

Concept-based instruction grounded on Vygotsky's Theory of Mind: Developing heritage Spanish students' metalinguistic knowledge on the subjunctive mood.

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Abstract

This paper examines the benefits of using Concept-Based Instruction, (CBI), grounded on Vygotsky's Theory of Mind (Vygotsky, 1986), to develop heritage Spanish students' metalinguistic knowledge on the Spanish subjunctive mood. Metalinguistic knowledge refers to the explicit and conscious knowledge students have about the linguist structures and overall characteristics of a language. It "is knowledge that students can explain and verbalize. Vygotsky's Theory of Mind is based on the notion that development of language takes place when it is internalized and verbalized.

Heritage Spanish (HS) students acquire the heritage language (HL) in informal, natural settings through interaction with family, friends, and community members. However, the heritage language input starts to diminish once students are enrolled in formal education, and English becomes the language of instruction (Montrul, 2020). It is then, that at an early age, HS students begin formal schooling in English, and many of the Spanish linguistic features, which had started to be acquired are halted. The lack of opportunities to have formal instruction in the heritage language has been one of the causes of incomplete heritage language acquisition, language attrition, or language loss (Rothman 2007; Pires & Rothman, 2009; Delgado, 2009). The Spanish subjunctive is one of the first linguistic features that suffers erosion since it is not fully developed when HSs enter formal education, and the main language of instruction is English (Potowski, Regerski, & Morgan-Short, 2009).

Unfortunately, when HS students attempt to re-learn their heritage language in higher education, the instructional approaches are meant to meet the needs of the non-native Spanish students (Eckerson, 2015), which are mixed with HS students in most higher education institutions in the United States. Vygotsky's Theory of Mind (Vygotsky, 1986) has motivated concept-based instruction to learn conceptual categories of a language such as mood, aspect, and tense. The main tenet of CBI is to develop performance not just competence on language concepts.

Keywords sociocultural, concept-based approach, heritage Spanish speakers

1. Introduction

The term heritage language (HL) had its origins in Canada when the Ontario Heritage Language programs began in 1977 (Cummings, 2005). However, the field of heritage language education did not arise in the United States until the 1990's (Valdes, 2005; Cummings, 2005; Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012). The number of heritage Spanish speakers (HS) in the United States has been growing at a rapid pace. In a 2000 Census (Lynch 2003), there were "more than 35 million people who identified themselves as "Hispanic" or "Latino"; this represented a 57.9 percent increase over the 22 million documented by the 1990 census" (p. 28). US Census Bureau (2017) reported that 17.8 percent of the population of the United States, as of July 1, 2016, was of Hispanic origin. This places the United States as the second largest host of Spanish population in the world.

The continuous rise in the Hispanic population in the United States have prompted an increased interest among scholars on heritage Spanish instruction in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Zentella, 2002, 2005; Lynch, 2003; Ducar, 2008). A heritage speaker is "someone who learned their second (majority) language in childhood, either simultaneously with the heritage language, or after a short period of predominant exposure to and use of the minority language" (Scontras, Fush, Polinski, 2015, p.1). In the case of Heritage Spanish speakers, they are exposed to Spanish since childhood through informal interactions with family and friends, however, as soon as the child begins to socialize in primary, middle, or high school, the use and input from the heritage language diminishes, and English slowly becomes the dominant language. Therefore, Heritage Spanish speakers develop literacy skills in English, and the heritage language suffers erosion, simplification, and many grammatical aspects, are not fully developed (Scontras, Fush, Polinski,

2015).

The subjunctive mood is one of the first lexico-grammatical forms that suffers erosion since it is learned at a later age in their first language. In a study with second-generation HS speakers, Montrul (2007) concluded that there was a significant loss of the subjunctive mood and participants showed a lot of difficulty distinguishing between subjunctive and indicative mood. Along the same vein of study, (Merino, 1983; Silva-Corvalan, 2003;), concluded that the subjunctive was developed much later than the past tense, composed of the preterite and imperfect. Similarly, a longitudinal study with children from kindergarten to fourth grade (Merino, 2003) reported that the morphology of subjunctive mood is the first one that suffers erosion. The Regression Hypothesis, formulated by Jakobson (1941), supports the outcomes of the studies. According to the hypothesis, the process of language attrition is the opposite of how a first language is acquired. In other words, "what is learned earlier is maintained longer, and what is learned later is more prone to rapid attrition, this is also referred to as first in, last out" (Bardovi-Harliga & Stringer, 2010, p. 3).

