



Morphological awareness and spelling in Spanish heritage language learners



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2015
Received in revised form 14 June 2016
Accepted 23 November 2016
Available online 28 December 2016

Keywords:

Metalinguistic awareness
Spanish as a heritage language
Spanish
Spelling
Morphological awareness

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of morphological awareness (MA) in Spanish heritage language speakers in terms of two cognitive processing components—analysis of linguistic knowledge and control of linguistic processes—as well as the effects of these two components in the processing of orthography. Forty-one Spanish heritage language college students participated in the study. Participants completed two MA tasks and one spelling task. The results show that the control component played a bigger role in the MA tasks than analysis did. The results also identify some strategies employed by the participants when facing conflicting phonemic, morphemic, and graphemic demands. Finally, results evidence the interaction between morphological awareness and spelling, supported by the correlation found between the MA and the spelling task.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, a large number of studies have been devoted to the specific linguistic characteristics and needs of Spanish heritage language (SHL) learners in the U.S. A heritage language learner is “a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (Valdés, 2001, p. 38). Carreira and Kagan's (2011) survey shows that SHL learners make frequent use of their home language (exclusively or in combination with English) but only in informal—non-academic—contexts. SHL learners' exposure to formal or academic Spanish is significantly limited, and the first exposure to Spanish literacy takes place in the home, when children are read by their parents or a relative. However, as Montrul and Potowski (2007, p. 303) explain, when Spanish-English bilingual children enter school, “there is a significant shift in language use to the majority language”, which very often leads to a language shift at home. This shift in language use and exposure typically results in halted acquisition and attrition of grammatical features, especially semantically complex ones (Polinsky, 2008; Silva-Corvalán, 1994a, 1994b). In addition, the fact that SHL learners receive their

literacy education in English typically results in an underdeveloped academic register in the HL.

In the recent decades there has been a remarkable growth in the field of Spanish heritage language education, and a number of studies have concerned themselves with the acquisition of grammatical features and the development of academic and formal registers of the language. However, with the exception of Beaudrie (2012), spelling acquisition and development has not received much attention in the research on SHL learners, despite the fact that it is one of the most challenging aspects for both students and teachers in SHL courses (Beaudrie, 2012; García, 2002).

Accurate spelling is perceived as an important aspect of written communication and as a marker of a well-educated person, and it is often used to judge written competency (Gerber & Hall, 1987; Graham, 2000; Marshall & Powers, 1969; Parker, 1991; among others). However, the importance of spelling does not only reside in responding to the public's perceptions. Arrested spelling development may constrain other aspects of literacy, such as reading acquisition and vocabulary expansion (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 2000, 2014; Gathercole, 2006; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Although there is a wealth of research on the acquisition of orthography, most of the studies focus on monolingual and bilingual children ages 5–12, because this is the age range in which literacy development usually takes place in the school setting. However, SHL learners typically do not start taking Spanish courses until they are in high school. We need to see how findings in orthography acquisition

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and development in these sectors apply to bilingual (young) adults who have developed literacy—including orthography—in English but have not received formal school education in their L1 at the normal literacy age.¹

Although the Spanish orthographic system is alphabetic and fairly transparent (shallow orthography), the acquisition of Spanish spelling skills goes beyond learning sound-to-letter correspondences. Likewise, while the most obvious linguistic skill behind orthography development in alphabetic languages is that of phonological awareness, research shows that sensitivity to morphological structure is an important contributor to the development of good reading and spelling skills, especially in older children (Carlisle & Nomanbhoy, 1993; Carlisle, 1995; Carlisle, 2000; Champion, 1997; Kirby et al., 2012; Leong, 1989; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006; Wolter, Wood, & D'Zatko, 2009). Although the impact of morphological awareness has received lesser attention in studies involving shallow orthographies, morphological awareness has been related to children's reading, vocabulary, and spelling in such languages (Burani, Marcolini, & Stella, 2002; García & González, 2006; Ramírez, Chen, Geva, & Kiefer, 2010). In fact, Ramírez et al. (2010) found that morphological awareness made a larger contribution in word reading in Spanish than in English, “probably because Spanish has a more complex morphological system” (p. 350).

