

What Happens When Direct Grammar Instruction is used to Develop Oral Proficiency in a Spanish Immersion Classroom?

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Submitted June 2002

Abstract

After six years in a Spanish Immersion program, most of my students seem to be lacking the grammatical knowledge necessary to freely communicate in the target language. This study explores how direct grammar instruction effects oral proficiency in a Spanish Immersion classroom. Emphasis is placed on practice with word gender, verb tense and sentence structure specific to the Spanish language. A variety of instructional strategies are implemented to engage students in learning grammar and applying correct usage to conversations. Teacher observation, student survey, student self-evaluation and the Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS) rubric measure student progress.

Introduction

My research is driven by a desire to teach my students to better understand the usage of the target language, Spanish, in order to be heard and understood. I want them to speak naturally and with confidence. I want grammar structure to become second nature. *Grammar* seems to be a forbidden word when creating the curriculum for the Spanish Immersion program at the elementary level for Fairfax County Public Schools. The purpose of the elementary school immersion program is for children to be taught math, health, and science in the target language, encouraging the oral communication portion of the language. Yet, how might students learn to use grammatical forms correctly?

I have been a Spanish Immersion teacher for the past three years at Ellen Glasgow Middle School where I have experienced the lack of language skills of the Immersion students. These are students that have been partially immersed in the target language since first grade and still cannot communicate without grammatical errors in Spanish when they reach seventh grade. Why not teach grammar more thoroughly at an early age when their brain is a gigantic sponge? Why not call "grammar"- "language adventures" and make it fun? When I took the Spanish teacher position, I was certain I would be teaching these students at a fluent level. I had high expectations and a desire to explore the Spanish language through literature, history, art, etc. To my surprise, these students were at a level one Spanish. Some of them were and are not capable of establishing a simple conversation or even forming a simple sentence. You would think that after six years partially immersed in the target language, some vocabulary and expressions would come easily to the students. This year in

particular, I have a class of twenty-two students. The majority of them cannot speak using simple sentence structure. Seeing this year after year, and putting myself in their shoes as a former English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) student, I decided to look into the forbidden word “grammar.”

I expect to find that teaching direct grammar will help my students to become proficient in their oral communication.

Literature Review

Could direct, fun and engaging grammar instruction be the key to improving oral proficiency? One must recognize that grammar instruction has been a controversial issue in the educational world. Grammar, according to Yip in 1994, has been the center of both extremes: from grammar-driven methods to communicative approaches (Yim, 1998, p. 12). As a result, this issue has given rise to two different positions: those known as the “anti-grammarians” and the “pro-grammarians” (Yim, p. 17). The anti-grammarians, according to Stern in 1992 (Yim, p. 17), believe that the direct instruction of grammar does not have an affect on competence in the Second Language (L2). They support comprehension input by arguing that the learner will improve in both fluency and accuracy. This conclusion was based on Krashen’s Comprehensible Input theory of 1981 (Yim, p. 17 – 18). In his review in 1991, Terrell presents the evidence that direct grammar instruction did not guarantee L2 learners the ability to freely engage in a spontaneous conversation (Terrell, p. 54; Yim, p. 19).

On the other side of this turmoil, we find the pro-grammarians who strongly believe, according to Ebsworth and Schweer, 1997, that direct grammar instruction helps accuracy and speeds L2 learning and acquisition. Ellis also supports this idea in 1993 and argues that explicit grammar knowledge provides learners with the background to form implicit knowledge (Yim, p. 20). Doughty, another pro-grammarian, in her 1991 study provides clear, irrefutable evidence that supports grammar instruction. In her research, Doughty finds that those students who received explicit and implicit grammar instruction outperform the group that was exposed to reading sentences in the comprehension test (Yim, p. 20 – 21). In an article written by Scarcella in 1996, a very interesting point about grammar instruction is argued. Even though her article is based on an ESOL program, she argues that students engaging in group projects or discussions with non-native English speakers, in and outside school grounds, develop non-standard English. Based on this finding, she encourages the role of grammar instruction and correct feedback in order to provide standard English instruction (Yim, p. 21). One can argue that the same occurs in the Spanish immersion classrooms where students are encouraged, based on the whole language approach, to speak among themselves, creating a gap for standard language acquisition at an early age.

