

# Joke identification, comprehension and appreciation by Spanish intermediate ESL learners: an exploratory study

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on an exploratory study examining joke identification, appreciation and comprehension by Spanish intermediate ESL learners. The study is based on a relevance-theoretic classification of jokes, which assumes that humorousness results from manipulation of three parameters: make-sense frames, cultural information and utterance interpretation. It firstly ascertains whether Spanish ESL learners recognise orally-delivered samples of seven types of purportedly jocular texts. Secondly, it examines whether these learners actually regard such texts as comical and why. Finally, it looks into the learners' interpretative problems in order to single out which joke type(s) is/are more challenging. The study relies on quantitative and qualitative data elicited through an online questionnaire comprising four tasks. The results indicate no correlation between joke identification and appreciation, and independence of successful joke recognition from sophisticated interpretative skills. Jokes involving invalidation of an activated make-sense frame were most easily identified and found most funny, but jokes exploiting cancellation of an initial, seemingly plausible, interpretation posed more difficulties.*

*Keywords: ESL learners, relevance theory, joke identification, joke comprehension, joke appreciation.*

## 1. Introduction

Humour is often intentionally sought through varied and complex texts like jokes (Attardo & Chabanne 1992; Chiaro 1992; Yus 1997, 2003, 2013a, 2016; Davies 1998, 2011; Dynel 2011). In addition to breaking the ice and releasing tensions, they also facilitate and mitigate certain actions, create and project identities, or boost relations thanks to personal revelations, expression of affinities and/or celebration of shared experiences (Attardo 2002; Norrick 2003; Habib 2008;

Yus Ramos 2016). Fulfilment of these socially beneficial functions depends on what is said and how it is presented, but, more importantly, on comprehension. Indeed, jokes may fail because of mistiming in delivery and processing, lexical and/or syntactic complexity, uniqueness or unexpectedness, inability to grasp pragmatic force and/or recognise comical frames (Bell & Attardo 2010).

Nevertheless, joke comprehension has proven difficult to unravel (Suls 1983; Graesser et al. 1989; Bell 2007b; Kozbelt & Nishioka 2010). A wealth of inquiries has looked into humour comprehension by children (McGhee 1971a, 1971b; Klein 1985; Masten 1986), children with nonverbal learning disabilities and reading disabilities (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass 2008), language-impaired adolescents (Spector 1990), adolescents with autism and Asperger's syndrome (Emerich et al. 2003), adults and elderly people (Schaier & Cicirelli 1976; Mak & Carpenter 2007) or patients with brain damage (Bihrlé et al. 1986). Regrettably, there is a remarkable paucity of studies focusing on non-natives and second language (henceforth SL) learners. Even in the case of highly competent learners, they may fail to perceive, understand and/or appreciate humour produced in their SL (Bell & Attardo 2010: 424).

One existing study addresses reading comprehension and analyses the impact of proficiency and ability to detect certain text properties on humour apprehension (Shardakova 2016). Another study targets conversational humour and shows SL learners' comprehension problems due to cultural factors, vocabulary, speed of talk, unexpected combinations of elements, unique turns of phrase, unpredictability of humour introduction and/or failure to clearly perceive a purpose (Bell & Attardo 2010). Although such problems are sometimes avoided through speech adjustments and elimination of potentially challenging forms (Bell 2007a), comprehension difficulties nevertheless do not preclude humour appreciation (Bell 2007b). Unfortunately, no study has yet delved into how SL learners understand orally delivered jokes. The current investigation aims to start filling this gap by centring on Spanish learners of English as an SL (ESL, henceforth).

Humour comprehension depends at least on text recognition, proper understanding and expected appreciation (Hay 2001; Bell & Attardo 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to elucidate if the said learners (i) identify jokes, (ii) appreciate their intended funniness, (iii) face difficulties with understanding various types of jokes, and, if so, (iv) which type(s) of jokes pose(s) difficulties and why. Like many other manifestations of humour, jokes have been approached from frameworks and perspectives ranging from Gricean pragmatics (e.g., Attardo 1990, 1993, 1994) or *superiority* and *relief* (or *release*) theories (Morreall 1987, 2009) to models based on *incongruity-resolution* (Suls 1977, 1983), such *bisociation theory* (Koestler 1964) or *forced reinterpretation model* (Ritchie 2004, 2006). However, the current investigation is informed, on the one hand, by the relevance-theoretic approach to jokes, which portrays them as scarcely informative texts whose relevance resides in the non-propositional effects that they generate: humour, amusement, entertainment, etc. (Yus Ramos 2016; Zuo 2020). On the other hand, it is based on a relevance-theoretic taxonomy of jokes, which differentiates seven joke types (JT, henceforth) according to three parameters intervening in the generation of laughter and amusement (Yus Ramos 2013a, 2013b, 2016). In contrast to studies analysing data from diaries or interviews (Bell 2007a, 2007b; Bell & Attardo 2010), this investigation relies on quantitative and qualitative data collected by means of a questionnaire. It exposes the participants to recorded JT examples and elicits information regarding recognition, appreciation and comprehension.

Section 2 briefly summarises the relevance-theoretic approach to jokes, while Section 3 introduces the said classification of jokes. Next, Section 4 explains the methodology developed for the study. Its data are quantitatively and qualitatively analysed and discussed in Section 5, while Section 6 comments on some limitations. Finally, Section 7 offers some conclusions and directions for future research.

## 2. Jokes in relevance-theoretic pragmatics

The relevance-theoretic approach to jokes incorporates insights from *incongruity-resolution* models (Koestler 1964; Suls 1977; Ritchie 2004, 2006). It argues that jokes favour a rather *salient* (Giora 1998, 1999), likely and effortless interpretation in the initial or *multiple-graded-interpretations* (MGI) part (Yus Ramos 2003: 1309). That interpretation appears *relevant* because it yields a satisfactory cognitive benefit in return for the invested effort (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson & Sperber 2004). Yet, the subsequent introduction of an incongruity renders it implausible. Resolution of the incongruity requires additional effort to consider a less accessible, perhaps unlikely, interpretation, which is nonetheless compatible with the text (Jodłowiec 1991; Curcó 1995, 1997). This is formulated in the final or *single-covert-interpretation* (SCI) part (Yus Ramos 2003: 1309) as a consequence of the tendencies to solve incongruities and to attain *optimal relevance* (Yus Ramos 2016: 307).

