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## **Listener Responses and Alignment in Intercultural Discourse: Can Beginning Spanish Students Respond Appropriately During Interaction in the L2?**

Providing effective and appropriate feedback to one's interlocutor is an important skill during the co-construction of conversation. For second language learners, appropriate use of listener responses (LRs) in second language (L2) conversation forms a part of their interactional competence (IC) (He & Young, 1998; Kasper, 2006; Young, 2008); however, while LRs are considered universal features of human language, specific LR behaviors are particular to certain languages and cultures, and can vary in terms of frequency, variability, and function (Heinz, 2003). Research on intercultural discourse reveals that differences in L1 listener response behavior can lead to misleading feedback and potential pragmatic failure during communication in the L2 (Heinz, 2003). In addition, the inappropriate use of listener response tokens can undermine the alignment between interactants (Stivers, 2008). Alignment refers to instances where interactants demonstrate their intersubjectivity and shared understanding during conversation by being involved in highly coordinated interaction, using a wide array of resources such as agreement, assessments, and collaborative contributions (Atkinson et al., 2007; Dings, 2014).

Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of beginning Spanish students' interactions with native Spanish speakers, this study explored the role LRs played in learners' ability to build and maintain alignment with their interlocutors in the L2, as a means of assessing their IC. Previous research on LRs comparing Spanish and English speakers focuses primarily on patterns of LRs, not the relationship between LRs and alignment during intercultural communication. A close analysis of the audio-recorded interactions compared form, function, and placement of listener responses between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) in two Spanish/American dyads, and examined how differences in LRs may have helped or hindered alignment between the learners and NSs. The research questions included: (1) What were the characteristics of LRs for the NSs and NNSs? (2) Did differences in LRs facilitate or hinder alignment?

Results of the study indicated that, while learners demonstrated deviation from native speaker LR norms in terms of their form, function, and placement, interactants were still able to maintain alignment during the majority of the conversations; however, differences in LR behavior did inhibit alignment between participants, at times. Overall, results from the study highlight a crucial aspect of L2 pragmatic development; not only does the listener contribute to the ongoing discourse, LRs can help build intersubjectivity by aligning with the speaker.

Due to the possibility of interactional consequences for L2 learners, building awareness of variation in LRs between English and Spanish is crucial to learners' development. Studies have shown that a focus on teaching interactional and pragmatic norms through consciousness-

raising strategies has a positive effect on interlanguage development (Dewaele, 2007). Due to the effectiveness of direct pragmatic instruction, future studies might look at whether students may benefit from explicitly learning Spanish LRs that they can use to align in a conversation with NSs. If learners can be instructed in NS LR norms, they may be able to participate more meaningfully in conversation, allowing them to align more closely with their interlocutors, thereby supporting their acquisition of IC in the L2.

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