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Long-Term Language Retention for Students of a Second Language: A Review of the Literature

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Long-Term Language Retention for Students of a Second Language:
A Review of the Literature

by

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Chapter 1: Topic Background

Purpose of this Study

For the last 8 years, I have been teaching Spanish at a large elementary school in the Midwest. I am one of five specialists in my building, so my students receive Spanish instruction once a week for 30 minutes each time. This means that my program is an exploratory program in order to provide students with exposure to the language. Since my students are only being exposed to the language, I have always wanted to ensure that the time they spend in my room with the language is as productive as possible. This led to research on best practices in foreign language instruction to guarantee the highest amount of L2 acquisition and long-term retention of the language.

Foreign language teachers have the tough task of finding the best teaching methods to use in order to ensure long-term second language acquisition. According to researchers Grey, Cox, Serafini, and Sanz (2015), students who participate in full or partial immersion programs and/or study abroad programs show the largest gains in their language skills. However, these types of programs are not always possible for teachers because they require the teacher to have an unlimited amount of time with their students. Many foreign language teachers see the value in these opportunities and encourage their students to participate in these experiences whenever possible, but they need to find more realistic options that can be applied in their classroom.

Many teachers will try to re-create experiences that students might have abroad in their rooms, in order to give them a more authentic experience. In doing this, teachers (and textbooks) group vocabulary words categorically. For example, this week the students will be practicing bartering skills, which is an accepted practice in many Latin American markets. Therefore, in

order for students to be successful in this activity, they will need to know how to say the names

of typical things you would find in a market (handmade goods, names of different pieces of

jewelry, magnets, shirts, blankets, etc.). They would also need basic shopping vocabulary (how

much does it cost, too expensive, can I have it for…, no thank you, etc.). Once students have

practiced and mastered these unit vocabulary words, the teacher can have students run through a

scenario where they are practicing buying and selling goods, as well as bartering over the price.

This method of teaching a second language through categorical vocabulary practice is

most accepted. Almost all L2 textbooks and how things are taught within a second language

classroom are set up in a manner that moves students from one unit of related words to the next

unit of related words. However, other studies show that students are better able to remember

vocabulary words when the words are grouped together phonetically instead of categorically.

Wilcox and Medina (2013) presented novice L2 learners with words that were clustered by

categorical and phonological similarities. They found that students were better able to remember

words that are presented in a phonetic cluster compared to those grouped by category. They

believed this to be true because students had to pay closer attention to the phonetically grouped

words in order to distinguish the differences in how to say the words. This heightened attention

to the pronunciation in turn helped with their ability to remember the meaning of the word.

My interest as an educator has always been how to help my students best acquire a

second language, and how to apply best practices in order to ensure that my students are able to

use the language at their fullest potential. I knew that research indicated that the best way for

students to acquire a second language is through total immersion in L2. However, as an

elementary school specialist, I only see my students once a week; therefore, I need the time that I

have with my students to have the most impact possible. I spent many hours researching the best games and activities to keep students motivated as well as have the highest impact on long-term success with the language. While researching, I came across the article written by Wilcox and Medina (2013) which not only opened my eyes to a possibility I did not even know existed, but also made me question the way in which I presented vocabulary words to my students.

Although my main focus as a L2 educator still centers on how to make the best long lasting impact on my students' language abilities, the two reoccurring philosophies of sorting vocabulary words categorically or phonetically peaked my interest and is the basis of my action research project. The majority of world language textbooks are set up using the categorical philosophy, where students learn the language through practical applications in context by using words that fit together within a similar theme. However, the research presented the fact that students may remember vocabulary words better if they are grouped phonetically, because it requires the brain to work harder to pick up on the differences within the words. Based on these two different beliefs, I want to perform my own research study to see which method works better for my students.

Research Questions

In this paper, and for my research, I will explore the following questions…

- What methods of L2 instruction provide best long-term retention for students?

- Does categorical or phonetic vocabulary practice provide better long-term retention of L2 for students?

- Which method of vocabulary word presentation shows better confidence in the use of the language during classroom activities?

- Which method of vocabulary word presentation allows for better pronunciation of the words during classroom activities?

To answer these questions, this study will review literature on second language acquisition, benefits of categorical vocabulary instruction, and benefits of phonetical vocabulary instruction. As well as look at real life students in an exploratory language program, and how they interact with the language.