Accordingly, (1) initially privileges the interpretation that the butler is taking off the clothes that the woman is wearing. This interpretation must be replaced at the end with the less likely one that the butler is wearing the woman's clothes and must take them off:

- (1) A wealthy couple had planned to go out for the evening. The woman of the house decided to give their butler, Jeeves, the rest of the night off. She said they would be home very late, and that he should just enjoy his evening. As it turned out, however, the wife wasn't having a good time at the party, so she came home early, alone. As the woman walked into her house, she saw Jeeves sitting by himself in the dining room. She called for him to follow her, and led him into the master bedroom. She then closed and locked the door. She looked at him and smiled. "Jeeves," she said. "Take off my dress." He did this carefully. "Jeeves," she continued. "Take off my stockings and garter." He silently obeyed her. "Jeeves," she then said. "Remove my bra and panties." As he did this, the tension continued to mount. She looked at him and then said, "Jeeves, if I ever catch you wearing my clothes again, you're fired!"

(adapted from Yus Ramos 2003: 1310)

Many jokes exploit *pragmatic ambivalence* by taking advantage of the possible outputs of *mutual parallel adjustment*, which is the series of mental tasks on which utterance interpretation relies (Wilson & Sperber 2004). Their words, phrases or sentences may be disambiguated, adjusted or assigned reference differently, and/or their sentences may be enriched with distinct unarticulated constituents. This is the case of (2), which plays with the ambiguity of 'denomination' as 'monetary value' or 'confession':

- (2) A person walks into the post office to buy stamps for their Christmas cards. "What denomination?" asks the clerk. "Oh, good heavens! Have we come to this?" said the person. "Well, give me 50 Baptist and 50 Catholic and one Methodist".

Still, other jokes provoke clashes between *make-sense frames*<sup>1</sup> and/or cultural information supplied as premises in inference. Thus, (3) confronts frames and assumptions concerning how charming old ladies treat their pets with how the one in the joke actually treated her cat, the behaviour and passion of beautiful young princesses with those of an old lady, and/or the physical condition and capabilities of good-looking men with those of the prince in the joke:

- (3) An old lady sits on her front porch, rocking away the last days of her long life, when all of a sudden, a fairy godmother appears and informs her that she will be granted three wishes. "Well, now," says the old lady, "I guess I would like to be really rich." \*\*\* POOF \*\*\* Her rocking chair turns to solid gold. "And, gee, I guess I wouldn't mind being a young, beautiful princess."

<sup>1</sup> These are stereotypical scenarios endowing texts with meaningfulness. They comprise *word-associated schemas*, *sequence-associated scripts* about events, and *situation-associated frames*.

\*\*\* POOF \*\*\* She turns into a beautiful young woman. “Your third wish?” asks the fairy godmother. Just then the old woman’s cat wanders across the porch in front of them. “Ooh - can you change him into a handsome prince?” she asks. \*\*\* POOF \*\*\* There before her stands a young man more handsome than anyone could possibly imagine. She stares at him, smitten. With a smile that makes her knees weak, he saunters across the porch and whispers in her ear, “Bet you’re sorry you had me neutered.”

In relevance-theoretic pragmatics, jokes are considered deceitful texts. Humorists predict information available and anticipate the inferential steps that are likely to be taken. Humour arises when the audience detects the inadequacy of entertained beliefs, make-sense frames and/or the output of specific pragmatic tasks, and realises the plausibility mistakenly granted to them (Yus Ramos 2003, 2013a, 2013b, 2016). This is possible thanks to their *epistemic vigilance* of the reliability and viability of information (Mascaro & Sperber 2009; Sperber et al. 2010), and their *hermeneutical vigilance* of the well-formedness and reasonability of interpretations (Padilla Cruz 2015, 2016).

### 3. Joke types

Three parameters are essential in joke creation: (i) utterance interpretation, (ii) make-sense frames, and (iii) cultural information (Yus Ramos 2016: 117). They may be exploited jointly or separately for the sake of humour. Despite the different classifications of jokes proposed on the grounds of varied criteria (Suls 1977, 1983; Ritchie 2004, 2006; Yus Ramos 2003; Dynel 2012), a more naturalistic one must consider the manipulation of such parameters and the crucial role of inference in the interpretation of jokes. Hence, such a classification needs to differentiate between “[...] jokes whose humorous effects lie in the steps leading to an interpretation [...] and jokes whose humour is based on cultural and collective information stored in the hearer’s mind” (Yus Ramos 2016: 115). The possible combinations of such parameters yield a seven-type taxonomy of jokes known as the *Intersecting Circles Model* (Yus Ramos 2013a, 2016). The seven types are:

a) Jokes cancelling an activated make-sense frame, cultural information and an interpretation:

- (4) As an airplane is about to crash, a female passenger jumps up frantically and announces, “If I’m going to die, I want to die feeling like a woman.” She removes all her clothing and asks, “Is there someone on this plane who is man enough to make me feel like a woman?” A man stands up, removes his shirt and says, “Here, iron this”.

(Yus Ramos 2016: 126-127)

The incongruity introduced by the man’s imperative in a catastrophe frame forces a shift to a sexist frame. Additionally, “die feeling like a woman” (“making love with a man”) and the denotation of ‘man’ (“good lover”) and ‘woman’ (“woman being given full sexual pleasure”) need to be adjusted differently.

b) Jokes invalidating a make-sense frame and cultural information:

- (5) Late one night, a mugger wearing a mask jumped into the path of a well-dressed man and stuck a gun in his ribs. “Give me your money,” he demanded. Indignant, the affluent man replied, “You can’t do this. I’m a politician!” “In that case,” replied the robber, “give me MY money!”.

(Yus Ramos 2016: 127-128)

The victim's refusal to give his money to the mugger contradicts a typical situation where muggers intimidate and get money. Hearers need to activate another frame where the mugger does not do wrong because the victim is a politician who might have embezzled money.

- c) Jokes activating a make-sense frame favouring an interpretation, both of which must be subsequently abandoned:

(6) On the night of their honeymoon, a newlywed couple had an unfortunate accident, resulting in the amputation of the groom's left foot. Unable to control her grief, the bride called her mother from the hospital. "Mother," she sobbed, "My husband has only one foot." The mother, trying to console her daughter said, "That's alright dear, your father has only six inches".

(Yus Ramos 2016: 128-131)

Replacement of the sense of 'foot' with unit of length must be motivated by a shift from a hospital frame to one connected with sex.

- d) Jokes depending on a shift of make-sense frame:

(7) A man was drinking in a bar when he noticed this beautiful young lady sitting next to him. "Hello there", says the man, "and what is your name?" "Hello," giggles the woman, "I'm Stacey. What's yours?" "I'm Jim." "Jim, do you want to come over to my house tonight? I mean, right now??" "Sure!" replies Jim, "Let's go!" So Stacey takes Jim to her house and takes him to her room. Jim sits down on the bed and notices a picture of a man on Stacey's desk. "Stacey, I noticed the picture of a man on your desk," Jim says. "Yes? And what about it?" asks Stacey. "Is it your brother?" "No, it isn't, Jim!" Stacey giggles. Jim's eyes widen, suspecting that it might be Stacey's husband. When he finally asks, "Is it your husband?" Stacey giggles even more, "No, silly!!" Jim was relieved. "Then, it might be your boyfriend!" Stacey giggles even more while nibbling on Jim's ear. She says, "No, silly!!" "Then, who is it?" Jim asks. Stacey replies, "That's me before my operation!!"

