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Perception of Irony by L2 Learners of Spanish

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Recent studies on the second language (L2) acquisition of irony and humor indicate that learners both use and recognize verbal irony in the target language and suggest that the ability to understand irony and to engage in verbal humor increases with greater language proficiency (Bell, 2005, 2006; Bouton, 1999; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2003). While the study of irony has enjoyed a long history in linguistics and the topic of humor in an L2 has received some attention in the field of SLA, few studies have specifically analyzed the understanding of irony by L2 learners. The objective of the present study was to examine the interpretation of ironic utterances in Spanish-language films by L2 learners of Spanish and the impact of an audiovisual context on the ability of learners to interpret irony. The results of the study support previous work on irony and humor in L2 learning in suggesting that the recognition of irony improves as proficiency level and experience with the target language increase. Furthermore, the hypothesis that the greater number of audio and visual sources available to the listener will make irony easier to process and identify (Yus Ramos, 1998; 2000) was only weakly supported and only for the more advanced learners in this study. It was argued that constraints on working memory and processing help to explain why the audiovisual context did not seem to assist the beginning-level learners in interpreting irony and why it seemed to help the more advanced learners in doing so, at least in one movie scene.

INTRODUCTION

While the study of irony has enjoyed a great deal of attention in linguistics (cf. Attardo, 2000), relatively little is known about the perception and use of this figure of speech by second language (L2) learners. The only previous study on this topic (Bouton, 1999) indicates that L2 learners do recognize verbal irony in the target language and that the ability to understand irony improves as a result of increased language proficiency and greater experience in the target language. Studies on the use of humor in an L2 have suggested a similar link between language proficiency and the ability to understand and use humorous talk (Bell, 2005; Bouton, 1999; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2003). As the aforementioned studies have shown, in order to understand irony and humor, L2 learners need to be able to comprehend the literal

meaning that the lexical and syntactic elements of the utterance convey, as well as to be able to detect a mismatch between the literal meaning and the conversational or situational context—all of which are skills that develop as language proficiency increases. Irony also frequently involves an allusion to norms and expectations or to sayings and quotes, meaning that L2 learners may need to be familiar with social norms and specific cultural references in the target language in order to understand the implied ironic meaning (Baena, 2005; Barbe, 1995). Consequently, learners' improvement over time in being able to interpret irony may also be explained by the increase in knowledge about the target culture that typically accompanies greater language proficiency and experience in the target language (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003). In addition, explicit instruction in irony appears to be effective in helping L2 learners to improve their ability to understand the ironic intent of utterances (Bouton, 1999).

An interesting finding that emerged from Bouton's (1999) research on the L2 acquisition of irony was that ironic utterances were more difficult to comprehend for uninstructed learners of English than other types of non-literal utterances. Even after spending four to seven years in the United States, Bouton's learners continued having difficulty with accurately interpreting irony. This finding suggests that trouble with irony persists even at more advanced levels of proficiency. However, the instrument that Bouton administered in his study consisted of multiple-choice items presented to learners in written form. Thus, the instrument lacked audio and visual cues that might have assisted learners in making an ironic reading of the utterances in question. While ironic utterances in verbal interactions are not always accompanied by cues such as a special intonation or facial expression, the presence of audio and visual cues may help to signal an ironic interpretation (Yus Ramos, 1998). Consequently, a question that arises from Bouton's results is whether L2 learners' ability to accurately perceive irony would be increased by the presence of an audio and visual context. Yus Ramos (1998) argues that the more the features of the context of the utterance make the literal meaning incompatible, the easier and quicker it will be for the hearer to interpret the ironic meaning. Following Yus Ramos' proposal, we hypothesized that the provision of an audio and visual context would make the ironic meaning of an utterance easier to perceive for L2 learners.

In order to address these issues, the present study was designed to examine the effect of L2 proficiency and the presence of an audiovisual context on the interpretation of ironic utterances by L2 learners of Spanish at three different levels of proficiency. In the first section of this study, we provide an overview of the conceptual background relevant for our examination of the perception of irony by L2 learners. We discuss the definition of irony, present Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) principle of optimal accessibility to irony, and review the research on the L2 acquisition of irony and humor.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Background on Irony

Irony has traditionally been defined as a figure of speech that means the opposite of what is literally said. This definition has been widely criticized both for being too general, as well as for being too limited (cf. Kaufer, 1981; Sperber & Wilson, 1981). Bouton's (1999) study on the L2 acquisition of irony was based on a definition of irony put forth by Grice (1975, 1978) which, while not diverging significantly from the traditional definition of irony, attempted to account for irony within pragmatic theory. Grice's approach defined irony as a conversational implicature that violates the cooperative principle and the maxim of quality ("be truthful"). Along with the traditional definition, the Gricean approach has also been criticized for being too restricted in scope (cf. Kaufer, 1981; Sperber & Wilson, 1981).

More recent attempts to address the limitations of the traditional and Gricean definitions of irony include, most notably, echoic mention (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 1986, 1998; Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Gibbs, 1982; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1991), pretense (Clark, 1996; Clark & Gerrig, 1984), graded salience and indirect negation (Giora, 1995, 1997, 1998), allusional pretense (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, & Brown, 1995), politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Jorgensen, 1996; Leech, 1983), pragmatics (Attardo, 2000; Glucksberg, 1995; Grice, 1975, 1989; Haverkate, 1990), and framing (Clift, 1999; Partington, 2007; Ritchie, 2005). For a comprehensive review of the work on irony in linguistics, see Attardo (2000).

Despite extensive discussion in the literature, there is still no agreement among scholars on a definition of irony. For the purposes of this study, we were interested in applying Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) principle of optimal accessibility to irony in order to examine the role of audio and visual information in L2 learners' perception of irony. Therefore, we follow Yus Ramos (2000), who bases his proposal on Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1998) echoic mention definition of irony. Echo theory rejects the claim of the traditional view that irony communicates the opposite of the literal meaning, positing instead that irony echoes previous utterances, thoughts, feelings, or events, conventional wisdom, social norms, or expectations. In echoing, a speaker attributes the utterance to someone else or to commonly held norms, in effect, disassociating him or herself from the utterance. Regarding the functions of irony, Wilson and Sperber (1992) argue that irony is generally used to express disapproval and dissociative attitudes such as skepticism, mockery, and rejection (Wilson, 2007, p. 1730). Irony is also frequently employed to be humorous.

Within an echoic mention theory of irony and relevance theory more generally (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1998), Yus Ramos (1998, 2000) proposes the *criterion of optimal accessibility to irony* to account for both the identification of irony as well as the cognitive effort required to process irony. Yus Ramos (2000, p. 50) summarizes the assumptions of his model into one criterion:

The processing effort required for the interpretations of the intended ironic meaning of an utterance decreases in proportion to the increase in the number (and quality) of incompatibilities (detected by the addressee) between the information supplied by the inferential integration of simultaneously activated contextual sources...and the information provided by the proposition expressed by the utterance.

In other words, the more the accompanying information makes the literal meaning of the utterance incompatible with the context, the easier and quicker it will be for the hearer to interpret the ironic meaning.

Yus Ramos (1998, p. 42) proposes seven categories, or “contextual sources,” that a hearer uses in interpreting the ironic meaning of an utterance:

1. **Encyclopedic, factual information:** The mental representations that people have about certain situations (e.g., frames, schemas, stereotypes), which make up the assumptions against which new information is processed. This category includes cultural knowledge and social norms, expectations, and assumptions.
2. **Mutually manifest physical context:** The physical setting of the interaction.
3. **Speaker’s nonverbal behavior:** This category includes facial expression, tone of voice, and other prosodic features.
4. **Addressee’s background knowledge of addresser’s biographical data:** Background information about the speaker can assist the hearer in interpreting the intended irony.
5. **Mutual knowledge:** This category refers to the common ground or mutual knowledge that is constructed in the interaction, between participants.
6. **Previous utterances of the conversation:** Previous utterances provide the conversational context and possible sources for echoic irony.
7. **Linguistic cues:** Syntactic structures and vocabulary choices that are used for ironic purposes (Note: this category was added in Yus Ramos, 2000).