This study will focus on all first grade students in a large elementary school in the Midwest. There are nine sections of first grade, which is a total number of students just under 200 that will participate in this study. For this study, I will randomly select four sections to receive their vocabulary instruction phonetically, and the other five sections will receive their instruction categorically. All students will take the same vocabulary test prior to instruction, at the end of their first-grade year, at the beginning of their second-grade year, and in January of their second-grade year to show growth and retention over an extended period of time. Student scores will be recorded after all four tests, and then analyzed to see if there is a significant difference between methods of instruction.

Throughout their time as first-grade students, in order to ensure integrity of the research, both groups of students will participate in similar classroom activities. During these activities, I will be keeping tallies of students that show confidence with the language and accuracy of pronouncing the vocabulary words in context. After each lesson, I will compile the data from all classes using the same delivery method and then compare the data to see which delivery method is having a bigger impact on the students' practical usage of the language.

Both of these pieces of the study are vital to the success of my students. Without having the base of vocabulary words to use, the students will not be able to communicate in Spanish. Without confidence, accuracy, and pronunciation students will not be willing to use the language in unfamiliar settings. In order for my students to be successful beyond my classroom, they will need to have a solid base of vocabulary words, but also the confidence, accuracy, and pronunciation skills to use them in real life settings.

Based on this Data

Based on the data that I find in doing the action research project, I will have professional discussions within my PLC groups. In these discussions, I plan to inform my fellow world language teachers of my findings, as to what delivery method of vocabulary words best works for our students. If it happens that my findings do not match our current method of instruction, I plan to make recommendations to modify our curriculum in order to ensure that the students are getting the best education possible. I will also be a more informed teacher on my own practices and ensure that my instruction is in the best interest of my students.

Limitations

This study will be conducted using a convenience sample through using my own classroom and students as the test sample, therefore it will be difficult to generalize information beyond this context. This study is focused on students in a smaller rural town in the Midwest. The population of this study is predominately white, English as a first language, and belong to working class families. Approximately 3% of students are Hispanic, 35% of students are on Free and Reduced lunch, and 13% are special education students. Given this small amount of diversity that is found in this study, these results might not be applicable to most schools.

Another limitation that is presented in this research study is the amount of time that I have with students. As a specialist teacher, my schedule is determined by the principal as a prep-filler around each grade levels math and reading blocks. Therefore, my schedule never looks the same year to year, which means my students do not have a consistent amount of time working with the language. The years in which this study takes place, the first grade students will have Spanish class only 30 minutes a week, which is a total of about 18 hours for the whole school year. This is a very limited amount of time in order to have true significant second language acquisition gains.

Definitions of Terms

Many researchers, including Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), agreed that the following are the standard definitions when discussing language acquisition, and will therefore be used in my paper.

- L1: the language that a person speaks from early childhood.

- Second language (L2): a language learned by a person after his or her native language.

- Language acquisition: to gain L2 skills through their actions and efforts.

- Confidence with the language: student's belief in themselves while using L2.

- Phonetic Instruction: teaching L2 vocabulary words that are grouped based on their similarities in speech sounds and pronunciation.

- Categorical Instruction: teaching L2 vocabulary words that are grouped based on their similarities in what context they would be used.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching strategies for L2 acquisition. Throughout this review L2 skills may be compared to the participant's L1 skills. The three teaching methods that will be covered in this review are immersing students in the language, teaching with realistic situations, and vocabulary introduction.

Immersing Students in the Language

Arguably one of the best methods in learning a second language would be to totally immerse the student in that language through a study abroad experience. In a study conducted by Grey et al. (2015) participants were tested before and after a 5-week study abroad program in a reading test in which they needed identify incorrect grammatical structures in the passage. The participants had to find errors that related to incorrect word order, number agreement, or gender agreement. Grey et al. (2015) found that after the study abroad experience student's accuracy on identifying the mistakes in the passages increased by an effect size of .77. Although this effect size is on the boarder of being considered a significant difference, this study demonstrates that even when participants are not specifically working on reading skills, they are obtaining grammatical correctness just by having to use the language every day.

Another study by Hardison (2014) showed the benefits of studying abroad. In this study a group of university students were tested on their L2 oral proficiency before and after a summer study abroad program. Upon their return students showed significant gains with effect sizes ranging from .83-.90 in pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and accentedness of the

language. This data were compared to students who took language courses at the university during the same time frame. The at home students showed no significant gains during this time with effect sizes of .7 or less on the same tests. Along with testing their oral skills Hardison (2014) asked the students to fill out surveys based on their experience abroad. In the surveys, students reported that they had more confidence in speaking in L2 and an increased ability to use more complex grammatical structures as they spent more time in their host country. This study shows the powerful impact that studying abroad has on students, they have better control of their speaking skills, but on a personal level they feel more confident using the language. Often times it is difficult for L2 teachers to get their students to participate in conversations because they lack the confidence in using their L2 speaking skills.