(Yus Ramos 2016: 132-133)

Funniness stems from rejection of the frame "man meets woman at a bar" upon hearing that the man in the picture was the woman.

- e) Jokes relying on cultural information strengthening a stereotype and the invalidation of an interpretation:

(8) Following a bitter divorce, a husband saw his wife at a party and sneered, "You know, I was a fool when I married you". The wife simply sighed and replied, "Yes, dear, I know, but I was in love and didn't really notice."

(Yus Ramos 2016: 132)

Disambiguation of 'fool' as "lacking sense" should reinforce the stereotype of marriage being troublesome. However, this disambiguation needs abandoning in favour of "stupid or silly person", which also fits the overall context.

- f) Jokes solely strengthening or weakening cultural information about stereotypes:

(9) A man lost both ears in an accident. No plastic surgeon could offer him a solution. He heard of a very good one in Sweden, and went to him. The new surgeon examined him, thought a while, and said, "Yes, I can put you right". After the operation, bandages off, stitches out, he goes to his hotel. The morning after, in a rage, he calls his surgeon, and yells, "You swine, you gave me a woman's ears." "Well, an ear is an ear. It makes no difference whether it is a man's or a woman's." "You're wrong. I hear everything, but I don't understand a thing!".

(Yus Ramos 2016: 133)

Comicality could result from reinforcement of the negative and disrespectful stereotype that women allegedly do not understand.

g) Jokes biasing plausible interpretations that must be annulled:

(10) A lady went into a clothing store and asked, “May I try on that dress in the shop window?”  
“Well,” replied the sales clerk doubtfully, “don’t you think it would be better to use the dressing room?”

(Yus Ramos 2016: 133)

Hearers should notice the readings “[try on that dress (that is) in the shop window]” and “[try on that dress] [in the shop window]”.

Tested against a 1000-joke corpus (Yus Ramos 2013b), this taxonomy may aid analysis of joke identification, comprehension and appreciation in interlanguage and intercultural pragmatics studies. It captures distinct humour-generating tactics that may be opaque or pose difficulties to SL learners due to unawareness of beliefs and/or frames, cross-cultural differences in their contents and/or idiosyncratic meaning-form mappings, and hence prevent humorousness detection and appreciation. What follows reports on a study based on this taxonomy. It ascertains if Spanish ESL learners (i) identify jokes in their target language, (ii) appreciate their jocularity, (iii) experience comprehension problems and, if so, (iv) which JT(s) is/are easier to understand.

## 4. Methodology

Since this study focuses on comprehension, it endorses a *receptive data approach* and relies on *pragmatic comprehension tasks* (Bouton 1994, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos 2010; Taguchi 2011a, 2011b, 2017). Data were elicited through an online questionnaire comprising recognition, appreciation and non-interactive meta-pragmatic tasks.

### 4.1. Questionnaire

Developed with the *Qualtrics* (Provo, UT) software, the questionnaire comprised audio input and various tasks. These were arranged on individual web pages in order to facilitate their administration through smartphones and computers. An introductory page gave information about the tasks and solicited consent to participate. The second page was a volume adjustment test (Appendix A). Then, nine sets of two pages followed.

Two of the sets included in the first page recorded narrative texts with no humorous intent. They served as distractors. The first page of the other seven sets contained a recording of one sample of each JT. These were examples (4)-(10) from Yus Ramos (2016) illustrating the discussion in Section 3. Recordings were made by one male and two female native speakers from the Midwestern United States. They had been trained so as to balance delivery and avoid prosody mismatch. No effect of gender factors was expected. Written transcripts were not supplied in order to prevent participants from (re-)reading joke texts, which would have diminished data reliability. Rather, participants had to attend to oral features that impact comprehension, such as prosody. Input delivery on separate pages enabled control of exposure time, as the software records the time spent on each page and tracks whether recordings were played more than once (Appendix B). Indeed, participants had to listen to the recordings only once.

The second page in each set presented four tasks. Completion of these was necessary to continue. They consisted of five questions, three of which gathered data amenable to quantitative analysis, while the remaining two elicited data amenable to qualitative analysis (Appendix C):

- *Task 1* required answering two questions. *Question 1a* was a multiple-choice asking to describe input as ‘boring’, ‘repetitive’, ‘confusing’, ‘humorous’, ‘informative’ and/or ‘absurd’. Multiple selection was possible and ‘humorous’ confirmed joke appreciation, a requisite for humour comprehension (Hay 2001; Bell & Attardo 2010). *Question 1b* enquired about choice rationale.
- *Task 2* involved placing a slider on a scale ranging from 0 (‘nonunderstanding’) to 100 (‘full understanding’). Although the scores were not intended to reflect actual comprehension, they shed light onto JT difficulty.
- *Task 3* elicited brief accounts of the easiness/difficulty of each recording. Since comprehension troubles may prevent joke appreciation (Hay 2001; Bell 2007b; Bell & Attardo 2010), the responses to this task will be correlated with those to *Question 1a*.
- *Task 4* entailed input identification through a multiple-choice. Participants chose from among ‘story’, ‘anecdote’, ‘joke’, ‘news’, ‘interview’, ‘letter’, ‘advertisement’ or ‘political discourse’. Correct selection of ‘joke’ revealed successful identification, another requisite for humour comprehension (Hay 2001; Bell & Attardo 2010).

To conclude, participants were asked demographic information, previous experience with English –including proficiency level as certified by an official institution or the courses passed in the School of Philology at Universidad de Sevilla– participation in study-abroad programs, work experience in a foreign country and an estimate of the hours per week spent in contact with English outside of class. These factors might impact the results (Appendix D).

## **4.2. Participants**

The participants were 49 Spanish undergraduates with a B2 level of English, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, henceforth). This choice was motivated by the correlation found between proficiency and comprehension (Taguchi, 2012). Furthermore, lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge at lower levels could have hindered understanding the recordings.

38 participants were women and 11 were men. Ages ranged between 19 and 22, with a mean average of 19.76. They were taking upper-division courses of the Degree in English Studies at Universidad de Sevilla. They were recruited from “Inglés Instrumental I” (“Instrumental English I”), a general second-year, advanced-level course (CEFR C1). Their proficiency level was certified by their institution upon completion of “Lengua Inglesa I” (“English Language I”), a general upper-intermediate, CEFR B2-level English course compulsory for all first-year students.

