

## EXPLORING THE DIFFERENT WAYS SPANISH INSTRUCTORS USE THE PRONOUN *WE* IN THE CLASSROOM

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### ABSTRACT

*Spanish language teachers use a variety of personal pronouns in their classes to address students including second person plural and singular in both Spanish and English; however, it has also been shown that Spanish teachers, as well as many other teachers, use the first person plural pronoun, we or nosotros, as a means to soften the imperatives and/or protect a student's image. This study looks at the various ways native and non-native Spanish speaking instructors use the pronoun "we" in the classroom, when addressing students (you), referring to themselves and their students (inclusive we), or referring to themselves and an outside group of people (exclusive we). In analyzing the latter two uses of the pronoun "we", the author compares them to the choice between using second person pronouns "tú" and "Usted" based on whether the speaker feels a connection or solidarity with the hearers. The data from the present study determines that the greater connection or familiarity the instructor feels with the students, the more likely the inclusive "we" is to be implemented. However, when the instructor identifies more with native speakers of the target language, the greater the chance an exclusive "we" will be used, creating distance between the instructor and students.*

### INTRODUCTION

The use of personal pronouns in speech to make reference to the speaker, hearer, or both can reflect a complex relationship and understanding of that relationship between all parties involved. When a speaker selects a pronoun to address another person or to make reference to the speaker, listener, or both, acute attention must be paid to the relationship between the two (Brown & Ford, 1961). Although many languages' personal pronouns consist of simple words phonetically, the meaning and reference behind them are much more involved. When choosing which personal pronoun a speaker will use to address or refer to the listener, s/he makes an important decision as to how s/he will assert his/her position in the relationship. In talking about the power of personal pronouns in her book, Lakoff (1990) refers to them as "humble and earthly servants of language, (which) can be pressed into service to perform lofty symbolic functions" (p. 183). While personal pronouns are powerful, complex features of language, all speakers of every language use them on a regular basis.

This paper seeks to uncover the personal pronouns teachers in Spanish language classrooms use to address their students as well as refer to

themselves and their students. More specifically, the author examines the different uses of the personal pronoun “we” or “*nosotros*.” This allows the reader to recognize when teachers create a sense of solidarity with their students by using the pronoun “we: I + you” versus when they choose to distance themselves from their students by using the pronoun “we: I + them.” Because these different uses of the pronoun “we” are discovered to be based on whether the instructor feels more or less connected to the students, it is shown to be similar to the choice between the familiar and formal “you” pronouns, “*tú*” and “*Usted*”. The research questions for the present study are:

1. What are the distinct uses of the pronoun “we” by Spanish language instructors in the classroom?
2. Is there a correlation between using the inclusive “we” (I + you) and the exclusive “we” (I + them) and the uses of “*tú*” versus “*Usted*”?
3. What determines whether an instructor uses the inclusive “we” versus the exclusive “we”?

### TEACHERS’ LANGUAGE USE

Previous research has analyzed characteristics of the pedagogical language instructors utilize when teaching students (Moje, 1995; Polio & Duff, 1994; Walsh, 2002). The classroom discourse of foreign and second language teachers shares similar features including speech modification, repetition, and an IRE sequence pattern (initiation, student’s response, and evaluation) (Mehan, 1979; Chaudron, 1988; Nunan, 1999). This discourse style, referred to as “teacher talk,” and can be displayed through instruction, questions, feedback, praise, etc. (Lynch, 1996). The language that teachers use when presenting the material, setting up tasks, or reviewing exercises can affect students’ comprehension, learning, and production of the target language (Chaudron, 1988; Johnson, 1995). As Johnson (1995) stated, “teachers control what goes on in the classrooms primarily through the ways in which they use language” (p. 9).

Much of the research on teachers’ pedagogical discourse in foreign language classrooms determines if instructors are able to create learning opportunities through their language use (Cazden, 1988; Cots & Díaz, 2005; Richards, 2006). Additionally, there have been studies showing the effects of maximizing teachers’ use of the target language in the classroom versus the students’ native language (Macaro, 1997; Polio & Duff, 1990; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). However, an area lacking in current research on language instructors’ teacher talk is how an instructor’s pronoun choice when addressing students and referring to him/herself reveals how s/he identifies with the students as well as speakers of the target language.

