

It's All about That Base: Persuading Learners of Spanish as a Second Language That Verb Acquisition Is the Essence of Communication

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Introduction

The intended result of a series of Spanish courses is the ability to speak fluidly, if not extensively, in Spanish. The quickest way to speak quickly is to learn some set phrases. As a result of strategies that involve this learning tool, perhaps 75% of Americans can parrot “¿Dónde está el baño?” and “Dos cervezas, por favor.” However, a disappointingly high percentage of people who can say those things cannot say anything that would be useful outside a restaurant.

Working backwards from my curricular goal of creating verbal facility in my students, I start by expressing the threshold concept that verb-conjugation skills matter more than a broad vocabulary when it comes to speaking clearly and smoothly in Spanish. I tell my students that you can point at objects you want to buy or eat, but there are many verbs that one would not be willing to act out before strangers in order to be understood.

Spanish learners show a general willingness to pick up vocabulary. I encourage the use of flash cards, which allows a student to avoid learning words in alphabetical order from a list and permits shuffling of cards. Students learn the infinitives of verbs as well; in my experience, verbs that refer to concrete actions (eat, walk, drive) show better retention than more abstract verbs (follow, put, realize).

Regardless of the retention level of an infinitive, when students try to utter complete sentences, the first pause in most sentences occurs when the time comes to conjugate the verb. The reason is that students, despite their willingness to learn the infinitive that corresponds to a particular action, do not put in the work necessary to be able to access the multiple forms of said

infinitive in live speech. Verb memorization and practice is a solitary, grueling process. It is prone to rationalization and self-deception. (Yeah, I know this verb; I won't need all of these forms anyway.)

Procedure

I know how the language-learner's mind works, and so, I decided that a year-long focus on the methodology behind efficient verb-learning would be my Backwards by Design project this year. My goal was to create ancillary materials that would allow for independent work outside of class time, materials that would foster increased understanding of the simplicity and predictability of verb patterns and thus make them more intuitive over the long run.

I hope eventually to code these exercises for online use, but I also believe strongly in the value of creating brain-hand connections for hand-writing language. For as long as students write exams on paper, they will need to practice writing by hand.

The first step, during Spanish 101 in the Fall quarter, was to help students see that verbs consist of three discrete elements. An understanding of verb endings, a phenomenon that carries little weight in English verb conjugations, gives those students who learn this threshold concept a great advantage from the start of Spanish study. Thus, I required them to fill in tables such as this one:

hablar			comer			vivir											
habl	o	Ø	habl	a	mos	com	o	Ø	com	e	mos	viv	o	Ø	viv	i	mos
habl	a	s	habl	á	is	com	e	s	com	é	is	viv	e	s	viv	Ø	ís
habl	a	Ø	habl	a	n	com	e	Ø	com	e	n	viv	e	Ø	viv	e	n

I encouraged them to fill in a portion of the verbs element by element, so they would see that, for example, the first-person plural forms always end in *-mos*. I also gave them worksheets to prepare ahead of time, on which they would write their answers to questions, which they would then

report to a classmate. After that, they would tell me what the classmate said. Here is a sample exchange:

¿Tienes dinero para comprar leche?

Student 1 answer: Sí, tengo dinero para comprar leche.

Student 2 report of answer: Chris tiene dinero para comprar leche.

This example focuses on irregular first-person singular forms, as the chosen verbs have such forms. I incorporated this worksheet into the third-quarter course, because the form in question is the base for the formation of the present subjunctive. I also gave the students a review of the preterite tense, because the third-person plural form of the preterite is the base for forming the past (imperfect) subjunctive tense.

Despite my warning students during the second quarter that they would need to remember the preterite for the third quarter's new verb tense, they lost a considerable amount of conjugation skill with both the present indicative and the preterite. Therefore, these worksheets were busy work for two or three students, helpful review for half of my students, and triage for the rest.

An issue that arises during the third quarter is that, despite our best efforts, we find ourselves with students at varying levels of previous exposure to the material. I have Western 102 students, both mine and those of other instructors, and a number of students sign up for 103 with two years of high-school Spanish under their belt. Nomenclature is a problem, as 102 and 103 are not designated as Elementary Spanish II and III, but simply as Elementary Spanish. I notify students new to me of that fact prior to the beginning of the course, but several choose to stay in the course anyway. They are normally the ones with little verb retention.

Results

The exam on which I had students write present subjunctive forms did not turn out well. I had not given them the worksheets; I simply told them to review the present indicative and practice the formation of the present subjunctive. After that exam, I gave them sheets to write and to use in

class for pair work, then I retested that section of the exam. Their performance was far better the second time, though I can't credit either my worksheets or their out-of-class review. However, in anticipation of the exam on the past subjunctive, we followed the verb worksheet protocol prior to the exam, and their results were exceptional on the section where they were to conjugate verbs in the imperfect subjunctive. I still can't credit my worksheets entirely, because the students might simply have been scared of a poor grade and thus have studied more.

Feedback

I surveyed my students anonymously after the verb practice, in order to see what they found effective. I was given good insight into their study preferences, and I know what adjustments to make for next year as I help the next generation of Spanish students develop a verb base that will allow them to speak and write fluidly without needing to use secondary materials to look up verb forms.

Of the 40 students who wrote a survey, all but three said the worksheets were helpful. As for using them in speaking exercises, eight found them less useful. The primary complaint was that they didn't know if their oral answers were correct. After they did the oral component, I had volunteers give their answers orally, and I wrote the verb forms on the board. I will seek a more effective way to get the correct answers across to them.

I had expressions of frustration with students who did not prepare properly (they had 48 hours to fill in the sheets), or who worked with students who did not have the sheets filled in. Next year, I will make each exercise worth a significant number of points, probably 10, in order to encourage compliance.

This year, I included a significant amount of self-grading online work in the course. Students found my sheets much more useful, and they said that the online work was a burden because of the extra time it required beyond my worksheets.

Conclusion

The exam results and the student feedback indicate to me that I am on the right track. However, I need to adjust the process so I do not burden my students with as much online work that they (not I) see as ineffective. I intend to rotate these worksheets, taking time throughout a quarter to recycle older verb tenses at the same time that I add in new ones. Providing context and review will lead to the development of a good verb base that will enable quicker gains in fluency over time.