

The Acquisition of Grammatical, Phonological, and Suprasegmental Features in L2 Spanish

A Literature Review

Sydney Christley

This literature review will evaluate current research about the acquisition of Spanish grammatical, phonological, and suprasegmental features that English-speaking L2 learners frequently find difficult. Those features include the perfect and imperfect aspect; specific grammatical structures such as clitic left dislocation (CLD); information focus; voice onset time (VOT); vowel perception and production; intonation, pitch and prosody; and the influence of suprasegmental features on speaker comprehensibility. Following this examination, future research will be suggested, including the effects of these features on speaker comprehensibility and accentedness, as well as teaching methods for these features.

As the population of the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the importance of Spanish-language ability in business, entertainment, and healthcare also becomes more and more important. Identifying the most difficult Spanish features to acquire would help improve teaching methods and allow English speakers to more effectively learn Spanish. This literature review will evaluate the importance of balancing grammatical and phonological competence (as well as suprasegmental features such as intonation) in language learning and identify several features of Spanish that English speakers find difficult to acquire.

Many previous studies have analyzed how English speakers acquire Spanish. Both languages share a considerable amount of wordstock from Latin; however, English is a Germanic language, and Spanish is considered to be a Romance language, meaning that while English and Spanish share many cognates and word roots, the grammatical systems are considerably different. In addition to these grammatical differences, such as verb conjugation and noun gender, the languages are quite different phonologically, and many learners face troubles when learning to pronounce sounds or sound combinations that do not exist in their native language. Decades of research have suggested the best ways for English speakers to study the grammar of Spanish, and teaching methods usually emphasize the study of these grammatical features.

While the acquisition of specific grammatical features has been thoroughly studied, a holistic approach to the topic is less common. Much more research is needed about additional grammatical features, as well as phonological features; how these features interact with each other; and how they influence speaker comprehensibility and accentedness. Additionally, more research is needed about how each feature is acquired and used by speakers at different levels of proficiency. This research would help to improve educational methods by emphasizing features that are more important in comprehension.

This literature review will examine the hypothesis that grammatical and phonological features (specifically the perfect and imperfect aspect, as well as specific grammatical structures such as clitic left dislocation (CLD), information focus, voice onset time (VOT), and vowel perception and production) have a significant effect on speaker comprehensibility and are vital

in language learning. Suprasegmental features such as intonation, pitch, and prosody are not as crucial. However, they can still affect comprehensibility to some degree and are a valuable topic of study for language learners because they can clearly mark a non-native speaker. Recent studies about each feature will be evaluated by examining their strengths, weaknesses, and overall conclusions. Finally, future research will be suggested about their effects on speaker comprehensibility and their importance in second language learning.

Acquisition of Grammatical Features

As many language learners have come to realize, English and Spanish can differ quite dramatically in their grammatical systems. Acquiring both basic and advanced grammatical features is an important step in being able to meaningfully communicate in a different language. By studying how learners acquire specific grammatical features, researchers can suggest teaching methods that will be more effective and help language learners to make progress more effectively.

Perfect and Imperfect Aspect

A common problem for English speakers learning Spanish is learning the difference between the perfect and imperfect aspects, which is most commonly seen in the preterit and imperfect past tenses. In a 2017 study, Domínguez et al. found that L2 speakers' incorrect use of the imperfect was due to negative language transfer from English. González and Quintana Hernández (2018) came to a similar conclusion about the effect of L1 interference on grammatical aspect when they evaluated how English and Dutch speakers use the perfect and imperfect aspect in Spanish. They found that the speakers' L1 corresponded with the types of errors they made and that each language affected the acquisition of aspect differently. The difficulty of acquiring the perfect and imperfect aspect is also supported by a study by Hernández (2019), who found that different lexical distinctions create biases in choosing between aspects in different proficiency levels and that there are significant differences between usage of aspect by proficiency level.