In another study, Llanes (2012) found that students who studied abroad were able to speak at a faster rate than those who stayed and learned at home. Students who studied abroad showed better fluency after living abroad by increasing their rate of speech from 65 to 111 syllables per minute. These scores were compared to those of the students who stayed at home and learned in the classroom. The at-home students' fluency rate showed no gains as they were able to speak at a rate 75 syllables per minute on both tests. Llanes (2012) also asked if fluency can be maintained long-term. In the study, he tested the students again a year later. The students who studied abroad were speaking at a rate of 122 syllables per minute and those who studied at home were at a rate of 93 syllables per minute. Although the students who did not participate in the study abroad experience had a larger effect size in the delayed test, those who studied abroad were still speaking at a more fluent rate.

These studies show the positive effects that participating in a study abroad program can have on the participants. By living in an environment that forces them to use the language in their everyday lives, they show significant gains in their speaking skills. They are able to speak at a more fluent rate and maintain that fluency long-term. As well as show a higher confidence with using the language and are better able to identify grammatical structures within the language. It is the job of teachers to encourage their students to participate in study abroad experiences in order to enhance their oral speaking skills as well as their overall usage of the language.

Teaching with Realistic Situations

Due to many constraints, most students are not able to participate in a study abroad program, so effective teachers will try to re-create that environment in their classroom. In order to do this, they will create realistic situations for their students to practice the language. Davis (2009) designed her Spanish Level 2 course in a community college in an environment that allowed for students to practice reading, writing, speaking, pronunciation, and listening skills with minimal use of a textbook. Every class period started with a 15-minute conversation completely in Spanish followed by student presentations of authentic written documents that came from Spanish speaking countries. Davis found that by structuring her class this way, she was better able to correct pronunciation mistakes as students were participating in the conversations and presentations. Student surveys also showed that they were more engaged, motivated, and able to find practical ways to use their language skills outside of the classroom. Many students decide to take a second language so that they can communicate with native

speakers while traveling, Davis has given L2 teachers a model in which to replicate a successful environment for students to become better speakers.

Another way to create realistic situations for students to practice their language skills is through authentic texts. Urlaub (2012) asked if using authentic texts would help students generate critical thinking skills when reading in their second language. Prior to reading the passages participants were given a lesson on the history of the country of origin. This part of the lesson was to bring awareness to the cultural tensions that were present during the time the text was written, then participants were asked to read texts of that time period. Urlaub (2012) showed that the participants using authentic texts had a mean growth of 1.14 compared to the control group that had a mean growth of .14 on the critical thinking test. This study shows that students are able to make deeper connections to texts if it originates from the country of study. Using authentic texts also allows for L2 teachers to go beyond the language skills and teach students about the culture of that country. Many students in United States do not have a good sense of the world outside their boarders, so it is important for teachers to take opportunities to broaden their horizons through cultural materials.

van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) conducted a study in creating realistic L2 listening scenarios for student immersion of the language. In this study participants listened to a variety of passages in an unfamiliar language to them and then took a test to see what incidental skills were acquired. The results of this test showed that 38% of the participants were able to understand the correct grammatical structures of the language without knowledge of the words being spoken. van Zeeland and Schmitt also asked if the frequency in which the structures were being used had an effect on participant understanding. The study showed that when participants

heard similar structures three times, 17% could recall the correct structure, but when the structures were used 11 times, 47% of participants could correctly recall them. If L2 teachers use this realistic situation of listening to native students will have the benefit of not only gaining incidental knowledge of grammatical structures, but also practice in hearing authentic speech. Many times when people try to converse with a native speaker they need to ask the speaker to slow down because they are not use to listening in L2 at the speed of a native speaker. By introducing authentic listening situations, students will become more comfortable with the speed of their speech.

These studies solidify the importance of frequently creating a classroom environment that is rich in realistic situations. Such as speaking for extended periods of time, reading authentic texts, or listening activities with native speakers. In doing so, the students will still gain understanding of grammatical concepts through a more authentic situation, as opposed to learning grammar through explicit instruction using verb conjugation charts.

