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Teaching Pragmatics with the *Mi Vida Loca* Video Program

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines the potentially beneficial role of utilizing an interactive video program (BBC's Mi Vida Loca) in aiding second language learners of Spanish to enhance intercultural competence via pragmatic training. The results of a discourse completion task shows that students who watched MVL significantly improved their performance in a series of tasks that are appropriate for a Spanish context such as ordering food, giving directions, etc., while the control group did not. Based on our findings, we believe that MVL is a tool that would lend itself readily towards fostering their intercultural and pragmatic competence to help students prepare for future encounters with native speakers of Spanish in the U.S. and abroad. Pedagogical implications on the integration of pragmatic training with authentic native speaker input are discussed.

Keywords: Mi Vida Loca, pragmatic competence, speech acts, videos, discourse completion task

Background

Many institutions of higher learning have stated that one of their main goals is to turn students into interculturally competent citizens in order to help them address the challenges of an increasingly global society. This trend is evidenced in the mission statements of many universities across the country. For instance, the authors' own institution, the University of Memphis, highlights as one of its core objectives "to address the challenges of our global society" (University of Memphis Strategic Plan: Defining our Future, 2015). The trend is also reflected in the *World-readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), which state that learners should be able to communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world. There are many efforts in which universities engage to help students develop this type of competence (i.e., the ability to function in an intercultural and international community, which includes being able to communicate and act ap-

propriately in accordance with other cultures' practices and unique world views). In particular, we believe language departments can play a key role in shaping students' awareness of others, not only in terms of language, but more importantly in terms of developing an understanding of the issues that emerge at the interface between language and culture. One of the main challenges we face as foreign language educators is to prepare learners to successfully navigate daily encounters once immersed in the target culture. For some students, this could partially have to do with low proficiency and a lack of mastery of the linguistic tools necessary to function in a conversation with native speakers (e.g., DeKeyser, 2010). However, in our view, part of this failure to carry on conversations in a natural way can also be attributed to their lack of awareness of pragmatic strategies in the L2; that is, their inability to communicate in a way that is culturally appropriate or relevant, thus falling short of the national readiness standards.

This problem has been attributed in part to two factors. First, there is a mismatch between the dialogues that students are presented in the classroom, which is where our study takes place, and the way conversations take place in real life (Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 1991; Myers-Scotton & Bernstein, 1988) particularly due to inadequate teaching materials (Vellenga, 2004; Wong, 2002). Second, pragmatic training tends to happen during study abroad but we feel that not enough emphasis is put on pragmatics before students encounter native speakers. There is a breadth of research that shows that studying abroad has beneficial effects for the development of pragmatic competence (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Barron, 2003, 2007; Bataller, 2010; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Kinginger & Blattner, 2008; Kinginger & Farrell, 2004; Reynold-Case, 2013; Schauer, 2006, 2007; Shively, 2011; Shively & Cohen, 2008; Taguchi, 2008, 2011). However, our research places the problem before that stage and attempts to find ways to equip students with pragmatic skills in the classroom before facing real-life interactions with native speakers.

Therefore, as foreign language educators, we continually strive to find ways to bridge this gap between the language of the classroom and the language outside of the classroom via training through different types of resources. Some, for instance, are exploring telecollaborative exchanges between students in different countries as a solution for this problem (O'Dowd, 2005). In our study, we turn to the use of interactive videos and, particularly the BBC's video program, *Mi Vida Loca (MVL)*, as a way to bring naturalistic and pragmatically sound language use into the foreign language classroom. Specifically, we investigate the effects of *MVL* on students' pragmatic development. This online video series, produced by the BBC, casts students as the main character and asks them to engage with the video in various ways — such as speaking or clicking — in order to proceed with various contexts simulating real-world encounters — such as ordering food or purchasing tickets for public transportation. In particular, our study aims to explore novice students' ability to acquire the linguistic and behavioral skills necessary to interact in a pragmatically and culturally appropriate manner with native speakers in typical daily encounters, either after being exposed to interactive videos or using more traditional activities in class.

Literature Review

Pragmatics and Second Language Learning

Pragmatics is key to communicating appropriately with those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) provided informal definitions of pragmatics, "the study of how-to-say-what-to-whom-when," and L2 pragmatics, "the study of how learners come to know how-to-say-what-to-whom-when" (p. 68-69). Similarly, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) defined L2 pragmatics as an area that "explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate" (p. 1). Particularly, they acknowledged several areas within L2 pragmatics: speech acts, conversational structure, conversational implicature, conversational management, discourse organization, and sociolinguistic aspects of language (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 1). In this study, we will focus on speech acts.

With the current widespread use of communicative teaching methodologies (Beacco, 2007; Rifkin, 2003), pragmatics has in fact become a key aspect of second language teaching and learning. In their seminal paper, Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as having four sub-categories: grammatical competence (i.e., the ability to use the grammar and vocabulary of the L2), sociolinguistic competence (i.e., the understanding of the sociolinguistic rules of the L2 speech community), discourse competence (i.e., being able to provide coherence and cohesion to a text) and strategic competence (i.e., the ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to overcome communication failures). Pragmatics is particularly important for both sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Thus, it is at the center of what the authors think (as instructors or researchers who believe in a communicative approach to language teaching) students should be able to do in the L2.

