"Spanish composition errors from a combined classroom of heritage (HL) and non-heritage (L2) learners: A comparative case study"

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Purpose An analysis of student error data collected from a combined class of fifteen second (L2) and heritage (HL) language learners

Objectives To determine from the data collected:

1) frequencies with which HL and L2 student participants committed errors at word- and sentence-levels;
2) how error frequencies compared for both groups over a semester's time with the writing of a series of five different compositions, each targeting a more advanced level of writing proficiency;
3) how documented errors committed by HL and L2 students might be used to teach Spanish grammar and composition to a combined class of HL and L2 students.

Background

In 2016, I began to notice increasing numbers of heritage (HL) speakers enrolling in my Intermediate Spanish class designed primarily for second language (L2) learners (See **Figure 1**). Both groups of students exhibited very different linguistic behavior, required different strategies for improvement, and teaching both groups in the same classroom posed challenges in terms of a single text suitable for both groups, as well as delivery of material.

This prompted me to begin collecting consensual data for over 30 different error types from both heritage and non-heritage students in order to better understand how each group's errors compared.. In 2018 and 2019, I published my results of the study in two separate articles (see references below) with the *Journal for Language Teaching and Research*. Among my findings were recommendations based on this data for how to teach both grammar and composition topics to a combined group of students in a single class.

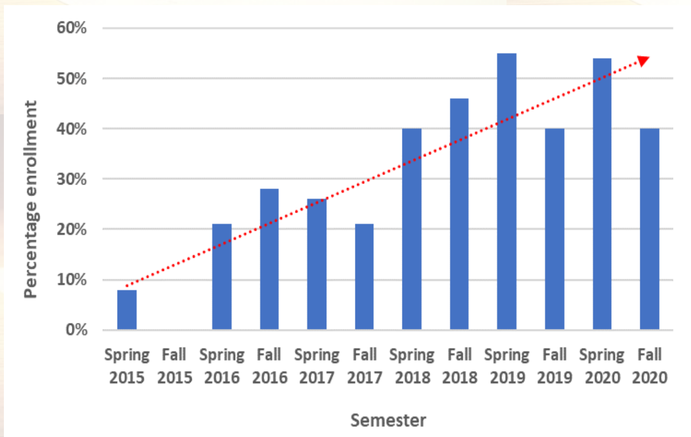

Figure 1. Percentage of heritage learner enrollment in SPAN 202 since Spring 2015

Heritage and Non-heritage Learner Errors—Findings

Figure 2 compares the frequencies exhibited by heritage and non-heritage participants of my analysis with respect to overall errors at word- and sentence-levels. It was interesting that heritage and non-heritage participants exhibited almost precisely inverse tendencies when it came to word- versus sentence-level errors. With heritage speakers committing more errors at word than at sentence level, this supports my hunch that each group has differing needs when it comes to the acquisition of grammar and composition skills, and that I would have to develop different strategies to deal with both groups of students and address their different linguistic needs.

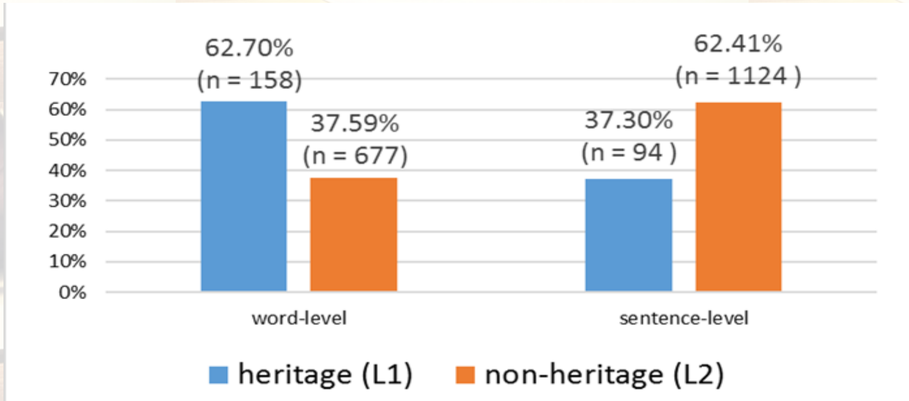

Figure 2. HL and L2 word and sentence errors compared

HL versus L2 errors

Figure 3 shows how the HL and L2 student learners of my study compared when it came to word-level errors within the same grammatical categories. For example, in contrast to their L2 counterparts, HLs were entirely free of copula or adverb errors, and only very sparingly committed gender (< 1%) or tense (< 2%) errors. However, as the figure also indicates, HLs were found to commit a higher percentage of accent (46.84%), spelling (19.64%) and capitalization (8.23%) errors than their L2 counterparts, altogether totaling a combined 74.71% of all word-level errors for that group.

