Oral proficiency and pragmatic marker use in L2 spoken Spanish: The case of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno}

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Abstract

This paper presents a corpus-based examination of pragmatic marker use in Spanish as a foreign language. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, it examines the frequency and seven functional differences in the use of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno} in the oral examination of 46 participants using the Computer Assisted Screening Tool (CAST) online test. The participants were adult (average age 22) non-native speaking examinees at two levels of language proficiency. The study investigated whether examinees’ proficiency level would influence the pragmatic markers’ rate of occurrence and variety of functions.

Frequency measures of pragmatic markers were obtained from examinees rated at two levels of proficiency: ‘full’ or ‘fail’. A discourse analytic approach was then employed to examine the discursive functions of pragmatic markers. The quantitative results showed that proficiency level was significantly related to the overall frequency of use of the focal markers, with the ‘full’ group tending to use them more frequently than the ‘fail’ group. Qualitatively, the study found that higher proficiency speakers used both pragmatic markers for a wider range of functions than their lower proficiency counterparts.

The discussion considers the implications for raising learner awareness of pragmatic marker contributions to perceived oral fluency and pragmatic capacity.

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1. Introduction

Pragmatic markers have been the subject of a growing interest in the study of language use in social interaction. In Spanish, they have been examined from such diverse perspectives as sociolinguistics (e.g., Serrano, 1999), additional language acquisition (e.g., Iglesias Moreno, 2001) and language pedagogy (e.g., Gozalo Gómez, 2013) utilizing different methodologies, such as conversation analysis (e.g., Vázquez Carranza, 2013) and, more recently, corpus linguistics (e.g., Stenström, 2006a,b).

Mainstream research in the acquisition of pragmatic ability has traditionally focused on a comparison of pragmatic marker use by native and non-native speakers. Several of these studies have shown a general tendency for non-native speakers (NNSs) to make less frequent use of pragmatic markers or use a more limited range of pragmatic markers than
native speakers (NSs) (Fuller, 2003; Aijmer, 2004; Müller, 2005; Gaëtanelle, 2008). One study that examined the acquisition of the Spanish pragmatic markers *pues* and *bueno* (among other pragmatic markers) by L1 Swedish exchange students on a five-month sojourn abroad in Spain (Lindqvist, 2006), however, found that while some students made no use of the pragmatic markers *pues* or *bueno* at all, others used them more than the NS control group.

A small number of more recent studies have focused on NNSs exclusively, investigating the variations in pragmatic marker use among learners at different levels of proficiency (e.g., Wei, 2011; Neary-Sundquist, 2013). In one such study, Wei (2011) examined pragmatic marker use by Chinese students majoring in English at two proficiency levels, i.e., intermediate and advanced. Wei compared the use of pragmatic markers between these two groups in terms of types, frequency, variety, and task interactivity. The results present a complex picture—both proficiency groups used the same types of pragmatic markers frequently, and showed sensitivity to task type (or interactivity level). Quantitatively, however, the advanced group showed a tendency to use a wider variety of pragmatic markers more frequently.

A closely related area that has also not been extensively researched is the potential relationship between pragmatic marker use, as a component of a learner’s discourse competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995), and perceptions of L2 oral performance. Hasselgren (2002) argued that, indeed, the use of pragmatic markers may affect perceptions of oral performance in L2 testing. Drawing on a learner and NS corpus, her analysis revealed that higher levels of perceived fluency are often associated with more frequent and diverse use of markers such as *well*, *right*, *all right*, and *okay*. Although the more fluent examinees used a wider range of pragmatic markers than the less fluent examinees, Hasselgren found that when compared to native speakers, their use was still less varied in terms of functions. She observed that this lack of variety “put them at a disadvantage in terms of creating the right pragmatic effect” (p. 164).

A review of the literature reveals that further research is necessary on the use of pragmatic markers by L2 learners of Spanish, the differences that may exist at different L2 proficiency levels, and their effect on perceptions of L2 oral fluency, especially in the context of oral examinations of L2 proficiency. To address aspects of this gap, the present study examines the differences between NNSs of Spanish at two proficiency levels in their use of two Spanish pragmatic markers, *pues* and *bueno*. The main objective of the present study is to offer a wide-angled corpus-based account of the use of *pues* and *bueno*, one which ultimately underscores the need for further inquiry across speakers with varied levels of language experience (e.g., non-native users at different proficiency levels, and native speaker populations). With respect to pragmatic markers, and drawing on data from CAST online Spanish test (see section 3.2 for details about the data), the aims of the present study are two-fold:

1. To compare and contrast differences in the use of pragmatic markers in an oral assessment context by NNSs of Spanish at two different proficiency levels.
2. To offer a broad description of the meaning and pragmatic functions of *pues* and *bueno* as used by NNSs of Spanish.

2. *Pues* and *bueno*

Although research on L2/FL pragmatic marker use is still at an emergent stage (Müller, 2005; Fung and Carter, 2007), *pues* has received considerable attention in the L1 Spanish pragmatics research literature (e.g., Martínez García, 1990; Porroche Ballesteros, 1996; Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006a,b; Vázquez Carranza, 2013), as has the marker *bueno* (e.g., Fuentes Rodríguez, 1993; Bauhr, 1994; Serrano, 1999; García Vízcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005; Travis, 2005; Bellés-Fortun and Fortanet-Gómez, 2009). Both markers are among the ten most frequent pragmatic markers in spoken interactions among NSs of Spanish, as evidenced by corpus data, e.g., *El Corpus de Lenguaje Adolescente de Madrid* (COLAm) and *El Corpus Oral de Referencia del Español Contemporáneo* (COR92) (Stenström, 2006a). Pues has been found to approximately correspond to English pragmatic markers ‘cos, well, and causal pragmatic markers so and then’ (Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006a). *Bueno* has been argued to have *anyway, okay, so and well* as its closest English correspondents (García Vízcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005; Travis, 2005).

