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A Process for Engagement with Threshold Concepts in Spanish Composition

Seán Dwyer

Numerous practices and assignments discussed at the 2012 Backwards by Design Curriculum Workshop appeal to me as sources of creativity in the classroom. Some will suit courses I teach in the future. For this year, I faced an issue: I am working with students whose classroom vocabulary is equivalent to that of a three-year-old, because I am teaching first-year Spanish.

The most applicable idea, one that energized me greatly, was the identification of threshold concepts. Working backward from that identification, I sought ways to implement practices that would, I hoped, bring those concepts permanently into my students' approach to writing in Spanish.

An ongoing challenge in the teaching of composition to first-year Spanish students is their failure to recognize that most of their mistakes are not ones that native writers would make. Whereas my students understand the importance of using grammatically clear English, and their ear for English usually tells them when their writing misses the mark, Spanish continues to be an academic abstraction, rather than an innate process. Therefore, proofreading a paper by listening to their inner voice serves no purpose for my students. By the same token, trying to fix essay grammar with a quick proofreading pass does not work, because students can make perhaps ten types of error in one two-clause sentence, and they simply cannot apply grammar rules at the proper moment with any consistency.

When my students reach second-year work, their professors will expect them to have mastered such “simple” concepts as noun-adjective agreement (in gender and number) and subject-verb agreement. In general, my students are capable of making nearly 100% accurate agreement choices *in isolation*. The threshold concept of agreement, the first big one and one of the most important threshold concepts to master, is not lost on my students. They are, however, at a loss to develop tactics for catching errors as non-natives that native speakers would by nature never make.

I decided that the second-year assumption of nearly perfect ability to make nouns and adjectives agree in gender and number was an achievable goal. How to get there was the question. Working backwards from the goal, I settled on two points, one a creation of perspective, and the other an attempt to play on my students' strengths.

The perspective was easy to create. I showed my students a worst-case scenario of how their Spanish would look to a native speaker. I wrote this paragraph on the board:

“I hove to sister, and I am older than them. We have fun together. Yesterday we go to playground and ran around alot.”

The first question was: “Is our Spanish that bad?” The answer: “Lamentably, yes.” My evidence is anecdotal, but the murmurs of alarm indicated to me that they took my point. I offered immediately a solution to the problem, and the students expressed a desire to implement a method that would take them past the roadblock.

I noted earlier that my students can discern errors when they isolate a proofreading task to one instance of the concept. I hypothesized that they could find all incidences of one *type* of error, provided that they did not think about other types of errors at the same time. And so, while I see a Spanish spelling checker as a crutch that hinders their learning for when they write by hand, I decided that some technology available in Word would suit my students' needs perfectly.

I created a proofreading protocol sheet that my students would apply to a 100-word essay they had written earlier in the quarter. I wanted them to learn several concepts: that making one proofreading pass through a paper for each type of error was a valuable use of time; that taking time to proofread a paper over the course of several days, rather than several times on one day, allowed their eyes to freshen and find more errors; and that Word's Search function could automate proofreading to the point that it was an efficient task with good return on the investment of time.

With my students' first drafts written, I handed out the proofreading protocol sheet. I

created a sample composition with paragraphs from several papers, and I demonstrated the technique in class. I required my students to turn in a new, differently named draft after each proofreading pass, so I would be able to verify that they had followed my plan. I also made the drafts due over the course of several days, to avoid reading fatigue, as well as last-minute rushes to complete the tasks. I made it clear that they were being graded on *procedure*, rather than grammatical perfection, so there was no value in having a native speaker proofread the paper. Following the protocol would ensure a B on the paper.

I have attached the feedback from my students, but I would like to note an unexpected result of the exercise. Students were seeing additional issues with the content of their papers while they proofread for particular items. In some cases, students decided to rework entire paragraphs. The requirement, or permission, to slow down and look carefully at the text enabled them to find problems that were more deeply embedded in their texts.

