

LOS EFECTOS DE LA INSTRUCCIÓN EN LA HABILIDAD ESCRITA DE HABLANTES DE ESPAÑOL COMO LENGUA HEREDADA: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO *

THE EFFECTS OF INSTRUCTION ON THE WRITTEN PROFICIENCY OF HERITAGE SPANISH SPEAKERS: A CASE STUDY

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RESUMEN

En los E.E.U.U., los hablantes de español como lengua heredada son aquellos que aprenden el español en la infancia, para luego cambiar al inglés, que pasa a ser su lengua dominante. Estos hablantes muestran varios niveles de bilingüismo. Los más avanzados tienen habilidades de comprensión y producción oral en la lengua heredada, no obstante, presentan deficiencias en su producción escrita. Una carencia en los estudios de lengua heredada comprende el impacto de la instrucción formal en la competencia lingüística de estos hablantes y áreas específicas. El presente estudio de caso investiga precisamente este asunto examinando la producción escrita de hablantes avanzados de lengua heredada. Los resultados después de un semestre de instrucción indican que la enseñanza explícita de gramática, acompañada de práctica extensa en escritura, es beneficiosa. El aprendizaje logrado a partir de la instrucción fue significativo en las áreas de ortografía y habilidad general de escritura.

Palabras claves: bilingüismo; efectos de la instrucción; lengua heredada; el español en los E.E.U.U.; habilidad escrita.

ABSTRACT

In the U.S., heritage Spanish speakers are those who acquire Spanish in early childhood, but then switch to English, which becomes their dominant language. Such speakers possess various degrees of bilingualism. Those of advanced proficiency have both receptive and productive oral skills in their heritage language, yet still fail to display native-like abilities in their written output. A gap in heritage language research is whether formal instruction has an impact on the linguistic competence of heritage speakers, and if so, in which areas. This case study addresses the issue by exploring the written production of advanced heritage speakers. Results after one semester of instruction revealed that a focus on explicit grammar teaching and extensive writing was beneficial. Gains after instruction were significant in orthography and general writing skills.

Keywords: bilingualism; effects of instruction; heritage language; Spanish in the U.S.; written proficiency.

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Introduction

Heritage Spanish speakers comprise the largest minority group in the U.S. and their presence continues to grow. According to a May 1, 2008 report by the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated Hispanic population has surpassed 45 million, roughly 15% of the total population. Consequently, heritage speakers of Spanish have become a rapidly growing presence at all levels of education, from elementary school through college. Unfortunately, despite significant progress in curriculum development, few university-led Spanish departments offer courses targeting heritage language speakers' actual linguistic needs (see Ingold, Rivers, Tesser, & Ashby, 2002), which vary according to their individual proficiencies, motivations, and backgrounds.

According to Valdés (2006), most heritage speakers have been enrolled either in traditional foreign language classrooms or in remedial courses intended to re-teach the basics of the heritage language they, supposedly, had not learned well at home. Consequently, heritage speakers wanting to pursue a Spanish major or minor often have no upper-level courses to help them continue developing their linguistic competencies or to maintain their heritage language. Furthermore, little attention has been given to advanced heritage speakers who want to improve their textual competence rather than developing the communicative proficiency they already possess (Alarcón, 2010).

Thus, the biggest challenge for heritage language programs is to design a curriculum that effectively helps heritage learners acquire, develop, and maintain their heritage language according to their specific needs and sociolinguistic profiles. Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, and Pérez (2008) have suggested that a research agenda aimed at guiding the design of heritage language instruction should investigate the role of different types of instruction in heritage learners' language development. In order to determine the types of instruction that are most effective, research assessing learning outcomes is required.

To the author's knowledge, there are only two published studies investigating the effects of instruction on heritage speakers' grammars. Montrul and Bowles (2009) examined lower-proficiency heritage speakers' dative case marking with both animate direct objects and *gustar*-psych verbs. Their experimental treatment consisted of a single online grammatical explanation of the uses of the preposition *a* followed by three practice exercises, for which the students received immediate feedback. The effect of instruction was measured by comparing results of a pre- and post-test. Results showed that, at least in the short term, explicit grammar instruction can facilitate heritage language acquisition. In the second study, Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009) investigated the effects of both processing and traditional instruction on the development of the past subjunctive by lower-proficiency heritage learners. Instruction consisted of two class periods in which participants were exposed to either the processing or the traditional methodology. Results of pre- and post-tests indicated that the type of teaching method had no effect on the heritage speakers' development after treatment, but that focused grammar instruction did yield significant improvement of this structure.