According to the model, these contextual sources are activated simultaneously while the hearer is interpreting an utterance. As the hearer processes an utterance, he or she looks for inconsistencies between the contextual sources and the literal meaning. The model predicts that the more contextual sources that are present to suggest an ironic interpretation (i.e., a high level of redundancy), the less effort it will take and the easier it will be to identify the ironic interpretation in comparison with the literal meaning. Conversely, if the number of contextual sources is not high enough (i.e., little redundancy), a misunderstanding of the irony may occur. To support the assumptions of his model, Yus Ramos (1998) analyzes conversational and textual data from native speaker interactions to demonstrate the relationship between the redundancy of contextual sources, the perceived incompatibilities, and the ease of processing irony.

In order to understand how these contextual sources may be related to L2 learners' perception of irony, it is useful to look more closely at items (1), (3), and (7) above. First, factual knowledge constitutes the background knowledge against which new information is compared and includes social norms, cultural references, expectations, and commonsense assumptions. For example, Torres Sánchez (1994) highlights the fact that in order to understand ironic utterances collected from a radio program in Spain, the hearer would need to draw on a broad range of Spanish cultural references, for example, the disheveled appearance of a well-known Spanish politician. Similarly, based on data from conversations and radio shows in Spain, Baena (2005) concluded that shared knowledge was a key factor in the ability of a hearer to interpret irony. Baena argued that when the hearers did not have enough shared knowledge about the personality, history, and beliefs of the speaker, the hearer did not understand the ironic intent.

With regard to nonverbal behavior, facial expressions such as smiling, frowning, winking, sneering, and deadpan, as well as gestures and laughing may help the hearer identify irony (Yus Ramos, 2000; Utsumi, 2000). Tone of voice may also help to signal an ironic interpretation (Bryant & Fox Tree, 2005). Common prosodic cues reported in the literature (primarily on English) include intonation contour, exaggerated stress, slow speaking rate, tone of voice, and nasalization (Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; Utsumi, 2000).

In Spanish, Kalbermatten (2007) reported that one of her speakers used a doubtful intonation (fall-rise) with an ironic utterance as a means to demonstrate the opposition between the literal and intended ironic meaning. Another prosodic cue that can mark irony in Spanish is vowel lengthening (Kalbermatten, 2007; Torres Sánchez, 1994). Haiman (1990, p. 194) also suggests that "total melodic monotony" or flat intonation (i.e., LL intonation instead of HL) often accompanies sarcasm in many languages, including Spanish. However, prosodic cues do not always co-occur with irony. Looking at Peninsular Spanish, Baena (2005) reported a complete absence of prosodic and nonverbal cues that would help hearers interpret the implied ironic meaning.

Linguistic cues in the form of vocabulary choice, syntax, and stylistic choices are another resource for interpreting irony. For example, Kalbermatten's (2007) study found that positive adjectives, such as *excelente* ('excellent'), *linda* ('beautiful') and *buena* ('good'), functioned as indicators of irony because the implied meaning was the opposite meaning of that adjective. Syntactically, word order was identified as a marker of irony in Argentine Spanish. For example, one ironical speaker, in a comment about an Argentine politician, used a marked word order (i.e., [adjective + copula] rather than [copula + adjective]) to highlight the non-literal meaning of the word *joven* ('young') in the following example: *Sí, un, un hombre, pero joven es* ('Yeah, a, a man, but **young** (he) is'). According to Kalbermatten, this marked syntax was one cue to the ironic meaning of this utterance.

In sum, following Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) proposed principle of optimal access to irony, we would expect that the more contextual sources that L2 learners

are able to draw from, the more likely they will be able to accurately interpret the ironic intent of an utterance. First, as L2 proficiency increases, learners are likely to have acquired more sociocultural information about the target culture, which can serve as background knowledge about social norms and cultural references. Second, the audio, visual, and discourse contextual sources may provide nonverbal, prosodic, and linguistic cues that signal incompatibility with a literal interpretation.

L2 Acquisition of Irony

Despite the large body of literature on irony, only one previous study that we are aware of has specifically examined L2 learners' acquisition of irony. A review of the small number of studies on the L2 acquisition, perception, and use of both irony and humor indicates that L2 learners can and do understand and use ironic and humorous language and that, furthermore, these productive and receptive abilities appear to improve over time with increased proficiency and experience with the target language (Bell, 2005, 2006; Bouton, 1999; Davies, 2003).

If we assume that irony functions similarly in different languages (as it seems to do at least in English and Spanish), then adult L2 learners do not need to acquire the ability to understand irony *per se*; they simply transfer that ability from their L1. The ability to recognize and use irony could be considered as part of a learner's "universal pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 164), along with other presumably universal concepts such as conversational implicature, speech acts, inference, and turn-taking (p. 165).

On the other hand, it is clear that there is much linguistic and cultural knowledge that L2 learners must acquire in the target language in order to be able to interpret irony. First, learners must be able to understand the literal lexical meanings of the words; they must understand the syntactic relation between the words; they must be able to interpret an utterance in its discourse context; and finally, they must be able to see why the literal meaning of an utterance fails to be compatible with the context. In addition to these linguistic skills, for those types of irony that allude to culture-specific norms, expectations, and references, L2 learners must possess the relevant cultural knowledge in order to recognize the implied ironic meaning. With respect to humor, Bell (2005, p. 4) argues that, "while humor itself is a universal phenomenon, its instantiations within cultural groups can be very particular, involving culturally specific topics, forms and styles of language, and contextualization cues." Irony may be similar.

The only previous study that has focused specifically on the L2 acquisition of irony is Bouton's (1999) longitudinal research on conversational implicatures. Defining irony in the Gricean fashion as a conversational implicature, Bouton administered a multiple-choice instrument to L2 learners of English from a variety of different L1s at the beginning of their stay in the U.S. and then again at 17 months, 33 months, or 54 months. Learners interpreted the conversational implicature of single utterances that were accompanied by written situations.

Bouton reported that uninstructed L2 learners of English did improve over time in their perception of irony (as well as in understanding other implicatures), but that after four and a half years they still had not reached native-speaker levels of perceiving irony. Furthermore, as described above, irony was the only implicature type with which learners were still having systematic difficulty after four and a half years. These findings suggest that perception of irony can be difficult for uninstructed learners of English, even after significant exposure to the L2. Similarly, studies on humor in an L2 suggest that even highly proficient L2 learners find humor difficult to understand and use (Bell, 2006; Nelms, 2002). However, Bouton discovered that explicit classroom instruction and awareness-raising about irony was effective in helping learners improve their skills in interpreting irony.

There are several problematic aspects with drawing conclusions from Bouton's study. First, the researcher never explains why it is that irony is so difficult for learners. In a review of Bouton's study, Kasper and Rose (2002) suggest that lack of cultural knowledge may be the reason that learners found implicatures such as irony to be difficult. Second, Bouton tested only one type of irony, the prototypical counterfactual proposition (i.e., when the opposite of what is meant is said). However, other types of irony that are not counterfactual – that is, when a truth criterion is not applicable – are also common (e.g., pragmatically insincere compliments, questions, and requests).