In early studies and grammars both *pues* and *bueno* were referred to as ‘filler words’ or ‘muletillas’ (e.g., Christl, 1996:117) considered unnecessary (e.g., Moliner, 1984) or representative of a lack of idiomatic resources (e.g., Gili y Gaya, 1961). Thus, for quite some time, these expressions were considered devoid of much semantic value or function—speakers simply ‘leaned on’ them (hence ‘muletillas’ or small crutches) to move the conversation along (Christl, 1996; Travis, 2005). With the advent of corpus linguistic methodologies that allow for the quantitative and qualitative analysis of large corpora, alongside a renewed interest in studying spoken language beyond the sentence level, recent research on these so called *muletillas* has provided evidence of their essential pragmatic roles in interaction. Following Stenström (2006a,b, 2009), in this study we regard *pues* and *bueno* as pragmatic markers.

It is generally agreed that pragmatic markers serve multiple functions (Ermann, 2001; Aijmer, 2002) and aid the hearer’s interpretation of an utterance (Aijmer, 1996; Müller, 2005). Our first focal pragmatic marker, *pues*, frequently serves as a turn-taking marker to “smoothly” or “aggressively” take over a turn (Stenström, 2006b:272). It is also used alone or in
combination with nada ‘nothing’ (in the expression pues nada) as a ‘conversational restarter’ to reestablish communication after a short period of silence with the intention to either continue talking or show that there is nothing else to say. In its function as a discourse organizer, pues builds cohesion and coherence by linking information units or marking a change in speakers (Stenström, 2006b). Finally, pues can also function as a punctuation marker, separating chunks of continuous discourse (Stenström, 2006b).

At the pragmatic level, pues helps smooth the transition from one topic to the next. Here, a speaker can use pues to mark that he or she is returning to a previous topic after some parenthetical comments (Stenström, 2006b). It may also function as a link or cohesive element between utterances, used as a resource to keep the conversation going. In this case, it may indicate that the speaker intends to continue with a topic and introduce new information (Martín Zorraquino, 1991; Porroche Ballesteros, 1996; Travis, 2005) or that the speaker is looking for the best way to express him or herself. In addition, pues can be used as a reinforcing marker to stress a previously introduced theme or emphasize an element from the conversation (Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006b); alternatively, it can be employed as a repair marker to indicate that the following utterance follows from and paraphrases the previous discourse (Travis, 2005). Furthermore, pues can be used to initiate a question connecting “implicit presupposed circumstances in the question, which is present in the speaker’s mind, with the subsequent utterance” (Stenström, 2006b:276), and it commonly functions as a response marker at the start of a yes-no and a wh-question answer (Travis, 2005). Another function of pues is that of introducing direct speech, i.e., speakers may use it to quote themselves, in which case it is often accompanied by a quoting verb. Finally, pues may appear at the end of an utterance for a speaker to mark topic completion (Travis, 2005).

Our second focal pragmatic marker, bueno, signals the introduction of a new topic (Travis, 2005), a change in topic, or a new orientation within a prior topic (García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005; Travis, 2005). It often also marks the end of a topic and the transition to another (Fuentes Rodríguez, 1993), or is used when a speaker resumes a topic after a diversion (similar to the conversational restarter function of pues). Bueno may also be used at the beginning of an utterance to link it to what has previously been said, occasionally signaling a concession or a desire to align with the interlocutor without fully accepting his or her assertion (García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005). In addition, bueno can indicate the end of an utterance or interaction and introduce self-corrections or corrections of others’ utterances (García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005) or changes in a speaker’s position (Travis, 2005). Finally, bueno can also be used with a quoting function (Travis, 2005) or as a marker of direct speech (García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005).

3. The present study

The corpus-based investigation described in this paper provides a report of pragmatic marker use by speakers of Spanish during a diagnostic screening test designed to determine whether examinees have reached an advanced level of oral proficiency in Spanish. The data were collected from participants who took the Computer Assisted Screening Tool online Spanish test (CAST OST) developed by the Language Acquisition Research Center (LARC) at San Diego State University. They were then transcribed, compiled into a corpus, and analyzed with the aid of Graphic Online Language (GOLD) developed by the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) at The Pennsylvania State University. Specifically, we aimed to find out whether differences existed in the use of pues and bueno by NNS examinees rated ‘full’ (indicating that an advanced level of oral proficiency is met) and those rated ‘fail’ (indicating that an advanced level of oral proficiency is not met) in terms of the frequency of use and the types of pragmatic functions with which they were employed by these examinees. To this end, the distribution and pragmatic functions of the two pragmatic markers as used by NNS examinees were analyzed via a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, as detailed in section 3.1.

3.1. Method

This corpus-based study explores the use of pues and bueno by L2 Spanish speakers who took the CAST OST. We identify and analyze the pragmatic functional differences in the use of pues and bueno by NNS examinees judged to have or have not met an advanced level of oral proficiency.