A study by Moje (1995) on the effects of teacher talk in a high school science classroom revealed that the teachers’ language choice, and more specifically, pronoun usage, enabled students to feel like they were members in a common group. She asserted that:

By using these linguistic devices (personal pronouns) the teacher encouraged students to identify with both the science and classroom communities. As a result of this identification and solidarity, students cooperated and worked with the teacher, lessening the need for overt control on her part (p. 355).

Moje's (1995) study revealed how teachers use the first person plural pronoun, "we", in order to draw students into a shared community, resulting in the students feeling a sense of belonging. The current study identifies a similar situation in Spanish language classrooms, but also reveals how teachers can use the pronoun "we" to create distance with the students, isolating themselves with an outside group.

### THE DIFFERENT USES OF THE PRONOUN *WE*

When teaching any material, instructors find themselves addressing students continuously. Whether calling on a student to answer a question, negotiating with a student about a question/answer, or simply checking for comprehension, teachers repeatedly use the address pronouns of singular and plural "you". In English the pronouns addressing "you" are relatively simple, limited to only second person singular and plural (you). In other languages, such as French, German and Spanish, there is more than one way to address a person depending on whether the relationship warrants more or less formality. Due to the diverging uses of second person plural and singular pronouns in various languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) introduced the symbols, "T" and "V", based on the French pronouns "*tu*" and "*vous*". "T" represents the intimate form of address, while "V" refers to the polite and/or distant form.

Although there may be a difference between instructors' use of the "T" and "V" pronouns in Spanish language classrooms, it remains clear whom the speaker is addressing. A personal pronoun which has often created ambiguity in the classroom is the pronoun "we". Usually when a speaker uses "we", s/he is referring to more than one person including him/herself. However, this is not always the case. In educational settings, the pronoun "we" is often substituted as a second person singular and/or plural address form (Hyman, 2004). This use of "we" is the polite form heard by many teachers, while actually referring to second person plural, "you" (Quirk et al., 1985). According to Quirk (1985), the use of "we" to signify "you" is a non-threatening technique used by teachers of all levels and subjects. This allows teachers to lower the affective filter level of their students, creating a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere, which can aid in the overall L2 acquisition process (Weaver, 1996). Cazden (1988) denotes this use of "we" as being a positive manner to impose an imperative on students, such as "ok, the rest of you, let's get the chairs in a circle" (p. 165).

According to Bialystok and Hukuta (1994) choosing to use inclusive personal pronouns, such as "we" or "us", is a means to accomplish positive politeness, a term Brown and Levinson (1978) gave to those utterances which work to minimize threat and appeal to common group membership and

reciprocity. The example Bialystok and Hukuta give to convey this idea is when a speaker says something like “lend us two bucks then, would ya, Mac” (p. 174). Although the speaker is asking for money for only him/herself, s/he includes the listener in the request by using the pronoun “us”. By doing this, the speaker lessens the demanding speech act of wanting and asking for money by actually making the listener feel like he is taking part in receiving the money. The same would be true for teachers who use the pronoun “we” to ask students to perform specific tasks.

The use of “we” meaning “you” is not the only use of the pronoun “we” heard in language classrooms. The second two distinct uses of the pronoun “we” salient to this study are the inclusive “we” (I + you) and the exclusive “we” (I + them). In her book, Lakoff (1990) implies that speakers use “we” as tool giving power and prestige to specific groups, while alienating others by targeting them as outsiders. She specifically gives examples of this through excerpts from politicians’ speeches, whose use of the pronoun “we” causes listeners to feel like they are part of his/her team. In turn, the “they” heard in the speeches will be the outside group, the opponents. Similarly, language teachers may choose to use the pronoun “we” to include themselves in the group of students because of shared characteristics or experiences. At other times teachers exclude the students from a group, using the pronoun “we” to refer to themselves and a group in which they are part of outside the classroom.

This use of the inclusive “we” versus the exclusive “we” can be compared to Brown and Gilman’s (1960) analysis of the uses of the pronouns “*tú*” or “*Usted*” based on the solidarity between speaker and hearer. Brown and Gilman asserted that the more the speaker and hearer feel a connection, the more likely they will address each other with the reciprocal “T”, and the lesser the connection, the greater the chance that there will be either a nonreciprocal address based on power or a reciprocal “V” will be used. This can be compared to the relationship between teachers and students in language classrooms which affect the use of either an inclusive or exclusive “we”. The more solidarity that is present between the teacher and students, the greater the chances an inclusive “we” will be used. And the less solidarity that exists, the more likely an exclusive “we” will be used.

