

Perceptions of L2 Spanish learners in the mixed classroom

Percepciones de los estudiantes de español lengua extranjera en las clases mixtas

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RESUMEN

El presente estudio se enfoca en las percepciones de los aprendientes de segunda lengua (SL) universitarios sobre tener hablantes de herencia (HH) en los mismos cursos de español. Aunque algunos estudiantes confesaron sentimientos de intimidación o miedo, en general había una actitud positiva hacia los beneficios de las clases mixtas para aprendientes de SL como la mejora de sus habilidades auditivas y culturales o el escenario de inmersión real. Considerando los comentarios de los estudiantes, hay algunas recomendaciones para la implementación en las clases mixtas.

Palabras clave: clases de español mixtas, habilidades auditivas, habilidades culturales, escenario de inmersión real.

ABSTRACT

The current study is focused on the perceptions of university second language (L2) learners on having heritage speakers (HS) in the same Spanish language courses. Although some students confessed feelings of intimidation or fear, overall there was a positive attitude towards the benefits of mixed classrooms for L2 learners such as the improvement of their listening and cultural skills and the real immersion scenario. Considering students' comments, there are some recommendations for implementation in mixed classrooms.

Keywords: Spanish mixed classrooms, listening skills, cultural skills, real immersion scenario

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mixed language classrooms consist of second language (L2) learners of Spanish and heritage speakers (HS) in the same language classroom. Despite the increasing Hispanic population in the United States, less than half of the US higher education institutions offer Spanish heritage courses or tracks (Beaudrie, 2012). She claimed that there were more Spanish heritage courses at the basic level rather than at advanced levels. However, there are institutions where HS' courses start at the intermediate level, above all when most of the HS are first or second generation. Therefore, in this study participants in mixed classrooms were recruited from intermediate and advanced levels: Intermediate Spanish for L2 learners with a focus on Composition and Conversation and an Advanced Grammar course, the language courses offered at these proficiency levels.

2. RESEARCH ON MIXED LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Recent research showed that there were more benefits for L2 learners in mixed language classrooms than for HS. In a study by Blake and Zyzik (2003), they found that HS assisted their L2 partners more than the reverse in chat-based interactions. L2 learners benefited from the HS' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary while HS did from L2 learners' knowledge of metalanguage (Walls, 2013). Even though separated classes are recommended to address their linguistic needs, funding and administrative realities encourage mixed classrooms, above all at higher levels of instruction (Kagan & Dillon, 2009). Tomlinson (2003) and Carreira (2007) suggested differentiated instruction and Kagan and Dillon (2009) supported this model of instruction with portfolios as an assessment instrument. Nevertheless, they considered that portfolios made grading difficult so other methods of assessment should be used. When an institution starts considering the implementation of a separate heritage track, what matters is what students actually need. If the focus at the basic level is on reading or writing, there might not be a need for separate courses for HS. If the focus is on conversation or culture, it would be more convenient to offer an alternative for HS (Benmamoun & Kagan, 2013).

Henshaw (2013) found that HS provided more corrective feedback to L2 learners in interactions and written texts in collaborative written tasks. In another study, Bowles, Adams and Toth (2014) claimed that HS-L2 pairs used the target language significantly more often than L2-L2 pairs in an information exchange oral task. Overall, L2 learners have an advantage in written tasks while HS do in oral tasks (Bowles, 2011). However, when proficiency is controlled and with oral and written tasks, they can mutually benefit from mixed classes. In a recent study by Dones-Herrera (2015), both L2 learners and HS showed a positive attitude towards being in a mixed class. She conducted a study on mixed Spanish classes for beginners. It seems that all the recent studies point in the same direction regarding the positive perceptions by L2 learners and HS (Alarcón, 2010; Campanaro 2013; Dones-Herrera, 2015; Edstrom, 2007). Students felt good about helping each other.

Language teachers need to be aware that simply mixing HS and L2 learners does not guarantee that L2 learners will have enough opportunities for interaction in the classroom. Therefore, they propose online small group interaction for L2 learners' participation (Freiermuth, 2001).