Additionally, pragmatics is a crucial component of intercultural competence. The ACTFL Global Competence Position Statement (2014) supports the notion that "[t]he ability to communicate with respect and cultural understanding in more than one language is an essential element of global competence." Thus, we believe that in order for students to be able to communicate and behave respectfully and in a culturally-sensitive way, the development of pragmatic strategies (such as apologizing or requesting in the correct manner) is absolutely essential. In fact, the ability to participate appropriately and effectively in foreign communities with empathy and understanding of cultural differences is reflected through language to a great extent. Therefore, the development of pragmatic strategies should be at the core of foreign language instruction since they can help students move beyond classroom language use and towards competence in the 5 C's (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) that are central to the World-Readiness Standards (NSFLEP, 2013).

Despite the important role that pragmatics plays in communicative methodologies and intercultural competence, explicit teaching of pragmatics is rare in the L2 classroom (Kasper, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). There is evidence that in the absence of explicit instruction students either acquire pragmatic competence slowly or fail to acquire this aspect of language (cf. Barron, 2003; Hoffman-Hicks, 1999;

Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985). Several researchers confirm the benefits of introducing explicit pragmatic instruction in the L2 classroom (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Cohen, 2012; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001). These studies focus mainly on the teaching of speech acts, conversational management and conversational implicature: the conveying of meaning that is suggested, but not overtly stated, in an utterance. In general, these studies suggest that pragmatics is indeed teachable, that explicit teaching is more effective than implicit teaching and that pragmatics can be taught at beginning levels (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012; Wildner-Bassett, 1994; Tateyama et al., 1997).

Bridging the Gap through *Mi Vida Loca*

Researchers have long called for the use of videos in the foreign language classroom (Chung, 1999, 2002; Moore, 2006; Kramsch & Andersen, 1999; Herron et al., 1999; Herron et al. 2000; Herron et al., 2002; Markham, 2000-2001; Weyers, 1999). However, technological advances have allowed educators to use more sophisticated learning tools in the last decades (Salaberry, 2001). We aim to revitalize the discussion around this topic by focusing on a different type of video, interactive videos. As mentioned, we believe *MVL* is a video program that can aid teachers with bringing into the classroom pragmatically sound language samples. In this section we describe the program, present a previous article addressing *MVL* as a pedagogical tool and address some work on related areas (interactive video and gaming).

MVL is a mystery video series created by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The series can be accessed via the BBC website (http://bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/) for free. The goal of *MVL* is to teach Spanish to non-Hispanophones and, due to its structure, it can be easily used as a self-learning tool. It consists of 21 episodes, each about 10 minutes long. The story is set in Spain. The video can be accompanied by subtitles both in English and Spanish. The one aspect of *MVL* that encouraged us to start this project was the interactive nature of the video program: something that, to our knowledge, is rare in this type of platform. In the video series, the viewer becomes the protagonist of the story. Not only is the whole story seen through the viewer's eyes (due to the perspective offered by the camera) but the learner has to engage with the video in different ways by responding to questions through clicking, dragging, or answering out loud in order to progress. This is a technique that allows the student to more fully identify with the story and prompts the learner to engage while watching the videos. The videos are presented by a narrator, who explains in English what is happening. Additionally, there is an interactive phrase book that either introduces or reinforces the vocabulary of the episode. Apart from this, there is a learning section that includes different types of activities related to the grammar and vocabulary of the lesson (e.g., fill in the blanks, matching exercises, crosswords).

The other advantage we consider *MVL* to have over other video programs is its authenticity; both because of the way language is used and because of the way culture is presented. The way the characters talk, while somewhat slower than natural speech, is typical of phrases and expressions Spaniards use in their daily lives, as judged by one of the co-authors (a native of Spain). The student is also faced with daily activities, like paying for a cab or finding an apartment. This introduces stu-

dents to Spain in a realistic way since they become familiar with the layout of Spanish cities, the system of public transportation, the different types of houses, *etc*. In our view, *MVL* is the epitome of what many have advocated for decades: the use of realia in foreign language classrooms (e.g., Smith, 1997), in this case through actual video footage of the sights and sounds of Spain. To date, Thomas (2011) is the only study we have found on the effectiveness of *MVL* as a language learning tool to promote listening comprehension. In that study, two groups of students at two different proficiency levels (Spanish 2 and Spanish 4) watched some of the *MVL* videos, which were integrated as part of the curriculum. The videos were followed by homework assignments and questions about the videos were included on the tests. Although Thomas found no correlations between *MVL* homework completion and higher test scores, he did find that the video series was engaging and that students were interested in watching it.

Earlier research (Gray, 1992; Watkins, 1991) describing a similar interactive program on video disc entitled *À la rencontre de Philippe* found that this program encouraged students to develop comprehension of both written and spoken French and to react appropriately to items simulating authentic cultural artifacts. In this series, the viewer is asked by the protagonist, a French journalist named Philippe, to help him move out of his apartment after a fight with his girlfriend. Students could view the video on a TV screen or projector, read additional cultural and situational information on their computer screens, and affect how the story progresses by replying to questions or choosing between options on their computers to indicate what action they wanted to take next. The program aimed to help students develop their "ability to cope with the French culture" (Watkins, 1991) by consulting culturally-appropriate content such as a clickable map of Paris, a floor plan in French of a typical apartment, phone messages with natural-sounding speech, or rental ads from a newspaper (Gray, 1992). Both articles speak highly of the program, *À la rencontre de Philippe,* however, no study was found exploring the effectiveness of this video series on students' acquisition of French or their cultural competence.

These interactive videos share certain important characteristics with newer forms of communications that have been explored in SLA research, such as the ones that take place in online gaming (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009). Some common points are the facts that (i) the student is an active participant in the storyline (either via an avatar, or through other channels), (ii) the student has the ability to manipulate the storyline, (iii) these types of environment create a high level of motivation in students. In fact, the benefits of online gaming have been recognized by the teaching community to the extent that publishing companies are starting to develop videogames specially designed for language learning purposes such as McGraw Hill's Practice Spanish: Study Abroad (http://www.mhpractice.com/products/Practice_Spanish).

