

Teaching irony in the Spanish/L2 classroom

BEATRIZ MARTÍN-GASCÓN
ORCID: 0000-0003-2962-8339
Universidad de Córdoba

Received: 4 March 2022 / Accepted: 28 December 2022
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.vi39.24084>
ISSN paper edition: 1697-7467, ISSN digital edition: 2695-8244

ABSTRACT: This article presents an empirical study on the implementation in the Spanish/L2 classroom of a cognitive-based pedagogical material to teach irony building from previous research on irony detection in Spanish and English tweets (Martín-Gascón, 2019, in press). Participants were 87 intermediate and 82 advanced students from a North American university. Data were collected during a 75-minute classroom session following a pretest/posttest design to measure irony production and identification. A linguistic background and language use questionnaire was also administered prior to instruction. Quantitative data derived from the irony recognition tests were analysed through a scoring system. Mixed data from the irony production tests were codified to pinpoint learners' ways of expressing irony using an analysis scheme based on Ruiz de Mendoza's (2017) twofold category of irony. The results revealed a significant improvement after the intervention for students from the two proficiency levels. Advanced students were significantly better in the production task; however, no significant difference was found between the two groups in the irony recognition tasks. Our findings outline the impact and importance of explicitly teaching irony—a rather neglected aspect heretofore—already at lower levels to avoid misunderstandings in the L2 and enhance learners' intercultural awareness and communicative competence.

Key words: Spanish/L2, cognitive-based instruction, verbal irony, written discourse, intercultural awareness.

La enseñanza de la ironía en la clase de Español/L2

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un estudio empírico sobre la implementación de un material cognitivo para la enseñanza de la ironía partiendo de investigaciones previas sobre detección irónica en tweets en español e inglés (Martín-Gascón, 2019, en prensa). Los participantes fueron 87 estudiantes de nivel intermedio y 82 de nivel avanzado de una universidad norteamericana. Los datos se recogieron durante una sesión de 75 minutos a través de un diseño pretest/posttest que midió la producción e identificación irónicas. Previamente se administró un cuestionario lingüístico. Los datos cuantitativos de los tests de identificación se analizaron a través de un sistema de puntuación. Los datos mixtos de los tests de producción se codificaron a partir de un esquema basado en la doble categorización de ironía verbal (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017). Los resultados revelaron una mejora significativa tras la intervención en ambos niveles. Los estudiantes avanzados realizaron la tarea de producción significativamente mejor; sin embargo, no se encontraron diferencias significativas entre grupos en tareas de identificación irónica. Los resultados destacan la importancia de enseñar ironía explícitamente—un aspecto desatendido en el aula—desde niveles principiantes para evitar malentendidos en la L2 y potenciar la conciencia intercultural y la competencia comunicativa en el aprendiente.

Palabras clave: Español/L2, instrucción cognitiva, ironía verbal, discurso escrito, conciencia intercultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Irony, as humor, is a pragmatic phenomenon that can be challenging for second language (L2) teachers and learners. Despite its difficulty, it is pervasive in thought and in everyday interactions, and its affective component favors a sense of fellowship and camaraderie in the classroom (Linares-Bernabeu, 2017, p. 206). Furthermore, irony, as a productive social mechanism, plays a significant role in the communicative act. Yet, recognizing and producing irony in an L2 require the ability to detect and interpret cultural and pragmatic incongruities (Ayçiçeği-Dinn et al., 2018; Chen & Dewaele, 2018), which has been a largely neglected aspect in the teaching of L2s. Ironic competence is directly tight to communicative competence, for being competent at an ironic level implies knowledge of the linguistic elements (linguistic knowledge), ability to structure discourse based on the context (pragmatic competence) and acquisition of certain skills to approach the social dimension of language use (sociolinguistic competence). Cook (2000) highlights this complementary vision of ironic competence when referring to humor and claiming that “its successful comprehension often requires a broad base of linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and cultural knowledge” (p. 204). This is in line with Deneire (1995, p. 291), who contends that the requirement to perceive different strata at different levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic) justifies the claim that the understanding of L2 humor (or in this case, irony) reflects a high level of proficiency in that language. Schmitz (2002, pp. 101-104) considers that the teaching of these phenomena should be relegated to advanced levels (B1-B2). However, Bell (2009) and Linares-Bernabeu (2017, p. 85) suggest that some aspects of irony can be introduced already at elementary levels. In this regard, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* includes humor as a pragmatic component only considered in C1 level. The *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes (PCIC)*, on the other hand, presents under the section “Discourse construction and interpretation” a series of linguistic markers that facilitate the understanding of humor and irony (Cervantes Institute, 2006, pp. 261-265). Yet, there is no reference to other essential cues (i.e., typographic markers, laughter typing, vowel enlargement, etc.).