2. The dichotomy between Spanish subjunctive and indicative mood

The Spanish language has three moods - the indicative, the subjunctive, and the imperative. The Spanish indicative is used when we talk about events, facts, and information that we considered to be true. The subjunctive, on the other hand, is used to express wishes and desires, give recommendations, express hope, or denial, show uncertainty, or things that are contrary to reality. The Spanish imperative is used to give commands. It is not uncommon to teach the formal imperative mood in Spanish along with the present subjunctive since they have many commonalities, including verb conjugations.

When high school students endeavor to reacquire the linguistic features of their heritage language during their post-secondary education, they often find themselves at a disadvantage. This is because instructional methods are primarily tailored to cater to the needs of non-native Spanish students, with whom heritage Spanish students are commonly integrated in most higher education institutions in the United States (Eckerson, 2015). According to Eckerson (2015), most Spanish programs are "designed for students who are novice learners and first language speakers of English, not for students who speak or hear Spanish at home" (p. 8). Heritage Spanish speakers typically possess limited metalinguistic knowledge (Valdes, 2001) and rely on implicit knowledge of their heritage language. However, their critical years for developing literary proficiency in their native language were disrupted when they entered primary school, where English became the official language of instruction. Consequently, their most pressing need lies in the development of literacy skills and metalinguistic knowledge.

It is worth noting that heritage Spanish speakers require less classroom time to enhance their speaking and listening skills compared to non-native students (Peyton, Ranard, McGinnis, 2001).

Several scholars (Garcia Frazer, 213; Williams, Abraham & Negueruela-Azarola, 2013) have stated that one of the main goals of instructional approaches to teach HS students should include explicit instruction and knowledge of lexical and grammatical features. One of the approaches to teach cumbersome concepts of Spanish grammar is 'Concept-Based Instruction grounded on Vygotsky's Theory of Mind (Vygotsky, 1986). One of the Theory's tenets is that to develop metalinguistic knowledge students need to have social interaction, learn from teachers or others more knowledgeable who can provide guidance and skills to transfer knowledge to other situations. The process to internalize and transfer the concept of Spanish subjunctive starts with scaffolding to determine learners' background knowledge on the concept and design the best plan of action. In what follows, the main characteristics of Concept-Based Instruction are explained in detail.

3. Concept-Based Instruction and the development of metalinguistic knowledge

Vygotsky's Theory of Mind (Vygotsky, 1986) has motivated concept-based instruction to learn conceptual categories in the language classroom, such as mood, aspect, and tense. The most important tenet is to achieve language performance, not just competence. The competence of knowing the rules does not guarantee that students can use subjunctive mood appropriately in various cultural contexts. Selieger (1979) reported the outcomes of an empirical study on verbalized language rules on the use of the English indefinite articles 'a' and 'an', and he concluded that memorization of rules did not correspond to the actual language performance of those rules in a given context. The basic tenet of Concept-Based Instruction "is not the learning of endings (morphology) or word order sequences (syntax) but internalizing new concepts to know how to deploy complex meanings (semantics) in real contexts to enact intentionality (pragmatics)" (Williams & Negueruela-Azarola 2013, p.3).

In this context, semantics is not just the study of words and meaning, "but also on how words, phrases and sentences come together to make meaning in language" (Rajendran, 2018, p.14). Pragmatics can be defined as "the ability to comprehend, construct, and convey meanings that are both accurate and appropriate for the social and cultural circumstances in which communication occurs" (Echeverria-Castillo, 2009, p.9). The focus on the semantics and pragmatics is what makes this approach appropriate to internalize the concept of subjunctive mood.

In a CBA, "cognition and language activity are interconnected, learning a second language is a matter of not only learning new forms but also internalizing new or reorganizing existing concepts" (Negueruela and Lantolf, 2006, p. 81). Garcia (2017) developed a pedagogical sequence to teach language concepts which are in tune with the need of HS students to develop metalinguistic knowledge.