The study done by Yoonkyung Kecia Yim (1998), demonstrates that grammatical knowledge plays a significant role in the students overall language proficiency. This finding supports what many researchers such as Doughty (1991) and Schneider (1993) suggest in the importance of grammar instruction.

Also the study reveals the relationship that grammar has with all language skill areas (Yim, p. 50).

Long in 1991 offers three advantages that formal grammar instruction has over those programs with no focus on form. The three advantages of grammar instruction are accelerates learning, affects the acquisition process in the long-term accuracy, and seems to increase the ultimate level of retention (Ruiz-Funes, 1999, p. 2-3).

So far, I have focused on grammar instruction in the acquisition of L2 (second language). But, have we thought of grammar in an immersion classroom? In 1992, Salomone reports that an immersion program in the United States started incorporating systematic planning and explicit teaching of the grammar and vocabulary, after verifying the lacking of accuracy in the students speech. As a consequence of the teacher's approach, a great improvement was shown. Other studies by Clipperton, 1994, Laplante, 1993, and Short, 1994 show the benefits of grammar instruction incorporated in the lesson design (p. 4).

Before I researched related literature, something unbelievable happened. The *Washington Post* published an article by Jay Mathews about grammar in the Sunday, February 3rd issue. At that point, I was still working with my question. I was trying to convince myself that it was not the best question to stay with. I knew by conversing with my peers in the "Language Minority Teacher Induction Program" that grammar has been a lost battle in the English curriculum. However, the feeling to know that someone was fighting against a gigantic monster such as the National Council of Teachers of English, gave me the strength to stick to my research question: What happens when direct grammar instruction is used to develop oral proficiency in a Spanish Immersion classroom?

Ms. Robyn Jackson is an English teacher at Gaithersburg High School, in Maryland. She is diagramming sentences in her classroom, the obsolete method according to many. She decided to start diagramming sentences after finding out that her students were lacking the understanding of the functions of the different parts of speech (C1).

In the long run, Ms. Jackson has found support and rejection of her teaching method. One of the many supporters of diagramming is Edward Cannon. Mr. Cannon is the head of the English Department at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. He said, "I use diagramming and I encourage my colleagues to use it because I believe that it gives a graphic representation of how our language is pieced together..."

According to Diane Ravitch, an educational historian and policy analyst at New York University, diagramming was one of the things left behind because of the "whole language" approach, allowing or forcing teachers to permit less motivated students to express themselves on topics of their own interest without paying attention to their spelling and grammar until they felt confidence with their writing. The irony of all this is that now we are offering remedial English college classes to fill in the gaps. There are parents and teachers who believe that "it is very helpful for all of us to have a common vocabulary to discuss parts of speech

and parts of a sentence so we can communicate clearly about improving writing” (C9, Col. 1).

Methods

During this school year (2001-2002), I have been working with students who have been enrolled in a Spanish Immersion program at Baileys Elementary and Ellen Glasgow Middle School for the past six years and with this year, seven. This class is composed of twenty-two students; five speak Spanish at home with their family and both parents are Hispanics; four have one parent with Spanish background and some Spanish conversations take place; and the rest of the class are native English-speakers or share a different language background at home. Out of the twenty-two students, three receive special education accommodations.

At the beginning of the school year, I started with cultural literature and geography in order to allow them to express freely about the readings. Geography was the tool to introduce all the Spanish-speaking countries and study the climate, the terrain, and products. Students were to create a book to later give to elementary schools for their students to read. This approach allowed students to visualize where the legends and stories that they were reading took place. I planned to gradually integrate the cultural aspect of the target language. At first, I did not pay too much attention to their writing mistakes, considering that at this point the whole idea was for students to express freely without worrying about language structure. But as the year progressed, I noticed a significant gap in language skills when it came to oral communication.