Research supports the advantageous role of interactions via virtual environment for the development of pragmatic skills. In particular, Sykes (2008) explored the use of pragmatics in second language learners of Spanish through the use of croquet (www.opencroquet.org), an open-source platform that allows instructors and researchers to create virtual worlds in which users can interact with others as if they were talking in person. The findings of this qualitative investigation confirmed

the positive impact of this type of interaction in the development of appropriate requests and apologies. Additionally, Sykes & Cohen (2009) supported the findings of the previous study by confirming that interactions in virtual environment resulted in significant improvement of metapragmatic strategies. Sadler (2012) described a number of ways the 3-D virtual world Second Life has been and can be geared specifically towards language learners, including islands he created in which users can practice their target language through interacting with native speakers or others learning the L2 (p. 65) and a marketplace where students must use their pragmatic skills to play the role of a vendor who is selling their classmates a list of culturally-appropriate virtual products — as determined by the instructor or the students themselves — or the role of a buyer who must negotiate prices to "purchase" these items (p. 135). Other examples of environments in Second Life propitious for L2 learners include virtual language schools designed specifically for students which sometimes (but not always) have "brick and mortar" equivalent (Sadler, 2012: 119) and recreations of famous locations in Real Life, such as the La Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona or Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy, that users can visit and interact with others as virtual tourists (p. 123).

Although the virtual interactions analyzed in the previous articles are of a different nature than those that emerge from the interactive video program referred to in this chapter, the similarities among these virtual environments and interactive videos pointed out earlier led us to predict that *MVL* could also represent an advantage for the development of pragmatic skills.

Speech Acts

Central to the notion of pragmatic skills is that of speech acts, the focus of our study. The theory of speech acts originated in the works of Austin (1962). He distinguished three levels with respect to speech acts: (i) locutionary act: the act of saying something, (ii) illocutionary act: the act performed by uttering a sentence and (iii) perlocutionary act: the effect or consequence produced by the utterance. His student Searle developed the concept of illocutionary acts by looking into finer distinctions of this concept (Searle 1965, 1969, 1975, 1976; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Throughout his work, he proposed a taxonomy of illocutionary acts (also known as speech acts). In the current project we focus on three types: representatives or assertives (e.g., stating, asserting), directives (e.g., requesting, ordering) and expressives (e.g., greeting, thanking). Given that we are testing novice learners, we will focus on fairly simple pragmatic functions such as ordering food or asking for directions. Wildner-Bassett (1994) describes these types of functions as "pragmatic routines," which she defines as "words or phrases whose occurrence is closely bound to specific recurrent situations (p. 4)." These routines, despite often being unanalyzed chunks in the learner's mind, are essential for succeeding in basic intercultural communication as well as the subsequent development of more advanced pragmatic functions. In the next section, we describe why and how we decided to evaluate pragmatic routines via the video program *MVL*.

The Study

Research Questions

Given the many benefits that we believe this video program presents, research is needed to ascertain the validity and the functionality of this tool and its applications for L2 learners. A video program such as *MVL* might address the above-mentioned deficiencies that students present in the pragmatic sphere and offer effective ways to compensate for the lack of authenticity that abounds in the foreign language classroom. Consequently, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. Can pragmatics be learned through targeted instruction?
2. Is teaching pragmatics via video tools more effective than via traditional methods?

Participants

Fifteen learners enrolled in a second-semester Spanish summer course at a Southeastern research university participated in this study. All participants in the study were native English speakers. The lower-division program follows the tenets of the communicative approach: students prepare grammar and vocabulary at home while class time is mostly devoted to communicative activities. The textbook used is *Vistas* (Blanco & Donley, 2012) and this specific course covers chapters six through 10. The control group in this study consisted of eight volunteer participants from one section of the course, while the experimental group had seven members from another section of the same course. The use of a control group serves as a baseline by which to compare progress made by participants, in order to judge whether or not it was the treatment (*MVL* activities) that was responsible for any gains. This addresses what we see as a shortcoming in Thomas' (2011) study of *MVL,* in which there was no control group and all students used *MVL.* Additionally, both classes were taught by the same instructor, which minimized the effect that the teacher might have on the results of the project.

Instruments and Procedure

Pretest. The week before starting lessons for the study, the volunteer participants attended a pretest session outside of class time during which they completed a background questionnaire and a recorded pretest. The background questionnaire (Appendix A) included questions about socio-demographic information as well as questions regarding the language/s spoken by participants and asked them to rate their proficiency. Lastly, the questionnaire also focused on items that had to do with the specific pragmatic functions practiced in the study (e.g., how comfortable do you feel ordering food and drinks in Spanish?). The pretest was an oral discourse completion task — also known as closed role play (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013) — which consisted of a simulated dialogue that the student had to perform in a computer lab with a pre-recorded voice. They had 30 seconds to reply to each question. Instructions were given orally before starting the study. A sample task is presented below. Each recording was approximately four and a half minutes long, with eight prompts eliciting responses involving some simple pragmatic functions, presented in Table 1. Students made the recordings in order for the researchers to assess their pragmatic competency at the onset of the study.

Table 1

Classification of Pragmatic Functions Tested in the Study

Pragmatic function	Illocutionary act (speech act)
1. Giving participants' name	Assertive
2. Spelling the name	Assertive
3. Expressing hunger	Expressive
4. Giving directions	Assertive
5. Ordering food	Directive
6. Asking for the check	Directive
7. Giving directions a second time	Assertive
8. Leave-taking	Expressive

The following excerpt, Pretest Example, shows the portion of the pretest during which functions 5 and 6 were elicited from participants.