In another study, although not about irony *per se*, Davies (2003) provides insights about L2 acquisition relevant to this analysis. Davies collected data from natural interactions between L2 learners of English and English native speakers and analyzed segments in which the frame of the conversation was one of joking. Included in her examples of joking is what we judge to be an ironic comment made by a learner as a means to be humorous. The interaction from Davies (p. 1379) is reproduced here:

- | | | |
|---|------------------|--|
| 1 | Arabic speaker1: | now my roommates didn't understand me I feel bad [] |
| 2 | Thai speaker: | what |
| 3 | English speaker: | well do they still do you sti- do they still have trouble |
| 4 | | understanding you |
| 5 | Arabic speaker1: | some not as much as at the beginning but but there are |
| 6 | Arabic speaker2: | your problem just your roommate go [get another one |
| 7 | Other speakers: | [heh heh heh heh heh |

As can be seen, the first Arabic speaker is describing the fact that his roommates do not understand him when he speaks to them in English and he feels bad about not being understood. The second Arabic speaker jumps in with what is arguably an ironic comment in line 6, saying that the problem is with the roommate and that the other learner should just go get another roommate. All of the L2 learners and the English native speaker laugh for a number of beats.

This example suggests that L2 learners can both produce and perceive irony in their L2 in a natural conversational context. Davies argues that the ability to be

humorous in an L2 is dependent less on strict lexical and grammatical ability and more on the ability to strategically use nonverbal, lexical, prosodic, and pragmatic resources to one's advantage and to a keen sensitivity to the ongoing discourse context. For example, the fact that the learners were aware that the frame of the conversation was a joking frame likely assisted them in knowing to interpret utterances such as the one in the example above as humorous and non-literal (Davies, 2003). In discussing the ability of learners to joke, Davies argues, "The key dimension of communicative competence required of participants in conversation joking might be characterized as a sensitivity to interaction which allows quick perception of a mutual focus of attention and shared context" (p. 1381). The importance of the strategic use of contextual sources from the discourse and audiovisual contexts reflects Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) proposal on ironic interpretation, which forms the backdrop for the present study.

In Bell's (2006) case study about humor, it is shown that an advanced English language learner (a native Thai speaker) is able to understand and construct humorous interactions in the L2, although at times with difficulty. The difficulties that the learner experienced with humor appeared to stem from different sources. In some cases, it seemed that native English speakers did not understand the learner's attempts at humor based on their perceptions of her as a less-than-competent speaker of the L2. In other cases, the learner lacked knowledge of specific lexical items (e.g., hillbilly) and the cultural associations that words like hillbilly have in U.S. American culture. In one case, the L2 learner did not find a joke about overweight people funny, which her American boyfriend thought was hilarious. The learner herself reported that, in Thailand, fat people are not the object of jokes. These results highlight the fact that not only does humor draw on culture-specific knowledge, but also that in each culture certain topics may or may not be considered humorous.

A second study on humor by Bell (2005), also about learners of English, suggests that the ability to use humor is linked to language proficiency. Bell argues that, while even the lowest proficiency learner did construct humorous utterances, her ability was limited to linguistically simplistic constructions and formulaic language. The most advanced learner, however, was able to create more complex and native-like humorous utterances and to playfully experiment with different "voices" (Bakhtin, 1986) in the L2, that is, to imitate or even echo the utterances of L2 others. This link between humor and L2 proficiency parallels what Bouton (1999) found for irony in the L2.

To conclude, the few studies that have been conducted concerning the acquisition of irony and humor in an L2 show that L2 learners are able to both understand and produce ironic and humorous utterances. There do appear to be constraints on this ability related to linguistic proficiency and degree of cultural background knowledge, but Davies' (2003) research on joking suggests that the use of the context can help learners to interpret humorous utterances.

Research Questions

The finding from previous research, which suggests that as L2 learners' language proficiency improves, so does their ability to interpret irony, prompted the first research question of this study:

Do L2 learners at higher levels of Spanish proficiency perceive ironic utterances in Spanish films more accurately than learners at lower levels of proficiency?

The second research question is based on Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) model of optimal accessibility to irony, which proposes that the greater number of contextual sources present to signal irony during the delivery of an ironic utterance, the easier it should be for the hearer to identify and process irony. We were interested in discovering whether this hypothesis would be true for L2 learners, prompting the second research question:

Do L2 learners of Spanish perceive written ironic utterances more accurately when those utterances are accompanied by an audio and visual context?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Subjects

A total of 55 L2 learners of Spanish who were taking language classes during the spring semester 2006 at a large, public university in the Midwest (U.S.) participated in this study. All but one student (in the second-semester class) were native speakers of American English. The students were all enrolled in one of three different Spanish language classes: second-semester Spanish, fourth-semester Spanish, and sixth-semester Spanish.

The second-semester group included 20 students. These subjects had only been formally studying Spanish for 7 months, and when they started they were "true beginners" of Spanish. While a few students had traveled to Spanish speaking countries for vacations, none had spent extensive time in a Spanish-speaking environment. The content taught in this course was highly standardized across all sections, and students would have had to pass this course to be able to enroll in the third- and fourth-semester Spanish language courses.

The second group consisted of 17 students who were enrolled in a fourth-semester Spanish language course. These students, unlike those in the first group, had been exposed to Spanish for longer periods of time, as many had begun formal study of the language in high school. However, none of these students had spent extensive time in a Spanish-speaking country at the time of the study. Students at this university could take the fourth semester course only after completing the three-semester sequence of prerequisite courses at the university or by taking a standardized language proficiency placement test. At the completion of this course, students are considered to be at an intermediate level of proficiency.

Eighteen subjects composed the third class level. These students were enrolled in a course entitled *Introduction to Hispanic Linguistics*, a third-year

(typically sixth-semester) Spanish course. All of the students in this class were either Spanish majors or minors. Several students had spent up to a year studying in a Spanish-speaking country. This class group was the most diverse in terms of language learning experiences. All Spanish majors and minors are required to take this class, but they have the option to do so either immediately after taking the fifth course in the series, or after having taken other undergraduate Spanish courses such as *Introduction to the Study of Hispanic Cultures* or *Introduction to the Study of Hispanic Literatures*.

While ideally an independent and reliable measure of language proficiency (e.g., Oral Proficiency Interview) would have been employed to group subjects, the scale of the study and the available resources made this option unfeasible. Thomas (1994) points out several methodological problems with using institutional status (e.g., class level) as a measure of language proficiency. In using institutional status, a researcher assumes—without employing any independent means to confirm this assumption—that the proficiency of the students at each level is similar and, in addition, distinct from that of other levels.

While we recognize that this aspect is a weakness of our study, we justified the use of institutional status on the basis that the course registration requirements for the second- and fourth-semester courses were fairly standardized, with students either passing prior standardized courses or a placement test in order to enter into those classes. The sixth-semester class likely represented a wider range of language ability, from intermediate-high to advanced. However, for the purposes of comparison with the other two class levels, it is clear that the sixth-semester students have a more advanced proficiency than the other two levels, based on previous coursework taken (i.e., at a minimum fourth- and fifth-semester courses), amount of time studying the target language, and their ability to complete the coursework for an upper-division linguistics course taught exclusively in Spanish. While we argue that, in this case, comparison based on institutional status allows us to draw conclusions about the behavior of beginning, intermediate, and more advanced learners, the limitations outlined above should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this study.

Instrumentation

Movie scenes were selected as the source for ironic comments for several reasons.¹ Comparisons of naturally occurring speech acts and speech acts in film show that film is a valid source of pragmalinguistic data. Film accurately represents the content and semantic-syntactic patterns of speech acts despite its tendency to misrepresent sociopragmatic norms (Kite & Tatsuki, 2005; Rose, 1997, 2001). In addition, film is widely used in second language classrooms as authentic language input (see Kite & Tatsuki, 2005 for a discussion). It is useful in the second language classroom because it provides both a visual and an auditory context for interaction.

