

QUESTION-DRIVEN GRAMMAR IN SPECIAL PERSON INTERVIEWS

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(A 6-minute read)

The teacher has great power to control student interviews, just by the nature of the questions directed at the student. Besides the content and vocabulary, you can focus specialized grammar to the level of the class with the questions you ask.

*This is an example of a compelling **Special Person** interview with a non-native Spanish 3 student named **Jayme**. Two recent transfer students in the class were not familiar with the present perfect tense. There were also a few slower-acquiring students that had not grasped parts of it, so some of the follow-up questions were formulated using that tense. It wasn't forced and often sounded like a natural part of the conversation. I also did not alert the students that I would be using that tense. The questions prompted Jayme to answer in with the present perfect, and my verification questions and review statements gave all of the students in the class opportunities to hear and use it.*

That's the trick: Make your follow-up questions sound like a natural part of the conversation. Forcing the present perfect into every single question and answer would have been too much. It would not have sounded like real language use. I needed to use other verb tenses and moods naturally along the way too.

I also purposefully used high frequency vocabulary, along with comprehensible course-level grammar in my questions. There were many repetitions of the target grammatical structures, but those structures did not feel repetitious because they were wrapped in questions and answers that were meaningful and personalized.

Comprehension Precedes Production

Since this was a third-year class, most of the grammar made sense to most of the students. Most of them could understand the questions, but they were not all confident in producing it. We needed plenty of differentiation. I did that with comprehension check questions. The transfer students, as well as the struggling students in the class may not have understood it all, so they were frequently asked comprehension questions with English answers permitted:

¿Qué acabo de preguntarle? *(What did I just ask her?),*
¿Qué acabo de decir? *(What did I just say?), or*
¿Qué dijo Jayme? *(What did Jayme say?),*

I did this to be sure the new and slower students were tracking, because if they didn't understand, all would have been lost. Those brief forays into English helped me to know if I was speaking too fast, adding content too quickly, or using too many unknown words. Total target language use in the class was still well over 95%. But if I had not used English occasionally to establish meaning, those students would have tuned out. They may have even dropped the class altogether. I wanted them to stay in the class, because I figured they would learn more Spanish if they were taking a Spanish class.

Follow the Student's Pride and Passion

Everyone in the class knew that Jayme played softball because I had let her and other players bring their big bags of equipment to class before school every day during club softball season and store it in a

special place in the back of the room. So, the initial question was a slam dunk: most students were at least aware that she played softball. We just wanted to know more about it. We wanted to let her talk about something she was passionate about. And she did. It turns out she was a proud of her family's history in New Mexico, but she was really into reading.

99% Target Language

There was much more language happening in the class beyond the transcription below. The questions and student-generated sentences are just a fraction of the communication that happened in the class. All of the conversation was in Spanish. Each of these steps were in the target language:

- 1) Initial questions (2nd person)
- 2) Jayme's answers (1st person)
- 3) 'Reporting back to the class' (3rd person)
- 4) Follow-up questions and comments when she showed interest or pride
- 5) Verifying the information with Jayme
- 6) Student-generated statements
- 7) Students writing sentences about Jayme with a partner
- 8) Reviewing what we had learned. Only occasional comprehension checks were in English.

See a chart of the Steps of the Special Person Interview Process here:

<https://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/Steps-of-the-Process-Chart-for-Special-Person-Interviews-1.pdf>

ACTFL's Proficiency Guidelines for Intermediate Mid Speaking:

"Speakers at the Intermediate Mid sublevel are able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward social situations. Conversation is generally limited to those predictable and concrete exchanges necessary for survival in the target culture. These include personal information related to self, family, home, daily activities, interests and personal preferences, as well as physical and social needs, such as food, shopping, travel, and lodging. Intermediate Mid speakers tend to function reactively, for example, by responding to direct questions or requests for information."

Source: <https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/guidelines/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012.pdf>

The classroom conversation, parts of which are transcribed below, falls mostly within the Intermediate Mid speaking range, with some parts possibly reaching Intermediate High.

English translations of the interview are provided for readers here that do not know Spanish. The translations were not used during the interview.

Jayme's 'Persona Especial' Student Interview:

• Question #1:

Te gusta jugar sóftbol, ¿verdad?

You like to play softball, right?