Vocabulary Introduction

Being able to create realistic settings for students within the school environment is important; however, the methods will not be effective unless if the students have the vocabulary to use within those settings. Erten and Tekin (2008) researched how best to introduce L2 vocabulary words. In their study participants were taught four lists of words, two that were grouped by category and two that were grouped with unrelated words. After working with the lists for 3 weeks participants took a test on the word meanings. Erten and Tekin (2008) found no significant difference in the participant's ability to recall words from the lists that were grouped by category to those that were grouped with unrelated words. This study failed to prove that

their hypothesis that when learning a second language, students are better able to make connections to words that are grouped categorically.

Wilcox and Medina (2013) performed a similar study; however, they grouped the vocabulary words differently. They presented novice L2 learners with words that were clustered by semantic and phonetic similarities. Wilcox and Medina found that students were better able to remember words that are presented in a phonological cluster compared to those grouped by category. Wilcox and Medina provided the connections between the words in the unrelated category that Erten and Tekin (2008) were missing. Teachers cannot just present any word grouping to their students. They must group them in some educational manner, and Wilcox and Medina show that phonetic grouping is a valid method.

Another way to introduce vocabulary words is through the keyword method. This was explored by Sagarra and Alba (2006). The keyword method connects the L2 word to a word that has a similar phonetic sound and description to a word in L1, essentially making a mnemonic device for students to remember the meaning of the L2 word. Sagarra and Alba found that the immediate recall posttest of the words had a mean percentage was 92 for participants using the keyword method and mean percentage of 70 who used rote memorization. In the delayed recall posttest of words, the mean percentage was 68 for participants using the keyword method and 46 who used rote memorization. Sagarra and Alba also asked the participants to rate which method they preferred, 92% said the keyword method while 8% said rote memorization. Although this method was shown to be very effective both in the short term and long-term tests, it demands a lot of prep work for the teacher to create of the keywords for students ahead of time.

Although Wilcox and Medina (2013); and Sagarra and Alba (2012) found different effective ways to get students to show vocabulary growth, one underlying theme they shared was the importance of accessing the student's prior knowledge when introducing new vocabulary. Wilcox and Medina stated that beginning level L2 learners do not have a base in which to make connections to other L2 vocabulary, so the use of L1 during instruction is needed. Sagarra and Alba showed the effectiveness in using L1 to create keywords for students to increase their recall abilities of L2 words. A study performed by Gorman (2012) looked at the relationship between working memory, vocabulary size, and phonetic awareness in students when new vocabulary is introduced. This study tested students who were at the beginning of their L2 introduction to see if there was a correlation between L2 gains and L1 gains in total vocabulary growth. Students showed significant growth of effect sizes over .7 in both languages. Since students showed L1 gains while working in a L2 setting, Gorman concluded that it is important to include vocabulary in L1 into the working memory when teaching phonetic awareness in L2.

These studies show that the way in which most L2 textbooks are created may not be organized in the most effective vocabulary introduction method. Textbooks are usually organized by groups of words with a common L1 connection, for example topics would include colors, numbers, foods, animals, and sports. However, Erten and Tekin (2008) and Wilcox and Medina (2013) could argue that phonetic similarities might be a better approach in ways to group words. Gorman (2012) also brought light to the fact that teachers need to be using L1 and L2 skills within the classroom daily in order for student's vocabulary growth and understanding to increase.

Chapter 3: Action Research

Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate which vocabulary introduction method would yield the best L2 retention for students at my large elementary school in the Midwest. For this research project I looked at four main research questions in order to improve my instruction and help my students better retain their L2 language skills from year to year. In this chapter, I will discuss each of the research questions and the results found in my study.

Research Question 1: What Methods of L2 Instruction Provide Best Long-Term Retention for Students?

The literature review in Chapter 2 focused on answering this research question. Current research shows that providing students with authentic situations will best maintain their L2 skills. Allowing students to study abroad is proven to be one of the best ways to have lifelong L2 retention because students are forced to rely on their L2 skills to communicate with others while they are abroad. However, when working within a school district's budget, teachers must get creative in how to provide the same kind of impactful situation without the cost of taking students abroad for an extended period of time. As Davis (2009) discovered in her research, it is possible for teachers to create these situations if they are willing to move away from the textbook and structure their classroom in a way that allows for students to be completely immersed in L2 practice. When structuring their classrooms in this way, teachers are ensuring the best long-term L2 retention for their students by creating experiences in which the students work entirely in that language.

