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THE NECESSITY TO MAKE ERRORS: THE CASE OF GERMAN LEARNERS OF SPANISH

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ABSTRACT: Learners of foreign languages make errors. There has been much debate over whether these errors are to be viewed as something bad, something wrong or something to be avoided. This paper analyses the efficiency of exercises aimed at avoiding the most frequent mistakes German beginning learners of Spanish make. A comparative study shows that learners who make these exercises improve only over their frequency of orthographic errors, but all other types of errors and the total number of errors remain the same as learners who do not make these exercises.

KEY WORDS: *Foreign language acquisition; Spanish as a foreign language; Error analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Spanish continues to enjoy general popularity as a foreign language at German universities: 6,249 students are learning Spanish at universities in Germany, according to the 2019 Annual Report of the Instituto Cervantes (p. 13). This long-established foreign language has already been extensively studied linguistically from the point of view of error analysis (Fernández, 1997; Vázquez, 1991; Bouwmeester, 2011), and the extensive panorama of teaching materials offers collections of frequent or typical errors (Bachhausen, 2014; Barros, 2003; Wotjiak & Herrmann, 1993; Rudolph & Miquel-Heininger, 2015; Varela Navarro, 2018, and many more). These teaching materials are not based on statistical studies of the absolute frequency of errors, or at least do not cite corresponding investigations as sources. In order to make an objective statement about the frequency of errors, statistical surveys of errors in written text productions in foreign language teaching were conducted at two Bavarian universities (Gebhard, 2016, 2019), which provide insights into the actual needs of learners. Complementary, a didactic concept for dealing with errors in the classroom needs to be elaborated. An error is to be understood here as a deviation from target forms used in teaching materials, which are not evaluated negatively and are seen as characteristics of learners' language systems. An analysis of these so-called interlanguage systems (Selinker, 1972) helps understand

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the needs and progress of learners and is used to design appropriate activities in and outside the classroom. Error analysis, as this is generally called, has received its share of criticism, as we shall see in the following section.

2. TRENDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES

The move away from the traditional sanctioning of errors and thus the increasing tolerance of errors in the course of the turn towards a more pragmatic approach to language learning and teaching is based on the development of learning theories over the decades. Contrastive perspectives (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957) sought to prognose or explain interlanguage systems by comparing learners' first language with the target language. In an individual-constructivist understanding of language learning (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972), errors are interpreted as indicators of a given point in a highly individual process of developing an unstable language system. Approaches such as the "negative knowledge" (e.g., Oser, Hascher & Spychiger, 1999) attribute an important positive role to deviations from an arbitrary prescriptive norm. Extensive research on how a positive depiction of errors can support their reduction in the individual learning process has yet to be conducted. Do targeted exercises help to avoid certain errors and thus accelerate the learning process of beginning learners, or should we accept naturally predetermined learning sequences as proposed by Krashen (1981) in his Natural Order Hypothesis? Along these lines, Pienemann suggests that controlled foreign language teaching can only have a limited effect (Teachability Hypothesis, Pienemann 1998) and cannot go against the principles of a processability hierarchy, according to which certain structures can only be understood and learned in a certain sequence (Processability Theory, Pienemann 1984, where he investigated into uninstitutionalized second language acquisition instead of institutionalized foreign language learning, however¹).

A study of the effectiveness of exercises aimed at reducing common errors was carried out at Ansbach University of Applied Sciences, in which two groups of learners of Spanish at beginner level (A1) were compared.

3. METHOD

In order to investigate the avoidability of errors, it is first necessary to examine the quality of errors. Text productions as part of written exams were analyzed for this aim. Test takers were given a choice of two topics previously touched upon in class to write a short text of 80 words. On the basis of frequent errors obtained from previous analyses, exercises were chosen to treat the corresponding difficulties.

In this comparison study, all controllable characteristics of teaching were kept identical as much as possible: Textbook, teacher, group size, amount of instruction, timing of

¹ We do not claim to uphold Krashen's (1981) untenable distinction between acquisition and learning but use these terms to point out theoretical distinction between second and foreign language acquisition/learning; cf. Königs (2010), whose uses the neutral 'Aneignung' in German, for a further discussion of these terms.

instruction (no extreme off-peak times such as early in the morning or late in the evening), methods of instruction. In the experimental group, exercises addressing the most common errors identified in previous studies were given in the last instructional session before the written test. In the control group, topics related to culture and civilization were covered in the same lesson. The study was conducted in two consecutive semesters (summer semester 2018 and winter semester 2018/2019) in two parallel courses of the same language instructor in each term, but two different instructors in the consecutive terms. In all four courses, the test took place approximately two weeks after the last lesson.

A T-Test was carried out with the total number of errors and the number of errors in each error category, such as morphology, orthography, and syntax, as factors.