The current study is focused on the perceptions of L2 learners on having HS in the same Spanish language course. According to Edstrom (2007), there was a positive impact on listening comprehension and oral skills since they had access to fluent speech and dialectal variation. Therefore, this was a real immersion opportunity in a conversational register, they appreciated the ethical values of respect and collaboration but recognized feeling intimidated by HS. Moreover, they thought that faculty expectations were higher in mixed classrooms and the pace was faster.

3. METHODOLOGY

Twenty Spanish L2 learners from language courses at the 200 and 300 college levels were the participants in this study. The researcher visited these language courses in order to recruit students and make appointments and the study took place in the researcher's office. The study consisted of two parts: a survey about their opinions and perceptions on mixed language classrooms (quantitative data) and a post-survey interview where students had the opportunity to develop their answers (qualitative data), all of them adapted from Edstrom (2007). In the survey, students had to give their opinion on a list of statements on mixed language classrooms following a scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 to 6): 1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Somewhat Disagree, 4- Somewhat Agree, 5- Agree, 6- Strongly Agree.

4. RESULTS

STATEMENTS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Good for my listening skills	0	0	1	1	5	13
Uncomfortable speaking in front of HS	0	3	0	12	1	4
As happy to work with L2 or heritage	1	1	4	2	5	7

I learn culture from HS	1	1	3	5	5	5
HS make me feel comfortable with other Spanish dialects	0	0	1	8	9	2
HS make me feel good/ they are also learners	1	3	0	9	4	3
HS' presence does not affect the content of the course	0	3	0	2	9	6
HS' presence affects the expectations of the course	3	5	4	2	2	4
Without HS, I would get better grades	4	5	7	2	2	0
HS' presence affects my participation	6	2	3	6	1	1
HS respect my contributions to class	1	1	3	1	10	4
HS speak Spanish better	0	0	0	2	4	13
Talking to HS improves my Spanish	0	0	0	2	7	11
HS have larger vocabulary in Spanish	0	0	0	3	4	13
My Spanish is more grammatical than that of HS	1	5	3	6	3	2

Table 1. Survey L2 Spanish learners¹

There were three questions that did not get 20 answers but 19: HS' presence affects my participation, HS respect my contributions to class and HS speak Spanish better. The reasons why these statements were not ranked by one student are unknown: it could be that they were skipped because the student(s) did not know how to rate them or that they were skipped by accident.

5. DISCUSSION

In order to interpret these results, qualitative data collected during the post-survey interview will be used. Most of these statements reflected positive feelings or perceptions of the presence of HS in the mixed language classroom.

The following is the list of the positive statements:

1. Good for my listening skills
3. L2 learners are as happy to work with HS as with other L2 learners
4. I learn culture from HS
5. HS make me feel comfortable with other Spanish dialects
6. HS make me feel good/ they are also learners
7. HS' presence does not affect the content of the course
11. HS respect my contributions to class
13. Talking to HS improves my Spanish
15. My Spanish is more grammatical than that of HS

The majority of the students (13) ranked the first statement with a 6 (strongly agree), which shows an awareness of the benefit of having HS in the same language class to improve their aural comprehension skills. In the next statement, there is more division. Even though most of the students considered that they were as happy to work with HS as with L2 learners (7), there were students who ranked these statements along all the numbers in the continuum. Regarding the cultural input received by HS, most of the students evenly rated this statement with 4, 5 and 6 (somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree). "It is lucky to have HS in the class, their cultural perspective, to see how they speak in reality and not only in class. For example, formal vs. informal Mexican Spanish vs. Peninsular Spanish" (Sarah²).