2 CAST is available at http://cast.sdsu.edu.
3 GOLD is publicly available at http://gold.gwserver1.net.
4 ‘Full’ and ‘fail’ are the terms used in the CAST test as descriptors of the test takers who were rated as highly proficient (‘full’), or as not meeting the criteria for highly proficient (‘fail’). In no way are they intended to disparage the efforts of any test takers.
3.2. Data

The data analyzed in this study were drawn from examinees that took the CAST OST. CAST is an online diagnostic screening tool designed to elicit adequate, ratable speech samples to determine whether an examinee has achieved an advanced level of oral proficiency. The CAST OST consists of five situation questions, with an additional warm-up and wind-down question. For each situation, examinees listen to a description and a prompt and are then asked to record an oral response. Each response is then rated by one experienced rater, who assesses whether it indicates an advanced level of proficiency based on three categories: accuracy, discourse, and function; accuracy is further divided into grammar, fluency, vocabulary, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatics, and pronunciation. Raters assign advisory performance ratings of “meets level” (full), “nearly at level” (approach) or “does not meet level” (fail), following the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines. These ratings can be used to estimate examinees’ likely scores on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). Specifically, examinees receiving an overall rating of ‘full’ are able to narrate events and/or describe people, places or things using present, past and future time frames “with perhaps some hesitancy or lack of accuracy” (http://cast.sdsu.edu/). In contrast, failed examinees show a “systematic pattern of mistakes in one of the three different areas (i.e., accuracy, discourse or function)” (http://cast.sdsu.edu/). The rating criteria do not explicitly refer to the use of pragmatic markers, but the appropriate use of “transition words” (i.e., being able to link ideas) is referenced among them. Along with the response evaluations and global rating, raters have the option to provide comments on each response as well as overall comments on how the examinee’s performance could be improved. While rater comments on the speech samples used in this study did not directly discuss examinees’ use of pragmatic markers, a few of them addressed the functions pragmatic markers could perform, as illustrated by a comment stating that an examinee “had difficulty linking ideas.”

All speech samples (each corresponding to one response; five responses per examinee) in our dataset were transcribed by two native speakers of Spanish in standard orthography, indicating pauses, fillers (both in English and Spanish), syllable lengthening, false starts and truncated words (see Appendix for Transcription Conventions). The transcripts were compiled, uploaded to and analyzed with the Graphic Online Language Diagnostic (GOLD).

3.3. Participants

The examinees in this study comprised students learning Spanish as a foreign language (NNS) who took the CAST OST, including 29 non-native speakers that were rated ‘full’, and 17 non-native speakers that were rated ‘fail’. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information about the examinees.

All examinees were of the age group between 19–30 years. Examinees in both the NNS ‘full’ and ‘fail’ groups reported an average of 3.7 years of studying Spanish. Among the 46 NNS examinees, 13 reported a prior study abroad experience in Spanish-speaking countries (10 in the ‘full’ group and 3 in the ‘fail’ group).

3.4. Analysis and coding

Occurrences of pues and bueno were retrieved from transcripts with the global ratings of ‘full’ and ‘fail’ separately. Each occurrence was examined in its local context (with up to 30 words to its left and right, respectively) and in the transcript.

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5 We recognize that an analysis of pues and bueno would profit from a more detailed transcription including prosodic information, which greatly determines the function of pragmatic markers (Briz, 2001; Stenström, 2009). As our corpus is relatively small, we resolved ambiguities by listening to the audio recordings.
from which it came. The uses of the two markers by individual examinees, identified by their test IDs, were also retrieved and scrutinized. This allowed us to determine the outliers in our dataset, as discussed in section 4.1.

At the micro-level, a discourse analytic approach was employed to explore and describe the pragmatic functions of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno}. Since each of these markers can have more than one function at a time, their classification becomes complex (Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006a). Two layers of analysis were performed using seven functional categories from previous research (Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006b), supplemented by additional categories emergent from instances of use in our data. These combined categories included: (1) comment markers, (2) hesitation markers, (3) pre-closing markers, (4) reformulation markers, (5) reported speech markers, (6) response markers, (7) thematic link markers and (8) other, as explained in section 4.2.

The occurrences of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno} used by participants rated ‘full’ or ‘fail’ were retrieved from the dataset and then filtered in two steps to eliminate adjectival uses of \textit{bueno} and uses by outlier examinees (see section 4.1 for detailed discussion on occurrence filtering). Each filtered occurrence was then manually coded into one of the seven functional categories by two trained applied linguists who are experienced users of Spanish and have extensive experience in discourse analysis. Reliability of the two coders was calculated using Cohen’s kappa and resulted in 0.97 for \textit{pues} and 0.98 for \textit{bueno}. Examples of the occurrences coded for each category are provided in section 4.2.

4. Results

4.1. Frequency of use

The retrieved occurrences of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno} were filtered in two steps. Given that \textit{bueno} may be used as either an adjectival or a pragmatic marker, all occurrences of \textit{bueno} used as an adjective were identified and excluded from subsequent analysis. An example of the adjective use of \textit{bueno} in our dataset is given in [1] below.

\begin{quote}
[1]
y creo que debemos (uh) levantar pesos (pesas) (uh) unas veces. (um) Tal vez, mmm tres veces en una semana, porque no es \textbf{bueno} usar pesos (pesas) (um) todos los días.
\end{quote}

Second, due to the fact that participants did not produce the same amounts of text in their oral responses, it was necessary to convert the raw frequencies of their pragmatic marker use into rates of occurrence. This normalization was achieved by dividing the number of occurrences of pragmatic marker use (per individual) by the total number of words produced (per individual), and then multiplying the result by 1000 (Biber and Jones, 2009). This produced a comparable figure of each marker use per participant. A similar calculation was made to compare the overall use of each pragmatic marker per group (see Table 3).

