Facilitating Elementary-Level University Students' Grammatical Competence through Children's Literature

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Abstract

This paper outlines a research study designed to document the contribution of children's literature in Spanish to the development of the grammatical competence of thirty students enrolled in one of two sections of an elementary-level Spanish course at a small four-year college in the southeastern United States. The study was completed in three consecutive phases. In the first phase of the study, students first learned the formation and uses of the preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish via the course textbook and then practiced these concepts in class. The goal of this phase was to provide students with an overall conceptual understanding of the construction and purposes of these verb tenses. In the second phase of the study, students read El cuento de Ferdinando *(*The Story of Ferdinand*) (Leaf, 1936), a book replete with example sentences containing verbs in each of these tenses. The goal of this phase was to deepen student's metagrammatical awareness concerning these two past tenses in Spanish while also strengthening students' knowledge concerning the formation of verbs in these tenses and the functions the tenses express, Students read and discussed the main themes in the book and then completed charts which helped build their conceptual understanding of the formation and uses of both verb tenses; the PACE model was used as a framework to design these activities. Following these activities, students participated in the third phase of the study in which they completed a questionnaire which asked them to document their awareness and knowledge of the uses of each past tense along their perspectives concerning the relevancy of the book to their understanding of both the forms and functions on both tenses. Preliminary findings suggest that the book facilitated students' emerging understanding of both tenses in that the book reinforced their knowledge of the formation of each tense while also allowing them to utilize contextual clues from the text to determine potential uses of each tense.*

Keywords: *Children's literature, Grammatical competence, Language proficiency Spanish language*

1. Introduction

The language teaching field from the 19th to the mid-20th century was characterized by a series of methods, defined by Richards and Rodgers (2014) as "the notion of a systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language and language learning" (p. 3). These methods tended to view grammatical competence as a prerequisite to developing proficiency in the target language. Such methods also typically taught grammar in a deductive fashion, meaning that learners were explicitly taught the rules governing a given grammatical structure. Then, beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, the field began to move towards approaches to language teaching, understood as "…theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" (Richards and Rodgers, 2014, p. 22). In contrast to methods, approaches were inclined to be less prescriptive in nature and, rather than perceiving grammar as an end unto itself, instead were disposed to view grammar as a means to an end (in this case, communication). For example, the goal of the Communicative Language Teaching approach is to advance students' interactional capacities in the target language, and grammar was thus seen as a means for learners to achieve this goal. Canale and Swain (1980) identified four necessary competencies to facilitate learners' communicative abilities in a given language: grammatical competence, sociocultural competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. Canale and Swain (1980) explain that grammatical competence involves "the levels of grammatical accuracy that are required in oral and written communication" (p. 27). This perspective concerning the role of grammar in communication demonstrates that grammatical competence is a necessary but inadequate prerequisite for communicative success and that such instruction should reinforce the form-function connections between specific grammatical structures and the communicative functions these structures fulfill. One procedure for guiding learners in understanding these connections is the PACE model.

The PACE model (Presentation, Attention, Co-Construction, Extension) (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002) is one avenue for teaching grammar inductively in which students encounter a "text" in the target language, devise hypotheses concerning the connections between particular linguistic forms and the communicative functions these forms demonstrate, and subsequently practice incorporating. These connections into their own communicative repertoire. The model consists of four sequential steps:

- Presentation: Learners are first exposed to an oral or written text that contains examples of a specific grammatical structure in the target language. The purpose of the text is to contextualize the use of the structure and provide students with examples of how the structure is used to accomplish one or more communicative functions.
- Attention: The instructor helps students' focus on the usage of a certain grammatical structure embedded in the text.
- Co-Construction: The instructor guides learners in a discussion during which they speculate on the rules governing the formation and usage of the grammatical structure.
- Extension: Students participate in a series of activities in which they become familiar with the rules governing the grammatical structure along with the communicative ramifications of the structure.

The purpose of the research study outlined in this paper is to expand the current literature concerning the role of the PACE model in developing language learners' grammatical competence. More specifically, the study aimed to document elementary-level Spanish students' perspectives regarding the contribution of children's literature in Spanish and the PACE model to the development of their grammatical competence concerning the preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish.

The research questions guiding the study were:

- To what extent does reading children's literature in Spanish (not) contribute to elementary-level Spanish students' awareness of the uses of the preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish?
- What are elementary-level Spanish students' perceptions regarding the relevancy of children's literature in Spanish to their developing grammatical competence in Spanish?

Due to space limitations, this paper focuses on findings concerning the second research question.