The idea of searching for one word at a time, whether to avoid overuse of a term or to catch errors of the its/it's variety, is not new. Its use is not limited to Spanish proofreading, though the search terms will be different for English papers. As far as my students are concerned, I also do not intend to have it be the only editing they do; we are peer editing in trios (15 minutes per paper) one day next week. Many of the minor errors have been eradicated, which means the 15 minutes will focus more on structure than on mechanics.

Before the workshop, I, along with many of my Spanish colleagues, saw the simplest agreement errors as a mere mechanical issue. I am now aware that noun-adjective agreement is a threshold concept, one I can fortify in my students through a heightened awareness of the number of errors they have caught. I foresee that this cohort will be very good composition writers in their 200-level classes because of new methods they will use to ensure that their work is up to their next professors' standards.

Anonymous Student Feedback

Seán Dwyer

My students found the editing process helpful and worthwhile, which I hope will induce them to use my sheet in future courses.

1. The proofreading tool is effective because it allows us to pay attention. Also, if we do the search without the spaces, it helps eliminate unintended joining of two words.
2. Editing papers in this style is helpful to me because I found a few errors I would not have caught if I were editing my paper as I would normally by looking it over once or twice. It's not hard and not tedious if you don't have a lot of errors, so I recommend doing this for other first-year classes.
3. This Method of editing our papers is really helpful. I was worried that it would be really time-consuming, but once I started following the steps, I soon realized that it went by fast and I caught tons of dumb errors that I had originally overlooked. Probably around five little mistakes that this method helped me find to make my paper better.
4. I found a few errors that I would not have found if I were not going back and combing for errors in this way. It's definitely a good idea and a great way to proofread. Beneficial without a doubt.
5. I found a few errors to begin with. After looking at the paper multiple times, I caught things that didn't make much sense and things that I got switched around. Doing these reviews has definitely been helpful.
6. It's helped a lot so far. Not so much with issues as far as not having things agree, but with forming sentences that actually make sense in Spanish.
7. Found several errors, not many. Didn't take too long.
8. I believe it did help. (I think the first four rough drafts could be combined into one.) Lots of edits and rewording sentences. Thanks!
9. So far, I have found a few errors, but I have found it very helpful because it made me go over the whole thing and find sentences that could have been worded better. I think it has helped me understand what I wrote the first time.
10. found lots of errors and was worthwhile. (Even if I didn't, it was worthwhile because it made me go through the whole thing and look at el/la etc.)
11. I found 5-6 errors through the system. After I reworded some of the sentences, there were \approx 12-14 errors.

12. Found about 6 errors when looking at el, la, los, las, and tú. Otherwise, I haven't found really any. It does help you be more aware, so I would implement it.
13. The proofreading sheet is very beneficial. Now that I see how common errors are, I will look out for them more while writing.
14. A few errors. Helped because they were simple errors that weren't found until doing the process.
15. I didn't find errors in all of the drafts. I found about 5 but they were all verbs. It helped more to go over peer papers—hard to find errors in my own paper.
16. Found maybe 2-3 errors so far. Helpful in editing. It makes sure it makes sense in process of correcting.
17. I found about 5 errors so far because of doing this, though I changed a few of my sentences and added some more sentences to make it more logical. This really really helped me in general with Spanish.
18. I think it's worth it! Maybe put something about checking subjunctive vs. indicative? [Note: it's in there, at the end of the process.] I found maybe 5 errors so far from your method, but I've changed a lot just by looking at it closer.
19. I'm not finding a ton of errors, but it is helping me to look closer at my paper and make corrections to each sentence individually. I think the step-by-step process is very helpful.
20. I haven't found any errors, but I think with a more complex or longer piece of writing it would be very helpful.
21. I found about 5 errors total, as well as other structural errors because I was taking a clear look.
22. The proofreading sheet did help in making corrections. I actually found a couple of silly mistakes in my rough drafts. The worksheet was helpful in structuring my proofreading.