The solidarity between teachers and students can be based on a number of factors, including, age, sex, social class, and nationality. The main factor pertinent to this study is the distinction of the instructors being a native speaker (NS) or non-native speaker (NNS) of Spanish. When students are learning a foreign language in their L1 environment, every aspect of the *subject* may appear alien and exotic, but they are still in the comfort of a familiar classroom within their own community. When the teacher is also a member of that community, a connection of solidarity may form between student and teacher resulting in the use of the inclusive “we”. However, the reverse can be said when a teacher is not a member of the community and may feel like an outsider and subconsciously use the exclusive “we”.

The exclusive pronoun “we” is used to signify that the speaker is a member of a group but the hearer remains on the outside. This is more likely to be the case in a NS teacher’s classroom who does not share the students’ language background. The teacher identifies him/herself with his/her language community, of which the students are not part. Although the teacher is part of the community which is the main focus of the class, the Hispanic language community, s/he realizes the students are not part of his/her community. Furthermore students associate the teacher directly with the community of the target language and do not identify him/her as part of their own community.

In the following sections, the author will present data demonstrating how Spanish teachers’ usage of the pronoun “we” fits into the aforementioned categories.

### METHODOLOGY

The data was taken from two classes—one in which the teacher is a NS of Spanish and one where the teacher learned Spanish as a second language and whose first language is American English. The NS was born in Spain and moved to the U.S. after completing his undergraduate college degree. He earned his MA in the teaching of second languages from a university in the U.S. When observed for this study, he had been teaching Spanish in a university for five years. The NNS began studying Spanish in a secondary school in the U.S. He then completed his BA in Spanish and earned an MA in Spanish Linguistics. At the time of the study, he had been teaching Spanish in a university for three years.

The author observed, audio-recorded, and transcribed approximately 3.5 hours from each class over the course of a semester. Analyzing the transcripts, the author highlighted each time the instructors used the term “we” whether in English or Spanish or a verbal form indicating first person plural, i.e., *hablamos*. Both classes were at the intermediate level in a university setting, and each of the classes contained close to twenty students. None of the students were heritage Spanish speakers; rather, all were native English speakers. All the students were from the U.S. and were between the ages of 19 and 25.

### DATA ANALYSIS

Once the author isolated the times in the classes when the instructors used the pronoun, “we”, it was determined that there were three distinct references:

- 1) “We” indicating “you”; a strategy to soften speech acts intended as directives or to achieve positive politeness
- 2) An inclusive “we” referring to the instructor and the students
- 3) An exclusive “we” referring to the instructor and an outside group of peoples

**“We” meaning “you”**

As mentioned earlier, Brown and Levinson (1978) included the strategy of using “we” to actually signify “you” as a means of achieving positive politeness. It makes the hearer feel liked and welcomed and is especially a means of protecting the students’ positive face considering the authoritative position of the teacher. As presented in the examples below, both the NS and NNS teachers used this strategy.

*Examples from NS:*

1. <sup>1</sup>**T:** *Bueno, ahora **vamos** a analizar un cuento de Isabel Allende que se llama <<El hombre de plata.>> Plata significa, bueno, silver. <<El hombre de plata.>> Entonces **vamos** a poner en grupos.*
2. **T:** *Bueno, pues, este era el ejercicio que **habíamos**, que no **habíamos** terminado el otro día. Ahora **vamos** a ver los ejercicios del semestre book. I think **we** have the right one. **We** can do them together. Cause **we** had some problems the other day, right?*
3. **T:** ***We** have a lot of things to go over. Let me just write them right here, okay. So that’s the plan for today. **We’re** gonna learn *expresar cosas en pasado subjuntivo*.*
4. **T:** ***Vamos** a hacer primero los ejercicios del workbook. *Venga*. This will be fast. *Éstas son actividades del vocabulario. Vocabulario que **tenemos** que aprender.**

All the pronouns and verbs in bold from these examples refer to first person plural, and although there are times when the instructor uses the pronoun “we”, and actually does take part in the task, there are times he used “we” strictly to refer to the students. In the first example, the instructor announces that “we are going to analyze a story by Isabel Allende,” it can be interpreted that he will participate in the analysis. However, in the next line, he states, “we are going to get in groups,” yet, as noted by the researcher, he does not actually get into a group himself. Therefore, the former use of “we” is to lessen the speech act of asking students to get into groups.

