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Spanish future of probability: teaching and learning

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Abstract/Resumen

This project investigates how the acquisition of the future of probability in Spanish can be facilitated through classroom instruction, taking into consideration what L1 English and L1 French learners of L2 Spanish bring to the process of acquisition of this linguistic feature and how language instructors may need to manipulate the input to facilitate learning. We designed an experiment which measures different outcomes of form focused and meaning based instructional methods compared to the one currently used at the University of Ottawa in the Spanish program. We have developed grammaticality judgment and limited written production tasks. We also consider long-term effects of the instruction based on the results of the delayed posttest. Our preliminary results suggest that there is an advantage of meaning based instruction over the form focused one on both tests. At the same time, both instructional methods have had more positive effect on the learner acquisition compared to the results of the control group in both explicit and implicit knowledge. As expected, French L1 learners have a slight benefit over the English L1 learners due to the positive transfer from their L1 into L2 Spanish.

Keywords/Palabras clave

Spanish future of probability, form focused instruction, focus on meaning instruction, classroom instruction

1. Introduction

Spanish future morphology can have at least two main interpretations: future time events and present time probability (or conjecture), which is also referred to as “epistemic future”. The latter expresses how probable the speaker considers the event or action in the present time. Spanish future of probability (SFP) is the focus of this study. Previous research in L2 acquisition of SFP by L1 English learners (e.g. Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela, 2007) supports the claim that learners are able to acquire the epistemic interpretation of future morphology in spite of the ambiguity of the input. A classic case of this ambiguity is presented by Bosque y Demonte (2000):

- 1.a. En este momento son las diez / It is ten o'clock at the moment (expresses simultaneity to the present moment)¹
- 1.b. Dentro de un rato serán las diez/ Soon it will be ten (expresses an event posterior to the present moment)
- 1.c. Serán las diez (en este momento)/ It will be ten (at this moment) (expresses the same meaning as a. but with the form of b.; as a consequence of this “temporal dislocation” between the central meaning and the temporal reference, a modal interpretation, that of probability, is formed)

As this paper evolves, we will show that avoiding such ambiguity in the Spanish language classroom requires clear context for proper interpretation of the morphological structure of the Spanish future.

The various interpretations and uses of the future morphology in Spanish have been discussed by Batchelor and San Jose (2010), Bosque and Demonte (2000), Butt and Benjamin (2004), Gennari (2002), Gili Gaya (1973), Lyons (1978), Soto (2008), to name only a few. On the subject of how learners acquire the future morphology, along with its temporal and epistemic interpretations, Benati (2001), Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela (2007) have shared their valuable research findings and insights. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2000), because expressions of the future encode a speakers' assertion of the likelihood of a future event, all expressions of the future are also expressions of modality. For the purpose of this paper, we investigate the future morphology in Spanish, its epistemic interpretation, and how its teaching can be facilitated in the classroom.

2. Future of probability in Romance languages

First, we will discuss how the future tense morphology in Romance languages came to express the future time and the present time probability. There are three

¹ English translations of the examples from Bosque and Demonte are ours.

ways of expressing future time in Romance languages: the morphological future, periphrastic future and the present simple form. Nevertheless, only the morphological future can be used to express probability in the present. The origin of the modern Romance morphological future form goes back to the history and the development of the individual Romance languages from Latin. The morphological future in Spanish and French is different from the English one that incorporates a modal-auxiliary *shall/will* to create a future form. A concise description of the transformation of the modern synthetic form of future is presented in Lyons (1978). He states that Spanish form developed from the original Latin synthetic form and was replaced by a compound construction in Vulgar Latin (auxiliary *habere* + *infinitive* of a verb). Then the two elements of this compound coalesced into a single form (that of Modern Spanish): *cantare habeo* -> *cantar he* (till the 17th century) -> *cantaré*. Gili Gaya (1973) explains that in the Middle Ages, when the form ‘cantar he’ was available, it also expressed obligation in the present, similar to modern “He de estudiar/I have to study” (p. 165). This is worth mentioning since the history of Spanish and French future morphology links modern future tense form with the ambiguity of its interpretation. In particular, the endings of Spanish future tense are the forms of the auxiliary *haber* conjugated in present (with minor changes), which are added to the infinitive of verb. *Haber* had three possible interpretations: auxiliary of perfect tenses, modal of obligation and epistemic interpretation. These interpretations are still available in modern Spanish, but they are restricted to context, as well as stylistic and dialectal differences. For example, in Mexico it is still very common to use “*haber + de + verb infinitive*” to express probability in the present (e.g. *Ha de llover*), instead of Future tense morphology (*Lloverá*). Nevertheless, without sufficient context Future tense morphology is generally interpreted with a simple future time, rather than as a probable event in the present.

