

BEGINNING SPANISH LEARNER ATTITUDES TOWARD PRONUNCIATION AND AN ORAL RECORDINGS PROJECT

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Despite previous phonetics research supporting the inclusion of phonetics instruction in foreign language classrooms at all levels, few studies have focused on the use of oral recordings projects, which center pronunciation practice within courses. The few existing oral recordings projects studies have tested only intermediate learners, finding largely positive learner attitudes toward both pronunciation and the projects themselves. Yet, it remains an empirical question whether first semester learners would have similar attitudes toward pronunciation or pronunciation projects. The present study included explicit phonetics instruction, a semester-long oral recordings and self-analysis project and an attitudes survey and debriefing questionnaire. Participants were twenty-nine beginning second language learners in an online Spanish course. The present study explored their attitudes regarding both pronunciation and the oral recordings project. Results did not find a statistically significant difference in learner attitudes toward pronunciation from pretest to posttest time. However, participants reported positive attitudes toward the project, and found it to be helpful, enjoyable, and manageable. These positive attitudes toward the oral recordings project provide evidence for the usefulness of such projects even at beginning levels. Follow-up research is needed to test for any pronunciation changes over time.

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INTRODUCTION

Although there have been several calls for the centering of phonetics instruction throughout the sequence of foreign language courses (Darcy, 2018; Sturm, 2019), few phonetics studies have focused on ways in which phonetics can be sustainably taught in foreign language classes. One possible way to teach phonetics over many semesters is through *oral recordings projects*. Such projects take place outside of class time throughout an entire semester. They include elements such as explicit phonetics instruction, feedback, and oral practice with recording individual words, sentences, tongue twisters, or more extemporaneous speech (Correa & Grim, 2014; Ducate & Lomicka, 2009; Lord, 2008). Some researchers have suggested that such projects can improve learner attitudes toward pronunciation (Lord, 2008) or, when assigned as groupwork, create a sense of community among learners while fostering language learning (Lord & Harrington, 2013).

Yet, such projects have not been the primary focus of many phonetics studies to date. The few studies that have examined the effects of oral recordings projects have reported inconsistent results regarding improvements in learner attitudes toward pronunciation from beginning to end of the

semester. However, in general, these studies have reported positive learner reactions toward the projects (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009; Lord, 2008; Lord & Harrington, 2013).

This previous research has tested learners only at the intermediate level. So, it remains an empirical question whether beginning Spanish learners would change their attitudes toward pronunciation after completion of an oral recordings project, and whether they would enjoy the project. It is possible that a project of this type would be considered unnecessary or too complex for learners at the beginning level. As suggested by Levy (2007), in computer-assisted language learning it is important to begin with learner attitudes/perceptions before jumping into using technology merely for technology's sake (p. 183). Therefore, the present study tests second language (L2) Spanish learners in a first semester online class at the beginning and end of a 16-week semester on their attitudes toward pronunciation and the oral recordings project.

Oral recordings projects and learner attitudes

Although oral recordings projects have been mentioned in the L2 phonetics instructional literature as a recommended element of pronunciation teaching (Correa & Grim, 2014) or included as part of the study (Counselman, 2015; Elliott, 1995), they have not been the primary focus of many studies. Only three studies to my knowledge have focused on oral recordings projects, Ducate and Lomicka (2009), Lord (2008) and Lord and Harrington (2013). These three studies tested intermediate L2 learners. They asked two attitudes-based questions; first, whether learners would improve their attitudes toward pronunciation from pretest to posttest, and second, whether learners found the projects helpful and enjoyed participating in them.

Regarding the question of whether learners improved their attitudes toward pronunciation during the projects, results varied even among the three above studies. Lord (2008) found that L2 Spanish participants significantly improved their attitudes toward pronunciation, as measured by the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI) (Elliott, 1995). However, mean attitude scores changed only from 46.9 to 48.9 (out of 60). Ducate and Lomicka (2009) tested L2 German and French learners. They found that scores from the attitudes survey based on the PAI, while high (indicating positive attitudes), did not significantly change over time. Lord and Harrington (2013) did not include a pretest survey, so it is unknown whether their L2 Spanish participants changed their attitudes toward pronunciation. From the previous research, then, it remains unclear whether intermediate level learners improve their attitudes regarding pronunciation after completing oral recordings projects. However, the research did in general show positive attitudes toward pronunciation at pretest time (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009; Lord, 2008). This could account in part for the small or nonexistent improvement in attitudes over time.