Pretest Example:

> **Examinador**: Aquí está el menú. ¿Qué quieres? *Examiner: Here is the menu. What would you like?*
>
> [Examples below are to appear in a box.]
>
> Burritos   Nachos   Quesadilla   Bebidas Postres
>
> De pollo De queso   De queso   Coca cola   Empanada de manzanas
>
> De ternera   De pollo De frijoles   Té   Churros
>
> De pescado   De cactus   Agua
>
> **Estudiante**: [se graba]
>
> *Student: [records]*
>
> **Examinador**: Yo una quesadilla de cactus y un té. ¿Pides la cuenta?
>
> *Examiner: For me, a cactus quesadilla and a tea. Can you ask for the check?*
>
> **Estudiante:** [se graba]
>
> *Student: [records]*

Pedagogical Intervention. After taking the pretest, participants completed lessons covering several pragmatic functions (such as ordering food or giving directions) either via video (*MVL*) or via worksheets (see Table 1 above for specific functions). Participants were in one of two groups. The experimental group saw the first five episodes of *MVL,* spaced out evenly so there would be one video shown every four days of class. The videos were each shown once in class with subtitles in English and Spanish, given the reported beneficial effect of captioning for foreign language listening (Winke, Gass, and Sydorenko, 2010). No rewinding was allowed to create consistency. When *MVL* asked students to answer the video, the instructor randomly selected a student to answer the question out loud. This was done to encourage participation

of all students. Although *MVL* includes a wide variety of activities, the only activities performed in class were those that corresponded to the worksheets that the control group completed (described in more detail below). That is, both groups practiced the same vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic functions and the format of the activities in the worksheets resembled as closely as possible the format of the activities in *MVL*. Therefore, the only manipulated variable was the delivery of instruction: either via video or via paper-based activities. This design ensured that the effects of the video were not overestimated due to this group completing extra practice.

The five *MVL* episodes watched for this study, as outlined on the website http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/syllabus.shtml, covered these main language functions:

- Episode 1: Essentials (simple social situations, saying 'yes, no,' and saying 'I don't understand.')
- Episode 2: Ordering at a café (masculine and feminine)
- Episode 3: Basic directions (understanding simple directions, reading street and metro signs, using numbers 0-3)
- Episode 4: Meeting and greeting (saying hello and your name, simple questions about nationality, name spellings)
- Episode 5: Ordering tapas (reading a menu, asking for the restroom, asking for the bill)

For example, in Episode 5, the goal is to learn how to order in a restaurant. The student imagines s/he is the main character sitting in a restaurant with friends, Merche and Jorge, and has to decide what to order. By interacting with the video, the student confirms that s/he has understood that an order needs to be placed, has looked at the items on the menu to make a decision, and places the appropriate order with the waiter. A menu is shown in the video, and the user can click on each item to hear how it is pronounced and see the English translation.

Example 1. MVL Dialogue from Episode 5
Merche: **¿Pedimos unas tapas para compartir?**

Merche: Shall we order some tapas to share?

Jorge: Vale. Yo quiero… pulpo a la gallega.

Jorge: Ok. I'd like… Galician-style octopus.

Merche: Vale, yo, pimientos de Padrón. Pide tú una.

Merche: Ok, I'd like Padrón peppers. You pick one.

Narrator: She's asking you to pick one. Let me help you with the menu. "Raciones" means "portions." Click to find out what they are, then select the one you want, practice saying it, then click "Next"

Merche [to the waiter]: Queremos unas tapas para compartir.

Merche: We'd like some tapas to share.

Jorge [to the waiter]: Una de pulpo a la gallega.

Jorge: A portion of Galician-style octopus.

Merche [to the student/video viewer]: Una de pimientos de Padrón. ¿Y tú?

Merche: A portion of 'Padrón' peppers. And you?

[Video stops for main character to answer]

The control group did not watch the videos, instead devoting the same amount of class time to practice the same pragmatic functions by completing worksheets with classmates. The worksheets were based on the *MVL* storyline, and the activities were modeled after those that appeared in the video. Activities were contextualized, with students receiving information related to the simulated situation for that activity. The instructor explained to students that the purpose of these worksheets was to learn how to say practical things in Spanish so that they could manage everyday situations, such as ordering food or asking for directions, in a Spanish-speaking country. The worksheets are structured in the following way:

- A statement providing the overall context for the activity

- Presentation of the vocabulary

- A vocabulary activity

- Details about the context for the dialogue and roleplay

- A model dialogue

- A main activity, which was more communicative in nature such as roleplaying.

The students worked in pairs for the vocabulary activity and the main activity. The model dialogue was read by the instructor and one or more students, depending on how many roles each dialogue had. This method is based on Bardovi-Harig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), who structure pragmatic training in a series of steps: (i) awareness activities, (ii) authentic language samples used as examples or models and (iii) interpretation or production activities completed by the learners. Each *MVL* video includes these same activity types, although due to the interactive nature of the videos and their storyline, the order of these elements can vary depending on the episode.

In Example 2, we present the counterpart of the example presented in Example 1. The goal of this lesson was ordering food at a restaurant, and the activity replicates the corresponding activity in *MVL*. Students were provided with the vocabulary and expressions that would allow them to successfully order at the restaurant, as in the video. However, in this case, instead of interacting with the video, the student is reading a model dialogue and practicing writing and reading their dialogue aloud with a partner via a role play.

Example 2. Control Group Activity
Ashley, Merche y tú vais de tapas a un restaurante en Madrid.