After a brief review of the origin of Romance future and probability, we look into how SFP can be presented in the bilingual context of the University of Ottawa classroom with maximum positive results for learners. In part following Bruhn de Garavito and Valenzuela (2007) experiment, we investigate a possible effect of form focused (FFI) and focus on meaning (FOM) instruction on the acquisition of Spanish epistemic future. In order to measure this effect, we conducted a small scale experiment.

3. Experiment

This study aims to measure the difference between FFI and FOM instruction of SFP for intermediate learners (B1/2) in order to develop didactic materials for university classroom, which would facilitate learning of the linguistic feature in question.

3.1. Research questions and hypotheses

Three research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. Will FFI have a positive effect on the acquisition of SFP in L2 Spanish learners?
2. Will FOM without explicit instruction of the use of SFP have a positive effect on the acquisition of SFP in L2 Spanish learners?
3. Will the participants in the FFI group retain the possible long term effect of instruction better than the FOM instruction group (after 4 weeks)?

Keeping in mind the three research questions, the following hypotheses were established:

1. If FFI has a positive effect on the acquisition of SFP, L2 learners in group A will perform better than the control group C on the two tests.
2. If FOM has a stronger effect on the acquisition of SFP, then group B will perform better than the control group C on the two tests.
3. If FFI facilitates long term retention of SFP better than the FOM, Group A will show less change than Group B between Time 1 and Time 2 test results.

A secondary hypothesis was formulated in the process of the experiment. Since French is closer to Spanish compared to English in expressing future tense and probability and transfer plays a role in the acquisition of SFP, we can assume that French L1 learners of Spanish L2 will have an advantage over English L1 learners. After analyzing the results of the experiment, we will see how our participants acquire SFP and then we can discuss whether L1 or the method of instruction and practice have positive, negative or no influence on their results.

In the following subsection we will discuss the methodology used for the experiment.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Participants

Our participants were asked to self-report as either English or French dominant (English L1 and French L1), although some were fluently bilingual in French and English. Our experimental groups' participants were enrolled in the third term of Spanish language course at the University of Ottawa. The control group participants were enrolled in 3rd or 4th year courses at the University of Ottawa. All participants were over 18 years of age and had no exposure to Spanish before entering the program. Two instruction groups of 5 and a control group of 6 participants were recruited for the study, for the total of 16 participants. Both instructional groups consisted of 2 French L1 and 3 English L1 students, while the control group had 3 French L1 and 3 English L1 speakers.

3.2.2. Procedures

Prior to the instructional session all three groups completed a Language Background Questionnaire developed for this study which determined what language subgroup they were assigned to: French L1 or English L1. Both instructional group participants performed a pretest in order to measure the effect of the instruction on the learners' acquisition later. Immediately after the instruction, the experimental groups completed two tests (Time 1): Untimed Grammaticality Judgment Task and a Limited Written Production Task. Four weeks later they completed a post-test (Time 2). Each testing took no more than 60 minutes.

The three groups of participants were formed according to the three instruction types that they received. All the instructions were written by the researcher, while all the exercises were collected from textbooks other than *Nuevo Ven 2* (Castro, et al, 2009), which follow the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, but were not used at the University of Ottawa at the time of the study.