Research Question Two: Does Categorical or
   Phonetic Vocabulary Practice Provide
   Better Long-Term Retention of L2
   for Students?

As the research showed in Chapter 2, there are two schools of thought on how to introduce and practice vocabulary words. One method of instruction is teaching students new vocabulary by grouping words in similar categories and the other is by grouping words in similar beginning sounds. These two competing methods of instruction spiked my interested in which way would best work for my students.

In order to answer this question, I decided to do a research study on the first-grade students at my school in the 2016-2017 school year. It was decided to perform this study on the first-grade students because they are blank slates, as this is the first year they are working with any of these vocabulary words. It is important that they have no background knowledge on any of the words, so the method in which I am instructing them would be the only practice they have ever had. If this study were performed on older students, we could not conclude whether it was prior teaching or the current method of instruction that was impacting the results of the study.

The set-up of this research project was done completely randomly, in order to ensure validity of the results. At my school students are randomly assigned to a first grade homeroom teacher. Homeroom teachers are randomly assigned to a day in the Specialist rotation by the school principal when building the master schedule. As we have nine first-grade sections, the students could not be split exactly in half. Teachers assigned to Spanish on rotation days one and two (four classes--83 students) were taught using phonetic instruction and students assigned to Spanish on rotation days three, four, and five (five classes--105 students) were taught using categorical instruction. All vocabulary words are determined by the school district curriculum.

The curriculum was designed using the categorical method, so in order to build the phonetic curriculum for this research project, I took all of the assigned words and sorted them based on their phonetic beginning sounds. The table below shows the words that the students were required to learn sorted by when they were taught throughout the school year.

Table 1

Vocabulary Words Taught during the 2016-2017 School Year

Month	Words Taught Categorically	Words Taught Phonetically
September	Lápiz = Pencil Computadora = Computer Libro = Book Marcadores = Markers Escritorio = Desk Mesa = Table Papel = Paper Carpeta = Folder Cuaderno = Notebook Pegamento = Glue Tijeras = Scissors Crayones = Crayons	Actor = Actor Artista = Artist Arroz = Rice Abogado(a) = Lawyer Agua = Water Hamburguesa = Hamburger
October	Continuation of same unit	Maestro(a) = Teacher Manzana = Apple Maíz = Corn Marcadores = Markers Mesa = Table Mono = Monkey

Table 1 (continued)

Month	Words Taught Categorically	Words Taught Phonetically
November	Manzana = Apple Naranja = Orange Plátano = Banana Uvas = Grapes Maíz = Corn Ensalada = Salad Papas = Potatoes Zanahorias = Carrots Brécol = Broccoli Pizza = Pizza Sándwich = Sandwich Helado = Ice Cream Galleta = Cookie Chocolate = Chocolate Pastel = Cake Pan = Bread Hamburguesa = Hamburger Pollo = Chicken Pavo = Turkey Jamón = Ham Papas fritas = French Fries Arroz = Rice Leche = Milk Agua = Water Jugo = Juice	Pájaro = Bird Pastel = Cake Pan = Bread Pavo = Turkey Papas fritas = French Fries Papel = Paper Papas = Potatoes Pegamento = Glue Perro = Dog Pez = Fish Policía = Police Officer Pollo = Chicken Plátano = Banana Pizza = Pizza
December	Continuation of same unit	Carpeta = Folder Caballo = Horse Canguro = Kangaroo Cocinero(a) = Chef/Cook Computadora = Computer Chocolate = Chocolate Cuaderno = Notebook Crayones = Crayons
January	Continuation of same unit	Lápiz = Pencil Lagarto = Lizard Libro = Book León = Lion Leche = Milk Lobo = Wolf

Table 1 (continued)

Month	Words Taught Categorically	Words Taught Phonetically
February	Perro = Dog Gato = Cat Pájaro = Bird Pez = Fish Serpiente = Snake Cerdo = Pig Vaca = Cow Oveja = Sheep Caballo = Horse León = Lion Cebra = Zebra Tigre = Tiger Mono = Monkey Elefante = Elephant Jirafa = Giraffe Canguro = Kangaroo Rata = Rat Ratón = Mouse Lagarto = Lizard Tortuga = Turtle Ballena = Whale Tiburón = Shark Delfín = Dolphin Lobo = Wolf Oso = Bear Ciervo = Deer	Sándwich = Sandwich Serpiente = Snake Cerdo = Pig Cebra = Zebra Ciervo = Deer Enfermero(a) = Nurse Ensalada = Salad Escritorio = Desk Elefante = Elephant Helado = Ice Cream
March	Continuation of same unit	Bombero(a) = Firefighter Brécol = Broccoli Ballena = Whale Dentista = Dentist Deportista = Athlete Delfín = Dolphin Doctor(a) = Doctor Granjero(a) = Farmer Galleta = Cookie Gato = Cat