## **4.3. Data collection**

One of the researchers contacted an instructor teaching two groups of the said course on March 2019 and asked for permission to use the last 30 minutes of two sessions in order to solicit participation. In April, the researcher visited the classes and informed the students about the investigation without revealing its purpose. Next, he projected on the display a slide with a QR code along with a URL to a blog post, which gave access to the questionnaire (Appendix E). He then explained the instructions: students had to (i) consent to participate, (ii) complete the questionnaire individually, (iii) listen to recordings only once, with headphones if necessary, and (iv) do each task. Students using smartphones scanned the QR code, while those using a

laptop typed the URL into their browser. The researcher also answered questions about the tasks and requested that participants notify him of technical problems.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

For quantitative purposes, responses were coded depending on (i) whether ‘humorous’ –a categorical binary factor– was selected in *Question 1a*, (ii) the acknowledged degree of comprehension in *Task 2* –a continuous factor– and (iii) whether ‘joke’ –another binary factor– was selected in *Task 4*. Comparison and contrast of the responses determined if jokes were identified and appreciated, as well as the type(s) involving more difficulties. In turn, responses to *Question 1b* and *Task 3* were analysed qualitatively on the grounds of explicit allusions to humour or the parameters intervening in joke construction. Irrelevant responses were disregarded.

### 5. Analysis and discussion

#### 5.1. Quantitative analysis

Overall, responses reveal that jokes tended to be understood by Spanish B2-level ESL students. 63.8% of the participants (31/49) correctly identified the recordings containing them and found them funny.

Responses to *Question 1a* indicate that JT examples exploiting invalidation of make-sense frames triggered the highest percentages of humour appreciation (see Table 1). Indeed, 81.6% of participants (40/49) selected ‘humorous’ for that of JT#3 [make-sense frame + utterance interpretation], 71.4% (35/49) for that of JT#4 [make-sense frame], 67.3% (33/49) for that of JT#2 [make-sense frame + cultural information] and 63.3% (31/49) for that of JT#1 [make-sense frame + cultural information + utterance interpretation]. However, the JT#1 example was considered ‘absurd’ by 67.3% (33/49) participants. In contrast, only 20.4% (10/49) and 28.6% (15/49) of participants evaluated the examples of JT#6 [cultural information] and JT#7 [utterance interpretation] respectively as funny.

Table 1. Results from *Question 1a*

JT	‘boring’		‘repetitive’		‘confusing’		‘humorous’		‘informative’		‘absurd’	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
#1	4.1	2	12.2	6	49.0	24	63.3	31	14.3	7	7.3	33
#2	4.1	2	10.2	5	8.2	4	67.3	33	36.7	18	26.5	13
#3	12.2	6	2.0	1	26.5	13	81.6	40	26.5	13	1.0	25
#4	12.2	6	34.7	17	6.1	3	71.4	35	16.3	8	2.7	16
#5	26.5	13	8.2	4	26.5	13	51.0	25	26.5	13	8.6	14
#6	34.7	17	16.3	8	24.5	12	20.4	10	24.5	12	7.1	28
#7	44.9	22	4.1	2	57.1	28	28.6	15	14.3	7	1.0	26



Self-assessments of joke comprehension in *Task 2* averaged over 80% for most JT examples (see Table 2). That of JT#4, which alters the mugging make-sense frame, ranks highest with an average of 98.2%. It is followed by JT#3 example, which cancels the hospital frame and the measurement-unit sense of ‘foot’, with an average of 90.2%. For the rest of JT examples, participants deemed their comprehension between 84.2% and 88.7%. The exception was JT#7 example.

Table 2. Results from *Task 2*

JT	%
#1 [Make-sense frame + cultural frame + utterance interpretation]	86.2
#2 [Make-sense frame + cultural frame]	86.9
#3 [Make-sense frame + utterance interpretation]	90.2
#4 [Make-sense frame]	98.2
#5 [Cultural frame + utterance interpretation]	88.7
#6 [Cultural frame]	84.2
#7 [Utterance interpretation]	59.2

In *Task 4*, 63.8% of participants correctly identified the recordings containing jokes, but selection of ‘anecdote’ by 23.6% evidences trouble (see Table 3). JT#3 and JT#4 examples achieve the highest rates of identification, thus matching the scores for *Question 1a*. However, JT#1, JT#2 and JT#5 examples exhibit lower scores: 44.9% (22/49), 55.1% (27/49) and 59.2% (29/49), respectively.

Table 3. Results from *Task 4*

JT	Joke		Anecdote		News		Tale		Interview		Letter		Ad		Political Discourse	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
#1.	44.9	22	44.9	22	2.0	1	6.1	3	2.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0
#2.	55.1	27	20.4	10	14.3	7	8.2	4	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	2.0	1
#3.	81.6	40	16.3	8	2.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0
#4.	75.5	37	10.2	5	0.0	0	14.3	7	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0
#5.	59.2	29	24.5	12	2.0	1	10.2	5	2.0	1	0.0	0	2.0	1	0.0	0
#6.	69.4	34	18.4	9	6.1	3	4.1	2	0.0	0	2.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	0
#7.	61.2	30	30.6	15	2.0	1	4.1	2	0.0	0	2.0	1	0.0	0	0.0	0
Mean	63.8		23.6		4.1		6.7		0.6		0.6		0.3		0.3	

Comparison of the results from *Question 1a* and *Task 4* reveals that jokes need not be considered funny to be correctly identified; or vice versa, identification does not involve appreciation (see Figure 1). Although the rates for appreciation and identification almost match in JT#3 and JT#4 examples, they do not in those of JT#6 and JT#7: despite successful identification, many participants did not find them humorous. This discrepancy is more significant in JT#6 example, which was correctly identified by 69.4% participants (34/49), but only 20.4% of them (10/49) considered it funny. Yet, the rate of identification in JT#6 and JT#7 examples is higher than that for the examples of JT#1 (44.9%, 22/49), JT#2 (55.1%, 27/49) and JT#5 (59.2%, 29/47).