Subsequently, based on what appeared to be instances of overuse of the focal pragmatic markers by some of the participants, the dataset was screened to identify potential outliers. Six examinees contributed over 1.5 times the upper quartile of the occurrences of either \textit{pues} or \textit{bueno} each in the ‘full’ or ‘fail’ group. The pragmatic marker uses by these six examinees are summarized in Table 2. For example, a total of 203 per 1000 occurrences of \textit{pues} were used by examinees in the NNS ‘full’ group, among which 76 (37.4%) were contributed by just one examinee (Examinee #1).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lrr}
\hline
\textbf{pues} & \textbf{bueno} \\
\hline
\textbf{Uses} & \textbf{Percentage} & \textbf{Uses} & \textbf{Percentage} \\
\hline
NNS ‘full’ group total & 203 & 37.4% & 179 & 16.8% \\
Examinee #1 & 76 & 37.4% & 30 & 16.8% \\
Examinee #2 & 0 & 0.0% & 24 & 13.4% \\
NNS ‘fail’ group total & 379 & & 26 & \\
Examinee #3 & 12 & 34.4% & 0 & 0.0% \\
Examinee #4 & 13 & 35.1% & 15 & 57.7% \\
Examinee #5 & 0 & 0.0% & 15 & 57.7% \\
Examinee #6 & 4 & 1.2% & 7 & 26.9% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Pragmatic marker uses by NNS top six examinees normalized to 1000.}
\end{table}
Although these six examinees did contribute heavily to the instances of the pragmatic markers, only one (Examinee #1) was considered a true outlier and removed from the quantitative analysis since it surpassed the upper limit of a z-score (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007) for both *pues* and *bueno* use. Additionally, this participant did not provide the requested demographic information, which may have contributed to a possible appreciation of such exaggerated pragmatic marker use.

Table 3 summarizes the frequency of use of *pues* and *bueno* as pragmatic markers by all non-outlier examinees. At the group level, the highly proficient non-native speakers tended to use the markers more frequently than the lower proficiency group. With *pues*, 126.9 were found in the NNS ‘full’ group, and 37.3 were found in the NNS ‘fail’ group. The normalized frequency of *pues* amounted to 4.0 and 3.4 per 1000 words for the two groups, respectively. As for *bueno*, 149.2 occurrences were found in the NNS ‘full’ group, and 25.7 were found in the NNS ‘fail’ group. The normalized frequency of *bueno* amounted to 4.8, and 2.2 per 1000 words for the ‘full’ and ‘fail’ NNS groups, respectively.

At the individual level, the percentage of examinees who used the two pragmatic markers was larger for the NNS ‘full’ group than for the NNS ‘fail’ group. For *pues*, the percentage was 46.4% (13 out of 28) for the ‘full’ groups vs. 29.4% (5 out of 17) for the ‘fail’ group; for *bueno*, the percentage was 75% (21 out of 28) for ‘full’ group vs. 29.4% (5 out of 17) for the ‘fail’

![Fig. 1: Boxplots of the distribution of pragmatic marker use.](image-url)
4.2. Pragmatic functions

The data allowed for frequency differences to be compared using a Mann–Whitney U test (MWU). Overall, the analysis showed that participants rated ‘full’ (Mdn = 9.1) on the CAST test used pragmatic markers in their speech significantly more often than those rated ‘fail’ (Mdn = 0) on the test (U = 105.5, z = −3.1, p = 0.001). The effect size (r) was −0.48, which demonstrates a medium large effect for group membership on pragmatic marker use. Looking at the individual markers, the MWU test showed that the frequency of use of \textit{pues} for ‘full’ examinees (Mdn = 0) was similar to the ‘fail’ group (Mdn = 0) in our dataset (U = 193, z = −1.19, p = 0.24, r = −0.18). For \textit{bueno}, the examinees rated ‘full’ (Mdn = 2.51) used the feature significantly more often than ‘fail’ examinees (Mdn = 0) in this sample (U = 126, z = −2.75, p = 0.005, r = −0.41). The effect size (r) indicates a medium to large effect of group membership on the frequency of use of \textit{bueno}.

4.2.1. Thematic link marker

As a thematic link marker, \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno} were used to add information while bringing it into focus (Porroche Ballesteros, 1996; Travis, 2005) and contribute to the smooth transition between topics (Stenström, 2006a,b). The most frequent use of \textit{pues} and \textit{bueno} within this category by our participants was immediately preceded by the coordinating conjunction \textit{y} and’ (which was oftentimes stretched, in our transcripts marked by the use of ellipsis “...”). Travis (2005) points out that, when preceded by \textit{y} “and”, \textit{pues} links the utterance to the previous discourse while at the same time indicating that there is more to come. These two-word chunks have been reported to be frequently used by native speakers of Spanish in naturally occurring talk (e.g., Christl, 1996).

The participants rated ‘full’ used the chunks \textit{y pues} a total of 23 times and \textit{y bueno} a total of 28 times,\(^6\) whereas those rated ‘fail’ used them a total of 2 and 0 times, respectively. In the data from examinees rated ‘full’, the co-occurrence of \textit{y

\(^6\) Not all instances of the chunks \textit{y pues} and \textit{y bueno} were rated as thematic link markers. For example, the NNS rated ‘full’ used \textit{y pues} in 7 more occasions as a hesitation marker (often accompanied by other hesitation markers such as uh or um and a pause in-between the conjunction and \textit{pues}).
“and” with *pues* and *bueno* tended to be used with an added summative and/or evaluative meaning. For example, in [2], instead of listing all the questions that a political candidate has had to address, the examinee utilizes *y pues* as a focus device, reinforced by the use of *básicamente* “basically”, which is generally used “when it comes down to the most central points of the argument” (Butler, 2008:44):

[2] [. . .] eh parece que es miembro de la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días (.) y ahí le están haciendo muchas preguntas acerca de su iglesia, de sus creencias (.) eh y . . . *pues básicamente* lo que cree esa iglesia.

[. . .] uh it looks like he’s a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (.) and there he’s being asked a lot of questions about his church, about his beliefs (.) uh y . . . *pues basically* what that church believes.