Clitic Left Dislocation

Leal et al. in 2017 studied how English speakers acquire a specific grammatical structure in Spanish called Clitic Left Dislocation (CLD), where the object is presented before the rest of the sentence. In this study the researchers found that participants could accurately predict what kind of information would be presented after the object when the object was located before the clitic. Participants could also identify when that expectation was violated. Their success rate depended on their proficiency in Spanish, indicating that awareness of CLD increases throughout the process of language learning. Leal and Slabakova (2019) also suggest that this structure is learnable and that exposure to naturalistic input is the most important factor in its acquisition. Another study from 2020 (Sequeros-Valle et al.) indicates that L2 Spanish speakers can accurately acquire this grammatical structure and use it in ways similar to those of native speakers; however, the researchers found that this ability is limited under higher processing pressure. This is only one grammatical structure, so more research would be needed to see if these results apply to other structures. However, as Leal and Slabakova (2019) note, CLD is commonly used by native speakers in vernacular speech and is therefore valuable for L2 speakers to acquire.

Information (Subject and Object) Focus

Another grammatical concept is the use of information focus. Leal et al. (2019) conducted a study that compared the way native Spanish speakers and L2 learners marked information focus (that is, the new or contrastive information in a sentence). They found that for subject focus, L2 participants could generally match the use of native speakers, but for object focus, they did not match their use as well. As is the case with object and clitic dislocation (Leal et al., 2017), the participants' ability was related to their overall Spanish proficiency. The study is particularly convincing because the researchers compared the performance of L2 learners to native speakers, allowing them to draw the conclusion that L2 learners learn to use information focus in a more native-like way over time.

Several other studies support this argument, including Alvarado (2018). According to Alvarado, advanced speakers use information focus in a more native-like way than intermediate learners, although they still make frequent errors. Lee et al. (2019) added an interesting dimension to the literature about the

acquisition of this feature by comparing how Korean and Spanish speakers acquire this feature in English; they found that when the L1 marks information focus by phrasal prominence, learners perform better in perceiving L2 sentence focus. Although this study focuses on Spanish-to-English learners instead of English-to-Spanish, understanding the opposite process can still yield valuable information.

Acquisition of Phonological Features

Another significant hurdle for English speakers is developing the ability to perceive and accurately reproduce Spanish phonology, which in many cases differs significantly from that of English. Generally, researchers assume that improvements in perception transfer to an equivalent improvement in production; however, recent studies have challenged the idea that there is a clear linear relationship.

Voice Onset Time

Voice Onset Time (VOT) measures the exact moment when voicing begins in the articulation process. In native Spanish speakers, VOT in stop obstruents is usually lower in comparison to native English speakers. Because even the difference of a few milliseconds can alter how a listener perceives a certain sound, an increased VOT in Spanish—where it should be decreased—contributes to accentedness. Nagle supports the idea that a speaker's perception of a sound must reach a certain level of accuracy before their production is affected and conducted a study (2018) to evaluate VOT in the stops /b/ and /p/. His results indicated that there was no significant relationship between perception and decreased VOT of /b/ in L2 Spanish learners, but that there was a relationship between perception of /p/ and a decreased VOT—meaning that as perception of /p/ improved, participants also improved their ability to pronounce it accurately.

Nagle studied decreased VOT of /b/ and /p/ again in a later experiment in 2019. This study does not consider the ability to perceive phonological differences but instead the change in participants' production ability over time. The results showed that participants' change in VOT during the first half of the study (approximately one semester of language instruction) could be mapped with linear and quadratic functions. They also indicated that participants' tendency to prevoice /b/ and /p/ in their native

language was associated with their tendency to prevoice the Spanish /b/. However, these results were quite inconsistent and varied widely; for example, some individuals' pronunciation of /p/ improved but not /b/. While VOT is a feature that affects native-like pronunciation, both studies face important limitations: Nagle (2018) examined only two phonemes, and Nagle (2019) did not observe consistent results. Therefore, drawing any conclusions about the importance of VOT, or the best way for L2 learners to acquire this feature, would be premature.

Vowel Perception and Production

Solon et al. (2017) examined the relationship between task complexity, language-related episodes, and the accurate production of L2 Spanish vowels. They found that giving participants more complex elicitation tasks led to an improved accuracy in perceiving and pronouncing the phoneme /e/. While this indicates there may be some value in making tasks more complex when teaching L2 learners, because participants only showed improvement in one phoneme, its efficacy is still uncertain. The study is also quite limited because it only asked participants to identify minimal pairs in information-gap map tasks, instead of measuring the acoustic qualities of the vowels.

Two studies that contradict these results deal with learners going in the opposite direction, Spanish to English, which is not the focus of this paper. However, as mentioned previously, understanding how the opposite direction works can still provide valuable information. Carlet and Souza (2018) found that participants improved their perception of English vowels but did not demonstrate a corresponding improvement in production ability; De Leeuw et al. (2021) also found that there was no significant relationship between production and perception accuracy. Further research about the link between production and perception for English-speaking L2 learners is needed to confirm the relationship.