Although these studies provide evidence of the effect of instruction, their results are limited to a single grammatical structure, a relatively short instructional treatment, and to only low-proficiency heritage learners. Though there are several other studies showing evidence of language areas in which heritage Spanish speakers display incomplete acquisition, such as the tense-aspect system (Silva-Corvalán, 1994) and gender agreement (Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008), these studies have also focused exclusively on lower-proficiency heritage speakers.

The present study, though exploratory, is a first attempt to assess grammatical knowledge and overall writing abilities of advanced heritage speakers before and after a full semester of instruction. There are two goals. The first is to determine the specific linguistic areas in which advanced heritage speakers display incomplete acquisition in their heritage language written production. The second is to investigate the extent to which targeted formal instruction is effective in those areas.

The present study

This case study describes the effects of heritage language instruction on the implicit grammars of advanced heritage learners as manifested in their writing. Performance was measured with specific assessment tools based on the pedagogical goals and materials specified at the beginning of the course.

Course description

The course was an upper-level *Grammar and composition for heritage speakers of Spanish*, specifically designed for English-Spanish bilinguals who were fluent Spanish speakers, and were primarily interested in perfecting their academic writing abilities. Students reported that their main reason for taking the heritage language course was “to become better with writing in Spanish” (Vicky, a participant). Self-assessments of their language skills indicated that all participants evaluated their speaking, listening, and reading abilities as either advanced or native-like, but their writing skills were generally self-rated as merely intermediate. When asked about the aspects of language on which they wanted their heritage language course to focus, all of the students agreed that the course should stress writing, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary, in that order.

The heritage language course combined formal language study with writing practice by following both Valdés, Teschner, and Enríquez’s (2008) program for English-Spanish bilinguals and Whitley and González’s (2007) integration of grammar into writing instruction. Within this framework, implicit knowledge system accommodation and restructuring occurs as the student prepares for each writing task (see Lee & VanPatten, 2003, for a detailed discussion). To maximize this preparation, students in the course were required to be active agents in brainstorming, outlining, composing, editing, proofreading, submitting a first draft, and then revising and resubmitting after receiving feedback from the instructor. Vocabulary learning was closely associated with grammatical development, since knowing a word implies not merely knowing its meaning, but also its grammatical behavior (Nation, 2001).

The instructional goals, pedagogical practices, and content of the course were based on the students’ sociolinguistic profile (see Alarcón, 2010, for a full report) and initial assessments of their linguistic abilities in written production (current paper). Based on these data, the course offered, first, explicit instruction on forms and grammatical structures that were particularly problematic for the students, such as hypothetical constructions and written accentuation rules; second, daily readings outside of class to serve both as additional input exposure and as the basis for homework and class exercises, including writing opinions, dictations, and drills (mechanical, meaningful, and communicative); and third, systematic and extensive writing practice of varied lengths and genres, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative, to apply grammatical and lexical knowledge that had been recently studied.

Research questions

The main questions motivating the present study were:

- (1) What are the linguistic areas in which advanced heritage Spanish learners display incomplete acquisition of the heritage language in written production?
- (2) Does explicit formal instruction in those areas lead to significant gains?
- (3) What are the pedagogical implications for heritage speakers' programs stemming from the present findings?

As recommended by Potowski and Carreira (2004), the present study considers heritage speakers' performance in relation to native rather than L2 speakers. The goal is to contribute to the existing heritage speakers' literature by providing both a global picture of advanced heritage speakers' linguistic performance in written production, as well as to provide evidence of the effects of explicit instruction on the learners' implicit knowledge systems. Most previous studies offering heritage speakers' global profiles have focused on the performance of lower-proficiency learners on a single oral semi-guided interview (e.g., Lynch, 2008). The present study examines the students' written production both at the beginning and the end of a semester-long course, thereby offering evidence of the effectiveness of instruction narrowly aimed at developing grammatical competence, lexical knowledge, and overall writing skills. The article focuses on both qualitative and quantitative analyses of specific linguistic measurements of the students' abilities in basic grammar, orthography (accentuation, spelling, and punctuation), and essay writing.

Method

Participants

The participants were heritage language students at a small private university with a very low Hispanic population. In Fall 2007 only 38 freshmen, 3.4% of the total, identified themselves as Hispanic. This explains the absence of a heritage language program in the curriculum. In Spring 2008, however, the university offered its first course exclusively for heritage Spanish speakers. The participants in this study were the only five undergraduates who self-identified themselves as bilinguals and enrolled in this pilot course. The average age of the students, four females and one male, was 19.6. In the present study, they will be identified as Carmen, Isabel, Vicky, Rosa, and Pablo. Rosa audited, but the other four students took the course for credit. Carmen and Isabel were freshmen; Pablo was a sophomore; Vicky, a junior; and Rosa was a senior.