Ashley, Merche and you go to get tapas in a restaurant in Madrid.

Vocabulario

Quiero…	I want
Una caña	A beer
Un vino de la casa	A house wine

Una tapa	A tapa (small plate of food)
Una ración	A big plate of food (for sharing)
Albóndigas con tomate	Meatballs with tomato
Pimientos de Padrón	Peppers
Pulpo a la gallega	Octopus with paprika and potatoes
¿Para beber?	What do you want to drink?
¿Para comer?	What do you want to eat?
El servicio	The restroom
Al fondo	In the back

1) Une los dibujos con la palabra o expresión adecuada.

Match each picture with the right word or expression.

Ashley, tú y vuestra amiga Merche estáis listos/listas para pedir.

Ashley, you and your friend are ready to order.

Merche: ¿Pedimos algo para compartir?

Merche: Shall we order something to share?

Ashley: Vale.

Ashley: Ok.

Camarero: ¿Qué quieren para comer?

Waiter: What would you like to order?

Ashley: Yo quiero pulpo a la gallega.

Ashley: I'd like Galician-style octopus.

Merche: Yo pimientos de padrón. Pide tú una.

Merche: I'd like Padrón peppers. You pick one.

Tú: Yo quiero albóndigas con tomate. […]

You: I'd like meatballs in tomato sauce. […]

Ahora crea un diálogo entre un cliente y un camarero usando la carta de este restaurante.

Now create a dialogue between a client and a waiter using the menu of this restaurant.

Camarero: _____

Cliente: _____

Camarero: _____

Cliente: _____

Camarero: _____

Cliente: _____

Posttest

One to two days after finishing the classroom portion of the study, participants completed the posttest and the exit survey. The posttest, a recorded discourse completion task, was identical in form and content to the pretest that participants completed. This methodology differs from that used by Thomas (2011), who determined progress by looking at homework and test grades, both of which could be affected by other factors not directly related to learning coming from the activities used in the study. In the current study, use of the recorded pretest and posttest made it possible to gauge participants' performance on the exact same discourse completion tasks before treatment (the *MVL* activities or paper-based lessons) and after.

Exit Survey. While the pretest and posttest aimed to measure students' ability to perform certain pragmatic functions, the purpose of the exit survey (Appendix B) was to get some subjective impressions from participants with regard to the videos or worksheets. Participants in the study were asked to give their reaction to *MVL* in part to follow up on the finding from Thomas (2011) that students reported the series to be interesting and engaging.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Two raters (the authors) independently scored all of the recordings. Since the current study is looking specifically at participants' pragmatic performance, the scale evaluates what Weyers (1999) called the "effectiveness of message" (p. 343): not the internal linguistic accuracy (such as grammar and vocabulary) of an utterance, but rather whether or not the underlying speech act would have been correctly understood by a native speaker. For our analysis, we considered the appropriateness of the utterance for the given situation as opposed to counting the number of errors, since accuracy is not necessarily required for a successful speech act.

Therefore, for each of the eight prompts on the recordings, a score was assigned to determine how successful participants were in completing the task. The following scale was used:

- 0—the subject did not answer the question or the answer was completely irrelevant or incorrect
- 1—the answer was partially correct
- 2—the answer was appropriate and relevant.

The scores for the prompts were added to obtain a total score out of 16 points for each of the two discourse completion tasks, the pretest and the posttest.

Interrater reliability. Before comparing between- and in-group scores, the totals were compared between raters to judge the consistency of scoring. Due to the small sample size for the exploratory study and the uneven number of participants in the two groups (seven participants in the experimental group and eight in the control group), non-parametric tests were chosen for analysis. Interrater reliability was confirmed to a highly significant level ($p < 0.01$, two-tailed) for both the pretest (Kendall's tau_b .733, Spearman's rho .876) and posttest (Kendall's tau_b .917, Spearman's rho .977). According to these measures, there was a strong level of correlation between the scores given by raters using this scale.

Findings

Data obtained from the pretest and posttest were analyzed between groups in order to compare any differences in pragmatic performance between the *MVL* and traditional groups at the beginning and end of the study, as well as within groups, so as to detect any progress each group made after completing their respective lessons. The results from these analyses are presented below.

Pretest Scores between Groups

Students in the *MVL* group scored higher on the pretest overall than those doing the paper-based activities. Those who were in the class that watched *Mi Vida Loca* had a mean score of 9.29 out of 16 possible points on the pretest, versus 5.00 out of 16 for the control group. Significance was reached on both the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Z = -2.207, Asymp. Sig. .027) and Sign Test (Exact Sig. .031). The difference between the groups was statistically significant prior to treatment. Based on these results, we cannot say the two groups were at the same level of pragmatic proficiency at the onset of the study; students in the *MVL* group scored a little over four points higher than the control group. This result must be taken into account when comparing groups, and will be explored further in the discussion section.

Posttest Scores between Groups

After the five in-class sessions, participants took the test a second time, the posttest, to gauge what progress, if any, had been made in their pragmatic abilities after completing the video series or paper-based activities. The *MVL* group once again scored higher ($\bar{x}$ = 11.57) on its recordings than the traditional group ($\bar{x}$ = 5.88), this time by over five points. Significance was reached on both the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Z = -2.207, Asymp. Sig. .006) and Sign Test (Exact Sig. .012). As with the pretest, the groups' mean scores differed. In this case, however, the gap between the two groups was larger on this second measure (5.69 on the posttest) as compared to the pretest (4.29). On average, students in the *MVL* group again scored higher than the group who had done traditional activities. A look at the difference within each group between the pre- and posttest sheds more light on the possible effect of the use of the *MVL* videos during the study.