Another benefit for L2 learners is the appreciation of other Spanish dialects in the classroom. Most of the students agreed (9) and somewhat agreed (8) with this statement: "*Puedo aprender acento de HS, estoy cómoda trabajando con otras personas, no es un problema. Puedo aprender mucho de su cultura. Como una estudiante del programa de educación, no tengo tiempo para viajar a otros países. Estoy estudiando este verano en México pero no tengo muchas oportunidades para aprender la cultura.*"

Vale la pena mucho tener a HS en clase” (Val). [I can learn accent from HS, I am comfortable working with other people, it is not a problem. I can learn a lot from their culture. As a student in the program of Education, I don’t have time to travel to other countries. I am studying this summer in Mexico but I don’t have many opportunities to learn the culture. It is worth it to have HS in class, my translation]. “Although it is intimidating, it is important because hearing different dialects really helps. You are not really understanding Spanish if you don’t live this” (Alyssa).

Concerning the awareness of L2 learners of the weaknesses of HS as learners of the language like them, 9 of them somewhat agreed and 4 of them agreed. There were still a few students who did not agree, who probably placed themselves in an inferior position linguistically-speaking. “It is good to know they are not perfect. There is a reason we are in class together. We are working towards the same goal” (Mary).

In terms of how the presence of HS influences the instructors or the content/ material of the course, most of them agreed (9) and strongly agreed (6) that HS did not have an impact on the content of the course. However, this was not the case in Edstrom (2007), where most of them strongly disagreed.

Following the positive perceptions that L2 learners have for HS, we should also consider how the former are viewed by the latter. Statement 11 reflects how L2 learners feel respected by HS. A vast majority (10) agreed. Overall, statement 13 summarizes the general positive feeling that the presence of HS makes L2 learners improve their Spanish. 11 students strongly agreed. This result aligns with the general positive perception that L2 learners have regarding mixed language classrooms as it has been shown in recent literature (...)

It seems that there are not the same feelings towards the last statement: “My Spanish is more grammatical than that of HS”. 6 of them somewhat agreed and 5 disagreed. The rest of them were divided along the continuum. It is possible that these ratings respond to a confusion of the term “grammatical” for them. Despite this, there are students who have a clear idea about the grammatical differences between them. “*Para la gramática tenemos niveles de gramática más avanzada, ellos aprenden algo más diferente y formal que en sus casas*” (Val). [For grammar, L2 learners have more advanced levels of grammar, they learn something more different and formal than at home, my translation]; “He doesn’t know why he uses the grammar he uses so we are in the same level” (Kim); “They have a better vocabulary but they have problems with writing and grammar. It is easier for them to speak and listen” (Monica).

Concerning the negative feelings or perceptions, we could consider the following within the survey:

2. Uncomfortable speaking in front of HS
8. HS’ presence affects the expectations of the course
9. Without HS, I would get better grades
10. HS’ presence affects my participation
12. HS speak Spanish better
14. HS have larger vocabulary

L2 learners somewhat agreed that they felt uncomfortable speaking in front of HS: “*Me siento incómoda con HS porque no tengo mucha seguridad en mi acento* [I feel uncomfortable with HS because I don’t have much confidence in my accent, my translation] so I have neighbors who are from PR, Panama, Mexico, I would not feel comfortable in speaking with my Spanish accent in class because I feel embarrassed, basically because I know there is one HS, I think it is helpful he is in our class because of diversity” (Kim).

Even though it is hard to compare these results to the study by Edstrom (2007) because of her low number of non-natives (4), most of her results are consistent with these but we could still note that in this specific statement, most of her non-native participants disagreed with this statement in the same line as Dones-Herrera (2015), which is a contradictory result to this study. However, regarding the expectations of the course the results are different than a previously related statement (HS' presence does not affect the content of the course). 5 students disagreed (the highest number of students), 4 somewhat disagreed and 4 strongly agreed. It seems that there is a clear division of opinions related to this issue in the same vein as Edstrom (2007). On the other hand, in Dones-Herrera (2015), we can find that most of the answers were under the "agree" section of the continuum, These are some of the students' opinions: "*Algunos profesores se comportaban diferente pero es raro, sobre todo aquí en esta universidad, los profesores tiene respeto para todos*" (Val). [Some professors behaved differently but it is unusual, above all, here in this university, professors have respect for everybody, my translation]; "Teachers are understanding" (Kim); "I have never experienced instructors treat us differently" (Mary); "It doesn't affect what the instructor expects. They can tell the difference, they don't raise their expectations but changes the dynamics of the class. It doesn't affect my grades" (Monica).