These heritage learners were initially given a departmental online diagnostic test consisting of 50 multiple-choice questions covering basic grammatical knowledge. This diagnostic test is regularly given to high-intermediate/advanced second language (L2) learners of Spanish at the beginning of their grammar and composition class, a parallel course. In addition to internal placement, administering the diagnostic test to the heritage speakers allowed comparisons of their grammatical competence with that of traditional L2 learners. The average score among L2 learners in five sections of the course offered in an earlier semester was 28/50 (*SD* 7.06, range 17-45). Results among the heritage learners were clearly superior: their average was 43/50 (*SD* 5.59, range 35-48). The individual scores were: Carmen – 45, Isabel – 44, Vicky – 48 and Pablo – 35. Rosa was unable to take the on-line diagnostic test because she was auditing. These test results revealed little variation among the heritage speakers, and that even their lowest score was higher than the average for L2 learners.

To determine the students' sociolinguistic profile, including their needs and heritage course expectations, an extensive linguistic background questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the semester. The survey measured the students' language attitudes, language contact, linguistic behaviors, and self-assessments of Spanish proficiencies. Results showed that these 2nd generation heritage Spanish students should be considered advanced, not only because they had linguistic skills surpassing those of high intermediate/advanced L2 learners (Draper & Hicks, 2000), but also because they were fundamentally different from lower proficiency heritage learners (cf. Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005). Contrary to most lower-proficiency heritage speakers, these advanced heritage learners acquired Spanish from birth, always spoke Spanish at home, felt very comfortable speaking and listening to the language, as well as reading and writing in Spanish, were committed to teaching their children the language, were confident in their heritage language skills, accepted the dialect they speak without negative biases, and wanted to become better writers in Spanish. Table 1 summarizes the relevant characteristics of the advanced heritage students participating in this study. (Complete survey results appear in Alarcón, 2010.)

Table 1: Advanced heritage speakers of Spanish

Heritage speaker	Age	Age of language acquisition	Home State	Parents' home country	Language spoken at home	Language in formal education	Self-identity	Spanish major / minor
Carmen	18	Birth	Florida	Nicaragua	Spanish & English	English	Hispanic	Yes
Isabel	18	Birth	Vermont	Mexico	Spanish & English	English	Latin	Yes
Vicky	21	Birth	New York	Argentina	Spanish & English	English	Hispanic	Yes
Rosa	21	Birth	North Carolina	Cuba	Spanish & English	English	Latin-American	No
Pablo	20	Birth	North Carolina	Perú	Spanish & English	English	Hispanic	Yes

Data collection instruments

The present article focuses on three specific assessment instruments addressing the students' linguistic knowledge and abilities in their heritage language: grammar and orthography tests, and an essay writing assignment.

The grammar and orthography assessments were administered as identical pre- and post tests at the beginning and end of the semester. On all occasions, the students were told that no grade would be assigned because the tasks were designed for research data collection rather than for instruction. The goal of the pre-tests was to distinguish the specific linguistic features and structures the students had already acquired from those that needed explicit instruction for development and (re)acquisition. The purpose of the post-tests was to measure linguistic improvement and thus the efficacy of the explicit instruction. These assessment instruments proved to be useful measurements of the linguistic abilities of the heritage learners before and after one semester of instruction. Each is described in detail in the following sections.

Grammar assessment. The grammar test consisted of 48 multiple-choice questions presented in brief and meaningful contexts. See examples (1) and (2). The students circled the best option in each sentence. This test included structures such as the copula *ser/estar*, article usage, stem-changing verb forms in the present, demonstratives, comparative structures, direct and indirect object pronouns, aspectual distinction (preterit vs. imperfect verb forms), *gustar*-type verbs, mood distinctions (indicative vs. subjunctive forms in complex subordinate clauses), indefinite adjectives and pronouns, the use of past subjunctive and conditional forms in hypothetical constructions, and preposition usage.

These basic Spanish grammatical forms and structures are usually problematic for traditional L2 learners (Koike & Klee, 2003), especially those forms that either differ significantly or are entirely absent from the learner's native language. For native English speaking learners, these include *gustar*-type verbs and grammatical gender marking. Moreover, the grammatical structures on the test are ones that L2 learners are expected to master upon finishing their basic language requirement courses. Heritage speakers in general display wide variation on these grammatical features, particularly in language contact situations, which almost inevitably lead to language simplification or loss (see Silva-Corvalán, 1994, for a thorough discussion).

- (1) *Tan pronto como (termino / termine) mis estudios, viajaré a Guatemala. Antes, iré a ver a mis padres a Boston para que me (den / dan) un poco de dinero.*
 (2) *Ayer, después de mi clase de Historia, (fui / iba) a la biblioteca para estudiar y hacer mis tareas. (Era / Fue) un día muy productivo.*

Orthography assessment. The two-part orthography test focused on written accentuation, spelling, and punctuation. The first part required students to identify and correct a variety of errors in brief but meaningful sentences, as in example (3). The second part asked students to decide whether the underlined vowel, which was tonic, needed a graphic accent mark, as in examples (4) and (5).

