

Lexical Exams in Spanish as Second Language and as a Heritage Language: A Tentative Guideline for Improvement

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Abstract

As research has improved regarding Spanish in the US, its research regarding the lexicon and the lexical assessments of students of Spanish as a second language (L2) and as a heritage language (HL), also has improved specially during the last three decades (Chávez, 2017 forthcoming). In this descriptive work, we present several research results for the Spanish lexicon, as a L2 and as HL, for lexical exams and for teaching lexical items or lexicon. The overall results show that the HL students have higher lexical levels than HL students due to several variables including gender, socioeconomic status, reading and Spanish use at home among others. However, according to several researchers, they still have several limitations and variations. Finally, we present a tentative guideline to improve the lexical assessments in Spanish as a L2 and as a HL based on previous research.

Keywords: Spanish lexicon, lexical exam, Spanish US, Spanish L2, Spanish HL, assessment

1. Introduction

As Spanish became the second most important language in the US after English, its investigations regarding heritage language learners (HL) and Spanish as a second language (L2) also have improved especially in the last four decades (Chávez, 2017; Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012). However, the investigations regarding their lexicon, teaching methodologies, materials and investigations are still limited and varied (Chávez, 2017). However, there are more investigations of the Spanish lexicon as L2 than as a HL. Due to the large number of definitions for lexicon, in our work we adopt Rodrigo's (2009) definition. We also believe that the lexicon is important for the students of Spanish as a HL and as a L2 because of its possible correlation with reading comprehension (Chávez, 2017; Velásquez, 2015). We also agree with other researchers regarding the importance of teaching more vocabulary in class due to its importance regarding message comprehension (Fairclough & Mark, 2003; Mrak, 2011; Rodrigo, 2009;). According to Nizonkiza and Van Den Verg (2014, p. 47), there are five periods regarding the lexical assessments: traditional, integrative, communicative, debate and exploration and varied. The lexical competence usually is determined by measuring "the size" and the organization of the "lexical items" (Lafford, Collentine & Karp, 2003, p. 133). Other researchers believe that lexical exams also need to be reliable and valid (Casso, 2010; López-Mezquita, 2005.) Bailey Victory (1971, p. 3) proposed three methodologies for lexical investigations up to 1970: objective, subjective and empirical. He also believed that they focused in four areas: measurement of language use, to classify students, to build vocabulary and to measure the student's progress (p. 4). It is also believed that there are two ways to organize the lexicon for L2: one is the Universal Grammar View and the other one is the Connectionist View (Lafford, Collentine & Karp, 2003, p. 132).

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2. Spanish Lexicon as a L2

Research regarding the lexicon and its teaching existed before 1970 for English as a Second Language in the US but it is more limited for Spanish (Chávez, 2017; Wade, 1938). However, it was after 1990 that they expanded in the US especially for Spanish as an L2 (Chávez, 2017; López-Mezquita, 2005; Nizonkiza & Van Den Verg, 2014). Several lexical exams have shown that students of Spanish as a L2 have an overall lower average than students of Spanish as a HL and that lexical exams are still varied in formats and on what they measure (Chávez, 2017). Chávez (2017) presents several recommendations for teaching the Spanish lexicon as a L2. However, Lafford *et. al* (2007, pp. 502-514) warn us about the implementation of computer assisted language learning (CALL) programs to increase the Spanish lexicon as an L2. They propose the following ten guidelines: teach in context and using the learner's background knowledge, use "multimodal input" (p. 504), teach using the saliency idea and using varied sources, use high order thinking skills, teach the importance of "relations among L2 lexical items" (p. 508), implement lexical productions providing feedback and use "task based activities" (p. 513).

3. Spanish Lexicon as a HL

Research regarding the lexicon of students of Spanish as a HL in the US expanded after 2000 but they are also very varied in format and on what they measure just like they are with Spanish as a L2 (Chávez, 2017). They exist at the preschool level, elementary, secondary, college and adult level. However, they are more common and numerous at the college level and the multiple choice are the most popular ones followed by the cloze tests exams (Chávez, 2017; Casso, 2010). Several lexical exams have shown that the overall results for students of Spanish as a HL are higher than for students of Spanish as a L2 (Chávez, 2017). Additionally, when compared to the native speakers (NS) of Spanish, the students of HL are in second place and the students of Spanish as L2 are in third place (Chávez, 2017). However, other variables are also important regarding the lexicon in Spanish. Rodrigo (2009) warns researchers that reading may have an important role in the lexical development. The author also acknowledges the difficulty it takes to create a good exam. The economic status, gender, teaching practices, Spanish level, school and mode of administration can also be other important variables (Bailey Victory, 1971; Chávez, 2017). However, some negative correlations were also found between the lexicon and other variables (Chávez, 2017).

4. Proposed Tentative Improvement Guidelines for Lexical Exams in Spanish

Several researchers propose improvement for the lexical exams in Spanish from preschool to college. Some of these guidelines are presented in Table 1.

Izura <i>et. al</i> (2014)	Lafford <i>et. al</i> (2003)	Pearson (1998)	Wood & Peña (2015)
Avoid items "too easy" or "too difficult."	Communicate with other researchers.	Use with large groups.	Avoid cultural preferences and language obstruction.
Use good real and nonreal words.	Expand actual research.	Explain limitations of research.	Avoid unequal distribution of difficulty.
Use objective tests which are uncomplicated and accessible.	Investigate the importance of input and technology.	Obtain language at home, experience, background, gender and socioeconomic status survey.	Avoid group constraints.
Test in several levels.	Improve research guidelines.	Assess productive vocabulary.	Asses, teach and retest.
Compare lexical levels across studies.			Assess validity and beyond the ceiling effect.
Aim for standardization across languages			

5. Using Spanish Lexicon to Give Specialized Instruction

Several researchers believe that we should use the Spanish lexicon to give specialized instruction, assess the students' knowledge, group students in class and modify instruction due to the differences in the student's levels especially in HL classes (Bailey Victory, 1971; Chávez, 2017; Wood & Peña, 2015).

Chávez (2017) also presents several tentative guidelines for teaching lexicon as a HL and as a L2 using leveled readings, movies, music, technology, professional development, etc. according to the levels of students' lexical knowledge. However, there are more resources to teach vocabulary as a L2 than as a HL (Chávez, 2017 forthcoming).

6. Conclusions

As we can see, research in Spanish as a L2 and as a HL regarding the lexicon has improved especially after 1990. However, for Spanish as a HL it has improved especially after 2000 (Chávez, 2017). However, we still have work to do if we want to progress as recommended by several researchers (Izura et. al, 2014; Pearson, 1998; Wood & Peña, 2015). We should continue improving the tentative agenda presented here based on previous research and with larger groups of data. That tentative guideline may include teaching practices with input, technology, assess validity, have a consensus on the presentation of results, include professional development that includes lexicon in our Spanish curriculum among others, since it is believed to be correlated with reading comprehension.

7. References

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