However, just as spelling acquisition and development is practically absent from SHL education research, so is the development of morphological awareness. A current debate in SHL research revolves around the possible benefits and disadvantages of language teaching methodologies that emphasize explicit metalinguistic knowledge. It has been argued that because SHL learners have acquired Spanish in an implicit manner and in a naturalistic context and have had little formal instruction in the language, they possess very little metalinguistic knowledge and do not benefit from instruction that emphasizes explicit instructional methodologies. The naturalistic context of SHL learners' language acquisition and their consequent weak metalinguistic skills are often presented in contrast with the process of learning Spanish as a foreign language, in which explicit metalinguistic knowledge is emphasized (see Correa, 2014). However, this *implicit vs. explicit* dichotomy itself is rooted in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) tradition, which condenses a multilayered L1 knowledge under the label of “implicit” knowledge. The present study is grounded on the idea that a real departure from the SLA tradition does not entail the simple rejection of pedagogies emphasizing metalinguistic knowledge, but rather stepping outside the oversimplified implicit vs. explicit dichotomy, and exploring a more layered component of L1 knowledge with a long tradition in L1 literacy practices, that of *metalinguistic awareness*, under which we find morphological awareness. Although the terms *metalinguistic awareness* and *metalinguistic knowledge* are sometimes used interchangeably in the SLA (and the HL) literature, they refer to different cognitive components.² While metalinguistic knowledge is declarative, and learned in an explicit manner, metalinguistic awareness refers to the insightful intuitions that speakers develop about the language through literacy practices such as reading and writing.

The present study is a first step in departing from the SLA-oriented view of explicit vs. implicit linguistic knowledge, toward

a more layered view of SHL learners' linguistic knowledge. More specifically, it investigates one of the areas of metalinguistic awareness—morphological awareness—in SHL college students, as well as its connection with spelling abilities and strategies. In particular, this study addresses the nature of morphological awareness with regards to the simultaneous attention to form, meaning and sound, and the effects of this attention requirement in making spelling decisions.

2. The Spanish orthographic system

Spanish is considered a shallow orthography, in which the relationship between graphemes and phonemes is fairly transparent. However, Spanish orthography has a few complex phoneme–grapheme correspondences (PGC), in which one grapheme is associated with more than one phoneme (for example, *g* → /g/ and /x/; *c* → /k/ and /s/), one phoneme is associated with more than one grapheme (for example, /x/ → *j* and *g*; /k/ → *c* and *qu*), or a grapheme is not associated with any phoneme (such as *h*). In cases of complex PGCs, the Spanish orthographic system responds to context-dependent PGC rules, as well as phonological and morphological requirements.

Spanish context-dependent PGC rules, although fairly reliable for reading, are limited and subject to lexical and morphological restrictions for writing. In addition, as Defior and Alegría (2005) point out, contrary to English, Spanish orthography prioritizes the phonological criterion over a morphological one. These authors give the examples of *vaca* / *vaquería* (*c/qu*) [cow/cattle farm]; and *escoger* / *escojo* (*g/j*) [to choose / I choose], in which grapheme consistency across morphology is lost in favor of the phonemic constraint, that is, maintaining the /k/ and /x/ phonemes, respectively. This morphology–phonology conflict arises in this case because the *c* and *g* graphemes are also associated with other phonemes (/s/ and /g/, respectively). In all other cases, that is, when no conflicts with phonology arise, graphemes are maintained across morphology. That is the case, for example, of *rojo* / *enrojecer* / *rojizo* (*red* / *redden* / *reddish*) in which the graphemic representation of /x/ as *j* in the root is maintained across morphology because there is no conflict with phonemic requirements (the *j* grapheme is only associated with /x/). Therefore, despite the phonological priority of the Spanish orthographic system, morphological information is also used as a resource for spelling (Defior & Alegría, 2005; Defior, Alegría, Tito, & Martos, 2008; Ramírez et al., 2010). The role of morphology in spelling is potentially greater in those dialects in which certain phonemes are omitted (such as final -s in the Defior et al. [2008] study) or in which certain phonological distinctions have disappeared, but maintained in the orthography (such as *b/v* or *c/s*).

In her corpus-based study, Beaudrie (2012) found that grapheme substitutions (writing one grapheme for another) in cases of complex PGCs was the most common type of spelling error—if we leave aside stress marks—among college-age SHL learners, and that spelling of the /s/ phoneme was the highest source of substitution errors.

In most Spanish dialects, the /s/ phoneme is associated with the following three graphemes: *s*, *z*, and *c*. While *s* can appear in all contexts (followed by a consonant or any vowel), the *c* grapheme is only associated with /s/ when preceding *e* or *i*. (In all other contexts, the *c* grapheme is used to represent /k/). Finally, *z* can appear in word-final contexts and when preceding a consonant or *a*, *o*, *u*. Although the *ze* and *zi* sequences do not result in another phoneme, they are not allowed by the Spanish orthographic conventions.³ These PGC are illustrated in Table 1:

¹ The fact that SHL learners typically do not receive literacy education in a school setting does not mean that Spanish literacy is completely absent in their lives. See the National Heritage Language Survey conducted by Carreira and Kagan (2011) for the self-rated literacy skills of speakers of different heritage languages, and Zentella (2005) for literacy practices in Spanish-speaking homes.

² In the SHL literature, the term “awareness” is often used to refer to *sociolinguistic awareness*, as, for example, in Potowski (2003), Potowski and Carreira (2004) and Martínez (2003).

³ Only a few exceptions of *z* preceding *e* or *i* exist for some foreign-origin words, such as *zen*, *zenit*, *nazi* or *zinc*.

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