In another instance, when narrating the motion picture *Life is Beautiful*, one of the examinees starts by retelling how the main characters met and fell in love, but quickly moves to focus on the most relevant information for the listener, given that the movie was set in the Second World War scenario. She does this by means of *y bueno*, together with *el asunto es que* “the issue is that”, as in [3]:

[3] Al principio, (uh) está hablando de, de un hombre quien es muy muy chistoso, muy gracioso, y . . . se encuentra con una mujer, y, ella le gusta, y, (laughs) y . . . al final, no, bueno, después de un poco tiempo, ah, se casan. Y . . . tienen un hijo, y. . . *bueno*, lo- *el asunto es que* (.) son judíos. Y, como están en, creo que están en Italia, viven en Italia, y. . . es- durante la segunda guerra mundial, (uh), con el holocausto y eso.

At first, (uh) he is talking about, about a man who is very very funny, very funny, and. . . he meets a woman, and, she likes him, and, (laughs) a . . . nd at the end, no, bueno, after a brief period, uh, they get married. A. . . nd they have a son, y. . . *bueno*, it- *the issue is that* (.) they are Jewish. And, since they are in, I think they are in Italy, they live in Italy and. . . it’s- during the Second World War, (uh), with the holocaust and that.

In [4], the examinee is describing his weekend. He describes going to a Salsa concert. After describing the musical genres that were played at the concert (i.e., Salsa, Merengue and Bachata), he uses *pues* to introduce his evaluation of the concert:

[4] Pues la semana pasada eh el fin de semana pasado de hecho el viernes (.) fui a un concierto de música salsa (.) y fue bastante interesante llegó (.) el grupo XX y. . . llegaron tocar este. . . bastante salsa, merengue (.) ehm y unas bachatitas también (.) y *pues* me gustó me encantó (.) la verdad (.) como soy salsero y me encanta (.) bailar (.)

Pues last week uh last weekend on Friday in fact (.) I went to a salsa music concert (.) and it was very interesting (.) the group XX arrived and. . . they managed to uhm. . . a lot of salsa, merengue (.) uhm and some bachatitas as well (.) *y pues* I liked it I loved it (.) in truth (.) since I am a Salsa lover and I love (.) dancing (.)

---

*Table 5*

Pragmatic function use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pragmatic function</th>
<th>Full</th>
<th>Fail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total #</td>
<td>Normalized to 100 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic link marker</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response marker</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitation marker</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment marker</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformulation marker</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-closing marker</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported-speech marker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In examples (2) through (20), *pues* and *bueno* are generally not translated, as we do not wish to commit to a particular translation in each case.*
In [5], another examinee uses *y bueno* to introduce her evaluation of the events at school during the last month:

> Y al fin de esto, muchas personas empezaron a (.) a llevar a este, a camisas a la escuela (.) que decían pues: porque la canción pues decía eso, pues que, que *y bueno*, fue fue muy chistoso. And after this, many people started to (.) to wear to uh, to shirts to school (.) that said pues: because the song pues said that, pues that, that *y bueno*, it was it was very funny.

The NNS examinees rated ‘fail,’ on the other hand, used *pues* mostly as a causal conjunction (Portolés, 1989; Porroche Ballesteros, 1996), in a few occasions reinforced by a *porque* “because” or *entonces* “then” immediately after. In [6], the examinee is describing his life in college. The examinee explains that, unlike his parents and brothers who are still at home, his elder brother attends the same college as he does. As a result, he is the person in his family he talks to and spends most his time with:

> [...] y mi hermano mayor asis-asiste (.) a la misma universidad que mí (.) *pues* (.) siempre hablamos y pasamos tiempo (.) juntos [...] [...] and my older brother att-attends (.) the same university as me (.) *pues* (.) we always talk and spend time (.) together [...]

In [7] the examinee is asked to introduce holidays and celebrations in the United States. He explains that the examiner has arrived at the perfect time because it is July, when Americans celebrate their independence. He introduces the reason with the use of *pues* together with the conjunction *porque* “because”:

> [...] Pues, Juan José (.) tú llegaste en (.) el (.) tiempo (.) mejor (.) que hay (.) es (.) donde (.) *pues* (.) *porque* este mes es el mes de (.) Julio (.) y... estamos celebrando (.) el festivo de (.) la Día de Independencia (uh) para los Estados... Estados Unidos [...] [...] Pues, Juan José (.) you arrived at (.) the (.) best (.) time that there (.) is (.) where (.) *pues* (.) *because* this month is the month of (.) July (.) and... we are celebrating (.) the holiday of (.) the Day of Independence (uh) for the United... States [...]

4.2.2. Response marker

Examinees rated ‘full’ were found to orient to their responses with *pues* and *bueno*, showing a preference for *bueno* (47 uses of *bueno*, compared to 25 of *pues*). While those rated ‘fail’ used them with this function in considerably fewer cases (11 instances), they also showed a slight preference for *bueno* (7 uses of *bueno* compared to 4 of *pues*). For example, in [8], after being asked about movies or TV series that she has recently seen, the ‘full’ examinee orients to her answer with an opening *bueno*:

> *Bueno* últimamente ví la película (.) Harry Potter número cuatro, Cáliz del fuego. Y es cuando Harry regresa por el cuarto año de colegio en Hogwarts. *Bueno* recently I saw the movie (.) Harry Potter number four, the Goblet of Fire. And it’s when Harry comes back for the fourth year at Hogwarts School.