Two versions of an instrument were developed in order to examine the rela-

tionship that the addition of an audiovisual context might have on the perception of irony by L2 learners. The first version of the instrument included only written input and the second version included both written and audiovisual input. Both versions of the instrument were based on the same eight movie scenes, gathered from six different popular Spanish-language films (see Table 1). Five scenes that included an ironic utterance and three scenes with no ironic utterances (i.e., distracter items) were included in the instrument. The researchers decided to include movie scenes from three different Spanish dialects (i.e., Argentine, Mexican, and Peninsular) because there was no single dialect that most students would be familiar with; students at this university received Spanish classes from instructors representing a wide variety of Spanish dialects, including those presented in the selected movie scenes. Table 1 provides a description of the scenes, the ironic utterances, and indicates the prosodic, nonverbal, and other auditory and visual cues that the researchers hypothesized could assist learners in interpreting the ironic meaning in each scene.

Table 1: Description of Movie Scenes

Scene number	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3
Scene descriptive label	“What a summer!”	“Bark is worse than bite”	“Geniuses”
Movie (year, country)	Motorcycle Diaries (2004, various)	El Crimen del Padre Amaro (2002, Mexico)	El Norte (1983, Mexico)
Description of scene	Two young men are riding a motorcycle in the snow	A seasoned priest jokes with a newly ordained priest	Two Guatemalan immigrants get stuck in Tijuana and some local men are making fun of them for being unprepared and naive.
Utterance in question	“¡Que veranita!” ‘What a summer!’	“Acuérdate, cura que ladra, no muerde.” ‘Remember, the priest who barks, doesn’t bite.’	“Qué mal que no son tan listos como ustedes, los genios, ¿he?” ‘Too bad that they’re not as clever as you, the geniuses, huh?’
Item type	Ironic	Distracter	Ironic
Audiovisual context	The viewer sees the snowy day and the characters having difficulty getting the motorcycle to go through the snow. The ironist first complains about how cold it is prior to uttering the irony. The ironic utterance is spoken with normal intonation.		Prior to the ironic utterance, the local men are laughing and making fun of the Guatemalan immigrants, who have a downtrodden look on their faces. The character who makes the ironic utterance does so with a prosodic tone of false sincerity and with a smile on his face. Immediately after he makes the ironic comment (whose victims are the local men), his facial expression changes dramatically to an angry look and then he tells the local men to get lost.

Scene number	Scene 4	Scene 5	Scene 6
Scene descriptive label	“The jewels”	“The secret is love”	“Don’t abandon your friends”
Movie (year, country)	Motorcycle Diaries (2004, various)	Como Agua para Chocolate (1992, Mexico)	El Día que Me Amen (2003, Argentina)
Description of scene	Che Guevara dances with his girlfriend.	Two women at a party who don’t get along are talking. The victim of the irony asks about a recipe for a dish which is the ironist’s secret family recipe.	The main character leaves the mental hospital and his friend behind.
Utterance in question	“Mientras más se entierran los diamantes, más decidido está el pirata a robárselos” ‘The more the diamonds are buried, the more determined the pirate is to rob them.’	“El secreto es hacerlos con mucho amor. Espero que te salgan”. ‘The secret is to make them with a lot of love. I hope that they turn out for you.’	“La próxima vez no te hagas amigos de la gente que vas a abandonar”. ‘Next time don’t make friends with the people you’re going to abandon.’
Item type	Distracter	Ironic	Distracter
Audiovisual context		Prior to the ironic utterance, the ultimate victim of the ironic utterance is conversing with the ironist. The victim has a tone of voice that makes the concern she expresses for the ironist sound fake. The ironist says the irony with little change in her facial expression, but with a matter-of-fact tone of voice. The second part the ironic utterance is said with a prosodic tone of fake sincerity when she expresses hope that the recipe will come out well for the woman. At the end of the utterance, the ironist smirks slightly and the victim gets an offended facial expression.	

Scene number	Scene 7	Scene 8
Scene descriptive label	“Watermelons”	“Friends come first”
Movie (year, country)	Como Agua para Chocolate (1992, Mexico)	Abre los Ojos (1997, Spain)
Description of scene	Two characters joke about how the mother is great at breaking open watermelons and other things.	A man wants to become intimate with his best friend’s girlfriend and the girlfriend shows hesitation because of this friendship.
Utterance in question	<p>“No cabe duda que tratándose de desmadrar algo, su madre es una maestra”.</p> <p>‘There’s no doubt that when it comes to breaking something apart, your mother is an expert.’</p>	<p>“Ya veo que para ti la amistad es lo primero”.</p> <p>‘I see that friendship is the most important thing for you.’</p>
Item type	Ironic	Ironic
Audiovisual context	The last part of the ironic utterance (“your mother is an expert”) is spoken with a high-pitched tone that diverges greatly from the pitch of the surrounding utterances, as well as in a laughing voice. The tone of voice might be described as lighthearted and joking. The viewer can see that the ironist laughs as she says the irony. The recipient of the comment also laughs after the comment is spoken.	The ironist makes this comment with little facial expression, although she has a slight smile at the end. The recipient’s response is directed at the literal meaning of the utterance, but then he smiles and laughs a little. The ironic then looks downward and smiles.

Both instruments provided subjects with a synopsis of each movie scene in addition to the utterance to be analyzed (in bold, as shown below). Examples of the synopses are provided below for Scene 1 (“¡Qué veranito!” (‘What a summer!’)):

Sample synopsis from written task:

In this movie, two friends (Alberto and Ernesto) are on a trip across South America on a motorcycle one summer during the 1950s. At this point in the trip, the two friends are crossing the Andes Mountains between Argentina and Chile on their motorcycle. As they near the top of the mountains, it gets snowier and snowier until the two friends find themselves riding in a snowstorm. Alberto says to Ernesto: “**¡qué veranito!**”

Sample of synopsis from video-enhanced task:

This movie is about the early life of Ernesto Che Guevara who took a motorcycle trip through South America with his friend, Alberto, one summer during the 1950s. In the clip you are about to see, the two friends are crossing the Andes mountains between Argentina and Chile on their motorcycle in the snow. Alberto comments: “**¡qué veranito!**”

As the item above shows, the synopsis on the written task was slightly more detailed than that of the video-enhanced task. The rationale for including more detail in the former was that students who completed the written task would have no other information beyond the written text and would need enough detail about the situation in order to be able to interpret the ironic meaning of the utterance in question. Likewise, some details were left out of the video-enhanced task synopsis because those features were present in the audiovisual context of the video clip shown to students. While it is possible that the students who completed the video-enhanced task may have been able to interpret the ironic intent from reading the written prompt alone, this aspect is not problematic given that the researchers' interest was to investigate whether the *addition* of an audio and visual context would assist learners in more accurately interpreting ironic intent in each scene, in comparison to those students who only had the written synopsis of the scene at their disposal.

Instructions for the task were provided to students in English. English, rather than Spanish, was used in the instructions for all class levels because the beginning-level students would have had difficulty completing the task had it been described exclusively in Spanish and, in addition, the researchers wanted to keep the task instructions consistent across all class levels.

After students read the synopsis of the movie scene and, in the case of the group that completed the video-enhanced version of the instrument, after they saw the video clip, students were asked to answer three questions about each item on the instrument. The same three questions were posed to those students who took the written version of the instrument as well as to those students who completed the video-enhanced version. In answering these questions, students were asked to interpret the meaning of the comment in question, determine the tone of the comment, and share whether they had previously viewed the movie. The three questions are shown below, using the example of the item for Scene 1 ("What a summer!"):

Question #1: What does Alberto mean by this comment?