This last observation really struck me when in one lesson; I created a “Community Museum” in my classroom. I brought pictures that depicted communities from different backgrounds. The objective of the lesson was for students to compare and contrast the different communities being represented through colors and expressions used by the artist. Their first task was to walk through the classroom observing each painting. As they were visiting the museum, they needed to select three paintings and describe them on index cards in simple sentences. They needed to provide the painters’ name and the title of the artwork. When the museum visit was over after fifteen minutes, the class was brought together for discussion. It was then, that I became committed to my research question: What happens when direct grammar instruction is used to develop oral proficiency in a Spanish Immersion classroom? These students, after six years in a Spanish Immersion Program were lacking vocabulary and language structure.

As I started planning, emphasis was put on practice with word gender, verb tense, and sentence structure specific to the Spanish language in a direct form. In a search for creative ways to teach direct grammar to improve oral proficiency, a variety of instructional strategies were implemented to engage students in learning grammar and applying correct usage to conversation.

The direct grammar instruction started with a review of the words composing a sentence. This review was done with the help of technology; I created a power point presentation that guided the students through the function of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. All the information was given in the target language. After each slide, students were encouraged to paraphrase the information given in their own words in their notebooks. Examples were provided for each part of speech and then later on, the students were called to give their own examples from their vocabulary bank. The visualization of the parts of speech was important in order to reach the different learning styles of my student body. Some of the students needed to see how these parts went together in a sentence. I provided five different color papers. Each color and geometrical figure represented as part of speech. The red triangle represented the nouns, the yellow circle the verbs in the infinitive form, the green square the adjectives, the blue hexagon the adverbs, and the gray rectangle the rest of the parts of speech such as prepositions, articles, connectors, etc.

The shapes became a visual drilling when new vocabulary or review vocabulary was introduced. One of the activities using the shapes was a listening comprehension activity in small learning groups. Each member of the group had a shape. All the groups were separated so they could not see what the other group had for an answer. The goal was to get the most points by identifying the parts of speech given to them orally. Competition among the groups proved to be a great tool to motivate the students. It took some modeling and practice until they were able to pick the right shape for the part of speech presented in writing or orally. The energy in the room was palpable. It was exciting to see students who usually struggle to speak, becoming part of the group cooperation and learning process. To see each individual working together and explaining to each other was fascinating.

One day, as we were doing word drills as a warm up activity, a teacher came to talk to me. As I stepped out of the classroom, one of my native Spanish-speakers took the initiative to continue the warm up activity by providing vocabulary words to the class. However, this time, the students added rhythm to their answers. The teacher was impressed with the students' initiative. The class continued to engage in other group activities to identify parts of speech in a sentence. A worksheet with vocabulary was provided and students were given five minutes to identify them. The team with the most correct answers got extra points. The groups were not always composed of the same students; they needed to rotate.

The geometrical color figures became handy when creating a word wall entitled "Recuerdame pero usame" (Remember Me but Use Me). Each shape was stapled to the word wall. Under each one, students were responsible for placing the chapter's vocabulary words. Because of space, words were changed with each unit. During the study of each chapter, students were introduced to a list of new vocabulary words. This gave all students the opportunity to participate in placing their words on the word wall. When someone was wrong, students were enthusiastically making corrections. Subsequently, as a whole group we reviewed the parts of speech and used the word in a sentence. If students were

having difficulties creating a sentence, I would explain how the correct answer could be determined by applying our knowledge about parts of speech and grammar. This part in particular was challenging because students wanted to give up or go the easiest way. But we helped each other by using the students' own sentences as examples for learning exercises. This has helped them to analyze mistakes instead of just having me correct them.

"Recuerdame pero usame" was and is a good tool to help students remember their vocabulary words. It is a great visual reinforcement. When they are in search of a word while speaking or writing, they can refer to the word wall. The word wall has helped them to continue speaking or writing without leaving an empty space in their sentences or ideas.