Follow-up Questions:

¿Por cuánto tiempo has jugado softbol?

How long have you played softball?



- ¿Qué posiciones **has jugado**? *What positions **have you played**?*
- ¿**Has jugado** en clubes de softbol, o solo para la escuela?
*Have you **played** in softball clubs, or just for the school?*
- ¿Para qué clubes **has jugado**? *What **clubs** have you **played** for?*
- ¿Y **has jugado** en el equipo de la escuela también? *And **you have played** on the school team also?*
- ¿Piensas que vas a jugar el próximo año? *Do you think you are going to play next year?*

Jayme answered all of these questions in the first person in Spanish. When the new students in the class indicated that a word was unfamiliar to them, it was written on the board in English and in Spanish. Those new words were left there until the end of the interview and everyone had a chance to write them down and use them in their write-up of the interview.

Student-Generated Sentences Based on Jayme's Answers:

1. **A Jayme le gusta jugar softbol.** *Jayme likes to play softball.*
2. **Ha jugado softbol por dos años.** *She **has played** softball for two years.*
3. **Ha jugado las posiciones *second base y center field*.** *She **has played** *second base and center field*.*

*Anglicized terms are often used in baseball by Spanish-speaking players. Words like: **cácher**, **pícher**, **jonrón** (home run) and 'está out' are common. In this class, 'segunda base' (second base) would have been comprehensible, and I probably should have used it, but 'jardinero central' (center field) would probably not have been. Since the agenda was to get to know the student and let her tell her story, I did not push it and I did not force her to use a new term that might have interrupted her narrative.*

This also might have been perceived as me pushing too much my own agenda on her. My goal was to listen to her first, and second, to use the present perfect naturally during our conversation. Adding unnecessary vocabulary would have been a further agenda item and might have been too much. As it was, she felt comfortable and she talked. A lot. Keep reading.

4. **Ha jugado en los equipos de club: *Blaze y Fever*.** *She **has played** on two club teams: *Blaze and Fever*.*
5. **También ha jugado en el equipo de softbol de la escuela por dos años.**
*She **has also played** on the school softball team for two years.*
6. **Dijo que jugará el próximo año también.** *She said that she will play next year too.*

• **Question #2:**

- ¿Cuántos años tienes? *How old are you?*

Follow-up Question:

- ¿Por cuánto tiempo **has tenido** dieciséis años? *How long **have you been** sixteen?*

Student-Generated Sentences Based on Jayme's Answers:

7. **Jayme tiene diez y seis años.** *Jayme is 16 years old.*
8. **Ha tenido dieciséis años desde el primero de enero.** *She **has been** 16 since January first.*



The follow-up question was an odd one. I wouldn't normally ask that, but I knew her birthday was January 1 because Jayme had been in Spanish 1 and 2 with me before. January 1 seems like an interesting birthdate, but she didn't seem proud or particularly interested in it. Also, when a kid reveal an age of 16, that can generate interest and pride because they may have a driver license and/or a car. Again, it bombed.

Not every line of questioning produces a winner response from the student interviewee or from the rest of the students in the class. We could only squeeze two tidbits of slightly interesting information from this one. There was no interest or pride demonstrated in Jayme's tone of voice or body language. She wasn't into it and neither were her classmates (even though a January 1st birthday is interesting), so we went on to another question...

• Question #3:

¿Qué nombre prefieres?

What name do you prefer?

Follow-up Questions:

¿No tienes un apodo?

You don't have a nickname?

¿Has tenido un apodo?

Have you had a nickname?

¿Quisieras compartir algunos de los apodos que has tenido en el pasado?

Would you like to share some of the nicknames you have had in the past?

I knew that for some reason, Jayme had several unusual nicknames, but this was another dud question. Jayme did not reveal any of her nicknames. Totally fine. The interview is under her control, not mine and not her classmates'.

The grammar here is interesting though. It was not conscious or intentional, but it was helpful that the combination 'ha tenido' (has had) showed up often in this interview. The words 'haber' and 'tener' are both translated as 'to have' in English, so it helps students to have contextualized examples to distinguish their meaning and usage.

Student-Generated Sentences Based on Jayme's Answers:

9. No tiene un apodo ahora, pero ha tenido muchos apodos en el pasado.

She doesn't have a nickname right now, but she has had many nicknames in the past.