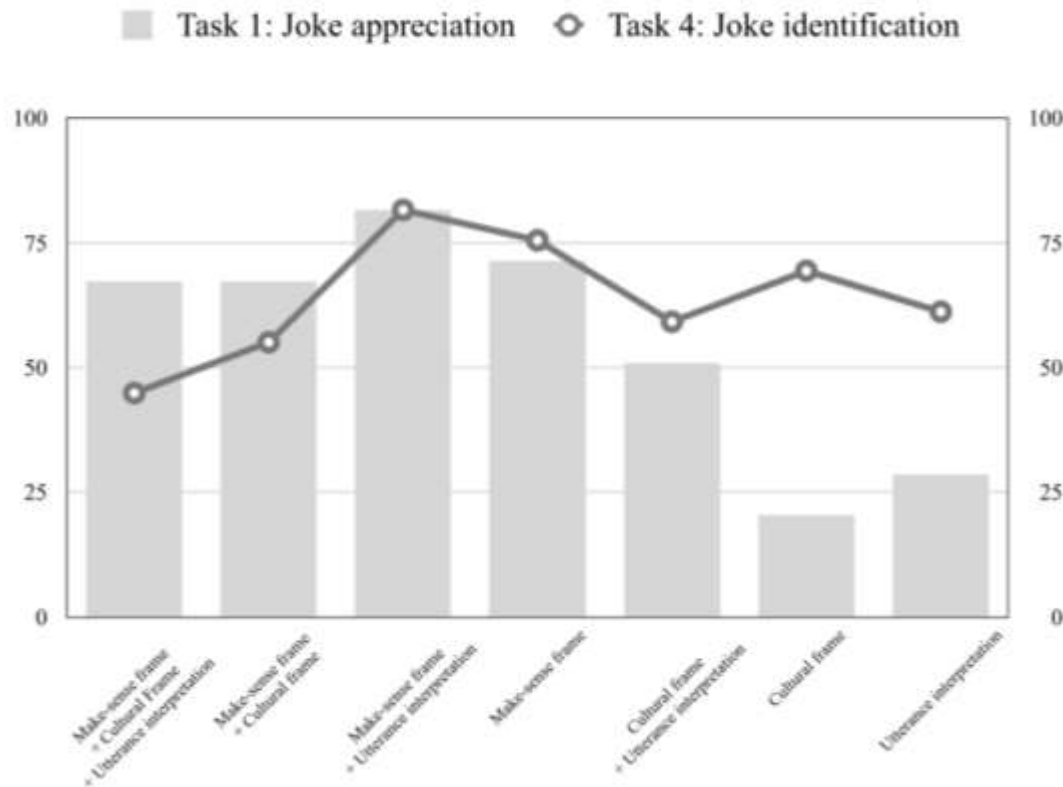


Figure 1. Comparative analysis between *Question 1a* and *Task 4*

*Tasks 2* and *4* reveal that satisfactory understanding does not necessarily lead to successful identification (see Figure 2). Indeed, the examples of JT#1, JT#2 and JT#5 achieved the lowest rates as regards identification. Overall comprehension, then, might not exclude difficulties with joke-construction manoeuvres facilitating identification, such as forced reinterpretation and/or detection of an invalid make-sense frame. JT#7 example is worth noting because rates for comprehension (59.2%) and identification (61.2%) almost match. In contrast, JT#3 and JT#4 examples achieved the highest scores in terms of comprehension –90.2% and 98.2%, respectively– and identification –81.6% (40/49) and 75.5% (37/49), respectively.

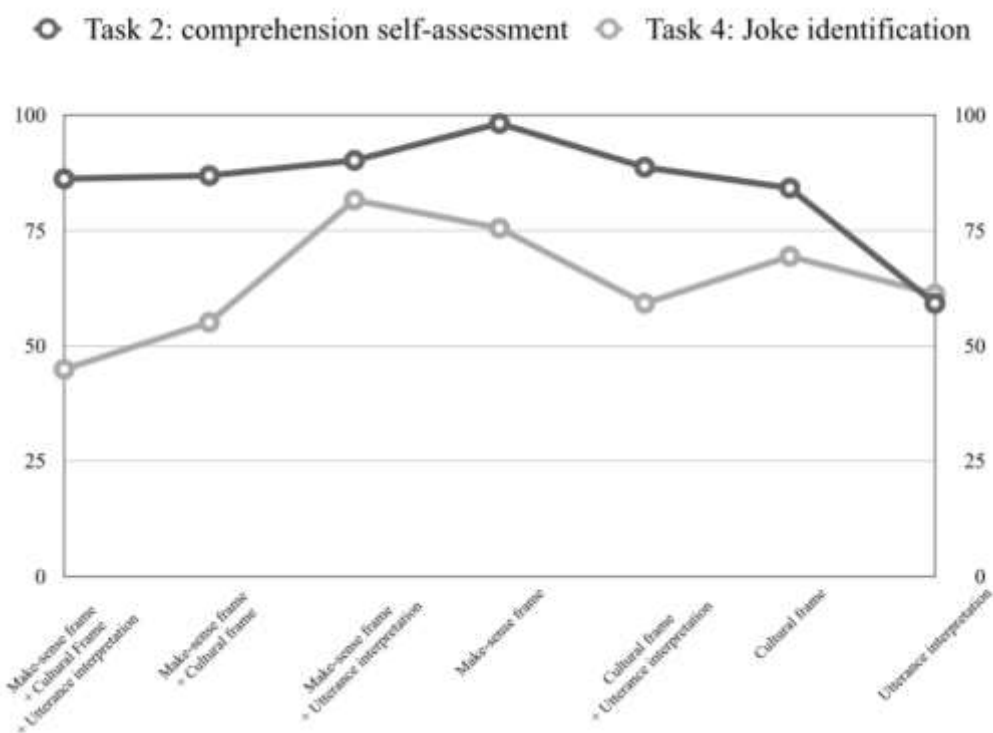


Figure 2. Comparative analysis between Tasks 2 and 4

## 5.2. Qualitative analysis

Despite absence of word limit in response boxes for *Question 1b* and *Task 3*, 76.2% of participants made general, plain and brief responses. Hence, the qualitative analysis only relies on 23.8% of them: 82 for *Question 1b* and 62 for *Task 3*. These comprise metalinguistic comments on recognition, understanding and quality, and evaluations that did not involve metalinguistic reflections (Bell 2009).

*Question 1b* elicited 17 responses about JT#1 example, most of which alluded to invalidation of the *plane crash* make-sense frame. 13 (76.4%) revealed awareness of the dependance of comicality on incongruity: “the fact of being illogical makes it funny somehow” or “it is so absurd that it is funny”.<sup>2</sup> Of these, three suggested that misidentification as an anecdote was due to nonsensicality or the situation: “the situation makes little sense” or “it is not funny because it is about an accident”. The remaining four comments (23.5%) showed that the sexist stereotype in the joke prevented humour appreciation, thus evaluating the example as a poor attempt at humour (Hay 2001; Bell 2009). Interestingly, responses did not refer to interpretative manipulations, thus unveiling unawareness of their part in this JT example.

In contrast, *Task 3* only elicited seven responses. They matched the results from *Task 2*, where 86.2% of participants claimed joke understanding. Yet, nonunderstanding –“I have not been able to understand the last part”– and double sense –“some words had a double meaning and I did not get it quite well”– were admitted to hamper comprehension in two metalinguistic comments. Comments like these are frequent responses to incomprehensible humour (Bell 2013).