Group A received FFI which included explicit instruction of the forms and the use of future tense morphology, temporal and epistemic interpretations, corrective feedback throughout the instruction period, a lot of form focused and some meaning based. For Group A we used exercises from *Prisma A1 + A2 Fusión, Libro de Ejercicios* (p. 89, 90), *Prisma A2, Libro de alumno* (p. 129). The goal of this instructional method was to provide extensive explanation of the forms and uses of the future morphology with a variety of examples and exercises, while maintaining meaningful communication. The lesson starts with a thorough explanation of the forms and uses of the future morphology, followed by examples, which call attention to the forms and usage. The explanation is followed by five exercises, mostly form focused, which vary between individual and pair/group, oral and written work activities.

The participants in Group B were provided with meaningful input flood. The instruction included explanation of the morphology of the future, but no explicit instruction on the uses of the forms. Therefore, the task of the participants was to deduce the uses of the forms from the examples. Starting the lesson with a comprehension exercise rather than an explicit description of SFP pushed our participants to comprehend the meaning before knowing what the forms represented. First, they read the text with future forms underlined. Then they completed a T/F comprehension exercise. Finally, they were asked to pay attention to the highlighted forms and to separate them into three groups. Then the instructor explained what those groups represented: three ways of expressing future time in Spanish (Periphrastic future, Present simple and Future simple). The warm-up exercise was followed by the grammar explanation of the regular

and irregular verbs forms of future with examples of different ways of using the forms, but without explicit instructions on its use for probability. These were followed by five meaning-based exercises, both oral and written. They also varied between individual and pair/group work. For Group B *EsEspanol 2* (p. 77) and *Horizontes* were used in addition to the ones mentioned earlier (used for group A). They were not provided with any corrective feedback.

Finally, the control group C received no instruction from the researcher. They followed the syllabus outlined by the course program for ESP 2991 (Fall 2012). The input and practice for this group came strictly from *Nuevo Ven 2 Libro de Profesor* (Unit 2, 4, 6). In the Unit 2 *Libro de estudiante* the Future Simple is presented for the first time: the forms of regular and irregular verbs are outlined, as well as the uses for future events, predictions and real conditions are presented. There is no mention of the use of future tense for present time probability in this chapter. One exercise follows the explanation, limited to 7 frequently used verbs (*hablar, beber, vivir, hacer, salir, saber, poner* and *poder*) (p. 24). In *Nuevo Ven 2 Libro de Ejercicios* (exercise book), Unit 2 contains a reading comprehension exercise that includes some sentences with future (p. 11). Then in Unit 4 (*Libro de Profesor*), the SFP is presented together with other ways of expressing degrees of probability in Spanish (expressions like *seguramente* and *a lo mejor*). One example with SFP is with the verb *estar* and two with *ser* (most common verbs used in SFP). In the exercise book, Unit 4 contains a dialog (part “Comunicación”) where only one sentence is in SFP and exercise 3 (p. 17) asks students to write phrases in the future following a model (only *estar* is present). In Unit 6, the Future Perfect is presented and is contrasted with the Future Simple in examples and exercises, but only with the verb *ser*, once again. To clarify the instruction conditions of the control group, we should mention that this group did not receive any instruction from the researcher; only classroom instruction is assumed as the sole source of information for these participants. Therefore, while the two experimental groups received additional instruction and practice materials, the control group was exposed to higher level of Spanish in general, since they were students of 3rd or 4th year.

In the following subsection we will describe the tests that were created especially for this experiment.

3.2.3. Tests

In order to measure the effects of our instruction methods, we designed two tests: an Untimed Grammaticality Judgment Task (UGJT) and a Limited Written Production task (LWPT). The first test consisted of two sets of materials to measure the participants’ sensitivity to epistemic interpretation and the aspectual

classes². The total number of tokens for this test was 60: 40 experimental and 20 distractors. The test aimed to measure acquired knowledge of the future tense morphology and its epistemic uses as a result of FFI and FOM instruction. For the purpose of our study we did not distinguish between explicit and implicit knowledge because for successful acquisition of SFP both types of knowledge are necessary. If our test was sensitive enough, the participants were expected to accept *stative* and *activity* verbs in future and epistemic contexts, but reject the ones where probability and future were impossible. Furthermore, we expected the participants to accept only the future tense, but reject the probability context with *accomplishments* and *achievements* because native Spanish speakers do not consider these verbs grammatical in that context. Several examples of such sentences can be seen below.