Previous literature on the L2 acquisition of irony and humor has found evidence that learners identify and use irony in the L2 and that their ability to engage in humor increases with higher proficiency of the target language (Bell, 2006; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2003; Shively, Menke & Manzón-Omundson, 2008). Although humor and irony hold a place among the most intriguing of humans’ cognitive capacities –and their study has been fruitful among linguistic investigation (e.g., Attardo, 2000, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza & Lozano Palacios, 2019) the perception and use of irony by Spanish/L2 learners has received little attention. Bouton’s (1999) study on developing learners’ skills in interpreting implicatures in English revealed that learners recognize verbal irony in the L2, and that better recognition of irony correlates with greater proficiency and exposure to the target language. Findings from his study also showed the effectivity of explicitly teaching irony, as it was found to help students understand ironic intent. In another study aimed at enhancing Korean’s ability to detect and interpret English/L2 spoken sarcasm –a more aggressive variant of irony– Kim and Lantolf (2018) used a pre- and posttest procedure and interviews to measure changes in conceptual understanding of sarcasm and found that learners improved not only their L2 comprehension of sarcasm, but also their awareness of the use and function of sarcasm in

their first language (L1). With regard to the study of irony by Spanish/L2 learners, Shively et al. (2008) examined the interpretation of ironic utterances in films in Spanish and looked at the impact of audiovisual context on the learner's interpretation of irony. The rationale behind the inclusion of audio and visual cues was that authors hypothesized that students' ability to accurately perceive irony would be increased by the presence of intonation and facial expression. In line with Bouton's (1999) findings, Shively and colleagues found that irony recognition improved as proficiency and experience with Spanish increased. In a more recent study, Alvarado Ortega (2018) proposed an analysis of irony and an application to the Spanish/L2 classroom based on research conducted by the GRIALE group on irony and humor in Spanish (Alvarado Ortega & Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Ruiz Gurillo & Padilla García, 2009).

Still, no study to the best of the author's knowledge has yet explored Spanish/L2 learners' perception and use of written irony as well as offered a cognitive linguistic-based instruction of irony. Hence, based on previous research on the detection of Spanish and American-English ironic utterances in Twitter in terms of cognitive modelling (Martín-Gascón, 2019, in press) considering Ruiz de Mendoza's (2017) echoic account and Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano Palacios' (2019) unifying framework for explaining ironic discourse, the present study focuses on the teaching of a rather neglected yet important figure of speech, verbal irony. More specifically, this investigation, building from a strong theoretical account (see section 2), aims to implement a novel instruction of irony in the Spanish/L2 classroom and to gain insight into the recognition and production of written irony by Spanish/L2 learners with different proficiency levels. With this bifold purpose, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in the Spanish/L2 learners' perception and use of written irony after instruction?

RQ2: Is there a significant correlation between the learners' proficiency and ironic performance (perception and use)?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Pragmatic studies have explored the connection between irony and humor (Ritchie, 2005; Thomson, 2003; Ruiz Gurillo & Alvarado Ortega, 2013). In Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano Palacios' (2019) account, humor is explained in terms of the parametrization of the attitudinal element of irony, which is obtained inferentially but not through the breach of conversation maxims (Lozano Palacios, 2021, p. 45). Irony has been also regarded by the experimental literature (e.g., studies based on machine-learning approaches to detect irony) as a rhetorical device or literary trope arising from the discrepancy between what the speaker puts across in words and what they actually mean. As a result, it has been mixed with other disparate phenomena such as understatement, banter, or jokes. Understatement is a figure of speech that minimizes emotional impact and works by scaling down a gradable concept and by using an unrealistic scenario-building strategy (Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020, p. 21). The attitudinal effects result from how the source domain is constructed (downscaling), whereas in irony, the attitude is revealed through an implicature that arises from the contrast between the echoed and observable scenarios. Consider as an example *It's a bit late*, used

in a context of say, a meeting that has been going on for hours, so observers will realize the incongruity with the actual situation / scenario). Banter is not a figure of speech, but a discourse practice linked to humor and to a playful attitude (Jobert & Sorlin, 2018, p. 9) with ironic potential. Jokes are a way of conveying situational irony and have been characterized as a form of communication consisting of conceptual incongruity, unexpectedness, lexical ambiguity, implicitness of information, and a sudden change triggered by the punch line (Muschard, 1999, p. 4). Jokes and humor are largely related as both are violations of the Gricean cooperative principle (Grice, 1989).

Ruiz de Mendoza's (2017) account is based on a cognitive-linguistic view of irony, which conceives ironic language as incorporated into everyday speech and irony as a figure of thought that differs from the above-mentioned presumably related phenomena. Ruiz de Mendoza's echoic account builds on a scenario-based approach that explains ironic meaning as a meaning inference that results from a clash between an echoed statement or thought and one's actual or attributed thoughts followed by a skeptical and ironical attitude with emotional implication. A more recent development of this account which aims at merging echoic (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1998; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991) and pretense (Clark, 1996; Clark & Gerrig, 1984) accounts has been recently developed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano Palacios (2019) and adds the view that ironic meaning is also the result of a pretense attitude that the observer is expected to unwrap. Furthermore, two types of irony can be distinguished based on whether the echo is implicit (within the sentence) or explicit (outside the sentence). See examples (1) and (2), which have been retrieved from Martín-Gascón's (2019) study on written irony in tweets.

- (1) I love going to withdraw money and finding a broken ATM.
- (2) I love Lady Gaga's singing #irony.