In example two, it is understood that the instructor will take part in going over the exercises with the students; however, it is clear in the last use of “we”, the instructor refers to the students as the ones that had “problems” with the activities, not himself. This could have been a strategy to protect the students’ positive face. By including himself he made the students feel like he, too, had problems, and they are not alone in their struggles. Again in examples three and four the instructor includes himself in the learning process the students are going through when in fact he already has learned the language. These are examples of the use of “we” to lessen the force of a directive as well as assure students that they are not alone in doing these activities; but rather

the instructor will aid in the tasks at hand. Below are similar examples from the NNS instructor's classes.

*Examples from NNS:*

1. **T:** **We've** seen direct object pronouns in 1101 and it's 1102. Um, so, I'm not gonna spend a lot of time on em. **We're** gonna look more at em when **we** start doing indirect object pronouns.
2. **T:** Use the infinitive after verbs such as *querer, necesitar, esperar, tener* and *poder*. Kay? **We've** done this a lot.
3. **T:** *Vamos a completar cada frase así usando una forma correcta del imperfecto de subjuntivo. Algunos de estos casos no **hemos estudiado** en el subjuntivo.*
4. **T:** *Porque es un pretérito irregular que no **estudiamos**. No **aprendimos**.*

In these examples, like those from the NS, the instructor uses “we” as a means to include himself, and potentially appear less threatening and soften the directives. In many of the examples from the NNS class, he uses “we” in reference to the content students are learning or have learned recently. Similar to the NS, the NNS includes himself in the learning process of the students. In examples one, three and four he talks about features “we have learned” or “we have seen.” It is understood that the instructor has learned the material prior to when he introduced it to the students; yet, he gives the impression that he is learning at the same time and space as his students. By portraying himself on the same level as his students, he strives to achieve positive politeness and potentially protects the students' positive face.

#### ***Inclusive we***

The divergence between how the NS and NNS instructors used the pronoun “we” is portrayed through their use of either the inclusive “we” or exclusive “we”. The following examples are times when the NNS chose to use the pronoun “we” to refer to himself and the students.

*Examples from NNS:*

1. **T:** Um, after prepositions; ‘*después de pintar*’ after painting. A lot of times **we** use this prepositional verb as a gerund. Uh, like ‘after eating it's good to rest,’ ‘after studying.’” And when the verb is the subject of the sentence. Um, and this is what I said about kind of working like a gerund. Um, **we** would use this in expressions like, like, skiing is fun. You know, you might want to say like ‘*esquiando es divertido*.’ But **Spanish** doesn't do that. **They** use the infinitive. ‘*Esquiar es divertido*.’
2. **T:** Um, in English **we** say, ‘what's your name?’ It would be wrong to translate it as ‘¿*qué es tu nombre?*’ Okay, because the answer would be something weird like well, ‘it's a word that my parents

assigned me,' you know, that's not what **we're** trying to get at. What other sort of questions would **we** use 'what' with in English, but you would use 'which' in Spanish?

3. **T:** Um, and I think in America **we're** just kinda losing that, it's all kinda lumped together.
4. **T:** You'll find that in Latin American countries, *el almuerzo* is the biggest, *es la comida más grande del día*. That's sorta different from here, what do **we** do?

In the first example the teacher is informing the students of the different instances when the Spanish verb would be used in the infinitive, such as after a preposition or as the subject of a sentence. He indicates that in English, "we use (the) prepositional verb as a gerund." He goes on to imply that in English, the gerund form of a verb is also used when it is the subject of a sentence. He includes himself, because he, a NS of English, could also have been more inclined to use the gerund form over the infinitive when initially learning Spanish. Later when he points out that "we" would want to say "skiing is fun," he again refers to himself as part of the group, reinforcing his being a NS of English. He also refers to Spanish speakers as "they", strengthening his inclusion in the group with the students and distancing speakers of the target language. This can increase the solidarity he has with the students, but it can also negatively decrease his solidarity with Spanish speakers.

In example two the instructor uses the pronoun "we" to not only include the students, but all native English speakers. This is shown with his referring to how in English, "we" use the question word "what," whereas in Spanish "they" use the question "which." Examples three and four further show how the NNS instructor strives to connect with students by including himself in the same group as the students. Both these examples occurred when the instructor was informing the students of the differences between meals and food in the U.S. and in Spanish speaking countries. In example three, he had just introduced the students to vocabulary for the courses of a meal (i.e. appetizer, main dish, dessert, etc.). His statement that in "America *we're* just kinda losing that," was referring to how the course system in the U.S. is dissipating, and meals are therefore being "lumped together." Again, he is part of the culture of the students, and as a result, it is appropriate for him to include himself in the students' group.