Question #2: What is the **tone** of Alberto's comment? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encouraging | <input type="checkbox"/> Authoritative | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sincere | <input type="checkbox"/> Sarcastic/ironic | <input type="checkbox"/> Critical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joking | <input type="checkbox"/> Friendly | <input type="checkbox"/> Enthusiastic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helpful | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

Question #3: Have you seen this movie before? (Circle one)

Yes No

The first two questions were both intended to assess students' perception of irony. The options provided in Question #2 were chosen as a representative sample from the different types of tones identified by the subjects in Beebe and Waring's (2004) study. Note that the researchers included irony as one type of tone, following Beebe and Waring.

Originally, the results from both questions were to be included in the analysis. However, Question #2 proved to be unreliable as a stand-alone question. In 21 (7.6%) of the 275 questions (5 irony questions x 55 learners), students were not consistent in their answers to Question #1 and Question #2. In those 21 cases, students clearly demonstrated through their answer in Question #1 (the open-ended question) that they understood the ironic or sarcastic intent of the utterance in question, but then did not check the "Sarcasm/irony" box in Question #2. Instead, they selected other tone descriptors such as "critical" or "joking." For example, in response to movie Scene 8 ("Friends come first"), one sixth-semester student (W40) wrote the following for Question #1: "This is a sarcastic comment to say she sees how friendship is really not important to him, that he's that comfortable hurting his friend and for very selfish reasons." Despite the overt use of the word "sarcastic" in the response, the student did not check the box for "Sarcasm/irony," and instead checked only "critical."

One possible explanation for this observed inconsistency is that some students did not interpret irony and sarcasm as "tone." Students may have had a different concept of the word "tone," thinking that answers such as "joking," "friendly," and "critical" were more appropriate descriptors of tone. These other descriptions were clearly also possible interpretations, alongside irony or sarcasm, reflecting the variety of functions that irony serves in speech, such as being humorous, creating social solidarity, teasing, or criticizing, among others (cf. Gibbs, 2000). Students who were able to describe what the speaker in the movie clip meant were clearly able to understand the speaker's ironic meaning, but may not have been able to label that speaker's intended meaning as "ironic." As Kreuz (2000, p. 104) argues, "The job of the listener is to recover the discourse goals of the speaker and not to identify some rhetorical label like irony or understatement." Jorgensen (1996) describes in her study of sarcastic irony that four out of 30 undergraduates (14%) were not confident about being able to define "sarcasm," suggesting that some individuals may not have a clear understanding of terminology such as "tone," "irony," and "sarcasm."

Whatever the reason, Question #1 (open-ended question) appeared to be a more reliable measure of students' perception of the implied ironical meaning of the utterance. In Question #1, students needed to explain what the speaker meant by the ironic utterance and, in doing so, displayed their own understanding of the utterance. Therefore, this analysis will focus only on the data from Question #1.

The third question was included in order to control for the possibility that some students may have seen the movies being presented and that having seen them would give those students an advantage over others. However, it was found

that previously seeing the movie did not have a statistically significant relationship with students' perception of irony.

Data Collection Procedures

Subjects participated in this study during their regularly scheduled class time. Each class of students (i.e., second-semester, fourth-semester, sixth-semester) was randomly divided into two groups and then each group of students was taken to a separate room in order to complete only one version of the instrument, either the written task or the video-enhanced task. That is, each participant in the study completed only one of the two tasks, not both. Table 2 shows the number of participants by class level and instrument version.

Table 2: Number of Participants by Class Level and by Task Type

Spanish class level	Task type		Total
	<i>Written task</i>	<i>Video-enhanced task</i>	
Second semester	10	10	20
Fourth semester	8	10	18
Sixth semester	9	8	17
Total	27	28	55

The written task was administered to each class level by one of the researchers in one classroom while another researcher simultaneously administered the video-enhanced task to the other group of subjects in another university computer lab classroom. Students who completed the video-enhanced instrument watched the video clips on their individual computer monitors and listened to the sound with headphones. Students were allowed as much time as they needed to complete the instrument; all students completed the instrument in 20-25 minutes.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researchers coded all of the data. Responses to Question #1 were coded for whether the student demonstrated comprehension of the implied ironic meaning of the utterance in question through their description of the meaning of the utterance. Three codes were employed: “0” for not understanding the irony, “1” for understanding the irony, “9” for a response that was not clear. Only those answers to Question #1 that either explicitly mentioned or described the opposite of the literal meaning or included the words “sarcasm” or “irony” in the response were coded for having understood the irony of the scene. Answers that were coded for non-understanding of the irony were those in which the student interpreted the meaning of the comment literally or the student did not understand either the literal or the figurative meaning of the utterance in question. In some cases, students’ understanding of irony was impossible to judge by their wording in response to the question; such responses were coded separately as “unclear.” Finally, the researchers analyzed the data statistically using chi-square tests.

FINDINGS

Research Question #1: Do L2 learners at higher levels of Spanish proficiency perceive ironic utterances in Spanish more accurately than learners at lower levels of proficiency?

Table 3 summarizes the findings for Question #1 based on chi-square tests for the combined sample (i.e., all three class levels combined together). The findings reported in the table below include the students who completed both the written and the video-enhanced tasks ($N=55^2$). As can be seen in Table 3, the difference among the three class levels was statistically significant only for Scene 1 (“What a summer!”) and Scene 8 (“Friends come first”). In both movie scene items, the second-semester class overwhelmingly did not understand the ironic tone of the utterance. For the fourth-semester class, the majority of students (11/14, 79%) understood the irony of “What a summer!” but less than half of the students (7/17, 41%) understood the irony in “Friends come first.” A large majority of students in the sixth-semester class understood the ironic intent of the utterance in both “What a summer!” (12/14, 86%) and “Friends come first” (12/16, 75%).

Table 3: Responses to Question #1 by Class Level and by Movie Scene Item (N=55)

Movie scene	Spanish class level	Response		Pearson chi-square value	Significance level (p-value)
		<i>Didn't understand irony</i>	<i>Understood irony</i>		
Scene 1 (“What a summer!”)	Second semester	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	15.291	.000*
	Fourth semester	3 (21%)	11 (79%)		
	Sixth semester	2 (14%)	12 (86%)		
Scene 3 (“Genius-es”)	Second semester	13 (72%)	5 (28%)	5.103	.08
	Fourth semester	12 (75%)	4 (25%)		
	Sixth semester	7 (41%)	10 (59%)		
Scene 5 (“The secret is love”)	Second semester	15 (79%)	4 (21%)	3.972	.14
	Fourth semester	9 (60%)	6 (40%)		
	Sixth semester	8 (47%)	9 (53%)		

Scene 7 ("Watermelons")	Second semester	18 (100%)	0 (0%)	2.649	.27
	Fourth semester	14 (89%)	2 (11%)		
	Sixth semester	12 (86%)	2 (14%)		
Scene 8 ("Friends come first")	Second semester	18 (95%)	1 (5%)	17.925	.000*
	Fourth semester	10 (59%)	7 (41%)		
	Sixth semester	4 (25%)	12 (75%)		

* = statistically significant at or below $p < .05$

Looking at both the statistically significant and insignificant results shown in Table 3, some patterns can be observed. First, most of the students in the second-semester class by and large did not understand the irony of any of the test items and, consequently, were the least accurate of the three class levels. Second, the proportion of students in the fourth-semester class who understood the irony of each scene was greater (range of 11-55% difference between the two groups) than that of the second-semester class in all but Scene 3, where the two lowest-level classes were more equal (25% and 28%), but less than that of the sixth-semester class. Third, the proportion of students in the sixth-semester class who accurately perceived irony was the highest of the three groups for all five movie scenes (range of 3-70% higher than the other two groups). However, it appears that Scene 7 ("Watermelons") was the most difficult item for all class levels, given that very few students from any of the three levels were able to understand the irony in that scene. In sum, the second-semester class was the least accurate in perceiving irony in Spanish, the fourth-semester class was the second least accurate, and the sixth-semester class was the most accurate of the three groups.