Condition	Example
Activity: probability possible	Aunque Luis tiene una voz horrible, él insiste en cantar en el concierto. Cuando el maestro de música entra él oye un ruido insoportable. El maestro dice: - Cantará Luis. a. acceptable b. no acceptable c. no lo sé
State: future and probability impossible	Julio llega a su casa con un trofeo después de ganar el campeonato de fútbol. Se lo muestra a sus padres. Julio dice: - Mi equipo será el ganador. a. acceptable b. no acceptable c. no lo sé
Activity: future only possible	Diego es muy delgado pero quiere ser campeón de boxeo. Sus amigos se ríen de él, pero el entrenador lo defiende: - Diego hará mucho ejercicio para tener éxito. a. acceptable b. no acceptable c. no lo sé
Accomplishment: probability impossible	Los investigadores buscan un barco que se hundió en el siglo XIX. Pasa un pescador que oye muchos gritos y pregunta qué pasa. El capitán que no ha visto nada, dice: - Descubrirán el barco hundido. a. acceptable b. no acceptable c. no lo sé
Achievement: future only possible	Los mejores amigos de mi hermano se van a casar. Mi hermano dice: - Escucharán una canción romántica en la boda. a. acceptable b. no acceptable c. no lo sé

Participants were presented with the task, where the instructions asked them to choose one of the options: a. acceptable b. not acceptable and c. do not know. The first part of each scenario presents context for the situation and the second part is the actual phrase that contains the experimental token. The

² It has to be mentioned that although the participants are tested for their sensitivity to the aspectual classes, they do not get any explicit instruction on the difference between the two groups of verbs (states/activities and accomplishments/achievements). Only through error correction exercise Groups A and B have exposure to them. Group C was not exposed to them at all.

participants judged the grammaticality of the entire situation, taking into consideration the context and the grammatical structure. In the examples above, the expected responses are in bold.

In the second task (LWPT) the participants were presented with a statement or a question in English or French (according to their L1) and the same statement or question in Spanish with an infinitive of a verb in brackets. A total of 30 tokens were presented: 20 experimental and 10 distractors. The participants were asked to express the meaning of the English or French sentence by conjugating the infinitive in brackets. Some examples can be seen below.

Condition	Example (English)	Example (French)
Probability	Victoria's watch must cost a lot. El reloj de Victoria (valer) _____ mucho.	Qu'est-ce que mes frères seront en train de faire? ¿Qué (hacer) _____ mis hermanos?
Future tense	How much will the flight cost? ¿Cuánto (valer) _____ el vuelo?	Miguel aura 19 ans le mois prochain. Miguel (tener) _____ 19 años el próximo mes.

If our lesson plans were successful, then we expect the two experimental groups to translate the verbs in brackets according to the context which in turn would show whether they acquired future morphology, as well as sensitivity to the use of probability in appropriate contexts. We take into consideration that some students opt for translating probability with periphrastic *deber* or *haber de*, instead of the future morphology. Similar situation may happen with the future tense interpretation: some participants opt for a more familiar way of expressing the future, “the periphrastic *ir a + infinitive*”.

So far we have presented the research questions, hypotheses and described the participants and the procedures of our study. In the next subsection we will analyze the results of the tests.

3.4. Results

We start this section with the pretest results. Then we discuss the results of the GJT and the LWPT tasks at Time 1 (right after the instruction session). Finally we present the results of the posttest (Time 2 tests) where we will discuss possible retention of the knowledge after a 4 week period.

3.4.1. Pretest results

GJT pretest results show that prior to our instructional sessions the participants in both experimental groups did not have any knowledge of the use of future of probability: they rejected all or a majority of both grammatical and ungrammatical tokens, with stative and activity verbs. At the same time they accepted most of the cases where probability was impossible with accomplishments and achievements. However, they had no problem accepting sentences where only temporal interpretation was grammatical.