Implicit-echoic irony (1) includes the speaker's intention within the linguistic material and, thus, it is easier for the reader to interpret. As a result, background information is not necessarily needed although previous context might be required for the utterance to be considered as ironical. Explicit-echoic irony (2), on the other hand, could lead to misunderstanding between the two participants, for the observer might understand the words literally. Hence, using linguistic or non-linguistic cues, such as echoic markers (e.g., *qué bien* 'how nice'), hashtags, emojis, or memes, among others, can give some clues to detect ironical attitude.

As opposed to oral communication where irony is normally accompanied by suprasegmental features (stress, facial expression, etc.), written-form irony –although pervasive in social media discourse– is rather difficult to both represent and perceive for L1 speakers (Martín-Gascón, 2019, in press), let alone for L2 learners who must have previously acquired linguistic skills and possess cultural knowledge to recognize the implied ironic meaning (Shively et al. 2008:106). Previous research examining linguistic and non-linguistic cues that serve as markers of irony has identified rhetorical questions (Muecke, 1978), morpho-syntactic markers (Haiman, 1998), tag questions and emoticons (Ghosh & Muresan, 2018; Kreuz, 2000; Singh et al., 2019), hashtags (Van Hee et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019), typographic markers and echoic markers (Attardo, 2000), memes (Davis et al., 2016; Lovink & Tuters, 2018) or GIFs (Dean, 2019) among other ironic signs used in ironic written utterances.

Martín-Gascón's (2019) analysis of Spanish ironic tweets in terms of cognitive modeling evidenced the use of a wide range of features closer to orality (interjections, punctuation

marks, vowel enlargement, capitalization, derivational suffixes and laughter) and features closer to written text (fixed expressions of approval or echoic markers: *claro que sí* ‘yeah sure’; collocations with qualitative adjectives: *dramática muerte* ‘drastic death’; phraseological units with intensifiers: *qué pena* ‘what a shame’; phraseological units with psych-verbs: *me encantan los lunes* ‘I love Mondays’; and phraseological units with metaphorical and metonymic mappings: *el próximo sábado culés y leones como un solo hombre* ‘next Saturday culés and leones as one man’. In a follow-up study examining irony in American-English tweets, Martín-Gascón (in press) found common patterns in some of the elements of the two-feature category proposed in Martín-Gascón (2019). Hence, American-English users also resorted to features closer to orality such as interjections, punctuation marks and laughter in their tweets, and to written features such as phraseological units with both intensifiers and psych-verbs (e.g., *What a perfect time to mess the game up / I hate making the decision on who ima go with #irony*). Diverging from results in the Spanish language corpus, temporal expressions (e.g., *#GOP was once about protecting homeland. Now all about tearing down our #FBI and other vital institutions. #ironic*) and rhetorical and tag questions (*Haha is Twitter still a thing??#ironic / He would know, wouldn't he? Irony, anyone? #IRONY*) were used by American-English users to convey irony.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

The present research was the product of a redesign and reimplementaion of a previous pilot study. This prior study, of a more descriptive nature, represented the day-to-day classroom, as students were presented to a material and an assessment that fit their daily classroom activities. Yet it departed to some extent from experimental research, so it allowed us to recognize methodological limitations and improve the research design. Findings from the pilot investigation still shed light into L2 learners’ perception and production of written irony and are briefly discussed in section 3.1.

3.1. The pilot study

Participants were eleven university students –one Spanish/L1 speaker, three heritage-speakers and seven advanced Spanish/L2 learners– at a North American University, who were first-time exposed to learning irony explicitly in a classroom environment. Data were collected during a 75-minute classroom session. Students were first given two pretests, then the instruction, and finally a posttest. For qualitative data, two online post-it boards were used as pre- and post-instruction tests (Appendix A), and quantitative data were retrieved from a survey on irony identification as pretest (Appendix B). The instruction package remained fairly similar to the one used in the main study. The data derived from the survey were analysed through a scoring system (1 correct, 0 correct) and the qualitative data were codified to recognise different themes and ways of conveying verbal irony in Spanish using a content analysis scheme.

Results from the two pretests showed the complexities of perceiving irony in written discourse (Appendix C) and its common misinterpretation with other presumably related phenomena, such as jokes, understatements, or banter. In relation to this latter, all partici-

pants scored the maximum for the ironic instances, except from two heritage-speakers and one L2 learner who scored 3 out of 4. As for instances where there was no irony, the native speaker rated 3 out of 6 as non-ironic cases, one heritage and three L2 speakers scored 2, one heritage speaker and three L2 learners identified only 1 instance of non-irony, and one heritage and one learner scored 0, mixing all the other phenomena with irony.

Results from the pretest asking for L2 learners' perception and understanding of irony were in agreement with previous studies with L1 and L2 speakers (Martín-Gascón, 2019, in press; Shively et al., 2008), as participants defined irony as literal descriptions with hidden and opposite meanings that allow for reflection, and related it to jokes, humor and sarcasm (examples 3 to 12).

- (3) Literal description but hidden meaning.
- (4) Say something but mean the opposite.
- (5) Used in funny contexts to make jokes.
- (6) A contradiction resulting in humor.
- (7) A description of something that is obvious in a conversation or in the text, used to reflect on something.
- (8) Similar to sarcasm, you say something but expect the other person to recognize it as different.
- (9) Using the structure of a sentence to convey a joke.
- (10) In an ironic situation, something that is the opposite of what you expect happens.
- (11) A way of speaking, using words that are the opposite of what you think to make a joke.
- (12) Intelligent and funny sentences.