4. MATERIAL

The most common errors identified were errors using the orthographic accent, errors in grammatical agreement (especially between noun and adjective), verb forms (e.g., missing diphthongization), missing articles, and prepositions (especially a, en, and de). For these grammatical topics, exercises were compiled from an entertainingly designed grammar exercise book that had not been used in class. All of the exercises chosen were taken from the A1 level of the exercise grammar in order to minimize the amount of unknown vocabulary. These exercises mainly took the form of insertion exercises, in which, for example, endings had to be added or verbs given in brackets had to be inflected. The previously identified lexical errors were not touched upon, since these errors are taken to depend highly on the topic of the text production.

Sample Size

A total of 66 written tests were included in the study. In the summer semester 2018, 32 learners participated in the two courses taught in parallel by the same teacher (experimental group with additional targeted exercises to avoid common errors: N=14; control group without exercises: N=18); in the winter semester 2018/19, 34 learners participated in the two courses taught in parallel by a different teacher (experimental group: N=18; control group: N=16).

5. RESULTS

Experimental vs. control group in the summer semester 2018

A Levene's test yields variance homogeneity: $F(1, 30)=0.085$, $p=0.772$, $n=32$. The T-test reveals no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group taking as factor the total number of errors found in the texts: $T(30)=0.340$, $p=0.340$. The T-value was also calculated for all error categories. In no case significant differences could be detected.

Experimental vs. control group in the winter semester 2018/2019

A Levene's test reveals variance homogeneity: $F(1, 32) = 0.076, p = 0.784, n = 34$. The T-test reveals no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group with the total number of errors as factor: $T(32) = -0.115, p = 0.909$. There are also no differences in any error category, but the condition of variance homogeneity is violated for the number of orthographic errors: $F(1, 32) = 5.902, p = 0.031$. In this case a Welch test yields a statistically significant difference: $T(19,949) = 2.269, p = 0.035$. It turns out to be relatively small, with a mean difference of 1.467 (on average, 2.0 orthographic errors were made in the experimental group vs. 3.47 errors in the control group).

Overall analysis (summer semester 2018 and winter semester 2018/19 considered as one group)

The overall consideration of the two groups of the summer and winter semester includes 66 texts and allows for a somewhat more robust statistical analysis. It yields a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control group only for orthographic errors. This highly significant difference ($p = 0.008$) turns out to be small: 2.38 errors in the experimental group after exercises vs. 3.70 errors in the control group without exercises (mean difference: 1.32 errors).

6. DISCUSSION

It must be questioned if error prevention by means of exercises prior to a written text is an effective way to avoid other errors than orthographic ones. Neither in the total number of errors, nor in the number of errors in any error category including morphological, syntactical, and lexical errors, can statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups be observed.

The results can be interpreted as a confirmation of the theories mentioned above, that suggest a predefined sequence of acquisition. The scope of these can thus be considered to be extendable to institutionalized foreign language learning, i.e., instruction. Certain errors are made at a given time because the target-appropriate structures cannot be acquired at that time due to constraints imposed by processability. The improvement in the area of orthographic errors can be interpreted as an indication that orthographic rules can certainly be processed and acquired by beginners. The comparatively uncomplicated orthography of Spanish makes this interpretation seem plausible, but errors are still made.

Another reading of the results is an underpinning of Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition, according to which explicit learning in an institutional setting does not (necessarily) lead to successful acquisition. For now, this interpretation will be narrowly restricted to the context under study: Highlighting rules and doing exercises to learn these rules approximately two weeks before a written test does not lead to the application of these rules in text production. Possibly, the communicative character of these exercises is too weak, so that the instructional goal of teaching these rules could

not be achieved. Such an interpretation leads to the demand to make foreign language teaching, but also performance assessment, even more communicative and to integrate real situations with a natural communicative need (see Gebhard, 2020 for a proposal for a more communicatively oriented performance assessment that is not based on counting errors). This way, communicative necessity might foster the acquisition of rules.

It is also conceivable that the period of two weeks is too long to observe an effect. In a replication study the distance between exercises and test will be decreased to one week to see whether this makes a difference.

7. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In light of the current results, it must be concluded that apart from orthographic errors, which might be described as more technical than communicative, certain errors seem to be unavoidable at beginner level, even though the respective target structures have been previously taught. Teaching methods should be adapted even more to a communicative approach that does not necessarily aim at therapeutic measures to avoid errors. By means of metacognitive and metalinguistic components in foreign language teaching, a more efficient individualized approach seems very promising.

In order to investigate how error frequencies might be influenced in a more individualized approach, the effect of reflective interventions will be investigated. As an intervention between a pretest and a posttest, again in the form of written text production, questionnaires address common errors on a person-by-person basis without necessarily focusing on a correction of these errors. They are rather designed to get an insight into learners' awareness of their own errors and learning strategies. Additionally, questions are asked about the source of these errors, such as interference from other previously studied languages or the first language to assess individuals' awareness of their learning process. Broadening the statistical data to analyze frequent errors, the results will show whether general learning sequences in controlled foreign language teaching can be assumed or whether individual acquisition processes have more weight.

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