Research Question #2: Do L2 learners of Spanish perceive written ironic utterances more accurately when those utterances are accompanied by an audio and visual context?

The model of irony put forth by Yus Ramos (1998, 2000) claims that the more contextual sources available to signal an ironic interpretation, the easier it will be for a hearer to identify and understand irony. We attempted to test this prediction by examining whether the provision of an audiovisual context—which presumably had more contextual sources—had any relation to students’ perception of irony. Chi-square tests were conducted to compare those students who completed the written task and those who completed the video-enhanced task both for the combined sample (i.e., all three class levels combined together) as well as for each class level individually. The results for the combined sample show that there is one statistically significant finding, as shown in Table 4: Scene 1 ("What a summer!"). On this item, it was found that more students who completed the written task (17/23, 74%)

understood the ironic intent of the utterance in “What a summer!” than students who completed the video-enhanced task (10/22, 45%), a difference which was statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. A similar pattern was found for scene 3 which approaches, but does not reach significance; more students completing the written task understood irony than those completing the video-enhanced task (range of 1-29 % higher on the written compared to the video-enhanced task). An opposite trend was observed for scene 5; in this scene, more students completing the video-enhanced task understood the irony. In the other two scenes, scene 7 and 8, approximately equal numbers of students understood the irony.

Table 4: Responses to Question #1 by Task Type (written vs. video-enhanced) for the Combined Sample (N=55)

Movie scene	Spanish class level	Response		Pearson chi-square value	Significance level
		<i>Didn't understand irony</i>	<i>Understood irony</i>		
Scene 1 (“What a summer!”)	Written task	6 (26%)	17 (74%)	3.794	.05*
	Video-enhanced task	12 (55%)	10 (45%)		
Scene 3 (“Geniuses”)	Written task	12 (50%)	12 (50%)	3.150	.08
	Video-enhanced task	20 (74%)	7 (26%)		
Scene 5 (“The secret is love”)	Written task	19 (76%)	6 (24%)	3.686	.06
	Video-enhanced task	13 (50%)	13 (50%)		
Scene 7 (“Watermelons”)	Written task	21 (91%)	2 (9%)	.008	.93
	Video-enhanced task	23 (29%)	2 (8%)		
Scene 8 (“Friends come first”)	Written task	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	.048	.83
	Video-enhanced task	17 (63%)	10 (37%)		

* = statistically significant at or below $p < .05$

Apart from analyzing the combined sample, the researchers were also interested in determining whether within each class level there was a difference in the perception of irony based on whether the students completed the written or the video-enhanced task. As suggested by Hatch and Farhady (1982), Fisher’s Exact Test (two-sided) was used to analyze the significance level of the chi-square comparison because it was found that a large number of cells had fewer than the expected count of five when the data were broken down in this way.

Table 5 shows there was one statistically significant difference for the second-semester Spanish students. On Scene 3 (“Geniuses”), none of the second-semester students who saw the video clip along with the written ironic utterance were able to perceive the ironic intent, whereas 63% (5/8) of those students who completed

the written task correctly perceived the irony.

Table 5: Responses to Question #1 by Task Type (written vs. video-enhanced) for the Second-Semester Spanish Class Sample (N=20)

Movie scene	Spanish class level	Response		Pearson chi-square value	Significance level
		<i>Didn't understand irony</i>	<i>Understood irony</i>		
Scene 1 (“What a summer!”)	Written task	5 (63%)	3 (37%)	1.639	.29
	Video-enhanced task	8 (89%)	1 (11%)		
Scene 3 (“Geniuses”)	Written task	3 (37%)	5 (63%)	8.654	.01*
	Video-enhanced task	10 (100%)	0 (0%)		
Scene 5 (“The secret is love”)	Written task	6 (67%)	3 (33%)	1.552	.30
	Video-enhanced task	9 (90%)	1 (10%)		
Scene 7 (“Watermelons”)	Written task	8 (100%)	0 (0%)	---	---
	Video-enhanced task	10 (100%)	0 (0%)		
Scene 8 (“Friends come first”)	Written task	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	.950	1.0
	Video-enhanced task	9 (90%)	1 (10%)		

* = statistically significant at or below $p < .05$

No statistically significant differences were found based on task type for the fourth-semester class. However, Table 6 indicates that in the sixth-semester class, a greater proportion of students who completed the video-enhanced task (7/8, 87%) were able to accurately perceive the irony of Scene 5 (“The secret is love”) compared to the proportion of students who completed the written task (2/9, 22%). The results for Scene 5 were the only statistically significant findings for the sixth-semester class level based on task type.

Table 6: Responses to Question #1 by Task Type (written vs. video-enhanced) for the Sixth-Semester Spanish Class Sample (N=17)

Movie scene	Spanish class level	Response		Pearson chi-square value	Significance level
		<i>Didn't understand irony</i>	<i>Understood irony</i>		
Scene 1 ("What a summer!")	Written task	1 (11%)	8 (89%)	.207	1.0
	Video-enhanced task	1 (20%)	4 (80%)		
Scene 3 ("Geniuses")	Written task	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	.084	1.0
	Video-enhanced task	3 (38%)	5 (62%)		
Scene 5 ("The secret is love")	Written task	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	7.244	.02*
	Video-enhanced task	1 (13%)	7 (87%)		
Scene 7 ("Watermelons")	Written task	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	1.750	.47
	Video-enhanced task	6 (100%)	0 (0%)		
Scene 8 ("Friends come first")	Written task	1 (13%)	7 (87%)	1.333	.60
	Video-enhanced task	3 (38%)	5 (62%)		

* = statistically significant at or below $p < .05$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research Question #1: Class Levels

Research Question #1 explored the relationship between proficiency level and accurate perception of irony. Previous research has suggested that with more time in the target culture and greater language proficiency, L2 learners are able to improve their recognition of humor more generally (Bell, 2005, 2006) and irony specifically (Bouton, 1999). In much the same way, Cook (2000) claims that the ability to understand verbal humor may be used as a test of L2 proficiency, since if learners are adept at verbal humor they must also have the skills to perform more routine language tasks. Thus, the researchers predicted that the more advanced the students were, the better they would be able to perceive irony (i.e., sixth-semester > fourth-semester > second-semester).

Looking at the results for the students grouped only by class level (i.e., not considering task type; see Table 3), the findings follow the hypothesized trend, with greater accuracy in perceiving irony as the class level increases. In every scene, participants in the sixth-semester courses perceived irony with greater accuracy than both the second- and fourth-semester learners. Moreover, the fourth-semester learners were more accurate than the second-semester subjects in all but one scene, Scene 3 ("Geniuses"), in which the difference between the two groups was minimal. Despite these general trends that were observed in the data, the differences between

the three class levels were only statistically significant for two of the five scenes: Scene 1 (“What a summer!”) and Scene 8 (“Friends come first”).

The findings for Scene 1 (“What a summer!”) revealed high accuracy rates in perceiving irony for the two higher levels: 79% (11/14) for the fourth semester class and 86% (12/14) for the sixth-semester group. Furthermore, the fourth- and sixth-semester students were more accurate on Scene 1 than on any other. The apparent ease of interpretation of irony in Scene 1 may be due to several factors. First, the linguistic content of the ironic comment is not complex and, in fact, this item was the shortest ironic utterance tested (i.e., *¡Qué veranito!*, ‘What a summer!’). The word *verano* (‘summer’) is typically well known to students by the fourth semester of Spanish study, if not earlier. In this case, the word *verano* is used in the diminutive, *veranito*, a form of the word that may not have been as familiar to lower-level students. The fourth- and sixth-semester students would likely have also been familiar with the syntax of the utterance; the exclamation structure *qué* (what/how) + noun/adjective is used frequently in Spanish. Finally, the ironic comment creates a clear opposition between what is said and the situation; that is, it points out the mismatch between the speaker’s expectations for what summer should be like with respect to the weather (e.g., warm, sunny) and the reality of the situation, which is in stark contrast: a snowstorm. The expectation that a snowstorm is not the norm for summer in many regions of the world is probably not culture-specific and was likely easy to grasp for the students.