To the question “Is it easy to understand irony?”, students agreed that it was easier in spoken text (conversations, audios, films) than in written form, and also in their L1 than in an L2. As factors that facilitate the understanding of irony, they highlighted context, tone, knowledge of the interlocutor and typographic markers such as quotes. Similarly, to the question “How can you show your interlocutor that you’re being ironic?”, they emphasized tone and context one more time, and added other linguistic and non-linguistic cues such as body language (e.g., facial expression), mannerism, word emphasis, or shared experience. As for the main topics that people tend to ironize about, learners mentioned social problems, daily life, news, politics, and emotions, among others, being these two latter along with sports the most common themes found in Martín-Gascón (2019, in press). Results after the application of the cognitive-based instruction revealed a productive and near-native use of written irony in Spanish, with the inclusion of linguistic and non-linguistic elements presented during the instruction (e.g., visual input, emojis, laughter typing, vowel enlargement, upper cases, rhetorical questions).

3.2. Research design

A mixed-method research design was followed to “broaden the scope of the investigation and enrich the ability to draw conclusions” (Dörnyei, 2000, p. 164). Hence, to gain insight into the learners' proficiency, linguistic background and exposure qualitative and quantitative

measures were employed. To elicit learners' perception and use of irony in Spanish and to understand the impact of explicitly teaching irony from a cognitive linguistics perspective, the study also used quantitative and qualitative data in the pre and posttests (see Figure 1).

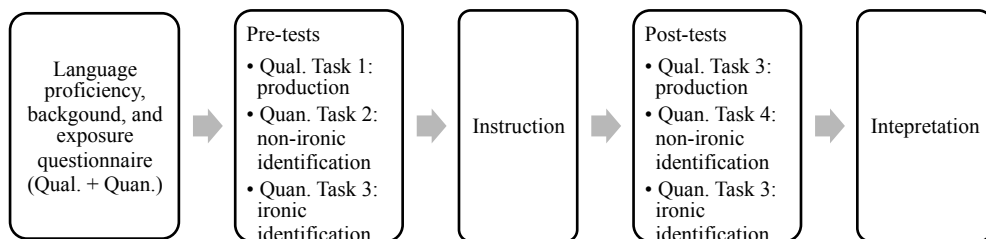


Figure 1. Research process of the mixed-method design

3.3. Participants

Participants were recruited from an initial pool of 169 undergraduate students enrolled in thirteen sections and attending either intermediate or advanced online Spanish/L2 courses as part of their curriculum at a university in North America. The thirteen sections were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups: intermediate (INT) ($n = 58$), advanced (ADV) ($n = 59$), intermediate control (CON_INT) ($n = 29$), and advanced control (CON_ADV) ($n = 23$). For sample selection only one criterion was put in place which was to have completed the linguistic background questionnaire and all pre-and-posttests. The initial pool of 169 students was then reduced to 146 participants, distributed as follows: INT ($n = 51$), ADV ($n = 57$), CON_INT ($n = 19$), CON_ADV ($n = 19$). 8 students from the INT group were Spanish heritage speakers, 2 from the ADV, 3 from the CON_INT, and 7 from the CON_ADV. 2 students in the ADV group and 1 in the CON_ADV considered themselves as English-Spanish bilinguals. In our sample, 24 students had as L1 other languages than English (or along with English) (Table 1). As for language use, all participants except one said they used only or mostly English at university, 11 said they spoke at home in Spanish or both in English and Spanish. From those 11, only 2 said they used both languages in social situations. All participants used English at work. From the total of students, only 15 responded that they frequently watched Spanish movies and TV shows.

Table 1. *Participants' L1s*

LANGUAGE/S	N
English	145
English and Spanish	4
Portuguese	3
Korean	1
Chinese	1
Farsi	1
Creole	1
Wolof	1
French	1
Igbo	1
Portuguese and English	1
English and Bangla	1
English and Tamil	1
English and Chinese	1
English and French	1
English and Arabic	1
English and Danish	1
English and Hindi	1
English and Bengali	1
English, Chinese, and Taiwanese	1

3.4. Materials

An instruction package (3.4.1) and data collection instruments (3.4.2) were designed and implemented.

3.4.1. Instruction package

The two experimental groups (INT and ADV) were explicitly taught about written irony in Spanish during a 75-minute session. The material was designed following Ruiz de Mendoza and Lozano Palacios' (2019) unifying framework for explaining ironic discourse and based on results on linguistic and non-linguistic ironic markers in Spanish and American English (Martín-Gascón, 2019, in press). The didactic sequence (Appendix D) included brainstorm-

ing questions in assembly that had been used in the pilot study and a definition of verbal irony based on the cognitive linguistics framework adopted. It also put the emphasis on the distinction between irony and other phenomena like banter, jokes, and understatement. It offered a taxonomy of irony (non-explicit and explicit-echoic irony, positive and negative), and exemplified the different ways in which Spanish speakers tend to convey irony –highlighting similarities and differences with English and focusing on ironic instances displaying the writer’s emotions on a certain topic.