The orthographical features covered on the test were accentuation of interrogative and exclamatory pronouns (e.g., *¿Cómo?*, and *¡Hola!*), of monosyllables (e.g., *sí* vs., *si*), of non-diphthongs (e.g., *Raúl*), and of accentuation following the general rules (e.g., *sábado*, and *árbol*); spelling (e.g., *b* vs. *v*); upper and lower case letters (e.g., *Dr.*, and *lunes*); basic punctuation (e.g., initial and final interrogative signs); and, finally, non-basic punctuation (e.g., commas/periods outside quotation marks).

For native speakers of Spanish, mastery of orthographical conventions (accentuation, spelling, punctuation) is an indication of a well-educated person. All of these features are common in written production in any standard Spanish variety, and must be addressed in the heritage language curriculum, especially in courses designed for advanced heritage speakers who want to improve their academic writing skills.

- (3) **“A que hora comiensa el partido?” “No se.”*
 (4) *limite, limite, limite*
 (5) *perdida, perdida*

Writing sample assessment. In accordance with Hasson's claim that to “capture the essence of an individuals' language competence, larger units of discourse, such as transcribed interviews, written paragraphs or full essays, are necessary” (2008, p. 140), the present study used writing

samples in the heritage language to measure proficiency with respect to overall literacy. The students were asked to write two essays, three to four paragraphs each, on their recent vacations (Christmas break for the pre-test and Spring break on the post-test). The writing samples were analyzed quantitatively on five categories: grammar, vocabulary, organization, content, and mechanics, following a thorough analytical scoring criterion (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). These five categories were not weighted equally, but rather reflected the conditions of the writing task and the emphases during instruction. For example, since the students did not know the topic of the essay in advanced, and thus had no prior preparation (e.g., an outline of the composition), content and organization were given less weight than grammar and vocabulary. Mechanics was assigned the least weight, since the students had a separate assessment on accentuation, spelling, and punctuation.

The essays were also analyzed qualitatively using an error analysis technique to identify specific grammar, lexical, and discourse marker errors. The features analyzed included the use of Anglicisms, word-choice problems, preterit vs. imperfect verbs, imprecise and/or missing prepositions, gender and number agreement, missing/wrong reflexive and object pronouns, article usage, personal *a*, copula *ser/estar*, erroneous verb form, and the redundant use of *yo*. All of these lexical, grammatical, and discourse features are taught in both traditional foreign language and Spanish heritage language courses.

Analysis and results

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data focused on specific areas of advanced heritage learners' written production, including their grammatical, lexical, and orthographical knowledge, as well as their essay writing abilities.

Grammar test

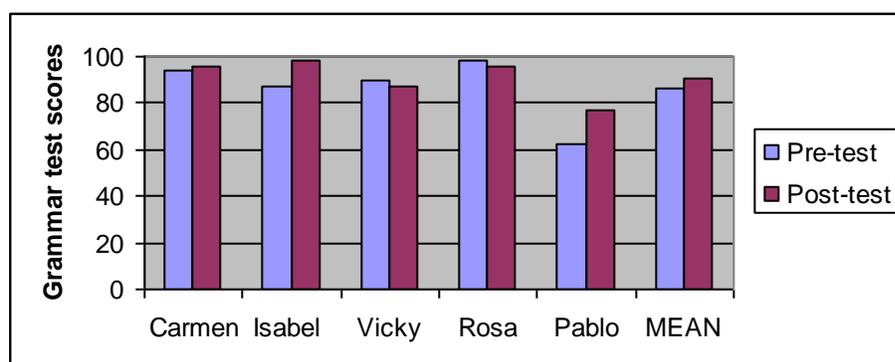
The qualitative analysis of the pre-test revealed errors on all of the tested features: mood distinction (present indicative and subjunctive) in nominal, adjectival, and adverbial subordinate sentences; preposition usage; *gustar*-type verbs; article usage; comparative structures; demonstratives; direct and indirect object pronouns; aspectual distinction (preterit and imperfect); and past subjunctive and conditionals in hypothetical constructions. The pre-test also provided individual linguistic profiles. For example, Pablo displayed errors in all of the targeted structures, while Rosa showed an almost perfect command of these structures, with only a single error in article usage. This variation in proficiency is characteristic of heritage speakers (Valdés, 2000).

