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(Not) Speaking Spanish: Explicit Pronunciation Instruction in the Online High School Classroom

Brahm vanWoerden

1. Introduction

Students in the language classroom often face a variety of challenges inherent to the process of learning a second language as an adult. These range from lack of sufficient motivation to structurally uninspired curriculum and are often amplified in the case of a drastic shift in environment. Such a shift took place rapidly over the course of 2020, transforming thousands of classrooms into virtual versions of themselves in a matter of weeks. Students began to receive vastly different quantities and types of language input and interacted with the language in substantially affected ways. Factors that previously played a large role in classroom success, like student confidence and willingness to communicate, became almost impossible to effectively address, especially in the face of a huge lack of resources for educators.

To attempt to address the variety of challenges wrought by the pandemic, I surveyed high school teachers on the changes in experience created by the shift to online learning and used their input to create a lesson concerned primarily with explicit pronunciation concepts. I then observed a high school AP Spanish class over the course of six weeks and delivered this lesson virtually. The content communicated in the lesson was inspired by the work I had completed as part of a previous research team at Western, that investigated the effectiveness of explicit pronunciation instruction in the intermediate college-level Spanish classroom.

This paper will begin with a review of the initial project and existing curriculum, and proceed to an overview of the work done at the high school level, including a survey to working

Spanish teachers, a class visit, and instructor feedback. The paper will end with a discussion on the implications of this work for future pedagogical research.

2. Background

The curriculum development team has formed a substantial part of my work at Western. In the fall of 2018, I joined the project and began working to develop targeted pronunciation materials in intermediate Spanish classrooms. This team was comprised of several student researchers as well as two faculty advisors, Dr. Kirsten Drickey and Dr. Jordan Sandoval. Those first two academic years, we created a curriculum that emphasized vowels, then consonants, and then suprasegmental features, including segment movement, syllable structure, and stress. These followed a basic structure of weekly phonology topics tied to Spanish-English influence, punctuated by two student-led class visits that elaborated upon the materials with in-class activities. The heart of the content was online canvas quizzes and activities that introduced concepts to students and gave them practical opportunities to explore new knowledge through perception, production, and comparison exercises.

Our evaluation of the effectiveness of this work was, at first, mainly concerned with the changes in student's perception and production, measured as its proximity to native-like production. Our analyses of these results did not yield substantially significant conclusions, or not those that would merit continued research. This finding, however, did not completely represent the effect of our curriculum on student experiences. Throughout the delivery of material, we had collected quotes and comments from students on their experiences with the content, and their thoughts on the interactions between the exercises and their progression with Spanish. This feedback was uniformly positive, and many students referenced increased

confidence in their speaking and listening abilities, related specifically to their work with the explicit phonological instruction. Below several quotes are listed that illustrate this feedback:

- “This knowledge will also assist me when I feel overwhelmed talking to native speakers who appear to be speaking so 'fast.’”
- “My confidence listening to Spanish is a lot better than at the beginning of the quarter.”
- “I feel that my speech flows much better, sounds much less awkward, and makes me feel more confident in the language.”
- “I think I have more confidence in speaking.”

This insight prompted a shift in our experimental paradigm, and in the fall of 2020, we shifted our curriculum focus to reflect this. Instead of measuring student production in the form of audio clips at the beginning and end of the term and evaluating the changes across a range of quantitative phonetic and acoustic characteristics, we provided a survey that established information about students’ self-reported willingness to communicate in Spanish in a variety of settings. This measure, we found, did illustrate an improvement in student self-assessed confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) at the end of the quarter. The WTC model is recognized as a proposal for the description of L2 learners’ classroom confidence (Macintyre et al, 1998). Due to a variety of engagement-related issues, we were not able to attract and retain consented students for a significant control group for this work, and thus have no true experimental foundation to assess the effectiveness of the material, outside of student specificity when describing the source of their increased confidence.

3. College-level Curriculum Examples

The college level curriculum has always been characterized by discreet online activities that support learners and guide them toward mastery of concepts both implicitly and explicitly. Several examples of these activities are reviewed below:

3.1 Spectrogram Analysis

Early on in our work developing materials to aid students in their proficiency comparing the differences between English and Spanish, we created activities that prompted spectrogram analysis. These ranged from prompting a student recording and directions to compare the result visually with both a native-like and English-influenced version to in-person peer observations and feedback in a laboratory setting. In all cases, we used spectrograms to add a visual element to what is typically a very abstract and strictly auditory comparison, and often divorced from any specific phonetic feedback. These comparisons, however, are difficult to simplify because of the irreducible complexity of a spectrogram, and in some cases intimidated students, leading to reduced outcomes. More research should be conducted that explores the effectiveness of waveforms and spectrograms for the acquisition of L2 phonology, and especially when these aids are annotated in a pedagogically targeted way.