LWPT pretest results show that our participants had no problem producing Spanish sentences using future morphology where temporal interpretation was appropriate. On the other hand, epistemic interpretation most of the time was not expressed with future morphology but rather in other ways, mostly ungrammatical (according to the context): conditional, present simple and *Deber-* phrase. Present simple was the most common option, possibly since the context of the sentences clearly referred to present tense. In this case, the participants did not express the probability implied in the sentences. Therefore, we can conclude that they had some knowledge of the future tense, but not of the epistemic use of the future morphology. Therefore, they were at the right level of language development of before the experiment.

3.4.2. Time 1 Tests results

After the instructional sessions we collected data from the two experimental groups and the control group. Figure 1 (see next page) shows the comparison of the responses of our participants on GJT Time 1. Recall that GJT tested all three groups on interpretation of future morphology by accepting or rejecting sentences in 5 conditions: Prob S/A (probability possible with stative and activity verbs), *Prob S/A (probability and future interpretations impossible with stative and activity verbs), Fut S/A (future time possible with stative and activity verbs), #Prob A/A (probability impossible with accomplishments and achievements), and Fut A/A (future time possible with accomplishments and achievements). The numbers demonstrate the percentage of correct answers by our participants. We notice that in general the FOM instruction group B performed better than the groups A and C.

Figure 1: GJT Time 1: % correct.

Groups: A - form focused, B – meaning focused, C - control). Conditions: Probability possible with stative and activity verbs, Probability and future impossible with stative and activity verbs, Future time only possible with stative and activity verbs, Probability impossible with accomplishments and achievements, and Future only possible with accomplishments and achievements.

Group B T1 results suggest that more exposure to Spanish meaning-focused input, that is seeing more evidence of what is and what is not used in the language, may have developed a better sensitivity to verb classes in the participants.

We will now turn to Figure 2 which presents the percentages of responses of our participants on the LWPT Time 1 which was designed to measure the production of our participants.

Figure 2: LWPT Time 1: distribution of results: %.

Groups A, B, C. LWPT 1A: present tense probability; LWPT 1B: future tense temporal use. F – future tense, DP – “deber” probability, PRES – present tense, PF – periphrastic future, OTHER – all other options used by the participants.

We have summarized the responses in F (future morphology), DP (*Deber* Probability), PRES (present simple and present continuous), PF (periphrastic future – *ir a + inf*) and OTHER, which included conditional, present perfect and past tenses). We should note that LWPT 1A refers to the condition where sentences are expected to be translated into Spanish using a probability form. Therefore, future morphology and *deber* probability are both possible responses in this condition. LWPT 1B, on the other hand, is directed to the temporal interpretation. Therefore, future morphology, periphrastic future and present simple are the target responses. In contrast with the pretest results, after the instruction session our participants in the two experimental groups did not use present simple to express future time.

The results show that the two instructional groups have outperformed the control group in the correct use of future morphology. Group B has shown especially high results (almost 100%) both for epistemic interpretation (condition 1A) and for temporal interpretation (1B), Group A shows fairly high results (88% for epistemic and 86% for temporal interpretation), compared to 31% and 60 % in the control group. The difference between the two instructional groups allows us

to conclude that the FOM group B has shown better results on the production task, compared to the FFI group A and the control group C, in both probability and the temporal use of future morphology in Spanish.

3.4.3. French L1 versus English L1 Time 1 test results

In order to assess whether knowledge of French gave some participants an advantage given that French patterns with Spanish with respect to future tense and probability, we subdivided the groups based on their L1. In the GJT 1 we see that both language groups show relatively high scores in recognizing the future morphology for temporal interpretation (in conditions Fut S/A and Fut A/A). It is not surprising that the participants have less difficulty with the temporal interpretation compared to the epistemic one, because temporal has a higher frequency of use. It is surprising, though, that French L1 learners of Spanish have scored lower on the temporal interpretation compared to the English L1 learners, although French uses very similar morphology for future tense as Spanish does. It can only be explained by the more common use of periphrastic future in both French and Spanish for expressing future time instead of the future morphology. What especially stands out are the higher scores of L1 French over L1 English on recognition of the epistemic reading. This can be explained by the closeness of French and Spanish in the way of expressing probability with future morphology. Since the epistemic interpretation is our focus in this experiment, based on the results of the GJT Time 1, L1 influence is evident here in the positive transfer from L1 French into L2 Spanish. Regarding English L1, we notice some interference, which is noted in lower scores of L1 English speakers.