Second-semester students should also have been familiar with the word *verano*, since the seasons are introduced in the first semester of Spanish at this university, but only 24% (4/17) understood the irony of Scene 1 (“What a summer!”). Second-semester students may have simply forgotten the word, or they may have not recognized it in the diminutive form. These beginning learners may also not have been very familiar with the structure used for exclamations (*qué* + noun/adjective), having had relatively little experience with Spanish.

The second scene for which the results comparing class levels were statistically significant was Scene 8 (“Friends come first”). 75% (12/16) of the sixth-semester students understood the irony, while only 41% (7/17) of the fourth-semester students and 5% (1/19) of the second-semester students were able to interpret the implied ironic meaning. Vocabulary and syntax may help explain the difficulty with this item by the lower two levels. For example, a number of students in the second-semester class clearly did not understand the word *amistad* (‘friendship’) in Scene 8, as evidenced by their answers to Question #1. Without this lexical knowledge, the speaker’s ironically counterfactual assertion “I see that friendship is the most important thing for you” would not be understood. Moreover, the syntax of this utterance is more complex. The construction *lo* + adjective is syntactically unlike the English translation, which is typically formulated using the structure *the* + adjective + thing (e.g., *lo bueno*, ‘the good thing’; *lo importante*, ‘the important thing’; *lo interesante*, ‘the interesting thing’). It was evident in the answers of some students from the lower two class levels that this structure was difficult to understand. Like

the word *amistad*, understanding *lo primero* ('the first thing', 'the most important thing') is essential to be able to interpret the implied irony of the utterance.

Thus, the findings suggest that as students gain more experience in Spanish, they are better able to understand irony in Spanish-language movies. An important basis for the accurate perception of irony appears to be lexical knowledge. It was evident that when students did not know certain key lexical items in the ironic utterance, they were not able to interpret the ironic meaning. In addition to the difficulty with the word *amistad* discussed above, in another case, some students in the second- and fourth-semester classes misinterpreted the meaning of the word *listo* in Scene 3 ("Geniuses"), which has two possible translations depending on the context: 'clever' and 'ready'. The appropriate meaning of *listo* in the context of Scene 3 is 'clever', an understanding of which is crucial in order to understand the irony of the utterance, "Too bad that they're not as clever as you, the geniuses, huh?". Students are likely to hear *listo* used more frequently as 'ready' than as 'clever' in the second language classroom—and therefore may be more familiar with this meaning—since 'ready' is used rather often for classroom management purposes (e.g., Teacher to students: "Are you ready to report from your small groups?").

Research Question #2: Written vs. Video-Enhanced

For the second research question we investigated whether there was a difference in understanding irony in Spanish between students who completed the written task and students who completed the video-enhanced task. Based on the Yus Ramos (1998, 2000) model, we predicted that the students who received the audiovisual input would have an advantage in understanding the ironic comments of the movie scenes because of the greater number of contextual sources that would be available to students through the audiovisual medium. The video-enhanced task gave students a context in which they had the opportunity to use prosodic, discourse, and nonverbal cues to help them interpret the ironic utterances.

The results were inconsistent with regard to this research question. For the combined sample (i.e., all class levels), it was found that on Scene 1 ("What a summer!"), students who completed the written task were statistically more accurate in perceiving irony than students who completed the video-enhanced task. While none of the other scenes produced statistically significant outcomes, observing the results for the other scenes in Table 4 shows that the audiovisual context was only potentially helpful in Scene 5 ("The secret is love"), where 50% (13/26) of the students who took the video-enhanced task understood the irony, versus only 24% (6/25) of the written-task students who understood the ironic intent. This result approached but did not reach significance ($p < .06$). In Scene 7 ("Watermelons") and Scene 8 ("Friends come first") equal numbers of students in the written and video-enhanced groups perceived irony accurately. Thus, these findings do not support the hypothesis that a prosodic, discourse, and visual context assists students in perceiving irony in Spanish.

In the case of Scene 1 ("What a summer!"), not only was the audiovisual

context not helpful, but those who completed the written task were significantly more accurate in perceiving the irony. It is clear that an audiovisual context is not necessary to understand irony, but the presence of additional cues was hypothesized to favor the ironic interpretation even more (Yus Ramos, 1998, 2000). One explanation for this finding is that there may have been a cue in the audiovisual context that actually led students to a *non*-ironic interpretation. The intonation that accompanies the ironic utterance in this scene can be described as a normal intonation pattern which, given the context of the comment, reflects false sincerity. Perhaps hearing the normal intonation, students thought that the speaker was being sincere in his comment. Other than the intonation of the ironic utterance, the visual image of the snowstorm, and the demonstration of the difficulty of riding a motorcycle in the snow, Scene 1 does not offer any nonverbal cues such as gesture or facial expression. During the scene the characters have lines of dialogue, but the whole time they have their backs turned to the viewer as they slowly ride away on their motorcycle.

Especially for the lower proficiency learners, constraints on working memory may also help explain why more students were able to understand the irony in Scene 1 on the written task compared with the video-enhanced task. Working memory is defined as “the place where information is analyzed and meaning extracted” (Randall, 2007, p. 17) and “those mechanisms that are involved in the control, regulation and active maintenance of task-relevant information in the service of complex cognition” (Miyake & Shah, 1999, p. 450). These definitions are based on Baddeley’s (1986) model of working memory, which posited a three-component system involving both storage and processing capacity. The primary element is the *central executive*, which controls the awareness of information entering the system. The two additional components consist of the *phonological loop*, which has a restricted capacity for storing phonological information, and the *visuo-spatial sketchpad*, which temporarily stores and processes visual and spatial information (Baddeley, 1986). In L2 learning, if the flow of unknown visual and phonological input is too rapid, the phonological loop and visuo-spatial components become overwhelmed and L2 learners do not have capacity to store and process unknown elements (lexical, syntactical, prosodic, etc.) in working memory. As a result, learners cannot keep up with ongoing dialogue and visual context of an interaction (Lafford, 2005).

Working memory is proposed to play an important role in *controlled and automatic processing*. Controlled processing is slow, effortful, limited by the constraints on working memory, and requires the person’s attention. Automatic processing, in contrast, is fast, effortless, not limited by constraints on working memory, and not under voluntary control (Schmidt, 1992). Shiffrin and Schneider (1977) propose that language learning skills only become automatic after they are subject to controlled processing. Furthermore, they argue that speaking and listening is a complex cognitive task with many components (lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, prosodic), each of which requires attention. If the demands on cognition

are too high for one component, other components cannot be attended to (Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; Schmidt, 1992).

Processing the dialogue as well as the visuo-spatial information of the movie scenes may have been more taxing on learners' working memory than reading the written description. The movies selected for this study were intended for a Spanish native speaker audience and therefore, the dialogue is spoken at a relatively rapid speed. For the lower proficiency learners, many elements in the dialogue (e.g., vocabulary, syntax) would have been unknown or unfamiliar and would have required significant cognitive resources to attempt to process. If learners were focusing their attention on lexical items and syntax in order to work out the meaning of the utterances in the dialogue of the movie scene, it is possible that they were not attending to other contextual cues such as intonation or mismatch between literal meaning and context. For some L2 learners, then, the presence of multiple contextual sources may not make perception of irony easier, as is proposed in Yus Ramos' (1998, 2000) model, since learners may not have the cognitive resources available to attend to all elements of the audiovisual and linguistic context. On the other hand, those students who completed the written task had only one source of input to focus on: the written word. Furthermore, since the description of the situation was in English, the only Spanish that they had to process was the ironic utterance itself. Therefore, the written task may have been easier for L2 learners to process than the audiovisual task.