Acquisition of Suprasegmental Features

An important consideration in language learning are suprasegmental features, which are independent of grammar and vocabulary and can extend over words and phrases. These features are somewhat “fuzzy” in definition but usually are referred to as intonation, intonation patterns, pitch, or prosody.

They can clearly mark non-native speakers and even provide hints about their L1s.

Intonation, Pitch, and Prosody

In an effort to learn more about this idea, McKinnon (2017) examined how explicitly instructing L2 Spanish learners about intonation patterns in the imperative and declarative moods affected their ability to distinguish the two moods and reproduce the patterns. In post-tests the participants changed their pitch range and intonation pattern after receiving instruction with a focus on grammar as well as intonation. Their ranges and patterns were still different from those of native speakers, but the change shows that they were attempting to mimic native speakers and reproduce their intonation. While intonation patterns may not have a significant impact on the intelligibility of a speaker, they do make a difference in others' perceptions of that speaker, and acquiring them helps a language learner to speak in a more native-like way. Seijas (2018) also confirms that this feature is learnable and can be improved by L2 speakers over time. However, this study specifically examines the effect of short-term study abroad programs, which limits its importance to this literature review, as that opportunity is not possible for the average Spanish-language learner in the United States.

The Influence of Suprasegmental Features on Comprehension

In an attempt to learn about the relationship between suprasegmental features and how native speakers perceive language learners, one recent study replicated an experiment from 1995 that evaluated how native speakers rated language learners in several categories (Huensch et al., 2021). The results clearly indicated that four specific linguistic features (phonemic errors, grammatical errors, prosody, and speech rate) were significantly related to intelligibility; however, two surprising results were found. First, there was a negative relationship between speech rate and intelligibility, meaning that as a learner spoke faster, they were less likely to be understood. Second, in lower proficiency speakers, a more native-like prosody or intonation pattern was less intelligible to native speakers. In higher proficiency speakers, the expected result occurred, and a more native-like prosody was more intelligible.

In a practical sense, these results show that beginning language learners should not focus too much attention on prosody until they reach a certain level of proficiency. Trying to improve on suprasegmental features too soon might hinder their ability to be understood, and prosodic or suprasegmental features seem to be most effective in improving that ability only after a sufficient proficiency is reached.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, specific features of L2 Spanish such as the perfect and imperfect aspect, Clitic Left Dislocation (CLD), information focus, Voice Onset Time (VOT), vowel perception and production, intonation, pitch, and prosody have been discussed, as well as important recent studies that add to the body of knowledge about how they are acquired by English speakers. Current research seems to support the original hypothesis for this literature review; the studies examined here suggest that these features are all important areas for L2 Spanish learners. However, in one respect, the original hypothesis was challenged—Nagle (2018) and Nagle (2019) did not provide strong evidence that VOT improved with better phonemic perception, and Carlet and Souza (2018) and De Leeuw et al. (2021) seemed to deny that vowel production improves with better vowel perception. The studies also indicate that suprasegmental features can have a significant impact on speaker comprehensibility but only at advanced levels (Huensch et al., 2021). This literature review has also shown that all of the features discussed are learnable by L2 speakers; that is, L2 learners can improve their command of the features over time and use them in a way that more closely matches native speakers.

These results have important implications for the field of second language acquisition; the command of certain features seems easier to improve than the command of others and therefore would be more useful to study. Mainly, it would be more effective for beginning language learners to focus on grammar and pronunciation before suprasegmental features such as intonation, pitch, and prosody. However, further research is needed to determine the exact ranking of the features' importance to L2 learners. Knowing which features have the most effect on speaker comprehensibility and accentedness will allow speakers to learn more effectively and increase the ability of the population of the United States to

communicate. More research is also needed to confirm the link between vowel perception and production.

As research continues, it will also become more and more important to evaluate methods for teaching Spanish and their effectiveness in regard to each feature. Knowledge of the vital importance of a feature of Spanish is useless if there is no effective way for L2 learners to improve their command of that feature. Specific information about how to use these results in the real world will make a significant difference in the way that people study Spanish. Future research should work to determine the best balance of teaching grammatical, phonological, and suprasegmental features.

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