Based on the results of the LWPT of the two language groups separately, we notice that while both display high scores on the production of future morphology for epistemic and temporal interpretation, there is an advantage of the French L1 learners over the English L1 learners of Spanish. The scores suggest that FFI resulted in more successful acquisition for the French participants, while FOM instruction has shown very close results for both language groups. In the two control groups French L1 participants display better results for the use of future of probability, while English L1 participants show higher scores for temporal interpretation. In the following section we will analyze the results of Time 2 tests.

3.4.4. Time 2 Tests Results

Recall that the posttests (Time 2 testing) were performed by our participants 4 weeks after the Time 1 testing. The control group C did not perform the posttests since the aim of these delayed tasks was to measure the long term effect of our instruction methods developed for this study. In Figure 3 (see next page) we show

the distribution of the percentage of correct responses of the two experimental groups at Time 2 of GJT.

Figure 3: GJT Time 2: % correct.

Groups: A - form focused, B – meaning focused). Conditions: Probability possible with stative and activity verbs, Probability and future impossible with stative and activity verbs, Future time only possible with stative and activity verbs, Probability impossible with accomplishments and achievements, and Future only possible with accomplishments and achievements.

We see that after the four week period since the instruction and FOM instruction group (B) shows better results than the FFI group (A) on most conditions. This suggests that the FOM had a better effect on long term retention of SFP knowledge in our participants. Next, we will look at the results of the LWPT posttest (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: LWPT Time 2: distribution of results: %.

Groups A (FFI) and B (FOM). Present tense probability versus future time events. F – future

tense, DP – “deber” probability, PRES – present tense, OTHER – all other options used by the participants.

Based on the results of the chart above we notice that the production scores are still high even after the 4 week period since the instruction session. Group B participants have demonstrated perfect results: they produced only the morphological future form for expressing future tense and probability (100%). Group A shows slightly lower results compared to group B, especially in the epistemic use (76%).

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this final section we address our research questions and hypotheses. First, we asked whether FFI would have a positive effect on the acquisition of SFP in L2 Spanish learners. Second question was whether FOM instruction without explicit instruction of the use of SFP has a positive effect on the acquisition of SFP in L2 Spanish learners. Based on the results of the two tests at Time 1, we conclude that both instruction methods developed for this experiment had positive short term effect on the acquisition of SFP in our participants since they outperformed the control group participants on the epistemic interpretation and production of the future morphology. Therefore, our responses to questions 1 and 2 are positive and our first two hypotheses are supported. Based on the results of GJT and LWPT Time 1, Group B outperformed Group A, which suggests an advantage of FOM over FFI in both interpretation and production of the SFP.

Next, we asked whether the participants in the two experimental groups retain the possible long term effect of FFI and FOM instruction of SFP (after 4 weeks). We hypothesized that if the results of the Time 2 tests remain comparable to the results of Time 1 tests, then the long term effect of our instruction was retained successfully. We believe that although both groups had lost some of the knowledge of SFP, the effect of our instruction sessions was positive since both groups demonstrated retention of most of the knowledge acquired as a result of instruction and practice during the experimental sessions. In particular, the FOM instruction showed a more positive effect on short term and long term acquisition of epistemic future than the FFI. In summary, the posttest results support our last hypothesis: since both instruction groups have retained most of the SFP knowledge compared to Time 1 tests, our instruction methods indeed had positive long term effects on their acquisition.

Through conducting this study we hoped to identify whether the two instructional methods developed for this experiment provided better results in the acquisition of Spanish future of probability compared to the method currently used in the University of Ottawa program. In particular, we were interested in the difference in the effects of FFI with more explicit instruction and a FOM, or

implicit instruction. The long term goal of this study is to create more suitable supplementary materials for the students in our program as well as other university and college Spanish programs.

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