3.4.2. Data collection tools

3.4.2.1. Language background, exposure, and proficiency questionnaire

A questionnaire asking about the participants’ linguistic background, exposure, and proficiency was adapted from Cuza and Frank (2015) (Appendix E) and can be found in the following link: <https://forms.gle/QnQ3KsJCtUsWMgzc9> (Appendix F). It included background questions to assess the degree of bilingualism as well as language contact in different life spheres. Although participants were taking part in two different Spanish course levels (intermediate and upper intermediate/advanced), self-assessment proficiency items asking about their perceived level in the four skills in English and Spanish were designed to triangulate and gather more accurate information.

3.4.2.2. Assessment tools

Four assessment tasks were designed in line with the cognitive-based approach and contents of the instruction material to elicit participants’ performance with regard to written irony (Appendix G). Task 1 sought to gain insight into participants’ use of irony (written production), and Tasks 2 and 3 focused on irony interpretation. These two latter included 5 items each with non-ironic instances (Task 2) and ironic ones (Task 3). The data retrieved from Tasks 1, 2, and 3 were analysed through a scoring system (1 correct, 0 correct). Although verbal irony, and more specifically, written irony was the target of study and the construct being measured, the assessment tools included linguistic ironic cues coexisting with other non-linguistic ones such as GIFs, emojis, hashtags, etc., as found in previous studies on irony detection (Davis et al., 2016; Dean, 2019; Ghosh & Muresan, 2018; Martín-Gascón, 2019; Singh et al., 2019; Tuters, 2018; Van Hee et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019).

3.4.2.2.1. Task 1 (production)

Pretest Task 1 (<https://forms.gle/4oJq1TawfmNokDhP9>) and Posttest Task 1 (<https://forms.gle/D4r7dbkMcJRF3cgPA>) were designed after conducting the pilot study and included ten visual cues displaying recurrent topics in the literature around which irony is built in Twitter and the ironic themes highlighted by participants in the pilot (e.g., social problems, daily life, politics, emotions). Based on this visual input, participants were required to write an ironic utterance in Spanish that matched the image creating a clash (Figure 2). The pretest differed from the posttest in that the former asked at the beginning about learners’ experience with irony inside and outside the L2 classroom (e.g., *¿Has estudiado la ironía en clase de español alguna vez?* ‘Have you ever studied irony in your Spanish classes?’, *¿Te parece fácil*

usar y entender la ironía en tu lengua materna? ¿Y en otras lenguas que hablas? ‘Do you find it easy to use and understand irony in your mother tongue? And in other languages you speak?’, *¿Cómo puedes mostrar a tu interlocutor/a que estás siendo irónico/a? ‘How can you show your interlocutor that you’re being ironic?’*, these two latter were adapted from the pilot study). The qualitative data derived from the open-ended questions were codified to recognise and group different ways of showing ironic intention.



Escribe en español algo irónico que te inspire esta imagen *

Tu respuesta

Figure 2. Item from production task

3.4.2.2.2. Task 2 and Task 3 (identification)

Pretest Task 2 and 3 (<https://forms.gle/tyu3K6fEhdvM1mz56>) and posttest Task 2 and 3 (<https://forms.gle/Ww6Ge2cWxAakyFD88>) were inspired by the pretest survey on irony identification from the pilot study. Yet, in this case, there was a pre- and post-instruction test each showing five instances of related phenomena (i.e., banter, understatement, and jokes) (Task 2) and five ironic items (Task 3) (see Figure 3 and 4, respectively) and participants were asked to say whether they were instances of irony or not.



¿Hay ironía en el ejemplo 1? *

- Sí
- No

Figure 3. Non-ironic item from Task 2

9) (Es un vídeo, dale a "play")



¿Hay ironía en el ejemplo 9? *

- Sí
- No

Figure 4. Ironic item from Task 3

3.5. Procedure

The pedagogical implementation and the different tests and questionnaire were delivered cross-sectionally during a normal 75-minute classroom session. All participants were informed about the study being conducted and guided through the different phases in a five-minute presentation. They were asked to sign a consent form stating that they were willing to participate, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study whenever they wished. The language proficiency, background, and exposure questionnaire was then administered, as well as the two pretests. In the following 60 minutes, the experimental groups received the instruction on verbal irony (the two control groups received instruction on a different topic) and at the end of the session all participants were asked to complete the two posttests.

4. FINDINGS

RQ1 examined the effectiveness of explicitly teaching irony from a CL perspective in learners’ recognition and written production. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of scores in the three tasks (Task 1 production; Task 2 identification of no irony; Task 3 identification of irony) by all four group conditions (INT, ADV, CON_INT, CONT_ADV) in the two time periods (pretest and posttest).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics*

<i>Time and Task</i>	INT (N= 51)		ADV (N =57)		CON_INT (N= 19)		CONT_ADV (N= 19)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pretest Task 1	1.53	1.86	1.58	2.21	0.63	1.21	0.58	1.30
Posttest Task 1	7.41	2.48	8.44	2.30	0.47	1.07	0.79	1.35
Pretest Task 2	1.29	1.08	1.25	1.02	1.37	1.21	0.79	.71
Posttest Task 2	3.90	1.02	3.86	1.07	0.89	.80	0.89	.80
Pretest Task 3	3.12	1.50	3.39	1.30	1.21	1.35	1.53	1.38
Posttest Task 3	4.65	.65	4.74	0.61	1.53	1.54	1.21	1.08