The post-test showed that some difficult structures had been overcome by most students. For example, everyone except Vicky had problems with article usage on the pre-test, but by the end of the semester only Carmen and Rosa were still making such errors, particularly by omitting definite articles in obligatory generic contexts. Isabel, who initially had problems with five grammatical structures, displayed errors only with *gustar*-type verbs on the post-test. In a few cases, the post-test revealed new errors. For example, Carmen made no errors with preposition usage on the pre-test, but on the post-test she did, selecting **soñar de* instead of *soñar con* (to dream of). But the qualitative analysis of the grammar test did not examine the frequency of errors. For example, even though Pablo made almost identical errors with most structures on both the pre- and post-tests, the frequency of his errors decreased substantially.

Quantitative analysis of the pre-test suggested that most of the students had already acquired the Spanish grammatical properties that are problematic for L2 learners, since the mean was

86.14% (SD 13.83). The post-test mean was 90.66% (SD 8.53). A one-tailed paired-samples t -test ($p < .05$) indicated that post-instruction gains were not significant (.1285). Pre- and post-test results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Grammar: Pre- and Post-test Results



Orthography test

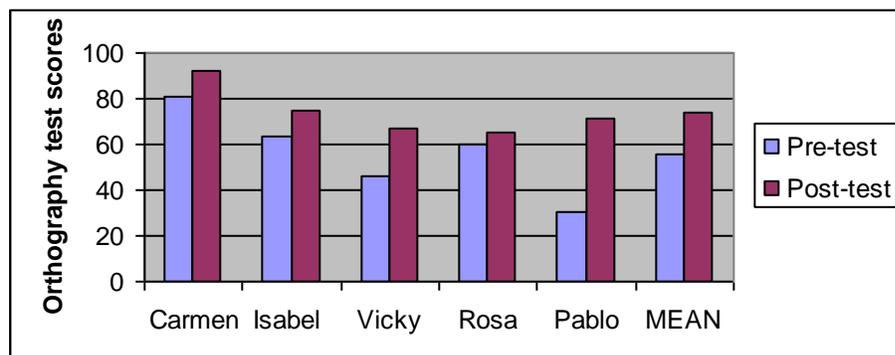
The qualitative analyses included the orthographical features on which the students displayed errors: written accentuation of interrogative pronouns, monosyllables, non-diphthongs, and words falling under the general rules; spelling of letters such as *c/s/z*; upper and lower case letters; and basic/non-basic punctuation. The number of tokens per category, though, was variable, because the test items were adapted from review exercises (Whitley & González, 2007), and not specifically designed for test purposes. Nonetheless, this variability accurately reflects real frequency of usage. For example, words following the general rules of accentuation are more common than interrogative pronouns, monosyllables and non-diphthongs, which are exceptions to those rules.

Pre-test results revealed that all heritage speakers had problems with accentuation rules, particularly with interrogative pronouns, as in *¿A qué hora?* (At what time?), and general-rule words, as in *Júpiter* (Jupiter), *fósil* (fossile), and *dieciséis* (sixteen). They also had difficulties with spelling, such as *z/c* in *comienza* (to begin) and *lápices* (pencils), and with non-basic punctuation, including the use of periods in abbreviations, as in *Sra.* (Mrs.). Post-test analyses showed improvement after instruction for all of these heritage speakers. The feature displaying the highest improvement was accentuation, in all subcategories, indicating that heritage speakers benefited from explicit instruction and intense practice of these rules. Spelling, upper and lower case letters, and basic punctuation showed inconsistent patterns within and among individuals: some students improved, others declined, and still others exhibited no change. On non-basic punctuation, however, none of the learners displayed any change between the pre and post-tests. This outcome reflects the limited attention devoted to this type of punctuation relative to other course topics, such as accentuation.

The quantitative analysis of the orthography test showed that the participants, except for Carmen, did not have a solid command of written accentuation, spelling and punctuation. The group pre-test mean was 56.02% (SD 18.54). After instruction, though, most of the students

improved enormously (except Rosa, who was auditing and missed several sessions during the semester due to schedule conflicts). The post-test mean was 74.24% (*SD* 10.75). A one-tailed paired-samples t-test indicated that the gains students made in their post-tests were significant ($p = .02$). Figure 2 shows these results.

Figure 2: Orthography: Pre- and Post-test Results



Writing samples

For this part of the heritage proficiency assessment, students were asked to write two personal narratives, the first on their winter vacation (essay 1) and the second on their spring break (essay 2). These essays were written at the beginning and the end of the semester. Since the topic, genre and social interaction type (free writing) were the same in both samples, the variables “field, tenor, and mood,” which determine the register to be used (Colombi, 2003), were also identical: informal written narrative. The average word counts, 244 on the first essay and 177 on essay 2, show significantly more production than in previous studies under similar conditions (118 words in 15 minutes in one example, Martinez, 2007). The qualitative analysis of the students’ written performance involved both an analytical scoring procedure (Lee & VanPatten, 2003) to assess students’ overall written proficiency in five categories: grammar, vocabulary, organization, content, and mechanics (cf. Hasson, 2008); and an error analysis technique to determine the specific grammatical and lexical performance errors (there were no errors in discourse markers).