Table 1 (continued)

Month	Words Taught Categorically	Words Taught Phonetically
April	Maestro(a) = Teacher Doctor(a) = Doctor Granjero(a) = Farmer Bombero(a) = Firefighter Enfermero(a) = Nurse Abogado(a) = Lawyer Cocinero(a) = Chef/Cook Policía = Police Officer Dentista = Dentist Actor = Actor Artista = Artist Deportista = Athlete	Tijeras = Scissors Tigre = Tiger Tiburón = Shark Tortuga = Turtle Jamón = Ham Jugo = Juice Jirafa = Giraffe
May	Continuation of same unit	Rata = Rat Ratón = Mouse Oveja = Sheep Oso = Bear Naranja = Orange Vaca = Cow Uvas = Grapes Zanahorias = Carrots

In order to show growth throughout the year, the students were given a basic vocabulary test the second week of school that included all of the words they would be learning throughout the year. Both groups started with the same average score, which showed that all students were starting with the same basic knowledge. As the year progressed, students worked through the vocabulary words in their respected instructional method. At the end of the year, students were given the same vocabulary test from the beginning of the year to see how much they improved throughout the year. The students who were taught using the phonetic instruction scored an average score of five points higher than the students who were taught in the categorical group.

Although this gave the phonetic group an average score 7% higher, the difference between the

two groups cannot be considered a significant difference.

Table 1 represents the vocabulary words used in my curriculum that students were tested

on. However, it is important to know that there are multiple ways to say these vocabulary words

based on the regional dialects. The following table shows a limited selection of possible

variations of the words covered in my curriculum based of different regions of the world.

Table 2

Variations in Vocabulary Words by Region

Curriculum Word	Alternate Word	Country of Origin
Pastel (Cake)	Torta	Many South American Countries
Pastel (Cake)	Bizcocho	Puerto Rico
Sándwich	Bocadilla	Spain
Lagarto (Lizard)	Lagartijo	Puerto Rico
Computadora (Computer)	Ordenador	Spain
Jugo (Juice)	Zumo	Spain

As my research question focuses on long-term retention of vocabulary skills, I continued

with this study in the 2017-2018 school year. As the school year started, all students (now

second graders) were given the same vocabulary test as last year. Due to the summer learning

loss, scores dropped, but overall the phonetic group scores were still slightly higher than those of

the categorical group. Since students were randomly shuffled into second grade classes, the

vocabulary instruction this year would need to be the same for all classes. This school year we

focused on making the language meaningful, and using our vocabulary words from first-grade in

authentic situations. Students spent the first 5 months of the school year using all their

vocabulary words on a weekly basis in different role play scenarios. When given their final

vocabulary test for this study, all scores increased. Also, students were back to being exactly the

same, as the average score was the same for both groups. The results from these tests are shown

in the table below.

Table 3

Vocabulary Test Results, Average Score

	September 2016	May 2017	September 2017	January 2018
Categorical Group	17/75	52/75	44/75	61/75
Phonetic Group	17/75	57/75	48/75	62/75
All Students	17/75	54/75	46/75	62/75

Research Question 3: Which Method of
   Vocabulary Word Presentation
   Shows Better Confidence in the
   Use of the Language during
   Classroom Activities?

Vocabulary retention is only one piece of the puzzle when learning a second language.

Another piece to the puzzle is ensuring students have confidence when speaking in the language.

As discussed in Chapter 2 the motivation for many students is to be able to use the language

when traveling abroad and conversing with native speakers. In order for students to meet this

goal, they must feel confident in their skills, so they are willing to have conversations while

traveling.

For this part of my research project, I randomly selected 1 day each month, and tallied the

number of students that showed confidence in their language usage during the classroom

activities. Confidence with the language as previously defined is any student demonstrating

belief in themselves while using L2. Tallies were given to students that would raise their hands

to answer questions, students that would volunteer to demonstrate skills in front of the class,

students that would help others during a lesson, and students that persisted with activities even if

corrected on pronunciation. Number of students that showed confidence on randomly selected

days are shown in the table below.