10. No nos dijo ninguno de los apodos que sus amigos la han llamado.

She didn't tell us any of the nicknames that her friends have called her.

11. No tenía ganas de compartir ningún apodo que ha tenido con la clase.

She didn't feel like sharing any of the nicknames she has had with the class.

• Question #4:

¿De dónde eres, originalmente?

Where are you from, originally?

Follow-up Questions:

¿Has vivido en Colorado por mucho tiempo?

Have you lived in Colorado for a long time?

¿Por cuánto tiempo has vivido en Johnstown?

How long have you lived in Johnstown?

¿Tus padres son de Colorado también?

Are your parents from Colorado too?



¿Por cuánto tiempo **habían vivido** tus padres en Nuevo México?

*How long **had** your parents **lived** in New Mexico?*

¿Todavía tienes familia allá?

Do you still have family down there?

¿Has **ido** a Nuevo México mucho?

*Have you **been** to New Mexico much?*

This question generated a bit more enthusiasm from Jayme. Since she was not a native speaker, she needed help understanding some of the structures in the questions. One of those structures was 'has ido' (you have gone). In most Spanish present participles there is enough in the stem for newbies to recognize the verb. The participle 'ido' (gone) was not sufficient for her to hear the verb 'ir' (to go), so it was clarified with a quick translation and writing it in English and Spanish on the board.

Student-Generated Sentences Based on Jayme's Answers:

12. **Básicamente, ella es de Colorado.**

She is basically from Colorado.

13. **Ha vivido en Colorado casi toda su vida.**

*She **has lived** in Colorado almost all her life.*

14. **Ella ha vivido en Johnstown por catorce años.**

*She **has lived** in Johnstown for fourteen years.*

15. **Sus padres son de Nuevo México.**

Her parents are from New Mexico.

16. **Su familia ha vivido en Nuevo México por muchas generaciones.**

*Her family **has lived** in New Mexico for many generations.*

17. **Ella todavía tiene familia allá.**

She still has family there.

18. **Ha ido a Nuevo México mucho para visitar a sus parientes.**

*She **has gone** to New Mexico a lot to visit her relatives.*

• Question #5:

Te gusta leer, ¿qué no?

You like to read, right?

*This question was a winner. Finally! Jayme's reactions encouraged more follow-up questions (13) and her longer answers and self-disclosure produced more student-generated sentences (21) from her peers than any other question had because of her heightened enthusiasm and pride. She gave more than just short answers, and often elaborated and added content beyond the question because we had hit upon her passion: Jayme was a reader. Turns out she reads all the time. She never goes anywhere without a book. Her own 'lean in' encouraged more follow-up questions. Very few of us in the class knew this about her before. This question was a winner because although not a native speaker of Spanish, she habitually and voluntarily practiced **extensive reading**, both in English and in Spanish—just what we want our students to do! Well, except maybe not during math class.*

Follow-up Questions:

¿Lees mucho?

Do you read a lot?

¿Cuántos libros **has leído** este año escolar?

*How many books **have you read** this school year?*

¿Por qué **has leído** tantos libros?

*Why **have you read** so many books?*

¿Qué tipo de libros **has leído**? ¿De qué género? *What type of books **have you read**? What genre?*

¿Has **leído** series de libros, como todos los libros de Harry Potter?

***Have you read** any series of books, like all of the books from Harry Potter?*

¿Has **leído** muchos libros de un autor?

***Have you read** a lot of books by one author?*

¿No tienes un autor favorito?

You don't have a favorite author?



¿Has leído libros en inglés o en español? *Have you read books in English or in Spanish?*

¿Qué géneros de ficción has leído? *What genres of fiction have you read?*

¿Has ido a la biblioteca para los libros? *Have you gone to the library for the books?*

Si tú no fuiste a la biblioteca, ¿de dónde conseguiste los libros?

If you didn't go to the library, where did you get the books?

¿Has comprado libros de papel o libros digitales? *Have you bought paper books or digital books?*

¿Cómo has tenido el dinero para comprar tantos libros? ¿Tienes un trabajo muy bueno?

How have you had the money to buy so many books? Do you have a really good job?

