is important that they not only know the difference, but practice it as well. Again I agree with Samaniego and Pino and many others who know that this practice gives the students greater opportunity for success in the work force.

How about the parents and others who feel the students need not be grouped? My response is that their particular problems would not be corrected. In an article entitled, “Developing the Potential of Latino Students,” a list of procedures crucial to Latino success, written by Haycok & Duany, suggests reducing unnecessary grouping and tracking. I hope that this is not a class where Haycock & Duany feel the grouping of Spanish speakers unnecessary. Some parents and students usually opt not to register for a native speakers class for various personal reasons. I feel that they are not aware of the benefits that a class with a group of students from various Spanish-speaking countries can offer. However, I feel these groupings by native speakers are valid and needed. As I mentioned earlier, the same students who found it difficult to adjust their form made less errors in their formal writing. On the other hand, the most mistakes noted were spelling and the important diacritical marks.

Someone may add that many people can't spell in their own language but they can use a dictionary. I agree, but in Spanish the rules are clear and consistent. Learning and applying the rules of spelling can benefit the native Spanish speakers even if they have acquired the language. On the other hand, a non-native speaker would benefit through memorization of the unknown vocabulary. The Native Spanish speaker could use the dictionary for checking the doubtful or unknown sound of certain words to verify the accurate spelling.

References

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