Pretest versus Posttest Scores, within Groups

Additional analysis was carried out to compare the performance of each group on the two measures to see the difference in their pragmatic competence between the pretest and posttest. When examining the results within the *MVL* group, the mean score obtained on the posttest ($\bar{x}$ = 11.57) was over two points higher than that on the pretest ($\bar{x}$ = 9.29). Significance was reached for this result on both the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Z = -2.207, Asymp. Sig. .027) and Sign Test (Exact Sig. .031). Participants who used the videos in class saw a significant improvement in performance between the pretest and posttest. Conversely, students in the traditional group scored less than a point higher on the posttest ($\bar{x}$ = 5.88) than they did on the pretest ($\bar{x}$ = 5.00). The difference for the control group did not approach statistical significance on the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (Z = -1.633, Asymp. Sig. .102) or

Sign Test (Exact Sig. .375). Unlike the *MVL* group, there was no significant gain in performance for the students in the traditional group between the pre- and posttests.

The results from the current study are presented below in Table 2 and can be summarized as follows:

The *MVL* group began with a higher mean score on the pretest ($\bar{x}$ = 9.29) than that of the control group ($\bar{x}$ = 5.00).

Students who participated in the *MVL* group also scored higher overall on the posttest ($\bar{x}$ = 11.57) than participants completing the more traditional activities ($\bar{x}$ = 5.88).

Progress made by the *MVL* group by the end of the study (an increase of over two points out of 16 possible) was statistically significant, while that of the control group was not (less than one point).

Table 2

Pretest and Posttest Pragmatic Competence Scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest—Mi Vida Loca	7	9.29	2.289	6	13
Posttest—Mi Vida Loca	7	11.57	2.878	7	15
Pretest—Traditional	8	5.00	1.927	2	8
Posttest—Traditional	8	5.88	2.232	3	10

Discussion

In light of these results, we can now discuss how participants' performance relates to the research questions stated earlier, as well as what the implications of this study are for developing intercultural competence in the L2. Some future avenues of research will also be explored.

The first research question — Can pragmatics be learned through targeted instruction? — can be answered affirmatively for these participants. The *Mi Vida Loca* group gained over two points ($\bar{x}$ = 9.29 to $\bar{x}$ = 11.57) between the pretest and posttest after performing tasks for the study, which represents a statistically significant improvement. After five lessons of the video program included as part of students' coursework, participants were able to achieve higher scores on a measure testing their pragmatic competence, that is, their ability to respond appropriately during a simulated conversation with a native speaker. Another consideration is not only whether or not participants using the *Mi Vida Loca* video program increased their pragmatic abilities, but how any improvement would compare to students who instead completed paper-based activities.

This leads us to our second research question: Is teaching pragmatics via video tools more effective than via traditional methods? The group performing more traditional paper-based activities covering the same material did not see the same gains

by the end of the study as those participating in the *MVL* group. While there was a slight improvement in scores ($\bar{x}$ = 5.00 versus $\bar{x}$ = 5.88) in the control group, their performance was not significantly better at the end of the study than at the beginning. Considering the second research question then, we can once again answer in the affirmative: the students who participated in the interactive video series in this study saw their pragmatic competence in responding appropriately in the L2 improve, while those in the traditional group saw no significant gains.

These results contrast with those of Thomas (2011), who found no language improvement for students using *MVL*. As discussed earlier, Thomas considered homework and test scores to try to evaluate listening skills (which does not seem to us to be a valid way to directly assess listening) instead of an instrument designed specifically to assess the specific skills being targeted in his study (in our case, pragmatic competence). For this reason, it is difficult to compare his results directly with those of the current study.

There are several factors that may explain why the *MVL* group improved significantly by the end of the study while the control group did not. Our results are in line with previous views in the literature (e.g., Weyers, 1999) emphasizing the benefits of videos and particularly interactive videos (Watkins, 1991) as related to language learning. Participants in the *MVL* group were able to see and hear the language being used and think of appropriate responses for the given situations, as opposed to simply learning about and manipulating forms on paper. In the case of *MVL* specifically, the videos also simulate the types of interactions students encounter in the target culture. Several articles (Bardovi-Harlig, et al., 1991; Myers-Scotton & Bernstein, 1988) have suggested that conversations by native speakers that more closely resemble natural speech set in an authentic cultural setting may reduce the existing mismatch between traditional classroom activities and real-life situations.

Furthermore, the setting of the video, which places the learner in the role of an active participant in the story, more closely addresses L2 pragmatics than paper-based and even other less interactive video programs that may contain exchanges that are incomprehensible or lack authenticity (Vanderplank, 1993). Each of the elements of L2 pragmatics described by Bardovi-Harlig (2013) and summarized earlier, is addressed by the *MVL* series:

• How to say (via expressions modeled in the video)

• What (learner responses using these expressions for situations in the storyline)

• To whom (characters students hear, see, and interact with virtually)

• When (at selected moments in the video).

The setting of *MVL,* shot in Madrid and showing authentic sights and sounds of the city, immerses the student in the same sorts of situations they can encounter in the target culture. In our view, the results of the study support the notion that the *MVL* series allows students to become aware of situations and practices that are different from those in their native culture and learn appropriate ways of communicating effectively in everyday interactions in the target culture.

While traditional exercises can teach students about these considerations, an interactive video program such as *MVL* puts them into practice, creating a simulated

immersion environment that engages students beyond traditional classroom activities. The approach of *MVL* allows students to practice how they would interact with native speakers through some of the basic functions (giving one's name, expressing needs, leave-taking) typically needed in real-world situations. The engagement, interactivity, and authenticity of the experience provided by *MVL* may be key factors in fostering pragmatic competency.