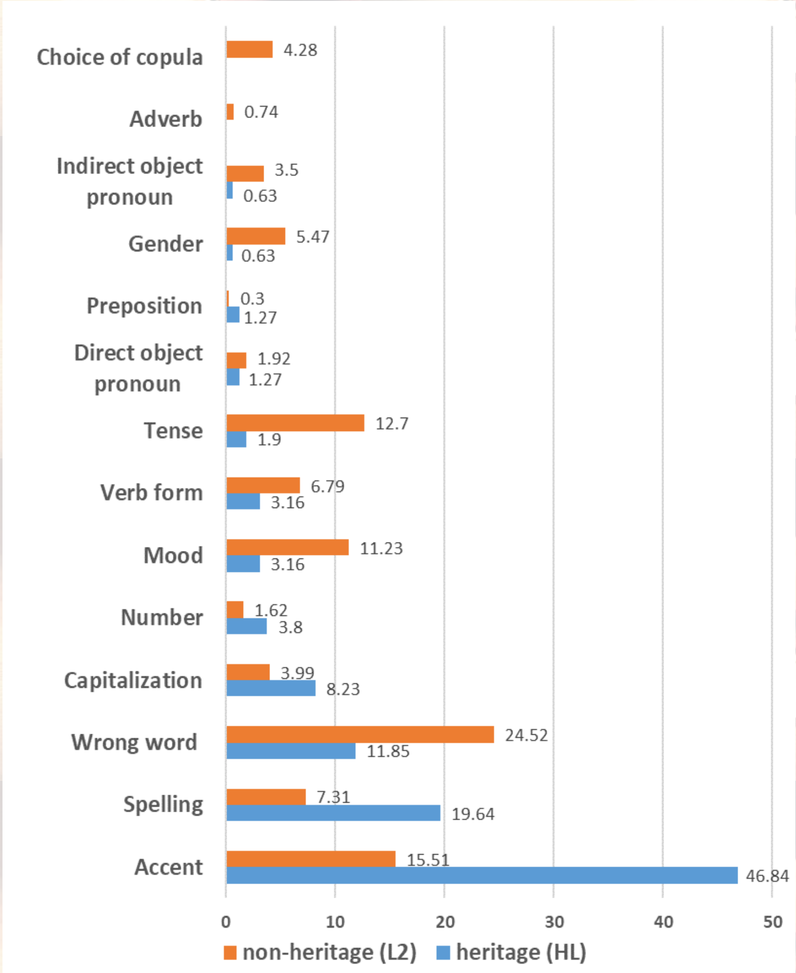

Figure 3. Comparative overall percentage distribution of word-level errors by HL and L2 students (Ryan 2018)

HL within group errors

The error data of this study suggested that as a group, HLs are not monolithic when it comes to proficiency; instead, they appear to lie somewhere along a continuum between first (L1) and second (L2) language learners. **Figure 4** from Ryan (2019) illustrates how four hypothetical heritage language learners (represented by HL^1 through HL^4) span the proficiency range between L1 and L2. .

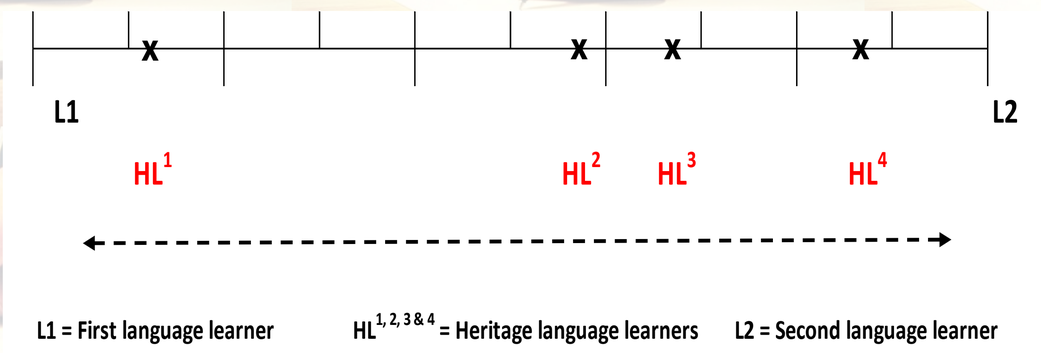

Figure 4. Heritage Learner Continuum (Ryan 2019)

In other words, students like hypothetical HL1 in Figure 4, who are closer in proficiency to L1 speakers of Spanish may commit fewer or more native-like errors, while others like HL2 or HL3 who lie somewhere in the middle of the continuum, may manifest a combination of error types, some being more similar to those of an L1 and others more typical of L2 speakers. Still others, like HL4, commit errors that more closely resemble those of L2 learners. .

Conclusions

- The comparative data of this study have provided me with additional insights and tools that I now use to approach the same grammar or writing topic with combined groups of HL and L2 students. For example, in some cases, as with teaching the rules for written accent marks, the explanation can be one and the same for both groups of students, while other errors, such as erroneous spelling, happen for different reasons within each group, and so these necessitate separate instruction and discussion.
- L2 students tend to make errors that are more of the transfer type from English, whereas HLs, in addition to committing some errors that are similar to those committed by L2s, often confuse "c", "z", and "s", as well as "b" and "v", and leave silent "h" unexpressed.
- Specialized drills that are targeted to each group allow for separate development toward the same learning outcome of improved spelling.
- The HL data of this study have made me more effective in identifying where different heritage students lie along the HL continuum, some requiring more L1-like support, others more l2-like support, and still others, some combination of the two.
- Becoming more knowledgeable of the likely issues each group encounters when approaching the different topics I cover in SPAN 202 has allowed me to continue planning lessons for a combined class with one and the same textbook, to follow a single sequence of grammatical topics, and to supplement my lessons with customized improvement plans for each group of students.

Sources

Ryan, John M. (2018). "Spanish composition errors from a combined classroom of heritage (L1) and non-heritage (L2) learners: A comparative case study." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 9 (3): 439-452.

Ryan, John M. (2019). "A comprehensive, research-based, peer review and self-evaluation module for integration into combined classes for second (L2) and heritage (HL) language learners of Spanish." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 10 (6): 1131-1141.