3.2 Resyllabification

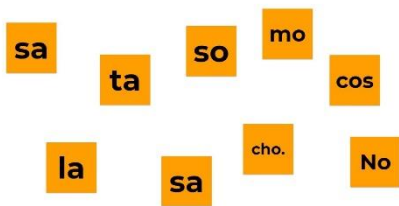


Figure 1

To address acquisition of Spanish syllable structure and, especially, resyllabification across word boundaries, we developed an activity that we gave in both in-person and virtual

formats during lab days. This activity, as shown in fig. 1, provided students with separate, syllabified segments of a phrase in Spanish, and prompted students to recreate the whole sentence by following segment movement rules. They could manipulate this in real time virtually or collaborate with physical pieces of paper in an in-person environment. This activity is best described as task-based learning, in which learners work to complete a specified objective using the academic concepts at hand, but in a supplementary way to the explicit description of the assignment. The noticing of the underlying form features is simultaneously essential for language acquisition (Skehan, 2013).

3.3 Audio Comparisons with Minimal Pairs

To build up precision with English transfer errors in Spanish production, students were introduced to an audio activity where two clips were played: one with native-like Spanish production, and one with specific English transfer errors. Students listened to each and determined which one expressed English influence, and then gradually created precise explanations for their choice. This activity could be conducted online, in a quiz format, or in-person using pairs of students given an orthographic representation to either produce or perceive and evaluate accordingly.

4. Pronunciation Instruction in the High Schools

In the high school environment, any explicit pronunciation instruction is characterized primarily by imitation in the audiolingual approach, and communication-focused feedback in context. This is usually separate from linguistically informed content. Our findings at the college level seemed to suggest that student confidence increased after exposure to this curriculum, both in learner self-assessments and qualitative evaluations from the instructor. Because teachers at

the high school level especially were suddenly faced with drastically different levels of input in the online classroom, it seemed possible that our curriculum could address some of the input deficit and improve learning outcomes for students who would otherwise experience a lack of language experience, and especially oral perception and production.

5. Survey of Instructors

To evaluate the state of pronunciation instruction around the northwest Washington area, I created and conducted a survey of high school and middle school Spanish teachers actively teaching during the shift to online learning. Questions attempted to ascertain the differences in the type and quality of instruction between the in-person and virtual environments, and any change in input across the two domains. I was able to find the contact information of 27 teachers and received data from 6. These instructors agreed that input decreased following the shift to online learning, but were unsure about the implications for the quality of their students' productions, or their success with measures of oral proficiency. They also agreed that their time in the virtual environment did not grant them enough time to create materials of all kinds, but especially pronunciation materials, and that, in that lack, they had no access to high quality instructional content in that area. These results seemed to imply that our curriculum, appropriately adapted and delivered, could address these issues, and help create a more successful language classroom at the high school level.

6. Student Motivation and ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

Students at the AP level are most often classified within the intermediate proficiency level, at one of three sublevels—intermediate low, mid, and high. To move between these sublevels, students must ultimately be “generally understood by native speakers unaccustomed to

dealing with non-natives” but “their pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax are strongly influenced by their first language.” The curriculum reflects these goals in that the end assessment is improvement in confidence, via increased experience with targeted comprehension and perception tasks. Students are not expected to demonstrate perfect production, but are rather given a thorough explanation of what constitutes native-like production and then enabled, ideally, to use the language with more fluidity and confidence.

An addition of dimension in student engagement with the language could provide additional avenues for self-directed study outside the classroom, leading to increased input and, then, a corresponding return of the benefits associated with increased language exposure. At the high school level, and especially in the online environment, a variety of options for learner engagement can be critical for student motivation and success.