Table 4

Confidence Shown in the Use of the Language during Classroom Activities

Month	Words Taught Categorically 105 Total Students	Words Taught Phonetically 83 Total Students
September	17	19
October	93	45
November	41	52
December	84	31
January	103	64
February	72	57
March	99	78
April	84	62
May	102	75

*Number of students showing confidence

As the results show, when each new unit was presented, the number of students who

showed confidence in their language skills would dip as well. This can be attributed to the fact

that as students are introduced to new words, they feel less confident using them on their own.

As they practice each new vocabulary list, their confidence gains, and by the end of each unit we

top out with nearly all students showing confidence in their skills.

An additional point of interest is that in general a larger percentage of students in the

categorical group showed confidence in their skills compared to the students who were taught

phonetically. I would hypothesize that the reason the phonetic students showed less confidence

is that they were given new words to work with every month, so they did not have the same

amount of time to work with each vocabulary group and feel comfortable with the words.

Another contributing factor to these results is the ability to lesson plan was a lot easier for the

categorical group of students. We could practice the words in more authentic ways because the words related to one another. Whereas, with the phonetic group it was harder to plan scenarios in which students needed a folder, horse, kangaroo, chef, computer, chocolate, notebook, and crayons.

Research Question 4: Which Method of Vocabulary
  Word Presentation Allows for Better
  Pronunciation of the Words during
  Classroom Activities?

Another piece of the puzzle when it comes to L2 success is pronunciation. Students need to ensure that they are pronouncing the words correctly in order to be understood when communicating with other speakers of the language. As I did with the confidence data, to measure pronunciation accuracy, I randomly selected 1 day each month, and tallied the number of students that demonstrated accuracy in pronunciation when saying the vocabulary words in classroom activities. The days that pronunciation accuracy data was measured were different than those that confidence data was measured. Tallies were given to students who correctly pronounced the word without teacher help. Number of students that demonstrated correct pronunciation on randomly selected days are shown in the table below.

Table 5

Pronunciation Accuracy Shown in the Use of the Language during Classroom Activities

Month	Words Taught Categorically 105 Total Students	Words Taught Phonetically 83 Total Students
September	25	30
October	92	67
November	44	59
December	78	73
January	91	79
February	68	61
March	86	82
April	62	80
May	96	81

*Number of Students Showing Correct Pronunciation

As the data show, the scores dropped as each new unit was presented, which again can be explained because the students were unfamiliar with the words which makes it more difficult to pronounce them correctly. However, the data for this research question show that the students in the phonetic group maintained a higher percentage of accuracy throughout the year.

I would attribute these findings to a couple of different reasons. The first being the method of vocabulary instruction. In the phonetic group, the students are really focusing on the way each word sounds in order to differentiate them from one another. With this heightened focus, they are also gaining heightened pronunciation skills in order to say each word correctly. The other reason for the higher percentage of accuracy can be credited to the fact that students are learning a smaller number of words each month which makes it easier for them to remember.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this research paper was to evaluate the methods of L2 instruction in order to find which provides the best long-term retention for students. Chapter 1 discussed the background on the topic and the proposed research study of first-grade Spanish students in the Midwest. Chapter 2 presented a review of literature on the topic, and Chapter 3 provided findings from the study I conducted with my students. In Chapter 4, I will discuss conclusion, recommendations and implications from this research.

Conclusion

I reviewed many studies that provided foreign language teachers with a variety of methods on how best to ensure long-term language retention for their students. The research showed that the result of implementing these techniques in the L2 classroom provided positive outcomes on the students' ability to use the language. Many studies showed that when using the language authentically in L2 classrooms, students show better confidence and grammar control. Several articles discussed how to provide students with these opportunities. The role of the teacher is no longer that of lecturing the students on the material, but of facilitating the learning. In order to have the most positive long-term effect, teachers need to build the scenarios, but from there the students need to take control of the lesson and perform the L2 speaking.

Although the raw scores from the vocabulary test in Chapter 3 did not yield significantly different results, the levels of confidence and pronunciation skills greatly differed. The students who were learning the vocabulary words in categories showed greater confidence when working on projects in class and talking with their peers. This can be attributed to the fact that they are

using the words more authentically. On the flip side, the students who were learning the

vocabulary words phonetically showed greater control over the pronunciation of the words. This

can be attributed to the fact that the focus was being put on the way each individual word

sounded and was different from the others in that grouping of words.