Concerning the following negative statement (Without HS, I would get better grades), 7 somewhat disagreed, 5 disagreed and 4 strongly disagreed. These ratings showed that most of the students do not consider that the presence of HS affects their performance in the class: "I don't think I would get a better grade without HS" (Sarah). Nevertheless, there were a few students who thought it did. 6 students strongly disagreed and 6 somewhat agreed regarding the thought that HS presence affected their class participation. This contradictory result is surprising since there were several comments in the post-survey interview about how many students felt intimidated speaking in public when there were HS in the classroom: "They can express themselves better because they have a wider vocabulary. At times I am thinking what I am gonna say. It is intimidating because I worry they are judging me because my Spanish is not as good as theirs. I am sure they aren't but I feel that way" (Alyssa); "Some people would feel hesitant to speak Spanish" (Mary); "There is definitely intimidation, they are so good at speaking." (Karen); "In my class, there are not many HS but if there were, I would feel more intimidated" (Kim). This last statement is related to the following: "HS speak Spanish better". The majority of the students (13) strongly agreed with this, which makes proficiency in this skill an obvious difference between them. In the same line, 13 students strongly agreed that HS have a larger vocabulary: "*Tienen palabras que yo no tengo, slang o algo cultural, no son las palabras académicas*" (Val); [They have words that I don't have, slang or something cultural, they are not academic words, my translation]; "They have more vocabulary than I do, I don't feel confident" (Kim).

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

After the survey, students participated in an interview in order to explain their answers and the last questions were geared towards pedagogical suggestions in order to maximize student learning in mixed language classrooms. Overall, most of the students enjoyed being in a mixed classroom: "I would rather definitely be in a mixed classroom. It wouldn't make sense not to be. The world is mixed so why would I not be mixed in the classes. I can learn culture, accent. They have that benefit and I do have the same benefit when I am speaking English" (Val). "I do think hearing the accent helps. It is another way to learn from them" (Mary); "I like mixed class, it brings diversity and culture to the classroom. Makes the language seem more alive" (Karen). Nevertheless, there were still a few students who were reluctant to be in the same class as HS: "Mixed classrooms suck. It is extremely difficult to understand HS. The challenges are different from English natives trying to learn Spanish and the other way around. I love the language, creating an environment in which I feel comfortable to learn and to speak" (Laura).

Regarding positive actions by instructors dealing with mixed classrooms: "They offer office hours to get help. They do a good job stopping and asking whether we understand. If we don't, she rephrased things. In the literature courses, it is more on my own. I do the readings on my own pace. I want Professors to give us opportunities of us expressing ourselves in discussion or more open-ended ways rather than a quiz" (Val).

Other students, like Karen, suggested: "Professors have to be aware of where the class is. As a L2 learner, that is the most important thing, to evaluate the progress". She remarked the importance of speaking with HS: "Speaking in Spanish with HS helps me a lot, we need more practice and understanding in both sides". Alyssa, on the other hand, highlighted the difference between HS and L2 learners: "Professors should be mindful who is HS and L2 learner, and the struggles, challenges for L2 learners". Finally, there are other students who proposed considering HS as a resource in the classroom: "We should continue to use heritage speakers as a resource, we can all work together and improve our abilities" (Monica).

Despite the general positive reactions of the students in the current study as well as those in recent research such as Dones-Herrera (2015), she suggested that the ideal scenario was to separate classes for L2 learners and HS to address their particular needs.

It is the responsibility of the instructor to ensure that L2 learners have enough opportunities to participate in class and avoid letting HS control class discussions. In the same vein, the instructor's role is also crucial in helping to reduce feelings of intimidation or fear in the classroom by engaging all students in interactive activities so that they get to know each other (Campanaro, 2013).