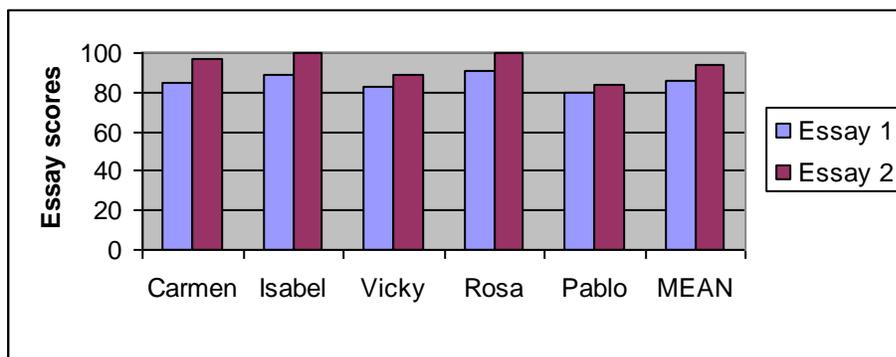
Overall essay results indicated that the occasional errors did not impede comprehensibility. Most of these students showed adequate, though unimpressive, vocabulary for this type of personal narrative. There were almost no erroneous word choices, and meaning was seldom confused or obscured. With respect to organization, despite the lack of preparation, most of the students wrote texts with an evident order, in which the main points stood out even when they were loosely organized. Most of the students showed improvement, achieving on the second essay a more logically and effectively ordered composition, in which the main points and details were fully connected. Regarding content, the students generally provided adequate information with some development of ideas. The second writing samples were superior in offering more information that was relevant and complete. Since accentuation, spelling, and punctuation were assessed separately, they were weighted more lightly in the analytic score. Initially, most students showed at least some errors in mechanics. By the time of the post-test, however, most of them had substantially overcome these errors when writing a narrative.

Next, an error analysis was done on both essays. Students made specific errors with aspect distinction, Anglicisms, imprecise or missing prepositions, incorrect word choice, number agreement (including subject-verb and singular/plural nouns), wrong or missing pronouns, missing articles, personal *a*, copula distinction, gender agreement, redundant *yo*, and verb forms. Examples (6) through (17) show grammatical and lexical written performance errors made by these advanced heritage speakers. The specific error has been underlined to illustrate the specific grammatical or lexical variable, other errors are in bold, and missing word(s) are in brackets.

- (6) Aspectual distinction (preterit vs. imperfect)
Ese mismo día era el cumpleaños de mi hermano mayor que cumplió veinticuatro años. (Carmen)
- (7) Anglicisms
Lo que hice más mientras estaba en Miami fue estar con mi familia y mis amigos y amigas. (Carmen)
- (8) Missing/Imprecise prepositions
Era mi primera Navidad a fuera de mi casa en Charlotte. (Pablo)
- (9) Word choice problems
Como vivo en Miami, mis vacaciones de invierno fueron muy caliente. (Carmen)
- (10) Number agreement
Durante mis vacaciones, hice un montón de cosas. (Rosa)
- (11) Missing/Wrong pronouns
Durante estos días me relajé y pasé tiempo con mis perros (Max y Cherrio) y familia. (Isabel)
- (12) Missing articles
Yo fui con el, asi podíamos estar juntos un año nuevo. (Vicky)
- (13) Missing personal *a*
Finalmente, fui a visitar a mi novio en Bangkok, Thailand. (Rosa)
- (14) *Ser* vs. *estar*
*Nunca he sido gran estudiante para apoyar [a] los equipos, pero en este partido si me divertí bastante y **por la primera vez** me quedé todo el juego y soy orgullosa de ser un Demon Deacon!* (Isabel)
- (15) Gender agreement
*Por suerte no **tuvo** que trabajar hasta el dos de enero entonces tuvimos tiempo para ir a escalar la montaña cerca de el base militar juntos.* (Vicky)
- (16) Redundant *yo*
*Yo **quedé** en Perú por casi cuatro semanas, y fue la primera Navidad que yo puedo recordar donde la familia **tuvo** más importancia que los regalos.* (Pablo)
- (17) Verb form
*Aunque viajé mucho **estos** vacaciones me divertí mucho y pude relajarme antes de que [las] clases empiezara.* (Vicky)

Quantitative analysis of the analytic scores on the essays indicated that the students already possessed basic Spanish writing skills. The essay 1 group mean was 85.6% (*SD* 4.44). Nonetheless, the gains in writing skills after instruction were significant. The essay 2 mean was 94% (*SD* 7.17), and a one-tailed paired-samples t-test revealed highly significant ($p = .0025$) improvement. Figure 3 displays these results.