When used as response initiators (Stenström, 2006b) or when prefacing an answer (Travis, 2005), *pues* and *bueno* were not always found at the beginning of the utterance. In [9], the ‘fail’ examinee is asked to describe her house, particularly contrasting the place where she grew up with the place where she lives now. She first produces an evaluation of the question and then uses *pues* to orient to the beginning of her answer:

> Prompt: Describe la casa donde vivías cuando eras pequeño. ¿En qué se parecía a la casa donde vives ahora? ¿En qué era distinta? (laughs) ésta es una buena pregunta (.) (tsk) *pues* (ahem) (.) (tsk) mi hogar (.) n (.) cuál (.) donde yo nací (.) era algo pues (.) déjame decirte algo que (.) yo viví (.) los (.) primeros diecinueve años (.) de mi vida (.) en... la misma hogar. Prompt: Describe the house where you lived as a child. How was it similar to your current house? How was it different? (laughs) this is a good question (.) (tsk) *pues* (ahem) (.) (tsk) my home (.) n (.) the (.) where I was born (.) it was something pues (.) let me tell you something (.) I lived (.) the (.) first nineteen years (.) of my life (.) in... the same home.
As [9] and [10] show, in our data, pues and bueno are often followed by a reformulation of part of the prompt (which corresponds with observations made by Porroche Ballesteros, 1996; Stenström, 2006b). This could also indicate their function as a hesitation marker, or a way to gain time before actually addressing the question. Such interpretation is reinforced by the use of other hesitation markers in conjunction with pues and bueno. In [10], the ‘full’ examinee was asked to list the qualities a person would need to have if seeking a job in the next 20 years. The examinee starts with bueno and en los próximos veinte años “in the next 20 years”, followed by another hesitation marker eh “uhm” and a pause (indicated by . . .):

Prompt: Exactamente qué va a necesitar una persona para que obtenga un buen empleo dentro de 20 años? Bueno, en los próximos veinte años, eh . . . porque la gente se hace más y más lista cada año, todas las personas nuevas van a tener que aprender más y más, y . . . su experiencia va a tener que también aumentar.

As mentioned above, pues and bueno have been found to introduce dispreferred responses (García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005; Stenström, 2006a, 2006b). However, in our corpus, none of the examinees used either of these markers with this particular function. We argue that this functional difference might be due to the special circumstance of the test situation (that is, examinees are less likely to contradict the examiner or the question, than a speaker would in a non-testing environment).

4.2.3. Hesitation marker or filler

When fulfilling this particular discourse function, pues and bueno were seen as indicators that “the speaker does not know how to go on and needs time to think” (Stenström, 2006b:274). In particular, in this study, bueno and pues were found to have a hesitation marking function in one of the following four situations. First, they occurred in between the repetition of the same lexical item, as in [11]:

[11]

Este (.) y creo (creo) que las relazones (relaciones) que (.) que tendré (.) con . . . bueno, con (.) con mi familia, pues esas (.) esas relaciones esté serán muy fuertes [. . .]

Um (.) and believe (I believe) that the relationships that (.) that I will have (.) with . . . bueno, with (.) with my family, pues those (.) those relationships um will be very strong [. . .]

Second, the speaker used other explicit verbal indications of hesitation, such as “I don’t know” immediately after pues/ bueno, and then continued with the same structure, as in [12]:

[12]

Uno de estos (.) de nuestros días festivos que te podía contar es (.) se llama (.) bueno (.) bueno no sé (.) se le (.) llama Thanksgiving Day que es (.) Día de Acción de Gracias (.) y . . . se celebra [. . .]

One of these (.) of our holidays that I could tell you about is (.) it’s called (.) bueno (.) bueno I don’t know (.) it’s (.) called Thanksgiving Day which is Día de Acción de Gracias (Thanksgiving Day) and . . . it is celebrated [. . .]

Third, they were preceded and/or followed by other hesitation markers (such as este “um”), as in [13]:

[13]

[ . . . ] este un programa que se llama Photoshop (.) y . . . con este programa pude . . . este . . . bueno, (.) este limpiar (.) esto . . . el polvo que en algunos fotos estaba y . . . pude combinar fotos y (.) este mejorar los colores [. . .]

[ . . . ] um a program that is called Photoshop (.) and . . . with this program I could . . . um . . . bueno, (.) um clean (.) um . . . the dust that was in some pictures and . . . I could combine pictures and (.) um make the colors better [. . .]

Finally, a combination of the previous three occurred at the same time, as in [14], where the speaker is trying to remember the pranks he played in his childhood:

[14]

[ . . . ] mi (.) hermano ma-menor. Se llama Michael. Y (uh) yo (.) yo pues (.) (uhm) yo, no sé, no recuerdo (laughs) porque no hi-no no hice muchos bromas [. . .]

[ . . . ] my (.) eld-younger brother. His name is Michael. And (uh) I (.) I pues (.) (uhm) I, I don’t know, I don’t remember (laughs) because I did not pla- not played many pranks [. . .]
Hesitation differed from reformulation in that the examinees did not modify the lexical structures used after using *pues* or *bueno* as a hesitation marker. When using these pragmatic markers as fillers, the examinees sprinkled them in their responses, often in-between grammatical structures that would normally go together (i.e., verb and direct object).

### 4.2.4. Comment marker

In our data, comment markers were turn-initial in that they occurred after a complete utterance followed by a pause (indicated by period without parentheses in our data). This is also the main difference between this category and thematic link markers, since they both indicate that the speaker continues with the same topic (Martín Zorraquino, 1991; Porroche Ballesteros, 1996). In [15], the examinee describes how he would like to spend the evening with his wife. After a short digression led by a word search, he resorts to *bueno* to return to the topic of narration:

[15] [. . .] con mi (uh) bella esposa y . . . tener la oportunidad de comer un poco, cuando está (.) cuando está (.) tocando las canciones más (.) más suaves, más (.) más (uh) (tsk) (uh) ¿ cómo se dice? más (uh) lentes. (laughs) Bueno, y también me (.) me gustaría bailar con (.) con ella. [. . .] with my (uh) beautiful wife and . . . have the opportunity to eat a bit, when (they) are (.) when (they) are playing the most (.) most gentle songs, most (.) most (uh) (tsk) (uh) how do you say that? most (uh) glasses [slow], (laughs) Bueno, and also I (.) I would like to dance with (.) with her.