7. RECENT FINDINGS ON MIXED CLASSROOMS

Considering recent findings on mixed classrooms, there are activities that have been suggested to be effective for mutual benefits for L2 learners and HS following Henshaw and Bowles (2015):

7.1. ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS

These interviews work as conversation practice with HLs (Henshaw & Bowles, 2015). L2 learners could be the interviewers and they should prepare for it creating a list of questions regarding Latino culture first and the HS would respond to these questions about their heritage and community.

7.2. DICTOGLOSS

These are text reconstruction activities to be performed in pairs. Below I provide an example of what this activity could look like. Students would listen to the following text twice and take notes:

(1) *María solía pensar qué haría si le tocara un millón de dólares. Solía decir a sus papás: "Si me tocara un millón de dólares, me compraría una casa en la playa y dejaría de trabajar. Pasaría el día en la piscina e invitaría a todos mis amigos. Sería una vida increíble"* (María used to think about what she would do if she won a million dollars. She used to tell her parents: "If I won a million dollars, I would buy a house by the beach and I would quit my job. I would spend all day in the pool and I would invite all my friends over. It would be an incredible life).

Then, they should engage in metatalk in the target language in order to reconstruct the story. This would be an easier task for HS due to their advantage in oral skills but it could be used as a strategy for grammar acquisition of certain forms that both HS and L2 learners struggle with such as the past subjunctive forms.

7.3. TRANSLATIONS

Translations are a common technique used with HS that could work with L2 learners at advanced levels as well. However, it is crucial that they be contextualized and serve an authentic communicative purpose such as flyers, signs or ads.

7.4. DEBATES

Debates represent a very powerful assignment for these learners as long as the topics are of interest to both HS and L2 learners (e.g. bilingualism, dialectal variation, social justice, immigration, study abroad or art).

7.5. COLLABORATIVE WRITING TASKS

Considering their strengths, L2 learners can assist in spelling and accentuation and HS in lexical repertoire (Bowles, 2011). Overall, it would be recommended to take a project-based instruction approach with collaborative tasks between L2 learners and HS (e.g. interviews, surveys, reviews, etc).

8. BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES FOR L2 LEARNERS

Research showed that there were more benefits in mixed classrooms for L2 learners than for HS (Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Bowles, 2011; Henshaw, 2013). They benefit from conversational exchanges with HS (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Plonsky & Gass, 2011). These exchanges provide them with comprehensible input through interactional feedback. Another advantage acknowledged by L2 learners in this study is the insight into the target culture (Katz, 2003). In terms of disadvantages, as mentioned earlier, L2 learners may feel intimidated by HS so they felt more confident working with other L2 learners. HS' presence affected their participation in class as explained in the current study. Therefore, instructors have to face some challenges in the classroom to find a balance so that these mixed classes are beneficial for all kinds of learners. An example of this could be via group or pair work to create a non-threatening environment. L2 learners learn from real exposure to the target language and they can help with spelling and grammar (Campanaro, 2013). Storch (2001) suggested that pairing a higher-proficiency learner with a lower-proficiency one would be more beneficial than pairing learners of the same level. In sum, the instructor plays a key role in the success of mixed classrooms.

9. CONCLUSIONS

In the present study we can find L2 learners' opinions and perceptions regarding their experiences with mixed Spanish language classrooms in a higher education institution in the Midwestern United States. Even though some students confess feelings of frustration, intimidation or fear, overall there is a general positive attitude towards the multiple benefits of mixed classrooms for L2 learners such as the improvement of their listening skills or the real immersion scenario. Considering students' comments in the post-survey interview, some suggestions for instruction are offered followed by recommended activities that can be implemented in mixed classrooms.

[1] The survey and interview questions are adapted from Edstrom (2007).

[2] All the names used to express students' opinions in sections 5 and 6 are pseudonyms.

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