7. Class Visit

To investigate the potential benefits of this curriculum in a real-world class, I designed and delivered a 50-minute sequence that introduced basic Spanish syllable concepts and using several key metaphors, introduced students to distinctions between Spanish vowel structures, including diphthongs and monophthongs. Ultimately, students left the class with an understanding of the differences between Spanish and English vowel quality, and experience identifying syllables and syllable types. This content was adapted from the lab day lesson given at the beginning of winter quarter, 2021, to two sections of Spanish 201. At the college level, we expanded on these syllable elements, and worked more specifically with English influence at the vowel level. To both save time and simplify the curriculum thematically, the previous adaptations were implemented.

A key example of the activities at the high school level was an audio comparison activity like that described in the above example section. Students listened, in the large group, to two different clips, one that expressed English influence on a particular vowel feature and one that was native-like. At the college level, students then split into small groups to practice with additional examples, but at the high school level, to ensure no student was left in a group with minimal participation, practice was kept to the main group. To address any issue about sharing in front of the entire class, the chat was used extensively to provide a low-stakes avenue for expression.

8. Feedback

After the lesson, the most important feedback provided was related to overall class structure; in a final version, this curriculum would be integrated into other class themes, and especially with grammatical concepts. In Spanish, many significant morphological features are expressed through phonological phenomena that are independent from the English system, and thus students, without a sufficient understanding of the sounds, will be unable to control the resultant meaning of a word. In general, this content provided, as intended, a new way to engage with the language. The instructor commented that her “AP students enjoyed dissecting the language and were interested,” the kind of engagement that could lead to additional, individually motivated input exposure.

9. Conclusion

In the original survey, instructors formed a consensus that student interaction with materials was different in the virtual environment. It is still unclear, however, the degree to which virtual learning changed a variety of factors in the classroom, including student

performance, student perceived learning, and instructor assessment. Moving forward, it will be especially important that educators work with a variety of methods to retain and promote student engagement, regardless of the modality. It is very clear that the learning environment is both critical for positive outcomes and can transform quickly into an entirely new world. This content could help instructors meet students' needs in many different formats, and should be more thoroughly explored as an option to address situations where input is severely lacking, alongside standard in-person applications.

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Appendix

A. Questions from survey, with answer options:

1. What is your name?
2. At what grade levels do you teach Spanish?
3. What did pronunciation instruction look like in your classroom before the switch to online learning? Check all that apply.
 - a. Overview of sounds at the beginning of the year
 - b. Explicit instruction throughout the year
 - c. Emphasis on error correction
 - d. No emphasis on pronunciation
 - e. Explanation of linguistic elements of Spanish pronunciation (overview of phonemes, place, manner, etc.)
4. How has pronunciation instruction changed in the shift to online learning?
 - a. Omission of pronunciation-specific materials due to lack of time
 - b. No change: pronunciation was not emphasized in in-person classes
 - c. Increased time with students and increased inclusion of pronunciation materials
 - d. Increased time with students but no increased emphasis on pronunciation
5. What have been the biggest changes in your delivery of Spanish input to students? Check all that apply.
 - a. Decreased input due to lack of time with students
 - b. Decreased input from native speakers
 - c. Increased input due to increased time outside of class
 - d. Overall decreased quality of input
 - e. Overall increased quality of input
6. Have you noticed any changes in student pronunciation after switching to online instruction?
 - a. Student pronunciation is more English-influenced after switching to online instruction
 - b. Student pronunciation is about the same in terms of English influence after switching to online instruction
 - c. Student pronunciation is less English-influenced after switching to online instruction
7. What do you think is the best way to teach pronunciation?
 - a. Allow students to acquire target pronunciation through practice in other areas, no explicit instruction
 - b. Explicit instruction
 - c. Corrective feedback
 - d. Precise student repetition of instructor production
8. Does your answer to the previous question accurately describe your classroom?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No, I don't have the resources to teach pronunciation in my preferred method

9. If you could teach pronunciation more (before online learning) would you?
 - a. No, pronunciation should not be taught explicitly
 - b. No, the amount of instruction I dedicate to pronunciation is sufficient
 - c. Yes, more explicit instruction
 - d. Yes, more high quality input
10. If you answered yes to either of the previous questions, which factors prevent expanded pronunciation instruction?
 - a. Not enough time with students
 - b. Other content areas are more important
 - c. No resources to access high-quality materials
 - d. Not enough time to create materials
11. Are you satisfied with student pronunciation at the end of the year?
 - a. Very satisfied
 - b. Somewhat satisfied
 - c. Not satisfied at all
12. Do you have any general thoughts on how the shift to online learning has affected your students' pronunciation?