

A Lexical Exam for Students of Spanish as Second Language Classes (L2) at the College level: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The lexical knowledge of students of Spanish is related with the global knowledge of language of students in Spanish and in English (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming; Fairclough, 2009; Rodrigo, 2009) as well as with reading comprehension (Velásquez, 2015). Other researchers have also proposed that Spanish instructors should use more time in class teaching vocabulary based on the student's level of knowledge (Fairclough & Belpoliti, 2015; Waldvogel, 2016). In the present study, we analyze the lexical knowledge of students of Spanish as second language classes (L2) at the college level. It is based in the lexical threshold theory. The instruments are a lexical multiple choice exam, a cloze test activity and a survey for the instructor. Its methodology follows Chávez (2017a forthcoming), Fairclough and Ramirez (2009) and Rodrigo (2009). This study follows the recommendations of the doctoral dissertation in Chávez (2017a forthcoming) and it is done as a pilot study. The results demonstrate a positive Pearson correlation between the lexical exam and the cloze test activity of $r=.762$. They also show a varied lexical knowledge of the participants as found in previous studies (Velásquez, 2015; Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough & Ramirez, 2009) and a lower level of lexical knowledge when compared to students of heritage languages classes¹ (HL) (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming).

Keywords: lexical knowledge, vocabulary, Spanish as L2, Spanish as a HL, Spanish in the US, assessment

Resumen:

Se considera que el conocimiento léxico está relacionado con el conocimiento global del lenguaje de los estudiantes en español y en inglés (Chávez, 2017a en proceso; Fairclough, 2009; Rodrigo, 2009) así como también con la comprensión lectora (Velásquez, 2015). Otros investigadores también proponen que deberíamos usar más tiempo en clase enseñando vocabulario en clase dependiendo del nivel del conocimiento (Fairclough & Belpoliti, 2015; Waldvogel, 2016). En la presente investigación analizamos el conocimiento léxico de los estudiantes de español como segunda lengua (L2) a nivel universitario. Se basa en la teoría del umbral léxico. Los instrumentos usados son: un examen léxico de opción múltiple, una actividad cloze test y una encuesta del profesorado. La metodología sigue parcialmente a Chávez (2017 en proceso), Fairclough y Ramirez (2009) y Rodrigo (2009). Este estudio se hizo como un estudio piloto siguiendo las recomendaciones de la tesis doctoral de Chávez (2017a en proceso). Los resultados generales muestran una correlación positiva mediana entre el examen léxico y la actividad cloze test de $r=.762$. Los resultados también muestran un conocimiento léxico variado como en estudios previos (Velásquez, 2015; Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough & Ramirez, 2009) y un nivel léxico bajo al compararse con los estudiantes de español como lengua de herencia¹ (HL) (Chávez, 2017a en proceso).

Palabras Clave:

conocimiento léxico, vocabulario, español como L2, español como LH, español en EEUU, evaluación

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1. Introduction

Previous studies show a lower lexical level of knowledge of students of Spanish as second language classes (L2) when compared to students of Spanish as heritage language classes (HL) (Chávez 2017a forthcoming; Chávez 2017b; Fairclough & Ramírez 2009; Rodrigo, 2009). Some researchers also believe in the importance of teaching vocabulary in class to improve their student's vocabulary knowledge according to their vocabulary level (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming; Fairclough & Belpoliti, 2015; Waldvogel, 2016). Due a large amount of definitions regarding the lexical knowledge, in this research Rodrigo's (2009) definition "the amount of vocabulary that somebody knows" is used (p. 580, my translation).

2. Methodology

In this pilot study, the lexical knowledge of students of Spanish as second language classes (L2) at the college level is analyzed. It is rooted in the lexical threshold theory. The instruments utilized were a lexical multiple choice exam (80 questions), a cloze test activity (30 fill in the blank questions) and a survey for the instructors. Its methodology follows Chávez (2017a forthcoming), Fairclough and Ramírez (2009) and Rodrigo (2009). This study follows the recommendations of the doctoral dissertation in Chávez (2017a forth coming). There were 23 participants in two public universities in Texas which included L2, HL and one native speaker. The L2 and HL participants are first year students and the assessment was performed at the beginning of the spring 2017 semester. Their ages are 18 years and older.

3. Results

The general results show a positive Pearson correlation of $r=.762$ between the lexical instrument and the cloze test activity. In other words, as the lexical knowledge level increases in one instrument, it also increases in the other. The results indicate that 91 percent of the participants are at the "beginning"(B) level following the tentative guidelines of Fairclough *et al.* (2010) and that two participants are at the "intermediate" (I) level. One of those participants is considered a heritage language student (HL) and the other one was a native Spanish speaker who did the instruments to verify its consistency. The native speaker is not enrolled in the classes. Those results make a 100 percent of the students at the beginning level. These results are like previous studies where HL students have a higher vocabulary level than the students of Spanish as L2 classes (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming). See Table 1 for more results.

Table 1

Results

Lexical Exam Level According to Fairclough et al. (2010)

0-3500: 91% (21/23) (Spanish as L2)

Beginning (B)

3500-5000: 9% (2/23) (native speakers, heritage learners)

Intermediate (I)

4. Discussion

The results show that an increase in vocabulary is correlated with the reading comprehension skills in the cloze teste activity. Similar results have been found in other research (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming). Regarding the inclusion of more vocabulary teaching in the Spanish classes, it is considered important by some researchers (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming; Nation, 2015; Rodrigo, 2009). The possible reason is because the more vocabulary you know the better you will be at reading comprehension. However, as this is a pilot study, there is a need to implement this study with a broader array of participants.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study indicates that there is a medium positive correlation between the lexical exam and the cloze test activity of $r=.762$. Those results agree to previous research (Chávez, 2017a forthcoming; Velásquez, 2015; Rodrigo,2009). However, this study should be implemented with a higher number of participants before more generalizations can be made.

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