### 4.2.5. Reformulation marker

In our data, *pues* and *bueno* were used to introduce a reformulation, self-correction or repair in 21 instances by examinees rated 'full' and in 5 instances by those rated 'fail'. As a case in point, in [16], the examinee starts off with the verb *tener* “to have”, which she reformulates as *ser* “to be”:

[16] [. . .] (.) pasar tiempo ahí porque (.) también (.) *tenemos* (.) *pues* (uh) nosotros *somos* . . . ocho (.) ocho personas en nuestra familia [. . .] (.) spend some time there because (.) also (.) we *have* (.) *pues* (uh) we are . . . eights (.) eight people in our family.

Many such reformulation instances indicated online self-monitoring. This often occurred while uttering fairly complex grammatical structures or trying to express relatively challenging grammatical concepts for native speakers of English, such as the different renderings of the verb “to be” (as seen in example 18), or the article system in Spanish. In [17], the examinee repairs her use of *el* “the” (masculine) for *la* “the” (feminine):

[17] [. . .] pero tiene que ir a trabajar para ayudar a construir algo, le dice al niño que s- que se quede en . . . *el, bueno, en la cama*, y que no salga [. . .] [. . .] but he has to go to work to help build something, he tells the child that s- that he should stay in . . . *the [masculine], bueno, in the [feminine] bed* and that he should not go out [. . .]

However, it is important to remember that when the NNS examinees used them to perform this discourse function, *pues* and *bueno* were not necessarily used to correct grammatical or lexical mistakes. In fact, sometimes they did just the opposite. In [18], the examinee first produces the preterit form of *vender* “to sell”, and when she self-corrects, she produces a non-expert-like variant, the subjunctive “venda”:

[18] [. . .] Pero también (.) encontramos esta . . . (tsk) esta . . . tienda (.) esta (.) (uh) en la (.) la esquina de una calle (.) que . . . *venda* (.) *pues* que *venda* (um) helado (.) [. . .] [. . .] But we also (.) found this . . . (tsk) this . . . store (.) this . . . (.) store (.) (uh) on the (.) the corner of a street (.) that . . . *sold* (.) *pues* that would *sell* (um) helado (.) [. . .]

Reformulation can also entail a word search or a change in register. In [19], the examinee decides to repair *un montón* “a lot” with the more formal *bastante* “so much”:

[19] [. . .] fue algo pues muy gracioso. (tsk) Y . . . pues yo no (.) pues, nada más me me *rio un mo-, este . . . bueno, bastante.* [. . .] it was something very funny. (tsk) And . . . well I just (.) well, I just laughed a *l*, uhm . . . *bueno, so much.*
4.2.6. Pre-closing marker

Four 'full' examinees 'full' used *pues* as a pre-closing marker four times. In [20], the examinee marks that she is about to finish her response with a turn-initial use of *pues*:


Interessingly, prior research (Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2009) has identified this function for *bueno*, which, however, was not used this way in our data.

4.2.7. Reported speech marker

*Pues* and *bueno* are noted in the literature (e.g., García Gómez, 1992; Christl, 1996) as having a reporting function where they introduce direct speech by "helping to mark off the quoted speech from the current speaker’s speech" (Travis, 2005:275). Marking reported speech is the least frequent function of *pues* and *bueno* among the examinees in our data (cf. Table 4). The one instance of *bueno* with this function in our data occurs when the examinee (rated 'full') introduced what she would say in a hypothetical situation, as illustrated in [21]:

[21] Es algo que nosotros (...) hemos perdido mucho el (...) nuestra capacidad (...) entender (...) y decir bueno este o eso es bueno eh o eso es malo. Pero es algo que tiene sus cosas buenas y malas (...) y hay buenos actores y malos actores. Y creo que... ese hombre es un buen actor.

When describing how she would bargain during one of her trips abroad, the examinee (rated 'fail') in [22] uses *bueno* to quote what the street vendors would tell her in order to get her to buy their merchandise:

[22] [...] de verdad las cosas no eran muy (...) muy caras ahí (...) aunque... algunas (...) personas (...) tratan a vendernos (...) camisas o sombreros o cosas así (...) trataron ah (ahem) recibir más dinero que querríamos pagar pero solamente (...) tenimos que decirles no, no quiero (...) no (...) no queremos comprarlo y (...) ellos (ahem) (uh) entonces después (...) dijeron oh **pues** (...) ok, entonces (...) dame... cinco dólares y ya (...) entonces s declamos ok, está bien, lo compramos.

In both cases, the use of these pragmatic markers is preceded by the speech act verb *decir* "to say". The use of *bueno* or *pues* introduces the portion of the utterance that contains the actual quotation. This use of quoting verbs (that help highlight the quote) has been noted to be common in this function and also to determine its turn-medial position (Travis, 2005:275).

5. Discussion

At the quantitative level, we found that NNS examinees rated 'full' used the pragmatic markers significantly more frequently than those rated 'fail'. In terms of the proportion of examinees using the markers, the 'full' group had a higher proportion using both *bueno* and *pues* than the 'fail' group. In terms of the average number of pragmatic markers per examinee, the 'full' group had a significantly higher use of *bueno* than the 'fail' group. Thus, our results resonate with previous studies (e.g., Hasselgren, 2002) that learners with higher levels of perceived fluency tend to use pragmatic markers more frequently and, as found in the qualitative analysis, with more diverse pragmatic functions.

At the qualitative level, our results reveal that the examinees rated as highly proficient used these markers for a wider range of pragmatic functions than the examinees rated as not proficient. The examinees used these markers primarily as thematic link markers and response markers, and as hesitation markers with varying frequencies. The examinees also used them as comment markers and reported speech markers, but only examinees rated 'full' used them as pre-closing
markers. Upon looking at each marker individually, we found that the functional uses of *bueno* were similar for both proficiency level groups. The functional differences appear to be more marked in the case of *bueno*, which was used with six different functions by the ‘full’ group but only three by the ‘fail’ group.