Based on these results, the conclusion could be made that both methods of instruction are

equally important. In order for students to build confidence they need to be put in authentic

situations which is far easier to plan for when vocabulary words are taught in categories. It is

just as important for students to have correct pronunciation which can be gained through practice

of words that sound similar. As the articles discussed, phonetic practice forces our brains to

focus on the differences in the words, which leads to better pronunciation. As L2 teachers, we

have to find the balance between the two methods of instruction in order to ensure well rounded,

confident, and accurate students.

Recommendations

Based on the literature review, it appears that students need to be practicing the language

in authentic situations as much as possible. Although, study abroad programs are going to yield

the best results, that is not always possible. Therefore, my recommendation to other foreign

language teachers is to create as many different situations that they can where students are using

the language authentically in their classrooms. Students need to build the confidence in their

skills in order to branch outside of the safety of the four walls of their classroom and have real

conversations with native speakers.

Often times L2 teachers state that they need to have their students memorize the grammar

rules before they can have conversations. To a point it is necessary for students to memorize the

grammar rules, because without any background knowledge it will be impossible for students to have a conversation with one another. However, as L2 teachers, we need to make sure we are doing more than just drill and practice. It is a disservice to our students if all we teach are the grammar rules. As the research showed, most students are taking foreign language classes in order to travel the world and communicate with natives. How can we help them meet their goals if we do not build speaking practice into our classrooms? In building opportunities for our students to use the language authentically, it will be a natural progression to correcting their grammar mistakes as they occur in conversation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This topic of interest has been highly researched in many different venues. Based on the fact that there is a lot of information available for ways to improve L2 language acquisition, my recommendations for future research are to look at this topic from different perspectives than are currently available. Below are my recommendations for future research questions on this topic.

1. How does student engagement impact long-term L2 language retention? As teachers, we are constantly coming up with new lessons and teaching techniques to increase student engagement. It would be easy to believe that if students are more engaged in the lesson, they would have longer retention of the language. Researchers could be testing that theory to see if students are in fact maintaining their L2 skills longer if they are more engaged in class activities and to what extent engagement plays in long-term retention.

2. What modality of L2 instruction yields the best long-term retention? Throughout this research study, current research puts the emphasis on students use of the language

through speaking. However, there are three other modalities to learning a language: reading, writing, and listening. There is limited research on how these modalities impact students' long-term use of the language. The Urlaub (2012) study discussed the importance reading through authentic texts and the van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) study discussed the importance of listening to native speakers, but we need more information than just these studies. Researchers could be testing to see if one modality holds more importance than the others. They could also be researching which combination of modalities yields the highest retention for L2 students.

3. Does categorical or phonetic vocabulary practice provide better long-term retention of L2 for students? This was the research question that I proposed for my project and worked to answer for 18 months. However, I do not feel like it is possible to get an accurate portrait of long-term retention in a time frame shorter than two years. Also, in my project students were shuffled together in the second half, so the vocabulary instruction method had to modified which left all students were practicing their words the same way. Researchers could be performing a study similar to mine, but keeping students in their respective groups for the length of the study as well as continuing the project over the course of many years.

Implications

As a Spanish teacher, I have taken to heart the overwhelming data that the research has showed creates positive long-term retention. I have been building more authentic practice into my classroom, especially since I teach at the elementary level when students are willing to take risks and have no fear of speaking in a second language. This is the perfect age to role play

different scenarios and allow for the students to use their creativity. I have shifted my focus from drill and practice to group work and role playing, and the changes I have seen in my students are incredible. This shift in vocabulary practice is also made evident in the vast improvement in their vocabulary scores from September, 2017, to January, 2018. It is clear that what matters most is the authentic practice of vocabulary words, and not solely in which method is used to input the words into the students' brains.

I have also shared my findings with the other Spanish teachers in my district. We all agree that the method in which vocabulary is introduced does not seem to have a great impact on our students' long-term success with the language. However, what is important is what we as teachers do with the language after the vocabulary has been mastered. As a department we are working on creating authentic situations which allow for students to spend the entire class time in Spanish. We are also challenging one another to find every possible way to incorporate more Spanish into our daily instruction. The way that I have met this challenge is by starting every day with a morning meeting completely in Spanish, where the students are asked a variety of questions that they must answer in Spanish. Students have morning meetings every day in their homerooms, and bringing that routine into the L2 classroom has provided the students with another authentic way to practice their Spanish skills.

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