Limitations

In spite of these promising outcomes, the current exploratory study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the relatively small and uneven number of participants in each group (eight students in the control group and seven in the experimental group) limits the strength of the statistical analyses. In view of this, our discussion was also limited to the overall scores assessing pragmatic ability, as opposed to a finer-grained analysis of individual speech acts.

In addition, one factor that could not be controlled for was previous ability in Spanish. As described above, the participants from the two groups were not identical in terms of abilities prior to the start of the study. Because the scores obtained on the pretest show that the *MVL* group started at a higher level ($\bar{x} = 9.29$) than the traditional group ($\bar{x} = 5.00$), it is possible that some of the difference in progress detected is related to the fact that the groups were at somewhat different base levels at the start of the study. For this reason, our results simply suggest that the *Mi Vida Loca* program helped increase students' pragmatic ability. We can state that participants in the *MVL* significantly improved their level after completing the study, while the control group did not improve significantly. Since the pretest and posttest assessments involved listening, the fact that the *MVL* group performed tasks during the study that involved listening (the audio from the videos) may have had an impact on their performance, as compared to the control group who used more traditional paper-based writing tasks as the primary medium of instruction.

Lastly, the study was run during the summer semester, as opposed to a regular full-semester course. For this reason, lessons were given over a short period of time: once every four class days. It is possible that students completing the video or traditional lessons over a longer period of time might perform differently. Additional research will be needed to confirm these findings and will aim to address these limitations.

Further Research and Conclusions

With these caveats in mind, the results of this exploratory study still have important implications. First, our study suggests that students at beginning levels of acquiring Spanish may benefit from interactive video lessons such as those in *MVL*. Beginning language students generally acquire pragmatic competence slowly (as students in our traditional activities group) or fail to do so at all (cf. Barron 2003; Hoffman-Hicks, 1999). In spite of this, students benefit from being trained in such skills at beginning levels (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012). Involving students early on in the pragmatic applications of the language should make language learners more proficient in interacting in the L2, showing them how the linguistic features they are

learning can be applied to situations they will encounter, and allowing them to deal successfully and appropriately in new settings. Those who wish to study abroad are often unprepared to interact in real-life situations (e.g., DeKeyser, 2010) in spite of linguistic training in the classroom. Many studies have explored the effects of study abroad in L2 learners' pragmatic development (e.g., Bataller, 2010; Cohen & Shively, 2007; Reynold-Case, 2013; Shively & Cohen, 2008). Although these studies generally report on the beneficial aspects of the study abroad on learners' pragmatic awareness and language use, they also highlight that there are a series of factors having to do with the learner (e.g., proficiency, previous experience with the language), the environment (e.g., quality and quantity of input) and the relation between the learner and the context (e.g., amount of interaction with native speakers, percentage of daily use of the L2) that need to be explored further. With over 60% of undergraduates indicating a desire to study abroad (Committee for Economic Development, 2006), improving students' intercultural competence and helping them learn strategies for navigating the types of interactions they would encounter prior to traveling may both prove to be important factors in encouraging student participation in study abroad programs, facilitating the success of those who spend time in the target culture or who interact with native speakers in any context, whether in the U.S. or abroad. Since varieties of Spanish vary from country to country and community to community, as is the case with other languages, any tools and strategies would need to be assessed for their appropriateness for the specific situations students would encounter.

Future research is needed to increase the generalizability of the results of this initial study. Specifically there is a need for a delayed posttest with more participants to track students' long-term retention and use of the skills they have learned using *MVL*. Additional populations to explore include true beginners, as opposed to the second-semester students assessed in the current research. Additional research is needed on similar video series, such as *À la rencontre de Philippe* or other series which may exist, with students taking other languages and preparing for the pragmatic need of communicating appropriately in other cultures. With the availability of free or inexpensive tools to create and publish content, it is also possible for researchers or instructors to develop their own video programs aimed at increasing students' overall pragmatic competence, or specifically targeted towards destinations in the target culture where students may be likely to travel (e.g., a city where an exchange program has been established). Research on the optimal design of pragmatic training video series is still needed. Also important would be an investigation into how best to build upon the opportunities provided by the interactive video series: how related activities such as classroom simulations and role plays could be used to enhance instruction and address different social variables (such as age, gender, relationship between interlocutors) that can also be key to successful speech acts.

This study provides preliminary evidence that interactive video programs, such as *MVL,* that engage students through a virtual immersion in the target culture might help increase second language learners' intercultural competence as compared to more traditional types of activities. Since the development of pragmatic skills provides an essential toolkit to navigate in target cultures, we believe this type of training will help students bridge the gap between the language they encounter in

the classroom and the conversations they will have to face when traveling abroad or trying to communicate with native Spanish speakers in the U.S.

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Appendix A

Beginning Spanish Study — Background questionnaire

A) Please answer the following questions. Your responses will be kept completely confidential.

1) What is your **name** *or* **participant number?** _____

2) What is your **gender?** _____

3) **What year in school** are you at the University of Memphis? (Please select one)
    Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior
    Other (please explain: _____)

4) What do you consider to be your **native (first) language?** _____

5) What **language(s) do you speak or have you learned/studied?** Please give the following information for English, Spanish, and up to 2 other languages in order of fluency. Please list NA (not applicable) if you've never spoken or studied/learned the language.