This explanation, however, does not provide an answer to why the results from the other movie scenes did not follow this same pattern. No visual or discourse element in Scene 1 ("What a summer!") seems to be significantly more difficult to process compared to other movie scenes, except perhaps the fact that the characters' voices in this scene are heard from a distance and, as a result, are not quite as loud as the dialogue in other scenes.

Given that the combined sample contained students at different levels of proficiency, it is perhaps more meaningful to look at the three class levels independently. For the second-semester students, the only statistically significant difference between the written and video-enhanced tasks occurred in Scene 3 ("Geniuses"), in which those who completed the written task were more accurate in perceiving the ironic intent of the utterance in question. This particular scene was relatively rich in contextual cues that make highly relevant an ironic interpretation (facial expressions, laughter, and tone of voice; see Table 1 for description). However, for these beginning level students whose processing of Spanish would not have been very automatic, constraints on working memory may have limited students' ability to attend to elements that the visual context provided.

Beginning learners in the second-semester class may also not have been as sophisticated in the use of language learning strategies. Many of the students in that class had not had very much prior experience studying a foreign language. Research on strategies in L2 learning supports the conclusion that use of language strategies can help students improve proficiency and achievement in the L2 (Oxford, Park-

Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993). For example, Cohen, Oxford, and Chi (2005) include the following strategies in their checklist: “Use the speakers’ tone of voice as a clue to the meaning of what they are saying” and “Watch speakers’ gestures and general body language to help me figure out the meaning of what they are saying.” Beginning learners may not have had the training or experience in language learning to know that paying strategic attention to nonverbal and prosodic elements could assist them in interpreting what is said in the L2.

The data for the fourth-semester students did not produce any statistically significant results, since in most cases, relatively equal numbers of students in the written and audiovisual groups understood irony. For the sixth-semester learners, however, the audiovisual context favored ironic interpretation on Scene 5 (“The secret is love”). In this scene, those students who completed the video-enhanced task were significantly more accurate (87%, 7/8) in perceiving the irony of that utterance compared to those who did the written task (22%, 2/9). In the case of this scene, the character who utters the ironic line makes a facial expression that cues in the viewer to the ironic intent. One of the students mentioned that, when she first read the line in the Scene 5 written item, she thought that it was produced in a friendly way. But after seeing the video clip, in which she noticed that the woman’s face was not friendly when she uttered the line, the student realized that the utterance was intended to be ironic. It may be that the audiovisual context for this scene is particularly helpful for interpreting the insincere well-wishing of the character (“*espero que te salgan*”, ‘I hope the recipe works for you’), whereas for other scenes examined here, the audiovisual context did not assist in the interpretation, despite the postulates of the model being tested here (Yus Ramos, 1998, 2000).

It may be significant that the only group for whom the audiovisual context assisted in making an ironic interpretation was the more advanced group of learners. Going back to what was mentioned about working memory and automatic versus controlled processing, more advanced L2 learners have likely automatized many aspects of their processing of Spanish. Many of the lexical items and syntactical structures would have been familiar to them. If more advanced students needed to pay less attention to vocabulary and syntax, they may have had the cognitive resources available in working memory to take note of and process more of the contextual sources (prosody, nonverbal, physical setting) available in the movie scenes, and therefore, be able to draw on more cues in interpreting the utterance as ironic. The more advanced learners may have also developed language strategies that allowed them to take advantage of the additional nonverbal and prosodic elements available to them in the video-enhanced task.

In sum, the results were mixed for Research Question #2 concerning whether an audiovisual context for irony will help L2 learners in interpreting irony in Spanish. The combined sample and the second-semester students were more accurate on one item on the written task while the sixth-semester students were more accurate on one item on the video-enhanced task. The preliminary conclusion that we can draw from this data is that an audiovisual context can assist more advanced

learners in interpreting irony, because those learners have the cognitive resources to dedicate to paying attention to a wider range of contextual sources. Beginning learners, however, may not be able to focus their attention on the contextual sources of the utterance due to constraints on automaticity and working memory. We can also conclude that L2 learners are able to understand irony when it is presented without any audiovisual cues, that is, when it is presented in writing.

Overall, this study supports previous work on irony and humor in second language learning in suggesting that the recognition of irony improves as proficiency level and experience with the target language increases. Furthermore, the hypothesis that the greater number of contextual sources available to the listener will make irony easier to process and identify was only supported in one movie scene and only for the more advanced sixth-semester learners in this study. We argued that constraints on working memory and processing could help explain why the provision of an audiovisual context did not seem to assist the beginning learners in interpreting irony and why it seemed to help the more advanced learners in doing so, at least in one scene.

Finally, the results from the present study revealed that even the most advanced students still had difficulties in interpreting some ironic utterances in Spanish. This observation reflects Bouton's (1999) finding that irony was persistently difficult even for L2 learners who had been immersed for a long period of time in the target language and culture. On the other hand, Bouton also discovered that explicit classroom instruction was effective in helping L2 learners improve their abilities to interpret irony in the L2. In that study, Bouton reported that a relatively short instructional intervention (six weeks), in which learners of English were taught to recognize ironic utterances, was effective in significantly increasing students' accurate interpretation of irony. After the intervention, L2 learners who had only resided for a short time in the U.S. were able to interpret irony at a level of accuracy comparable to learners who had spent a much longer period of time immersed in the target language and culture. Taken together, these findings suggest that explicit instruction about irony could be beneficial, for example, by assisting L2 learners in being more fully able to enjoy the humorous irony of Spanish-language films.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of the present study is the use of class level in lieu of a more reliable measure of language proficiency. As scholars in SLA have argued, future research should endeavor to measure proficiency level not indirectly through institutional status, but rather, by means of a standardized instrument such as an Oral Proficiency Interview. The use of a valid and reliable measure of proficiency would avoid the need to make assumptions about individual students' proficiency based on their enrollment in a specific class. Furthermore, an independent measure of proficiency would make results more generalizable across studies. Another potential limitation of this study was the format of the instrument. The fact that the

movie scene descriptions were slightly different for each task, written and video-enhanced, may have generated an additional variable that we were not interested in examining, namely, the provision of more or less detailed written descriptions. The written task may have also been easier than the audiovisual task considering that little L2 processing was required to answer the question. The relatively small sample size was also a limitation of the analysis. Future research on the topic should endeavor to address these limitations. Despite these limitations, the present study provides new insights into the perception of irony by L2 learners and contributes to the growing literature on the use of humor and irony in an L2.

NOTES

¹ Pilot testing was done with four Spanish native speakers (two from Colombia and one each from Guatemala and Mexico) in order to determine whether the movie scenes that the researchers selected were perceived as ironic by Spanish native speakers. All four Spanish native speakers considered Scenes 1, 3, 5, and 8 (see Table 1 below) to be ironic or sarcastic. There was disagreement among the speakers about Scene 7 (“Watermelons”); the two subjects from Colombia considered it to be friendly, sincere, and joking while the other two Spanish native speakers found the scene to be ironic or sarcastic. This inconsistency may be due to dialectal differences or to the fact that not all native speakers agree in marginal cases of irony, since Scene 7 was not prototypically ironic. Despite the disagreement, Scene 7 was left in the analysis as an example of a non-prototypical type of ironic utterance.

² There were three instances in which students did not complete a question (i.e., missing data). In addition, as described above, students’ answers that were unclear were coded as “9” during the data analysis. For this reason, the N is not always 55 for every movie scene in the tables below. Missing data and unclear responses were not included in the chi-square analysis.

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