4. Concept Based Instruction Pedagogical sequence

Heritage Spanish speakers acquire their heritage language in natural settings through the contact with family members and friends. HS speakers acquired grammatical notions such as aspect, mood, tense in these naturalistic settings. This process is the opposite of what HS speakers face when they attempt to learn their heritage language in a classroom setting, where memorization of morphology and rules can sometimes create conflict between meaning and form (Correa, 2011). Therefore, Concept Based Instruction places more emphasis on meaning, situated, and contextualized instruction to be more in accordance with the characteristics of the HS student population.

According to C-BI the first step is to establish the unit of instruction, which is the concepts of the subjunctive and indicative moods. The dichotomy between the subjunctive and indicative mood can be problematic for HSs, (Stokes & Krashen, 1990; Terrell, Baycroft, & Perrone, 1987) have acknowledged that subjunctive mood selection and performance are poorly developed even after numerous opportunities to practice it. Even if students can recite by memory all the endings of the present and imperfect subjunctive and indicative, and some basic rules for their use in noun clauses, there is no guarantee that they will use subjunctive mood appropriately in various cultural contexts (Selieger, 1979).

Once the concept under study is selected, the next step is to determine student's background knowledge on the use of subjunctive vs. indicative to design the kind of intervention they need. Heritage Spanish students come from diverse backgrounds and there is a wide range of diversity regarding their linguistic profiles. Therefore, it is important to assess what they know prior to designing the level and type of mediation they need. The help provided by scaffolding is only temporary and lasts for as long as the learner needs it. Once students advance to a higher stage in their learning and understanding of the concepts under study, scaffolding is no longer needed. and necessary for as long as the learners need it. Once students advance to a higher level, scaffolding is no longer needed. The pictorial representation of scaffolding, or in Vygotsky's term 'zone of proximal development' is depicted in Figure 1.

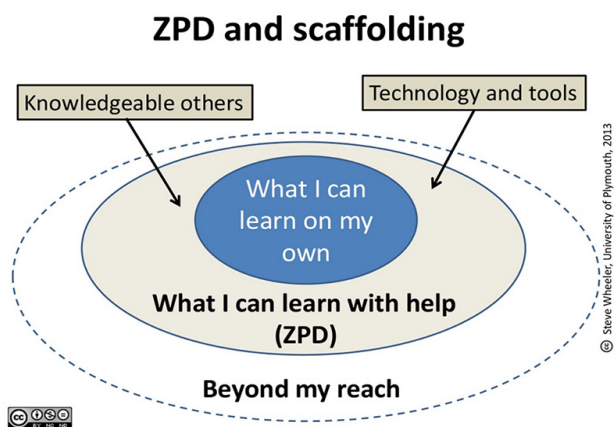


Figure 1. ZPD and scaffolding.

(Source: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>)

To activate the zone of proximal development, it is necessary to have students interact with their language instructors, classmates and, other didactic tools that will help them understand, process and apply the concepts to other contexts.

The language tools used to materialize the concept under study “are the didactic and material tools that learners have at their disposal to help understand and internalize the concept” (Negueruela, Lantolf, 2006, p. 84). It is useful to use charts or other graphic representations that can clearly demonstrate in concrete form the abstractness of the concept under study. Gal’perin (1992) introduced the term, “Scheme of a Complete Orienting Basis of an Action” (SCOBA) which signifies the complete set of conditions which are to be considered” (Haenen, 2001, p.162). The didactic materials accompanied by teacher’s explanations fall under the category of ‘knowledgeable’ others’ and ‘technology tools’ in the ZPD and scaffolding chart previously depicted.

Following is an example of what a good SCOBA might look like. This graphic can be used to work with the concept of the subjunctive mood and modality. It was adapted by Garcia Frazier (2013) in her C-BI study.