Student-Generated Sentences Based on Jayme's Answers:

19. **A Jayme le gusta leer.** *Jayme likes to read.*

20. **Lee mucho.** *She reads a lot.*

21. **Ha leído treinta libros desde agosto.** *She has read 30 books since August.*

22. **Dijo que tiene dislexia, y lee para ayudar con su condición, pero también, a ella le gusta leer.**

She said that she has dyslexia, and she reads to help with her condition, but also, she likes to read.

23. **Ha leído muchos libros de ficción.** *She has read a lot of fiction books.*

24. **No ha leído ninguna serie de libros este año.** *She has not read any series of books this year.*

25. **Casi todos los libros han sido por autores diferentes.**

Almost all of the books have been by different authors.

26. **No tiene un autor favorito.** *She doesn't have a favorite author.*

27. **Ha leído libros en inglés y español.** *She has read books in English and in Spanish.*

28. **Ha leído novelas de fantasía, ciencia ficción, aventura, espías, y romance.**

She has read fantasy, science fiction, adventure, spy and romance novels.

29. **No ha ido a la biblioteca para sacar los libros.** *She hasn't gone to the library to get the books.*

30. **Ha comprado todos los libros en línea.** *She has bought all of the books on line.*

31. **Sus padres quieren que ella lea, así que ellos le han comprado todos los libros.**

Her parents want her to read, so they have bought all of the books for her.

If this were a higher-level class like level 4/AP, I would have followed up more and asked more details about this point, asking if Jayme had gotten all the books she wanted, and if not, why not? I would have used much more complicated vocabulary and grammar with the class so that after more follow-up questions, back-and-forth, verifying details, and review, instead of the single sentence above (#31), students could have produced something like this:

Los padres de Jayme siempre han querido que ella leyera mucho y, por lo tanto, le habrían comprado todos los libros que podría haber leído en su vida, pero, lamentablemente, fue imposible para ellos hacerlo completamente este año debido a una grave desgracia en sus vidas en la forma de una situación económica desafortunada en la forma de la mala suerte con sus inversiones y la confianza en unos sinvergüenzas del mercado financiero que habían fingido ser sus amigos y confidentes pero que, sin embargo, resultaron tener corazones de piedra. Pero su madre y su padre se han sacrificado y han podido presupuestar suficiente dinero para comprarle por lo menos cuarenta libros al año para enriquecer su vida, ayudarla a lidiar con su dislexia y ayudarla con su educación en general.

Jayme's parents have always wanted her to read a lot, and thus they would have bought her all of the books she ever could have read in a lifetime, but alas, it was impossible for them to do this completely this year due



to severe misfortune in their lives in the form of an unfortunate economic situation, in the form of bad luck with their investments and putting their trust in scoundrels in the financial market who had pretended to be their friends and confidants, but who nevertheless turned out to have hearts of stone. But her mother and father have sacrificed and have been able to budget enough money to buy her at least forty books a year to enrich her life, help her to deal with her dyslexia, and to help her with her education in general.

32. **Jayne no tiene trabajo.** *Jayne doesn't have a job.*
33. **No puede trabajar porque está muy ocupada con tareas y la práctica de fútbol.**
She can't work because she is very busy with homework and softball practice.
34. **Casi todos han sido libros electrónicos.** *Almost all of the books have been eBooks.*
35. **También ha comprado libros de papel.** *She has also bought paper books.*
36. **Ha leído muchos libros en su teléfono.** *She has read a lot of books on her telephone.*
37. **A veces ha leído durante sus clases, cuando estaban aburridas.**
Sometimes she has read during her classes, when they were boring.
38. **Ha leído durante la clase de matemáticas.** *She has read during math class.*
39. **Ha compartido los libros de papel con sus amigas.**
She has shared the paper books with her friends.

Students in the class generated 39 sentences based on the interview. The assessment for this interview was on the following day. For the quiz, students wrote as many sentences as they could remember about the interview with Jayme in Spanish. No notes. Writing 30 of the 39 sentences was the expectation, but students that can remember more are always encouraged to show what they know and can do, even though they do not receive extra credit for it. That kind of pride challenge encourages student autonomy and agency. It gives them control and ownership of their own learning. It gets students to learn for learning's sake and the inherent interest of the course content, in this case, amazing facts about Jayme, rather than merely doing the minimum for an 'A' grade.