2. Research Context

The current study took place in a second-semester Spanish course at a small postsecondary institution in the southeastern United States. Participants in the study were enrolled in two sections of the Spanish course taught by the author during the fall semester of 2016.

The course unit consisted of three distinct phases. In the first phase, learners were acquainted with the rules governing the formation and uses of the preterit and imperfect tenses listed in the course textbook (Hershberger, Navey-Davis, & Alvarez, 2013) and engaged in a variety of activities intended to advance their understanding of the forms and functions of these verb tenses. In the second phase of the unit, students participated in several class exercises designed around the book *El cuento de Ferdinando* (Leaf, 1936) which contained abundant examples of sentences that contain both tenses. The activities included in the second phase utilized the PACE model as a conceptual framework. In this phase, participants first read through the book and engaged in a group discussion with their classmates in which they answered comprehension questions concerning the overall gist and supporting details concerning the plot of the book; the goal of this activity was to utilize the book in order to provide students with sufficient context to subsequently understand the sentences in the text conjugated in the preterit and imperfect tenses. Learners were then assigned to random groups and re-read specific pages in the book that included sentences in the preterit and/or imperfect tenses. In groups, learners completed worksheets in which they were given a list of verbs conjugated in the preterit and imperfect tenses and were asked to indicate whether the verb in a given sentence was conjugated in either the preterit or imperfect tense, the infinitive from which the form is derived, the subject of the sentence, and whether the form is a regular (-AR, -ER, or -IR) or irregular form of the specific past tense. Figure 1 below is a sample worksheet that students completed in groups.

Fig.1. Sample Worksheet

Verbo	Pretérito / Imperfecto	Infinitivo	Sujeto	-AR / -ER / -IR / Irregular
había (2)				
llamaba (3)				
vivía (4)				
corrían (4)				
brincaban (4)				
le gustaba (5)				
tenía (6)				
era (7)				
era (8)				
preocupaba (8)				
temía (8)				
estaba (8)				
decía (9)				
respondía (9)				
dio (10)				
estaba (10)				
era (10)				
era (10)				
dejó (10)				
pasaban (11)				
crecía (11)				
volvió (11)				
habían (12)				
peleaban (12)				
topetaban (12)				

In the third and final phase of the unit, students completed a post-unit questionnaire which asked them to describe the uses of the preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish and to indicate their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the course unit along with their suggestions for improving the course unit moving forward. All students' names in the quotes included in the next section are pseudonyms.

3. Preliminary Findings

3.1 Strengths of the Course Unit
Some students commented that the children's book helped them better understand the forms and functions of the preterit and imperfect tenses in Spanish. For example, one student indicated that "it [the activity] was more fun than just reading sentences using them [the preterit and the imperfect] and it was helpful when you can see it [the tenses] in a story coming together" (Student #8, Class #1). Another student commented that "overall I believe the activity worked fine between going over the differences between the two forms and when to use them and then reading *[El Cuento de] Ferdinando* to see what we learned in action" (Student #5, Class #2). These quotes demonstrate that some learners believed that the activity helped contextualize the uses of both verb tenses and extended the form-function learning they initially gained from the activities surrounding the course textbook.

3.2. Weaknesses of the Course Unit
In regards to the weaknesses of the course unit, one student stated that "[I] had to look up many of the verbs' meanings. I could see how the verb was conjugated and knew which group it belonged to but not always what it was saying" (Student #13, Class #1). Another student asserted that "…at times it was hard to understand the story. This would cause confusion at times when trying to focus on learning [the] *pretérito* and [the] *imperfecto*" (Student #14, Class #02). These quotes affirm that some students believed that the book caused them difficulty in understanding the form-function relationships of both tenses due to the complex vocabulary included in the book.

3.3 Suggestions for Improving the Course Unit
Several students offered several propositions for strengthening the course unit in the future. For example, one student declared that "perhaps expanding the activity with a second book so that students can draw comparisons across the story's grammar" (Student #6, Class #1). Another student disclosed that "I think it would be good to have both the English and Spanish versions of each book in order to gain a better understanding of how Spanish reads" (Student #7, Class #2). These quotes

signal that, among other considerations, instructors should reflect on the lexical complexity of the texts used in class activities and exercises to ensure that this complexity does not detract from the pedagogiocal value of such texts in promoting students' grammatical understandings.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the utilization of children's literature in combination with the PACE model as one viable possibility for advancing language learners' grammatical competence. It is hoped that this paper may inspire other educators and researchers to incorporate this approach in foreign/second language curricula and document the effectiveness of such an approach on the development on students' grammatical competence in order to expand the current literature on this topic.

References

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