The statistical analyses run consisted of nonparametric tests, for normality criteria were not met for all subsamples. Table 3 shows the statistical analysis run to survey the effects of the pedagogical treatment. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed that there was a change in the scores obtained in the pretest and posttest by the INT group, which proved to be statistically significant for all 3 tasks: Task 1 ($Z = -6,108, p = .000$), Task 2 ($Z = -6,085, p = .000$), and Task 3 ($Z = -4,806, p = .000$), with large effect size for Task 1 (r

= .06) and Task 2 ($r = .60$) and medium for Task 3 ($r = .47$). Indeed, the median score increased from 1,00 in pretest to 8,00 in posttest in Task 1, from 1,00 to 4,00 in Task 2, and from 4,00 to 5,00 in Task 3. For the ADV group, all 3 tasks revealed a statistically significant increase from pre to posttest: Task 1 ($Z = -6,528, p = .000$), Task 2 ($Z = -6,318, p = .000$), and Task 3 ($Z = -5,771, p = .000$), with large effect size (Task 1, $r = .61$; Task 2, $r = .59$; Task 3, $r = .54$). The median increased from 1.00 to 10,00 in Task 1, and from 1,00 to 4,00 and 4,00 to 5,00 in Task 2 and 3, respectively. Previous tests show that there is a statistically significant increase in test scores in all three posttest situations in the two groups. This calculation hints at a large effect of applied intervention for both experimental groups, which indicates the efficacy of the treatment in intermediate and advanced students and an acceptable degree of generalization. As expected, there are no significant changes in test scores within control groups.

Table 3. *Wilcoxon signed-rank test statistics*

	INT (N= 51)			ADV (N =57)		
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Z	-6.108 ^b	-6.085 ^b	-4.806 ^b	-6.528 ^b	-6.318 ^b	-5.771 ^b
Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Effect size	0.604	0.602	0.475	0.611	0.591	0.540

The second RQ surveyed whether there was a statistically significant change in test scores in both the pretest and posttest situation between groups. Mann-Whitney U tests were run to examine the type of correlation between all four groups, and between proficiency and ironic performance. Results revealed a significant difference between the two experimental conditions (INT and ADV) on the posttest for Task 1 ($Z = -2,907, p = .004$) (Table 4). Results from comparisons between intermediate-level groups showed a significant difference between INT and CON_INT on the posttest for all 3 tasks: Task 1 ($Z = -6,204, p = .000$), Task 2 ($Z = -6,311, p = .000$), Task 3 ($Z = -6,350, p = .000$), and in the pretest for Task 3 ($Z = -4,109, p = .000$) (Table 5). Results also revealed a significant difference between the two advanced groups (ADV and CON_ADV) for all tasks in the posttest: Task 1 ($Z = -6,585, p = .000$), Task 2 ($Z = -6,292, p = .000$), Task 3 ($Z = -7,266, p = .000$), and for Task 3 in the pretest ($Z = -4,365, p = .000$) (Table 6). No significant difference in test scores between the two control groups was found.

Table 4. *Man-Whitney test statistics. INT and ADV.*

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretask 1	1410	3063	-0.284	0.776
Posttask 2	997	2323	-2.907	0.004
Pretask 1	1411	3064	-0.272	0.785
Posttask 2	1437	3090	-0.106	0.915
Pretask 3	1331.5	2657.5	-0.778	0.437
Posttask 3	1358	2684	-0.810	0.418

Table 5. *Man-Whitney test statistics. INT and CON_INT.*

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretask 1	363	553	-1.729	0.084
Posttask 2	20	210	-6.204	0.000
Pretask 1	468	1794	-0.226	0.821
Posttask 2	16	206	-6.311	0.000
Pretask 3	179.5	369.5	-4.109	0.000
Posttask 3	48.5	238.5	-6.350	0.000

Table 6. *Man-Whitney test statistics. ADV and CON_ADV.*

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretask 1	390	580	-1.999	0.046
Posttask 2	13	203	-6.585	0.000
Pretask 1	1411	601	-1.648	0.099
Posttask 2	28	218	-6.292	0.000
Pretask 3	186.5	376.5	-4.365	0.000
Posttask 3	8	198	-7.266	0.000

5. DISCUSSION

Findings from the current study demonstrate the positive outcomes of explicitly teaching irony in the Spanish/L2 classroom, this being in line with the previous scarce research conducted on this topic and in this language (Alvarado Ortega, 2018; Bouton, 1999). More specifically, results revealed that intermediate and advanced learners performed significantly better after the intervention in all recognition and written production tasks. When participants

were asked in the pretest whether they had ever learned irony in an L2 instructional environment, 164 out of 169 students answered no. This absence of irony in the L2 curriculum might be due to the almost lack of mention of this pragmatic phenomenon in reference documents such as the *CEFR* and *PCIC*, which are consulted by textbook writers, curriculum advisors and practitioners. In this regard, our findings are noteworthy as they prove the high benefits of an explicit and cognitive-based pedagogy in learners' L2 ironic performance. The answer to the question whether they found it easy to use and perceive irony in their mother tongue and in other languages they spoke was no (in other L2s) in all cases except from four students. Although it was beyond the scope of this study, it would have been interesting to compare the cognitive experimental condition with a traditional one –which offered a more traditional account of verbal irony, based on, e.g., the socio-historical approach taken by literary theorists. Further research should be conducted addressing this.