Proofreading Your Spanish

I'm going to give you a process that will help you turn in clean, A-worthy compositions to your professors. That doesn't mean they will be perfect when you turn them in, but the basic Spanish 101 errors will not be a factor in your grade.

My directions will be meticulous, and you need to follow them carefully when you turn in your final product. If you follow the directions, you are guaranteed a B on this paper, even if your Spanish is not perfect, because this exercise is about your goal: to write error-free essays in Spanish. If you develop well your eye for proofreading Spanish, your grade will be an A.

1. Name your file according to this format: **Lastname Firstname 0 rough draft** Save it.
2. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 01 el**
3. Do a search (CTRL + F on a PC) for [SPACE]el[SPACE]
4. Each time you hit "el", look at the noun it modifies. If the noun is not masculine singular, change "el" to the proper form of the article. If "el" is followed by a verb, you need to change "el" to "él."
5. When you finish, save the file. **EMAIL it to me: sean.dwyer@wwu.edu**
6. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 02 la**
7. Do a search for [SPACE]la[SPACE]. Fix agreement errors. If **la** is being used as a direct object pronoun, make sure it appears right before the verb. Follow Step 5.
8. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 03 los**
9. Do a search for [SPACE]los[SPACE]. Fix agreement errors. If **los** is being used as a direct object pronoun, make sure it appears right before the verb. Follow Step 5.
10. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 04 las**
11. Do a search for [SPACE]las[SPACE]. Fix agreement errors. If **las** is being used as a direct object pronoun, make sure it appears right before the verb. Follow Step 5.
12. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 05 lo**
13. Do a search for [SPACE]lo[SPACE]. **Lo** is a direct object pronoun, so make sure it appears right before the verb. **Do not use lo as a subject pronoun.** Follow Step 5.
14. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 06 adjectives**
15. Read the essay and highlight **every** noun and pronoun. **Don't use yellow highlighting.** Decide if the noun is singular or plural, masculine or feminine. Then check the ending of each adjective that modifies that noun (including **un/una**), and change endings as necessary. Follow Step 5.
16. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 07 verbs**

17. Highlight every verb form, including infinitives. **Don't use yellow highlighting.** Identify the subject of each verb from among the highlighted nouns/pronouns. Check the conjugation of each verb to make sure it matches its subject. Follow Step 5.

18. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 08 P-I**

18. **Remove all of the highlighting.** If you wrote your essay in the past, make a timeline for preterite/imperfect choices and change as necessary. Follow Step 5.

19. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 09 subjunctive**

20. Do a search for [SPACE]que[SPACE]. Look at the main clause of its sentence for a subjunctive trigger: influence, emotion, doubt, denial, noun being described by the *que* clause, or conjunction (including *que*). This search won't catch all conjunctions, but almost all subjunctive situations will show up. If you have a subjunctive trigger, make sure your verb is in the proper subjunctive form. Use verb charts if you need to. Follow Step 5.

21. Do a Save As: **Lastname Firstname 10 gustar**

22. Do a search for [SPACE]gust[SPACE]. Check each form to make sure it agrees with the pleasing item, not the person, and make sure you use the proper indirect object pronoun for the person who is pleased. Follow Step 5.

23. Print four copies of version 10 of the essay. One is for me, two are for classmates to peer edit, and one is for you to examine while your classmates tell you what does not seem perfect on your paper.

Due dates

Draft	Email deadline, midnight
01 el	24 de mayo
02 la	24 de mayo
03 los	25 de mayo
04 las	25 de mayo
05 lo	26 de mayo
06 adjectives	26 de mayo
07 verbs	27 de mayo
08 P-I	27 de mayo
09 subjunctive	28 de mayo
10 gustar	29 de mayo
Printed draft 10, 4 copies	3 de junio
Peer edits of two papers	5 de junio en clase
Final version, incorporating peer edits	Beginning of final exam time or sooner