Another part of the power point lesson was sentence structure. At this point, the sentence structures that I emphasized were the simple ones, those composed by the noun, verb, and adjective. Since it is hard enough for students to express ideas coherently in the target language, why not keep it simple until they feel comfortable with the word usage, order, and verbs? Sets of sentence structures were given as the whole class created them with my supervision. Sentences were given and the students needed to use the parts of speech to diagram the structure. Diagrams without words were given to the students for them to complete with the correct vocabulary words. New and old vocabularies were used when creating their sentences. This method narrowed the many things they might have said grammatically incorrect.

Structuring their writing was a concrete writing and speaking assignment. Vocabulary words were given for them to create a story. Some stories were presented orally and others in written form. They could not use other words. The only ones allowed were articles, prepositions, connectors, etc. When stories were written, students exchanged papers and looked for grammar mistakes. When stories were told, students really had to depend on their listening skills to identify errors. This last one was the tough one. Students were eager to share their work on the overhead when not too many mistakes were made or caught.

Kinesthetic activities were important in the teaching of verbs. When I was in college, one of my Spanish professors used a wonderful strategy to visualize and interact with verbs. Her idea for teaching verb tense came from the weather pattern. Each pattern represented a verb in its many tense forms. As I thought of her idea, different dress periods in history occurred to me as a representation for one of the most difficult parts of the Spanish language. I still think this is a wonderful idea; the teacher could wear costumes to set the mood for the verb tense. However, changing outfits did not work because of restraints on time and resources. This is when I decided "caps" would be handy to demonstrate the same idea. The idea is to have a cap for each of the three tenses: past, present, and future, each one colored to distinguish between verb tense. The past can be done in black or brown, the present in red, and the future in silver. Each student received a red cap to set the mood for introducing the present tense. At this level of language skills development, I concentrated on present regular and some stem change verbs. The silver cap this year was used when introducing "ir+a" (going to) to express future action.

Before getting to the “cap” strategy, students learned and re-learned the endings of the Spanish verbs: -ar, -er, and -ir. In addition to conjugating the verbs on a worksheet to keep them organized according to endings, students created a verb reference tool using ice cream sticks of different colors to differentiate the endings of the -ar, -er, and -ir verbs as the personal pronouns in order to use them correctly when speaking and writing. This was a pocket tool for them to have at all times. When endings were memorized, students worked in groups to decode the vocabulary given and create sentences. The verbs were provided in the infinitive form for them to conjugate based on the subject of their sentence. Also, adjectives needed to agree with the noun(s) in number and gender.

It was later on that caps were used to establish the verb mood for the conversations, listening activities, and writing. For example, I would read small passages and students needed to decide if it was in the present tense by putting on their present tense cap. If you would like to do this, make sure that the students have their heads down to avoid cheating. It is amazing to see how some of them doubted and others made their decisions right away. Dialogue prompts were given where only the present or future tense needed to be used. Students rotated to another partner when conversation was done. They had one minute to communicate. As they spoke, the caps were used as reminders for their verb tense. When using the future tense with the form “ir+a”, the students would wear the silver cap to keep them aware of tense at all times. This took place as each partner presented his or her dialogue: describing a friend, their family, a day at school, or obligations, or things they were doing for the weekend, after school, and during vacation time.

Having students record their own progress was a self-motivating strategy. Students were encouraged to speak four to seven times a week based on their oral proficiency in the classroom. What does proficiency mean? It means to be able to participate in a variety of contexts and perform different tasks using the target language with accuracy (Ruiz-Funes, 1999, p. 1). The tape recorder was a way for them to monitor their oral progress as applied what learned in class. Students recorded individual conversations about real life situations. Their progress was measured by teacher observation, student survey, student self-evaluation, and the PALS (Performance Assessment for Language Students) rubric. Students did their self-evaluation by literally writing what they said and correcting their conversations. Also as homework, I assigned specific topics for them to tape record.

Even though grammar still is a taboo word for many educators and students, I hung on to it as I designed my lessons to help my students succeed orally in the target language acquisition and accuracy. It was a tough job to make grammar interesting and fun. The majority of the students jumped on the “grammar wagon” for their long-term language acquisition.