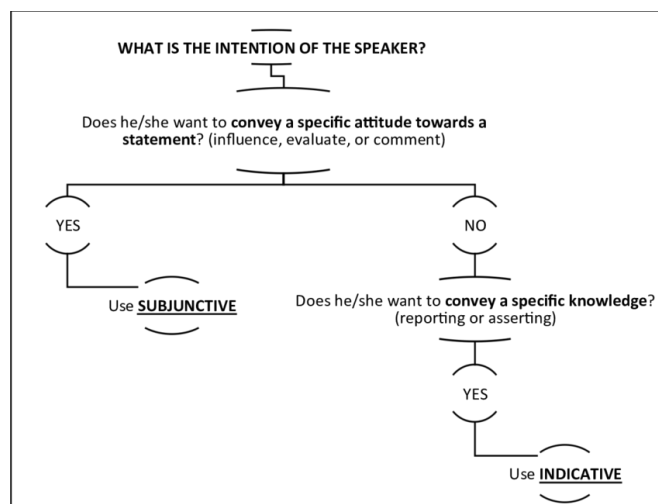


Figure 2. Adaption of the SCOBA implemented by Garcia Frazier (2013 in her C-BI study)

The use of SCOBAS as tools to verbalize and reflect on the concept in the classroom is grounded on Vygotsky's theory that ‘the classroom is a place for learning and thus a place where metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection are allowed and play a key role’ (Vygotsky, 1978; Esteve, 2007b.) The SCOBA needs to be introduced and clearly explained to students, who need to visualize it and use it as a tool to learn the concept of mood. There are many options to visually introduce students to SCOBA, and the “particular sequential linguistic actions are often represented as a flow chart or decision tree (Garcia-Frazier, 2013; Negueruela, 2003), but other visual representations are possible such as the use of objects that can be manipulated, charts, graphs, drawings, etc. (Ganem-Gutierrez and Harum, 2011). According to the Sociocultural Theory on language learning, using tools that

help facilitate and understand the world are essential for cognitive development. The use of tools like SCOBAS informs about best practices regarding methodology, didactic materials, and any other pedagogical issue to facilitate students' understanding and learning of cumbersome linguistic issues such as the Spanish subjunctive mood.

The next step in CBI is to verbalize in the form of (self) explanation/and interaction to facilitate regulation" (Harum, Abdullah, Wahab, Zainudin, 2019, p.256). This process of verbalization, inner talk, helps HSS to develop metalinguistic knowledge on the concept of the subjunctive, or other concepts such as tense and aspect. Students can do the verbalization to themselves, or with a peer, or a small group.

Other important characteristics of using a concept-based approach to develop metalinguistic knowledge is that it allows for explicit grammatical explanations, which need to be concise and clearly stated (Garcia Frazier, 2013; Williams, Abraham & Negueruela-Azarola, 2013). The explanations are introduced with visuals -charts, graphs, and timelines, among others. It is important that the explanations be followed by student's reflections either verbally or in writing on the subjunctive vs indicative mood to develop metalinguistic knowledge.

According to Garcia (2017), it is necessary to "embrace those approaches that empower learners and foster their agency as they co-construct, transform and co-own their learning experiences" (p.14). Garcia (2017) used Concept Based Instruction in the Spanish heritage classroom to promote the notion of 'aspect', which seems to be one of the linguistic areas where Spanish heritage speakers have weaknesses. Along the same argument, a research study by Garcia Frazier (2013) also used Concept Based Instruction (CBI) to study six heritage Spanish students on the concept of modality in Spanish. However, in her study, the concept of modality was just one part of her study. Data from the afore-mentioned studies emphasized the use explicit knowledge of lexical and grammatical features as well as the acquisition of those features based on students' background knowledge. Abdullah et. al. (2017) stated "this pedagogical approach that is predicated on Vygotskian thought, centers on promoting the quality of the grammar rules in helping learners to understand and use the grammar concepts to achieve their communicative needs" (p.1).

To summarize, CBI grounded on the main tenets of Vygotsky' Theory of Mind are very promising to develop HSS' metalinguistic knowledge on a wide range of linguistic features that were incompletely acquired or suffered erosion once they entered formal schooling, where English was the language of instruction. HSS speak a wide range of linguistic varieties, thus the importance of determining the 'zone of proximal development (ZPD),' so that the appropriate mediation, or plan of action can be devised. Once the ZPD is determined, the abstractness of the linguistic concept is visually presented to students by means of graphics, charts, pictures, moving pieces, among others. The concept needs to be clearly and explicitly explained to students and they can practice with exercises prepared by the teacher. It is of the outmost importance that students verbalized the concept, verbalization and

reflection are the pedagogical tools that facilitate the internalization of the concept, learn it, and apply to other sociocultural contexts.

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