Particularly notable is the finding that the learners that did not pass the test barely used *bueno* as a pragmatic marker at all – they used it a total of 9 times, or 0.66 per 1 K, compared to 151, or 4.88 per 1 K. Importantly, in 7 of those 9 instances *bueno* was used as a response marker, suggesting that it was mostly used in a sentence-initial position (further inspection revealed it was used mid-sentence on only one occasion). Although speculative, it is likely that, just like its English counterpart *well*, the many different pragmatic marking functions of *bueno* are infrequently discussed in the Spanish L2 classroom (Fung and Carter, 2007:433) and possibly afforded a limited amount of pedagogical coverage, particularly with students at earlier stages of language development.

In the case of the other focal pragmatic marker, *pues*, our results indicated that the examinees rated ‘fail’ used it largely as a thematic link with a causal meaning (i.e., as a causal conjunction). This pattern is noteworthy because the use of *pues* as a causal conjunction has previously been found to be more prevalent in writing than speech (Travis, 2005; Vázquez Carranza, 2013). Pragmatic markers used in written language (especially when they have a clear discourse organizing function, as is the case here) tend to receive more attention in the L2 classroom (Fung and Carter, 2007). The results of the present study suggest that the learners in the data may have been exposed to this instructional tendency, thus possibly affecting the perception of their oral Spanish ability.

The consequences of taking little notice of pragmatic markers as an integral part of a learner’s L2 pragmatic capacity, especially in cases of frequent and interpersonally meaningful *bueno* and *pues*, might have an undesirable impact on language learner’s performance and their perceived level of spoken proficiency in the L2. By way of illustration, pedagogically exploring the use of *bueno* or *pues* as a hesitation marker device in several transcripts of conversations or as part of the two-word chunks “*y bueno*” and “*y pues*” in the sentence-medial thematic linking function could go a substantial way toward enhancing learners’ “fluent and naturalistic conversational skills” (Fung and Carter, 2007:433), which are crucial in tests like CAST OST.

6. Conclusion

Through a qualitative and quantitative exploration of the use of *pues* and *bueno* in a corpus of the online CAST Spanish test responses by 46 examinees, the present study has sought to contribute to the research on the use of pragmatic markers by L2 Spanish speakers in general as well as the relationship between pragmatic marker use and NNSs’ oral proficiency in L2 Spanish. Our results suggest a number of quantitative and qualitative differences in pragmatic marker use among examinees at different levels of proficiency. It is important to note that no claims are being made about causal relationship between the examinees’ pragmatic marker use and the global ratings they received on the test. The tendencies revealed in our analysis may certainly benefit from further examination on a larger corpus across examinees with a wider variety of proficiency ratings and with a control group of NSs. It is also critical to examine whether the linguistic situations presented to L2 learners are the types that would necessitate a reasonable amount of pragmatic marker use by highly experienced speakers (native and non-native). In future research it would also be useful to examine in more depth how differences in individual learners’ backgrounds and preferences are linked with the frequency and functions of their pragmatic marker use.

Further research in this area may shed more light on concealed aspects of pragmatic ability because, as Svartvik (1980) argued, while grammatical errors are easily singled out, non-expert uses of pragmatic markers are not so easily identifiable but might carry more important interactional value, such as making the speaker come off as dogmatic, impolite, or awkward. A learner adept at pragmatic marker use, on the other hand, is more likely to appear more articulate, fluent, and competent. It is worth reiterating that a range of language features (e.g., repetitions, pauses, reformulations) including pragmatic markers have at times been frowned upon as indicators of performance deficiencies in the oral performance of language learners, especially in relation to their perceived oral fluency (e.g., Trenchs-Parera, 2009). In contrast, it has been shown that in everyday conversations, those who would generally be perceived as highly articulate speakers use these features quite often and for a wide variety of functional purposes (McCarthy, 2005; Aijmer, 2011). Research admittedly points to fundamental differences between the discourse structure of oral production elicited through language proficiency interviews (such as CAST) and unplanned conversation (e.g., van Lier, 1989; Johnson and Tyler, 1998). Congruently, arriving at a clear-cut definition of “the construct of speaking ability in a second language is in fact a theoretically challenging undertaking” (Young and He, 1998:2); however, the apparent ubiquity and importance of pragmatic markers in everyday interactions point to their consequential nature in appraising second/foreign learner speech. Researching the relationship between pragmatic markers and second/foreign language learners’ performance has a considerable potential for revealing the extent and scope of the necessary reconsiderations in pedagogically addressing and assessing the pragmatic functions that these markers help realize.
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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital letters, periods, commas and question marks</td>
<td>Es decir, ¿te gusta la comida?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid phrase or mid-sentence pause</td>
<td>(.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterance not understood</td>
<td>(xx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words pronounced “incorrectly” are followed by the</td>
<td>ricién (recién), neito (necesito)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transcriber’s best guess of the intended word in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parentheses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension of final syllable is indicated by an</td>
<td>este.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ellipsis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False starts or stutters at the beginning of words</td>
<td>po- poner, a- agredir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are indicated by a hyphen at the point of cutoff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English filler words appear in parentheses</td>
<td>(um), (oooh), (uh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish fillers appear in plain text</td>
<td>eh, ehm, ah, ahm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other paralinguistic features are indicated in</td>
<td>(coughs), (laughs), (sniffs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parentheses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

Fuentes Rodríguez, Catalina, 1993. Comportamiento discursivo de bueno, bien, pues bien. Estudios de Lingüística de la Universidad de Alicante 9, 205–221.