Six of the 12 responses about the JT#2 example in *Question 1b* acknowledged that funniness depended on cultural information about the narrated event. The other six pointed out that it

<sup>2</sup> Responses have been translated into English.

stemmed from make-sense frame invalidation: “the end is unexpected”, “it is funny that someone gets to do something like that” or “the mugger’s reply can be funny”. Nine of these comments exhibited endorsement of the stereotype about politicians embezzling money: “it is a critique that can be funny” or “the joke makes you think about the money that politicians embezzle”. The remaining three considered that the topic and overtones were inappropriate for humour, however (Hay 2001; Bell 2009).

The nine responses gathered through *Task 3* were along the lines of those seen with the JT#1 example. They mainly reported on problems with words like ‘mugger’, ‘ribs’ or ‘affluent’, or fragments like “jumped into the path of a well-dressed man”, “stuck a gun in his ribs” or “give me MY money!”. The last one repeated the punchline while admitting nonunderstanding (Bell 2013). Overall, the JT#2 example was found predictable and easy to understand because of the entrenchment of the stereotype wherewith it plays: “I already had an idea of what was going to happen”.

*Question 1b* elicited 11 responses about the JT#3 example. 36.3% of them (4/11) deemed its hilariousness to arise from the shift from the *hospital* to the *sexual* frame: “the unexpected ending of the story was funny” or “the last part was quite funny”. 63.6% (7/11) considered it to stem from ambiguity: “it is a joke with a double meaning” or “foot and inches are also units of length”.

Although 81.6% of responses to *Question 1a* appreciated the humorousness of the JT#3 example and 90.2% of those to *Task 2* acknowledged comprehension, 57.1% of the 14 responses (8/14) in *Task 3* admitted comprehension problems due to vocabulary (Bell & Attardo 2010; Bell 2013): “I did not quite catch the topic because of lack of vocabulary”, “easy, although I missed some words/expressions” or “there are some words that I have not been able to catch”. One of them even overtly pointed to the double sense of ‘foot’ as the major source of difficulty: “everything is easy to understand except that I did not catch the joke because I do not know what ‘6 inches’ refers to”.

The majority of the 14 responses (85.7%, 12/14) to *Question 1b* about the JT#4 example rightly took the plot twist achieved by the invalidation of the *man meets woman* frame to trigger humour: “it is funny because of the man’s misunderstanding” or “it is very funny with the unexpected ending”. This might have been why the participants rated this example as the funniest. There were negative reactions, though, as it was considered offensive to the transgender collective in two cases.

Also, the majority of the seven responses in *Task 3* indicate absence of comprehension problems: “it was easy to understand because it employs easy words and I understood everything” or “very literal and easy to follow”. These results are consistent with those from *Task 2*, where this JT example scored the highest in terms of self-assessment of comprehension (98.2%).

The sexist attitude in the JT#5 example accounted for humour disapproval in two of the eight responses to *Question 1b*: “it is too sexist” and “if there is so much complaint about marriages, why do they still get married?”. The other responses, however, found humour to be caused by the reinforced cultural stereotype –“because that happens to many married couples and since you can identify with it, it is funny”– and the double sense of ‘fool’ –“the woman has a good comeback” or “because the woman’s response was witty”.

As with the JT#4 example, the eight responses about that of JT#5 obtained through *Task 3* matched the results from *Task 2*, where it scored 88.7% in terms of comprehension assessment. Two metalinguistic comments clearly stated that the recording was understandable: “it is a simple text” and “simple grammar and vocabulary”. Yet, the others alluded to lexical gaps –“I did not quite catch what the girl said because I did not understand her vocabulary”– the SCI part –“I did not understand the last part”– or cultural aspects –“it is hard to understand because if you have not been married before, you do not know what a joke like that can lead to”.

66.6% (8) of the 12 responses about JT#6 example in *Question 1b* indicated that joke comprehension and identification do not always involve appreciation. This backlash was due to the stereotype pertaining to women's alleged nonunderstanding: "this topic does not make me laugh", "I can understand the joke but I do not share it" or "it is kind of offensive". One comment even warned about its awkwardness: "it may offend women, but humor is humor, I love these kinds of jokes, although nowadays you have to be very careful with these issues".

The eight responses to *Task 3* reveal that the lower assessment of the JT#6 example in terms of comprehension (84.2%) was also due to lexical problems (Bell & Attardo 2010; Bell 2013): "I did not understand some words" or "I did not understand the last word, which is the most important one". However, they did not preclude overall grasping of the joke (Bell 2007b), as three of them (37.5%) manifested: "I missed some words. I understand the core" or "some words that I did not know, but in general I understood well".

Finally, five of the eight responses to *Question 1b* about JT#7 example associated humour with syntactic ambiguity: "it was a curious play on words". The other three admitted problems at disambiguating the key structure in the SCI part, thus explaining the decrease in comprehension (Bell 2013). This was assessed as 59.2% in *Task 2*.

The nine responses to *Task 3* also confirmed the impact of ambiguity on comprehension: "I got lost in some parts" or "it was confusing". They also made it clear that joke appreciation may be hindered by comprehension problems. Although 61.2% of the participants (30/49) satisfactorily identified the recording in *Task 4*, only 28.6% of them (15/49) considered it funny, as revealed by the responses to *Question 1a*.

### **5.3. Discussion**

The elicited comments and self-assessments could unveil only a subset of the challenges faced by the participants in this study. They might have concealed some problems because, given the Degree in which they were enrolled, experiencing them and/or displaying nonunderstanding might be risky (Bell & Attardo 2010: 429). Jokes would have been knowledge or skill tests, so failure to understand would have portrayed the participants as incompetent. Moreover, comprehension problems would have threatened their face in a context where correct understanding would be expected at their level of study (Bell 2013: 178-187).

Nevertheless, the data reveal that the participants overall understood the JT examples in the target language. Also, joke identification did not necessarily involve appreciation, and failure to appreciate jocularity might be attributable to lack of sense of humour (Chiaro 1992; Norrick 1993). Availability of a make-sense frame in the participants' and the target cultures (Schmitz 2002), as well as unexpectedness of plot twists, might have facilitated assessments of the examples of JT#1, JT#2, JT#3 and JT#4 as jocular. Moreover, in the JT#4 example allusion to a sensitive gender-related issue, such as sex reassignment, did not detract from humour, as 71.4% of the participants (35/49) regarded it as funny. However, responses to *Question 1a* indicate other reactions.