### ***Exclusive we***

Below are examples of when the NS uses the exclusive "we" to refer to himself and a third party outside the classroom.

#### *Examples from NS:*

1. **T1:** *Aho...* (starts saying the verb *ahorren* in an attempt to prompt a student to complete the verb conjugation)

**S1:** (Student is unable to complete the verb conjugation and remains silent.)

**T2:** *'Tan pronto como,' 'tan pronto como' es una conjunción del tiempo. So...* (Here the instructor is trying to help the student realize the verb conjugation needs to be in the subjunctive by cueing him/her with the key phrase, or subjunctive trigger, *tan pronto como*.)

**S1:** *Ahorren.* (Student gives correct answer, but incorrectly strongly pronounces the “h” in the word.)

**T2:** *Ahorren, we do not pronounce that “h.”*

**2. T:** *No buscar por, buscar para, we don't use anything else with buscar. Just simply buscar.* (The instructor is pointing out to the students that the verb *buscar* does not require a preposition as it would in English.)

**3. T:** *El dinero, la envidia, en países hispanos el verde significa la esperanza. Hope. Uhuh. For you it's more otra cosa. Envy. Green with envy, no? But para we don't have that thing of verde, envidia. Well, we have that too, sí. Pero en general el verde es un símbolo de esperanza.*

In example one, when the instructor says “we do not pronounce that ‘h’,” he refers to himself and a group, presumably native Spanish speakers, who are outside the classroom. He would not say “we” and intend to include the student because the student proves that s/he *would* pronounce the “h”, whereas the teacher points out that “they” do not. Similarly in example two, the instructor gives a grammatical explanation of how he and other Spanish speakers would say something in Spanish and how it differs from English. Example three is a further illustration of when the instructor sets himself apart from the students, using the exclusive personal pronoun “we”. In this illustration, the teacher is referring to how emotions can be represented through various colors. This example is especially helpful because it addresses a cultural connection the instructor feels with other NS of Spanish, yet possibly does not have with his students. He states that for the students the color green is something different; “green with envy.” However, for him (and other Spanish speakers), green is a “symbol of hope.”

## DISCUSSION

Pronouns are a part of language which clearly reflect the universal complexity surrounding the formation of all languages. Pronoun use also demonstrates the amazing ability each human being is given to be able to learn and produce language with unbelievable ease. Speakers choose pronouns to address and refer to their listeners as well as themselves, and by doing so unconsciously define the relationship they have with the listeners. With languages requiring a distinction between “T/V” pronouns, there is even more complexity added to the relationship between speaker and listener.

Pronouns used in Spanish language classrooms reflect the solidarity between an instructor and the students. Although there may be some differences between a NS and NNS Spanish speaking instructor's use of the "T/V" pronouns when addressing students, the relationship the instructor portrays with his/her students can sometimes be even more clearly exemplified with the use of the pronoun "we".

The use of the pronoun "we" in language instruction is not only significant in establishing the solidarity between instructors and students, it has the potential to protect students' positive face. It is clear from the examples given in this article that both teachers have control over the use of "we" when wanting to lessen the speech act of imperatives. However, the instructors differ with their use of the inclusive or exclusive "we" depending on whether they identify more with the target language or with the students' native language. The NS identifies himself with the target language whereas the NNS can more closely relate to the language and culture he shares with the students. This can be compared to one of the factors speakers consider when choosing between a "T" or "V" pronoun to address the listener. The more one is able to identify with the listener, the more likely s/he is to choose a "T" pronoun. On the contrary, distance between speaker and hearer can result in a "V" pronoun choice.

The present study highlights how NNS instructors who share the same L1 as their students identify with them and use pronouns which allow for solidarity to be strengthened between the two groups. However, there are limitations to this study. The examples in this paper are limited to two instructors. More observation of classroom discourse from various teachers could strengthen the argument or demonstrate a variant phenomenon. Furthermore, it would be interesting to know how a nonnative speaker of both English and Spanish as well as a heritage Spanish speaker would address his/her students. The present study could be incorporated into further studies which include such instructors from various language backgrounds.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription symbols used in this study:

**T** = instructor

**S** = student

... = rising intonation

**BOLD TYPE** = salient feature