Figure 3: Writing Sample: Essay 1 and Essay 2



Discussion and pedagogical implications

Based on the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the students' performance in the assessment instruments discussed in the present study, the three research questions posed above can now be addressed.

(1) *What are the linguistic areas in which advanced heritage Spanish learners display incomplete acquisition of the heritage language in written production?*

The grammar test results suggest that these advanced heritage speakers have native-like knowledge of the core properties of Spanish grammar. In terms of overall grammatical proficiency, there was little variation among the speakers (except for Pablo). Nonetheless, these students did show individual variation in terms of the specific grammatical features needing further (re)acquisition and development, including mood distinction, preposition and article usage, *gustar*-type verbs, comparative structures, demonstratives, object pronouns, aspectual distinction, and hypothetical constructions. This individual variation in the learners' incomplete acquisition of Spanish grammar might be due to variable and insufficient input (Montrul et al. 2008). Indeed, the learners' responses to the background questionnaire provide evidence of variable linguistic exposure. For example, even though all participants reported speaking Spanish with their family at home, only two of them (Vicky and Rosa) regularly visit Spanish language websites either for news or to chat with friends and relatives. Similarly, they were the only students who regularly read Spanish outside of class. As for listening, only Carmen, Vicky, and Rosa reported listening to Spanish music and radio, as well as watching Spanish language television and films.

The orthography pre-test results revealed clearly that all of these heritage learners required formal instruction on written accentuation, spelling, and punctuation rules. Variable input also explains Carmen's overall advantage in this linguistic area: she was the only participant exposed to Spanish formal instruction during her primary and secondary education. Moreover, these

results are also consistent with the students' self-reported motivation and goals for taking a heritage course. They each claimed to want to strengthen their ability to write in Spanish using a more formal register and vocabulary and to improve their grammar, both of which involve mastery of standard Spanish orthography (accents, spelling and other writing conventions). As Vicky reported "I doubt myself much more when writing in Spanish because of the accents." This particular linguistic skill is one of the most important goals among heritage speakers taking upper-level university heritage language courses (e.g., Mikulski, 2006).

The informal written narratives, which provided evidence of the participants' overall literacy skills, suggested that vocabulary was an area needing further development. Although all of these students showed adequate word use and choice, with sufficiently few errors to avoid confusing or obscuring content, and virtually no use of English, most of the students did not demonstrate an extensive vocabulary that allowed systematically precise and effective word usage. The need for increasing their lexical repertoire is supported by the students' self-reports. Rosa affirmed "I feel pretty confident writing in Spanish –I know my grammar is good, although again if I am writing something academic I often find my vocabulary inhibiting," and Isabel claimed "I write well but I'd like to develop my style and learn to write more eloquently." Thus, in an essay on a familiar topic, these heritage learners showed native-like linguistic competence and lexicon, and yet the latter remains an area to address with both formal instruction and more linguistic exposure, such as extensive reading. Both the teaching of vocabulary and the reading of different types of texts are pedagogical practices contributing to the learner's language maintenance and expansion of the bilingual range (Valdés, 1997). Outside of class, free voluntary reading is the major source of vocabulary growth and overall literacy acquisition and development (e.g., Krashen, 1989).

(2) *Does explicit formal instruction in those areas lead to significant gains?*

All of these advanced heritage speakers benefited from the semester-long instruction. They all improved in grammar, orthography and overall writing skills, despite having come to the classroom with native-like grammatical knowledge and basic writing skills. Furthermore, the gains in orthography and overall writing abilities were found to be statistically significant (.02 and .0025, respectively).

Additional concrete evidence of the learners' implicit knowledge system development is found in the writing samples. Since the topics of the two essays were similar, and the genre the same, the students used comparable structures and vocabulary in both. Comparisons revealed that higher grammatical and lexical accuracy was achieved after instruction. For example, in her first essay, Carmen used the Anglicism *amigos y amigas* (male friends and female friends), but in essay 2, she used the masculine generic *amigos* (friends), which in standard Spanish usage includes friends of both sexes. Similarly, Vicky had incorrectly assigned masculine gender to the feminine noun *vacaciones* (vacations) in essay 1, but in essay 2 she corrected that error.