Language	When you started learning it	What place(s) you learned it (in high school, at home, online, etc.)
a) English		
b) Spanish		
c) _____		
d) _____		

6) For the languages you listed on #5, please rate your **ability to write <u>informally</u>**, with a friend for example.
    1 = poor   2 = fair   3 = good   4 = very good   5 = excellent

    a) English ____   b) Spanish ____   c) Language c ____   d) Language d ____

7) For the languages you listed on #5, please rate your **ability to write <u>formally</u>**, for a term paper or business for example.
    1 = poor   2 = fair   3 = good   4 = very good   5 = excellent

    a) English ____   b) Spanish ____   c) Language c ____   d) Language d ____

8) For the languages you listed on #5, please rate your **ability to speak <u>informally</u>**, with friends for example.
    1 = poor   2 = fair   3 = good   4 = very good   5 = excellent

    a) English ____   b) Spanish ____   c) Language c ____   d) Language d ____

9) For the languages you listed on #5, please rate your **ability to speak <u>formally</u>**, with a professor or for business for example.
    1 = poor   2 = fair   3 = good   4 = very good   5 = excellent

    a) English ____   b) Spanish ____   c) Language c ____   d) Language d ____

10) Are there other languages you speak or have studied/learned besides those you mentioned above? If so, please list them and mention your fluency briefly. If not, please write NA (not applicable).
_____

11) In **what country** were you born? _____

12) **Have you ever visited or lived in a country** besides the one you mentioned in #11? (Please select one) YES / NO

If yes, please indicate **which country/countries**, **when** you went, and **for how long** you were there.

    a) Country 1: _____

    b) Country 2: _____

    c) Country 3: _____

    NOTE: If you've lived in or visited other counties, please continue your list below. If not, please write NA (Not applicable)

    _____

13) Please indicate any other personal or professional experience with languages or foreign countries that you have that you didn't provide above.
_____

B) Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest.

1.   How comfortable would you feel talking to a native Spanish speaker in Spanish?
      1   2   3   4   5

2.   How comfortable would you feel traveling to Spain (or another Spanish-speaking country)?
      1   2   3   4   5

3.   How comfortable do you feel introducing yourself in Spanish?
      1   2   3   4   5

4.   How comfortable do you feel ordering food and drinks in Spanish?
      1   2   3   4   5

5.   How comfortable do you feel asking directions in Spanish?
      1   2   3   4   5

6.   How comfortable do you feel spelling names in Spanish?
      1   2   3   4   5

7.   How motivated are you to go to a Spanish-speaking country?
      1   2   3   4   5

8.   How motivated are you to learn about the culture of Spanish-speaking countries?
      1   2   3   4   5

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix B

Exit Survey

Mi Vida Loca Group

1. Do you think the videos were: (choose all that apply)
   a. Entertaining
   b. Interesting
   c. Easy to understand
   d. Helpful
   e. Straightforward
   f. Practical
   g. Boring
   h. Uninteresting
   i. Hard to understand
   j. Unhelpful
   k. Confusing
   l. Impractical
   m. None of these

2. Do you like these videos better or worse than the ones you have watched in other foreign language classes? Why?

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest.

3. How comfortable would you feel talking to a native Spanish speaker in Spanish after watching these videos?
   1   2   3   4   5

4. How comfortable would you feel traveling to Spain (or another Spanish-speaking country) after watching these videos?
   1   2   3   4   5

5. How comfortable do you feel introducing yourself in Spanish?
   1   2   3   4   5

6. How comfortable do you feel ordering food and drinks in Spanish?
   1   2   3   4   5

7. How comfortable do you feel asking directions in Spanish?
   1   2   3   4   5

8. How comfortable do you feel spelling names in Spanish?
   1   2   3   4   5

9. How do these videos motivate you to go to a Spanish-speaking country?
   1   2   3   4   5

10. How do these videos motivate you to learn about the culture of Spanish-speaking countries?
    1   2   3   4   5

11. Please add any additional information in the space below.

Pragmatic Training Group

1. Do you think the worksheets lessons and activities you did for this study were:

a. Entertaining
b. Interesting
c. Easy to understand
d. Helpful
e. Straightforward
f. Practical
g. Boring
h. Uninteresting
i. Hard to understand
j. Unhelpful
k. Confusing
l. Impractical
m. None of these

2. Do you like these lessons and activities you did for this study better or worse than the ones you have used in other foreign language classes? Why?

Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest.

3. How comfortable would you feel talking to a native Spanish speaker in Spanish after completing the lessons and activities for this study?

    1   2   3   4   5

4. How comfortable would you feel traveling to Spain (or another Spanish-speaking country) after completing the lessons and activities for this study?

    1   2   3   4   5

5. How comfortable do you feel introducing yourself in Spanish?

    1   2   3   4   5

6. How comfortable do you feel ordering food and drinks in Spanish?

    1   2   3   4   5

7. How comfortable do you feel asking directions in Spanish?

    1   2   3   4   5

8. How comfortable do you feel spelling names in Spanish?

    1   2   3   4   5

9. How much do these videos motivate you to go to a Spanish-speaking country?

    1   2   3   4   5

10. How much do these videos motivate you to learn about the culture of Spanish-speaking countries?

    1   2   3   4   5

11. Please add any additional information in the space below.

(Endnotes)

1   Because *Mi Vida Loca* is set in Spain, *vosotros* (you pl.) is the most commonly used form to refer to *you* plural instead of *ustedes* as is the case in other Latin American countries. For that reason, the worksheets also include the *vosotros* forms. The instructor made students aware of the difference between *vosotros/ustedes* at the beginning of this project.

2   While a student on his or her own would be able to rewind video, having the instructor play the video only once in a whole-class setting ensured that all students were exposed to each segment one time. In this way, any gains in competence could not be said to result from the number of times students viewed or completed the task.