Furthermore, results also revealed a positive correlation between L2 proficiency and ironic written production, as advanced students showed statistically significant higher scores in that task than intermediate learners, which aligns with previous literature on L2 acquisition of irony and humor (Bell, 2006; Davies, 2003). However, findings in the current study did not show a significant difference between the two proficiency groups for irony recognition tasks in the posttest. This suggests that understanding irony does not necessarily require a high level of proficiency, as intermediate learners performed similarly to advanced ones in identifying ironic and non-ironic instances. These findings depart from studies (e.g., Bouton, 1999; Cook, 2000; Deneire, 1995; Schmitz, 2002; Shively et al., 2008) that have found that irony and humor recognition improves as proficiency increases, and therefore advocate their inclusion at advanced levels, in agreement with the *CEFR* guidelines. In line with Bell (2009) and Linares-Bernabeu (2017), our promising findings suggest that irony can be already introduced at lower levels.

6. CONCLUSION

Ironic language, as a social mechanism and part of everyday speech, holds an affective component that favors a sense of camaraderie in the L2 classroom. Due to its crucial role in the communicative act, using irony requires the ability to interpret and produce pragmatic incongruities, among others. Previous studies have shown that humor engagement grows as linguistic proficiency increases. However, irony has been a largely neglected area in the teaching of L2s in general, and even more so of Spanish, with the exception of a few studies (Alvarado Ortega & Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Ruiz Gurillo & Padilla García, 2009; Shively et al., 2008). Considering this gap in the experimental literature, the study presented here, building from previous research on irony detection in Spanish and American-English tweets and from a strong theoretical approach based on the echoic account has implemented a pedagogical material in an instructional environment. On the one hand, it has examined the efficiency of explicitly teaching irony from a cognitive linguistics perspective on Spanish/L2 learners' perception and use of irony. On the other, and following previous research, the study has explored the relationship between linguistic proficiency and ironic performance.

The study has succeeded in showing significant learning gains after instruction for both experimental groups, intermediate and advanced. Findings have also revealed the efficiency

of teaching irony already at intermediate levels in the Spanish/L2 classroom. Furthermore, the study has examined not only learners' recognition of irony, but also written irony production, a generally unheeded skill in experimental studies heretofore. By enhancing ironic competence, we are contributing to boosting students' linguistic knowledge and pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence. This is clearly not a trivial pedagogical matter and as such should be further addressed. Although more research is needed to replicate and corroborate the results reported, we believe that the study is a significant step forward in demonstrating the importance of teaching irony to enhance learners' communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Reyes Llopis-García and Irene Alonso-Aparicio for their very helpful comments, and to students and instructors at the Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures at Columbia University for their participation and commitment. I would also like to thank the Reviewers for most constructive feedback on earlier drafts. I remain, however, solely responsible for any weaknesses.

8. REFERENCES

- Alvarado Ortega, M.B. (2018). The pragmatics of irony in the L2 Spanish classroom. In D. Dumitrescu, & P.L. Andueza (Eds.), *L2 Spanish pragmatics: From research to teaching* (pp. 169–190). Routledge.
- Alvarado Ortega, M.B., & Ruiz Gurillo, L. (2013). *Humor, ironía y géneros textuales*. Universidad de Alicante.
- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S. (2000). Irony as relevant inappropriateness. *Journal of pragmatics*, 32(6), 793-826.
- Attardo, S. (Ed.). (2017). *The Routledge handbook of language and humor*. Taylor & Francis.
- Ayçiçeği-Dinn, A., Şişman-Bal, S., & Caldwell-Harris, C. L. (2018). Are jokes funnier in one's native language? *Humor*, 31(1), 5-37.
- Bell, N. (2006). Interactional adjustments in humorous intercultural communication. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 3(1), 1-28.
- Bell, N. D. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(3), 241-258.
- Bouton, L. (1999). Developing nonnative speaker skills in interpreting conversational implicatures in English. *Culture in second language teaching and learning*, 30(1), 47-70.
- Cervantes Institute. (2006). Plan curricular del Instituto Cervantes. Madrid: Biblioteca nueva. Retrieved from http://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/.
- Chen, X., & Dewaele, J. M. (2019). The relationship between English proficiency and humour appreciation among English L1 users and Chinese L2 users of English. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 10(4), 653-676.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge university press.
- Clark, H. H., & Gerrig, R. J. (1984). On the pretense theory of irony. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113(1), 121–126. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.113.1.121>