The JT#6 example, which exploits a negative stereotype about women, was assessed as 'absurd' and 'boring' by respectively 57.1% (28/49) and 34.7% (17/49) of the participants. Individual beliefs might have prompted them to communicate with such assessments metamesages concerning the offensiveness and unacceptability of a stereotype contributing to women's inequality (Canestrani & Attardo 2008). In turn, the JT#7 example, which plays with alternative interpretations, was found 'absurd' by 51% of the participants (26/49). Low proficiency might have impeded effective hermeneutical vigilance (Padilla Cruz 2015, 2016). As a result, the participants might not have noticed the ambiguity of "try on that dress in the shop window" despite the sales clerk's question in the SCI part –"don't you think it would be better to use the dressing room?"– and failed to invalidate an initial effortless and seemingly

plausible reading. These findings are further supported by responses to *Question 1b*: dissent with a stereotype or failure to consider differing interpretations prevented joke appreciation (Bell & Attardo 2010). On the other hand, the progressive increase in the selection of ‘boring’ from JT#1 example (4.1%) to that of JT#7 (44.9%) might reveal *cumulative fatigue*. Questionnaire completion could have made participants tired and diminished their attention (Chaudron 2003; Dörnyei 2005).

The ratings in *Task 2* show participants’ satisfaction about comprehension. The JT#1 example could have been expected to be particularly demanding because of the joint manipulation of the three humour-generating parameters. This could have increased cognitive effort (Sperber & Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson & Sperber 2004). However, it was the JT#7 example, which only plays with interpretation, that proved the least comprehensible one. The rating of comprehension as 59.2% seems caused by awareness of an alternative reading of the punchline –the sales clerk’s question– and failure to discover it (Bell 2013). Increase in humour-generating tactics, then, needs not affect comprehension. That of the participants seemed instead affected by lack or difficulty of vocabulary, and challenging structures, as most comments on JT#1, JT#3 and JT#5 examples, and a few comments on the JT#7 example, pointed out in *Task 3*.

The comments in *Task 4* generally evince correct joke identification, too. Quick detection of the playful tactics –frame shifts and competing senses– could account for success with the JT#3 and JT#4 examples. Availability of the *mugger-victim* and the *troublesome marriage* make-sense frames, as well as similar beliefs about politicians (Schmitz 2002), could in turn justify right choices in the JT#2 and JT#5 examples. The JT#1 example was also considered an anecdote, though. Failure to notice the final incongruity and to replace the *plane crash* make-sense frame, or dissent with the sexist attitude and frame introduced by the imperative “iron this” in the SCI part, could explain this. Misidentification was also frequent with the examples of JT#2, JT#5 and JT#6, which rely on cultural information. The responses to *Question 1b* and the comments in *Task 3* imply that dissociation from the sexist stereotypes that JT#2 and JT#6 examples reinforce, and unawareness of the two senses of ‘fool’ – i.e., momentary or general state– in the JT#5 example, might have hindered identification.

## 6. Limitations and future research

The representativity of the results is curtailed by the number of participants and their extraction. Their motivation to learn the target language and their attitudes towards it might have impacted on the responses. Recruitment from other levels and courses, as well as from a wider range of centres, will surely enable broader generalisations about Spanish ESL learners’ abilities to recognise, understand and appraise jokes. This could additionally facilitate longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons. More valid and generalisable claims about joke identification, comprehension and appreciation should also be based on a comparison of the ESL learners’ responses to their L1 equivalents of the input jokes. While providing valuable information about their L1 processing skills, such responses may also aid evaluation of their sense of humour, on which joke appreciation greatly depends.

The number and variety of JT examples in the questionnaire also detract from generalisation. Additional studies should consider more examples addressing distinct topics and manipulating different interpretative tasks. More revealing insights could thus be gained on the problems that SL learners face and their reactions to JTs. If the inclusion of a higher number of examples in data-collection tools was likely to increase fatigue, studies could target only specific JTs and leave comparison of results to further contrastive studies. Future studies could also take

into account factors like response time and/or gaze direction, which reveal joke comprehension and appreciation, as software tracking them are already available.

Finally, the results of this study were not correlated to individual factors such as length of study, and/or study- or work-abroad experiences. Their effects on ESL learners' reactions and interpretative skills could also be ascertained in the future. Similarly, it could be corroborated whether pedagogical intervention (Padilla Cruz 2019) benefits joke identification, comprehension and appreciation.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study explored whether Spanish B2 ESL learners recognise, understand and appreciate jokes; which JT examples pose difficulties and where they stem from. Despite its limitations, the results show that:

- Joke appreciation and identification by these learners need not correlate.
- High comprehension self-assessments do not guarantee joke identification.
- JT examples based on the invalidation of make-sense frames were easier to identify and more appreciated.
- JT examples relying on disambiguation were more challenging.

The JT#3 example, which required make-sense frame invalidation and reinterpretation, turned out the easiest to identify and understand, and was the most appreciated. Absence of structural or lexical ambiguities, and make-sense availability could explain this. In contrast, the JT#7 example proved to be the most difficult to understand and identify because of the ambiguity on which its funniness depended. This could suggest that low proficiency may impede efficient hermeneutical vigilance conducive to ambiguity resolution. The greater or lesser difficulties posed by the humour-generating tactics of the other JT examples placed these at different points along this cline.

The limitations of the data-collection tool and the number of participants render this an exploratory investigation about joke identification, comprehension and appreciation by ESL learners. Future studies should recruit higher numbers of participants and use better-suited or more efficient data-collection tools. These could concentrate on specific joke types, include a wider spectrum of samples and avoid participants' fatigue, boredom or demotivation. Future studies should also explore how availability of cultural and make-sense information favours or hampers the comprehension of jokes relying on various types of disambiguation or other interpretive processes.

Some JT samples in the study rely on sensitive topics like sexist stereotypes and triggered negative reactions. Although transgression often plays a major role in humour, sociocultural and generational issues should not be underestimated, as they explain certain beliefs and attitudes that may ultimately be responsible for humour failure. Future research could also examine the reactions arising from jokes exploiting other stereotypes or the extent to which stereotypes are ultimately essential in jokes in the current context. Undeniably, data amenable to comparison is also necessary in order to undertake cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of ESL learners' comprehension of jokes. Thus, a more fine-grained picture of how their pragmatic performance varies across proficiency levels and time could be gained as regards joke identification, comprehension and appreciation.

## **Appendix A**

Questionnaire introductory page, volume adjustment test and training:



**¡Bienvenidos a esta investigación!**

*Mi nombre es Santiago Arróniz y estoy llevando a cabo una investigación para mi Trabajo Fin de Máster en la Facultad de Filología.*

*La realización del estudio le llevará alrededor de 15-20 minutos. Su participación en esta investigación es voluntaria. Tiene el derecho a retirarse en cualquier momento durante el estudio, por cualquier razón y sin ningún tipo de prejuicio. Cualquier dato que proporcione durante la realización de la misma será tratado de forma totalmente anónima y con un fin exclusivamente estadístico y de investigación. Si desea ponerse en contacto con el investigador principal del estudio para hablar sobre esta investigación, envíe un correo electrónico a [sarroniz@outlook.com](mailto:sarroniz@outlook.com)*

*Al hacer clic en el siguiente botón, reconoce que su participación en el estudio es voluntaria, tiene más de 18 años de edad y sabe que puede decidir dar por finalizada su participación en el estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón.*

*Tenga en cuenta que esta encuesta se mostrará mejor en un ordenador portátil o de escritorio. Algunas características podrían ser menos compatibles para su uso en un dispositivo móvil. Es muy recomendable usar auriculares durante todo el estudio. Si llega a tener algún tipo de problema técnico al cargar la página, pruebe a refrescarla. Si persiste, póngase en contacto con el investigador. No retroceda de página durante el estudio.*

*Puede responder a las preguntas en [español](#) o [inglés](#).*

*¡Muchas gracias!*

He comprendido la finalidad de este estudio, cómo se usarán mis datos y doy mi consentimiento para llevar a cabo la investigación.