Findings

An analysis of teacher observations, student surveys, student self-evaluations, and the PALS, reveals that direct grammar instruction has improved

the students' writing skills. The majority of the student body was able to recognize errors in written language. Their writing skills improved tremendously as students created sentences with meaning and correct grammatical format. The lessons provided the foundation to start building standard language writing acquisition and accuracy. Students felt comfortable sharing their written stories and correcting peers' papers as they learned the proper reason why changes needed to be made. There was no more, "Just fix it!" Now students were commenting, "Oh, remember that because your noun is masculine, your adjective needs to agree. What do I mean by agree? Well, it needs to be masculine too."

Speaking on the other hand, did not improve significantly among the native English-speakers. For them, it was difficult to visualize their conversations and correct the mistakes. However, the opportunity to speak into a tape recorder for some of them was a good experience. These students did not feel pressure. On the contrary, they felt comfortable talking without the pressure of having a whole class watching and listening. Evaluating conversation had two parts; students needed to listen to what they had just said and try to write down the mistakes they were able to catch and they needed to literally write what was said and make the corrections. Students were able to recognize mistakes by seeing them on paper but not by listening to them.

The more emphasis that was put on grammar instruction, the more thoughtful some students became when speaking. Students no longer bumbled on words, but instead used the strategy of thinking before speaking. Out of this small group, some were able to stop and correct pronunciation, verb conjugation, or an adjective agreement.

Direct grammar instruction was helpful when choosing the proper word; it broke things down, helping students compare the target language structure with the English language. Concrete and interactive strategies encouraged students to be more engaged, and were presented in a variety of ways to allow self-confidence to develop.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what happens when direct grammar instruction is used to develop oral proficiency in a Spanish Immersion classroom? The active research with my students made me recognize the need to emphasize grammar structure in my lessons without embedding it into the whole language approach. Students should become aware of the importance of grammar when learning a second language in order to achieve a long-term acquisition and accuracy of the target language (Ruiz-Funes, 1999, p. 2 and 3).

This study gave me the opportunity to fill some of the gaps that my seventh grade Spanish Immersion students brought with them into my classroom. My goal was to explore how explicit grammar instruction affected my students' oral proficiency. What I found was that my students developed strong writing skills.

As I continue with the research, I will change the requirements for tape recorder. I will assign this as a project grade. It was a struggle to have the students speak on a daily basis to the recorder.

On the other hand, the research was not in vain. I was satisfied to see the tremendous improvement in writing skills. I no longer had to beg to use student writing as an example to review in class. Students were eager to volunteer their work. For some of my students, especially the two with accommodations, there is still a long path to walk but with dedication and an eager attitude and desire to learn, they will also succeed.

In my opinion, grammar is one of the best tools to help our oral and written communication. It is a lens through which the structure of our language is visualized and interpreted. Working with my students one on one, I wished that someone had done this for me as I was learning English. Because I did not understand the structure or the foundation on which the English language is based, my own little cues to remember things crumbled down in my written and oral communication. It was not until college that I had the opportunity to analyze sentences in English, giving me a clear view of how the language is structured. It was a great struggle to stay with the pace of the class. My research question about direct grammar instruction will continue with my next seventh grade Spanish Immersion class and will follow the rising eighth graders to monitor the results of a structured language approach over a longer period of time.

Summary

There have been many studies done that favor grammar instruction in an L2 classroom by supporting the idea that explicit grammar instruction betters language acquisition and accuracy. On the other hand, there are studies that seem to be advocating against explicit grammar instruction. These studies show no effect on second language competency. Anti-grammarians minimize grammar instruction by saying that it does not guarantee the ability of the learner to speak freely and to engage in conversations.

In my research, I found that direct grammar instruction had a positive impact on the students' writing skills acquisition. However, the opposite happened in their speaking skills. Very little improvement was achieved due to the lack of visual sound and sentence structure in the mind of the students.

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