- Cook, G. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Cuza, A., & Frank, J. (2015). On the role of experience and age-related effects: Evidence from the Spanish CP. *Second Language Research*, 31(1), 3-28.
- Davies, C.E. (2003). How English learners joke with native speakers: an interactional socio-linguistic perspective on humor as collaborative discourse across cultures. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1361-85.
- Davis, C.B., Glantz, M., & Novak, D.R. (2016). "You Can't Run Your SUV on Cute. Let's Go!": Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse. *Environmental Communication*, 10(1), 62-83.
- Dean, J. (2019). Sorted for memes and gifs: Visual media and everyday digital politics. *Political Studies Review*, 17(3), 255-266.
- Deneire, M. (1995). Humor and foreign language teaching. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 8(3), 285-98.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2000). Motivation in action: Towards a process-oriented conceptualisation of student motivation. *British journal of educational psychology*, 70(4), 519-538.
- Ghosh, D., & Muresan, S. (2018, June). "With 1 Follower I Must Be AWESOME: P." Exploring the role of irony markers in irony recognition. In *Twelfth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*.
- Gibbs Jr, R. W., & O'Brien, J. (1991). Psychological aspects of irony understanding. *Journal of pragmatics*, 16(6), 523-530.
- Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Harvard University Press.
- Haiman, J. (1998). *Talk is cheap: Sarcasm, alienation, and the evolution of language*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- Jobert, M., & Sorlin, S. (Eds.). (2018). *The pragmatics of irony and banter* (Vol. 30). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Kreuz, R. J. (2000). The production and processing of verbal irony. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 15(1-2), 99-107.
- Kim, J., & Lantolf, J. P. (2018). Developing conceptual understanding of sarcasm in L2 English through explicit instruction. *Language Teaching Research*, 22(2), 208-229.
- Linares-Bernabeu, E. (2017). "¿Y dónde está la gracia? El humor en el aula de ELE." *Foro de profesores de E/LE* 13, 20.
- Lozano Palacios, I. (2021). *A scenario-based approach to irony. Structure, meaning and function*. [Unpublished PhD Thesis]. Universidad de la Rioja, Logroño, Spain.
- Lovink, G., & Tuters, M. (2018). Memes and the reactionary totemism of the theft of joy. non.copyright.com.
- Martín-Gascón, B. (2019). A cognitive modeling approach on ironical phraseology in Twitter. In G. Corpas & R. Mitkov (Eds.), *Computational and Corpus-Based Phraseology* (pp. 299-314). Springer, Cham.
- Martín-Gascón, B. (In press). *Irony in American-English tweets. A cognitive and phraseological analysis*. John Benjamins.
- Muscard, J. (1999) Jokes and their relation to relevance and cognition or can relevance theory account for the appreciation of jokes? *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 47(1) 12-23.
- Muecke, D. C. (1978). Irony markers. *Poetics*, 7(4), 363-375.
- Ritchie, D. (2005). Frame-shifting in humor and irony. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 20(4), 275-294.
- Ruiz de Mendoza, F.J. (2017). Cognitive modeling and irony. In H. Colson & A. Athanasiadou (Eds.), *Irony in language use and communication* (pp. 179-200). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ruiz de Mendoza, F.J. (2019). Figurative language: relations and constraints. In J. Barnden & A. Gargett (Eds.), *Producing figurative expression*. John Benjamins.

- Ruiz de Mendoza, F.J. (2020). Understanding figures of speech: dependency relations and organizational patterns. *Language & Communication*, 71, 16–38.
- Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, F.J., & Lozano-Palacio, I. (2019). Unraveling irony: From linguistics to literary criticism and back. *Cognitive Semantics*, 5(1), 147-173.
- Ruiz Gurillo, L., & Ortega, M.B.A. (Eds.). (2013). *Irony and humor: from pragmatics to discourse* (Vol. 231). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Ruiz Gurillo, L., & Padilla García, X. (Eds.) (2009). *Dime cómo ironizas y te diré quién eres*. Peter Lang.
- Schmitz, J.R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 15(1), 89-113.
- Shively, R. L., Menke, M. R., & Manzón-Omundson, S. M. (2008). Perception of irony by L2 learners of Spanish. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 16(2), 101-132.
- Singh, A., Blanco, E., & Jin, W. (2019, June). Incorporating emoji descriptions improves tweet classification. In *Proceedings of the 2019 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies, Volume 1 (Long and Short Papers)* (pp. 2096-2101).
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1981). Irony and the use-mention distinction. *Philosophy*, 3, 143-184.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1998). The mapping between the mental and the public lexicon. In P. Carruthers & J. Boucher (Eds.), *Language and thought: Interdisciplinary themes* (pp. 184-20). Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, R.M. (2003). Satire, Irony, and Humour. In C.J. Mews, C.J. Nederman & R.M. Thomson (Eds.), *Essays in honour of John O Ward, Turnhout. W. William of Malmesbury, rhetoric and renewal in the Latin west* (pp. 115-127).
- Tuters, M. (2018). LARPing & liberal tears. Irony, belief and idiocy in the deep vernacular web. In M. Fielitz & N. Thurston (Eds.), *Post-digital cultures of the far right* (pp. 37-48). Transcript-Verlag.
- Van Hee, C., Lefever, E., & Hoste, V. (2016, May). Exploring the realization of irony in Twitter data. In *Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC'16)* (pp. 1794-1799).
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (1992). On verbal irony. *Lingua*, 87(1), 53-76.
- Zhang, S., Zhang, X., Chan, J., & Rosso, P. (2019). Irony detection via sentiment-based transfer learning. *Information Processing & Management*, 56(5), 1633-1644.

9. APPENDICES

Appendices have been uploaded to the following Open Science Framework URL: https://osf.io/s6dvr/?view_only=8013554173874cdcadd43fac68e22228