Este es un ejemplo de lo que encontrará a lo largo del estudio (no es necesario responder a estas preguntas). Por favor, **ajuste el volumen** de su dispositivo electrónico para que escuche lo mejor posible. Asegúrese de **leer bien** el enunciado de cada pregunta y cada una de las opciones.



¿Qué piensas sobre lo que acabas de escuchar? Por favor, responde "Sí" / "No" y "¿Por qué?" para cada una de las siguientes opciones:

	Sí	No	¿Por qué?
Humorista	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Agustín	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Comedia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Humor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Humorista	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Humor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>

¿Te ha resultado fácil o difícil de comprender? Por favor, desliza el cursor hasta lo que consideras que ha sido tu porcentaje de comprensión:

0% (no entendido nada) | 100% (no entendido completamente)

Desliza...

Describe brevemente por qué te ha resultado fácil/difícil de comprender:

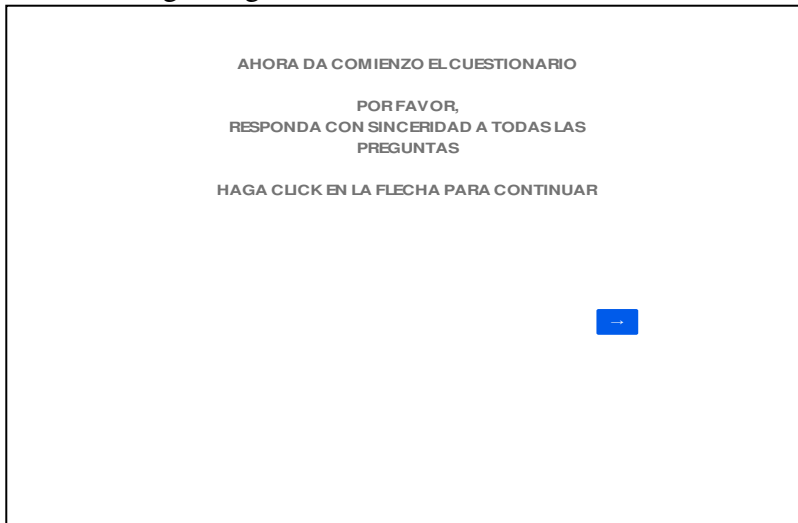
¿Qué tipo de texto piensas que es?

<input type="radio"/> Cuento	<input type="radio"/> Entrevista
<input type="radio"/> Anécdota	<input type="radio"/> Carta
<input type="radio"/> Chiste	<input type="radio"/> Anuncio publicitario
<input type="radio"/> Noticia	<input type="radio"/> Discurso político



## Appendix B

Questionnaire beginning:



## Appendix C

### Questionnaire tasks and questions:

¿Qué piensas sobre lo que acabas de escuchar? Por favor, responde "Sí" / "No" y "¿Por qué?" para cada una de las siguientes opciones:


	Sí	No	¿Por qué?
Adaptas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Repetitivo	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Confuso	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Gracioso	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Informativo	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>
Aburrido	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="text"/>

¿Te ha resultado fácil o difícil de comprender? Por favor, desliza el cursor hasta lo que consideras que ha sido tu porcentaje de comprensión:

No he entendido nada      Lo he entendido completamente

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

Desliza...



Describe brevemente por qué te ha resultado fácil/difícil de comprender:

¿Qué tipo de texto piensas que es?

<input type="radio"/> Cuento	<input type="radio"/> Entrevista
<input type="radio"/> Anécdota	<input type="radio"/> Carta
<input type="radio"/> Chiste	<input type="radio"/> Anuncio publicitario
<input type="radio"/> Noticia	<input type="radio"/> Discurso político



Powered by Qualtrics

## Appendix D

### Background questionnaire:

#### ¡SOLO UNAS PREGUNTAS MÁS SOBRE TI!

##### INSTRUCCIONES:

Por favor, complete el siguiente cuestionario sobre algunos datos personales. No debe dar su nombre en ningún momento. Sus respuestas se guardarán de forma anónima y segura y sólo se reportarán en conjunto con los datos de otros participantes. Siéntase con libertad de hacer preguntas si tiene dudas sobre cualquier parte de este cuestionario.

¿Con qué género te identificas?

Edad:

¿Posees algún Certificado Oficial de Inglés?  
(Cambridge, Trinity, TOEFL...)

Sí

No

Si eres alumno de la Facultad de Filología, por favor, **especifica la asignatura de Lengua Inglesa/Inglés Instrumental aprobada más avanzada**. En caso negativo, puedes saltar esta pregunta.

Lengua Inglesa 1

Lengua Inglesa 2

Inglés Instrumental 1

Inglés Instrumental 2

¿Has cursado algún año de estudios en el extranjero?  
(Por ejemplo, Programa Erasmus o Fulbright) Por favor, **especifica el destino y el número de meses**. En caso negativo puedes saltar esta pregunta.

Programas en el extranjero	
Destino	Número de Meses
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Por favor, selecciona el número aproximado de horas que pasas en contacto con la lengua inglesa, **a la semana y sin contar las horas de clase**.

0-10 horas

10-20 horas

20-30 horas

Más de 30 horas

¿De dónde eres? (Especifica tu ciudad natal)

Indica tu nivel más alto de educación completada:

Estudios Completados

¿A qué te dedicas actualmente?

¿Cuál crees que fue el objetivo de este estudio?  
(opcional)

¿Tiene cualquier otra observación o sugerencia de lo que este estudio podría beneficiar? (opcional)

## Appendix E

Slide with the QR code and the URL address to access the questionnaire:

[blogs.iu.edu/research/  
estudioadquisicioningles/](https://blogs.iu.edu/research/estudioadquisicioningles/)



Santiago Arroniz: [sarroniz@outlook.com](mailto:sarroniz@outlook.com)



## Estudio de Adquisición Inglés L2

Posted on [April 11, 2019](#) by [sarroniz](#)

Has click en el siguiente enlace para ir al estudio:

[https://iu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_29NcXCWJVXOOZs9](https://iu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29NcXCWJVXOOZs9)

¡Gracias!

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