Nonetheless, according to the native speaker norm, these advanced heritage learners, even after one semester of focused instruction, still displayed incomplete acquisition in specific linguistic areas, including: in grammar, *gustar*-type verbs and mood distinctions; in orthography, general accentuation rules, spelling, upper/lower case letter usage, and punctuation; and in overall writing skills, and vocabulary expansion, particularly regarding synonyms and adverbial connectors.

(3) What are the pedagogical implications for heritage speakers' programs stemming from the present findings?

As Carreira (2003) indicated, the main challenge facing heritage language instructors is adjusting pedagogical practices to fit each individual class. The design of courses for heritage language speakers should be guided by the linguistic goals and needs of the heritage learners themselves. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative data gathered through sociolinguistic surveys and pre- and post-tests, as in the present study, can provide language instructors with relevant sociolinguistic information for designing curricula for particular groups of heritage language learners.

Moreover, in heritage language courses designed specifically for advanced proficiency learners the pedagogical approach should be based on the native speaker model. Advanced heritage students already have receptive and productive skills, and usually have little need for or interest in developing their basic communicative abilities. They are closer to the native speaker norm than they are to low-proficiency speakers, who more closely resemble the typical L2 learner (Lynch, 2008). As native speakers, heritage learners do have an implicit knowledge of the grammar of the language, an intuitive grasp of word meanings, an ability to communicate within diverse social contexts, a wide range of linguistic skills, and the capacity for using the language creatively (Stern, 1983). Consequently, advanced heritage students will need instruction focused on grammar and writing that helps them (re)acquire the linguistic gaps in their implicit knowledge systems that might be incomplete due to variable and insufficient language exposure (Montrul et al., 2008). In addition, as Schwartz suggests, “vocabulary development should be one of the cornerstones of SNS [heritage language] courses and should be integrated with writing instruction” (2003, p. 252).

The following suggestions for a heritage language program for advanced students were proposed by the participants in the present study when asked for their “ideal” heritage Spanish course. They largely agreed that the class should be conducted entirely in Spanish, with no preference for the Spanish variety of the teacher. They also insisted that a small class provides a better environment for individual attention, because “we all got along, helped each other, knew each others strengths and weaknesses, and were taught according to our individual needs” (Isabel). Moreover, they preferred a course focusing on literature and grammar, but not on culture, because “people know culture on their own” (Rosa) and “literature will essentially incorporate culture if good, contemporary authors are selected” (Isabel). The students did not favor any particular teaching methodology, instead suggesting that a mixture of lectures, group discussions, and seminars would be most beneficial. They did favor activities involving questions-and-answers, self-correction, and drills, but not pair-work, which “is often ... inefficient” (Isabel). Perhaps surprisingly, they welcomed teacher correction of their verbal errors, if it is not excessive, since “we have to figure out our mistakes on our own” (Carmen), and if it is accompanied not merely by a substitution of the correct form “but an explanation of the mistake you make if it was grammar” (Pablo). Finally, most of the students emphasized the value of daily quizzes to evaluate their learning progress over other assessment forms, such as journals, oral presentations, and papers, because “[it] makes the student keep up with the reading and puts less pressure on tests” (Isabel).

Limitations and conclusion

Although results demonstrate consistent improvement in all assessed areas, the current study is exploratory. It is a first attempt to evaluate the restructuring of learners' implicit language systems as suggested by development in their written behavior following formal instruction in specific linguistic areas in the written heritage language. Due to the low number of participants, a consequence of both the small Hispanic enrollment at the university where the study was conducted and the fact that the course was new in the curriculum, the results cannot be generalized to all advanced heritage learners. Future research that includes larger numbers of participants is needed to confirm the findings of this study, which was indeed intended partially as a prototype for further studies. In addition, although it is not directly relevant here, the present study, despite a limited number of participants, could potentially inform more theoretical research pertaining to differences between L1 and L2 acquisition.

As it stands, the present characterization of advanced heritage speakers' linguistic abilities in written production is a useful reference for instructors who are teaching advanced heritage students of Spanish for the first time, or who would like to contrast their own heritage learners to these advanced students. This study has demonstrated that heritage language teaching has an important role to play in the (re)acquisition, development and maintenance of heritage languages. Formal instruction in Spanish grammar, orthography, and writing addressing the specific language goals, interests, and needs of advanced heritage learners had an impact on the students' implicit knowledge systems and overall writing abilities. The next step, though, is to examine whether the effects on the learners' implicit systems are sustained over time. Only then will we know if instruction in grammatical features and syntax is genuinely effective.

Research on heritage languages needs to continue investigating how instruction can improve linguistic behavior in the particular language areas that are problematic for heritage speakers, and to develop more effective assessment tools for those areas. The growing sociological importance of the Hispanic community in the U.S. demands that we, as instructors and researchers, renew our efforts to find the best approaches and methods for helping our heritage learners maintain their heritage language.

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