Considering the second attitudes question, whether learners enjoyed the oral recordings projects, results are clearer. On the posttest attitudes survey, learners from Lord and Harrington (2013) reported that they enjoyed the recording and self-analysis parts of the project and felt that they had increased their confidence and improved their pronunciation. Lord (2008) also found high overall enjoyment of the project on the end-of-semester survey. Participants stated that they felt the project was useful and that they had learned a lot about their pronunciation strengths and weaknesses. Participants in Ducate and Lomicka (2009) appreciated completing pronunciation tasks with a

native speaker model and feedback and were interested in participating in a similar project in the future.

Based on the results from previous research, it is not expected that learners in a first semester online Spanish course will improve their attitudes over time regarding pronunciation. However, they may find a pronunciation-based oral recordings project enjoyable and perhaps useful. Yet, given their limited Spanish speaking skills and the possibility of cognitive overload from a pronunciation project at such an early level of study, it is possible that participants will not feel that they benefit from such a project. If participants find the project overwhelming or too difficult, this may be enough reason to not continue this line of research. Below, these two research questions are described in more detail, followed by the methodology of the present study.

Research Questions

RQ1 Is there a change in beginning L2 Spanish learner attitudes toward pronunciation after completion of an oral recordings project?

RQ2 What are learner attitudes toward the project?

METHODS

Participants

There were 55 students enrolled in the online beginning Spanish course during the three semesters that the study was carried out. However, only 31 students completed the pretest and posttest attitudes survey and consented to have their data included in the study. Data from two additional students were removed from the analysis because they misunderstood the purpose of the posttest survey, reporting their opinions on the entire course, rather than just the oral recordings project. This left 29 participants' data for analysis. The average age of participants was 28 (range 19-58). Two participants were native speakers of Chinese and Vietnamese. The other 27 were native speakers of English although four were also *receptive* Spanish heritage speakers, who reported having heard spoken Spanish growing up but not speaking it. Their average age for starting to learn Spanish was 21 (0-58). Fifteen participants had previously taken Spanish courses in high school, middle school, or at another college or university, but most reported not remembering much. The mean number of months of previous Spanish study was 9.8 (0-40). None had studied abroad but a few had visited Spanish speaking countries on weeklong trips. Twelve participants had previous experience with other languages, from beginner up to native speaker, including French, Japanese, German, ASL, Vietnamese, Russian, and Greek.

Data Collection

Study tasks were a background questionnaire and pronunciation attitudes survey, an oral recordings project, and a follow-up attitudes survey and debriefing questionnaire. The study also included a vocabulary test and a short pretest and posttest task in which participants read a word list followed by a short paragraph. However, the last two parts will not be explained here, as they were not the focus of this study.

The background questionnaire asked about participants' previous experience with Spanish and other languages, perceived skill level in English and Spanish, and previous study abroad experiences or trips to Spanish speaking countries.

The pretest and posttest included the same attitudes survey, a modified version of the Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI) (Elliott, 1995), which consisted of 8 items in a Likert-scale format. A 1 on the scale represented the statement "never or almost never true of me" and a 5, "always or almost always true of me." The survey included 5 positively worded items and 3 negatively worded items, regarding participants' attitudes toward pronunciation. An example of a positively worded item is, "Acquiring proper pronunciation in Spanish is important to me." An example of a negatively worded item is, "I will never be able to speak Spanish with a good accent."

The posttest included a debriefing questionnaire with 7 questions regarding participants' opinions of the project and its perceived usefulness, adapted from Lord (2008). Debriefing questionnaire statements were positively worded, for example, "I enjoyed this project" and "This is a useful project that should be implemented in future courses." The same 5-point Likert scale was used for this survey.

The oral recordings project, modeled after Lord (2008) but altered to be level-appropriate for beginners, began in week 2 of the semester. The project comprised 8 weeks of recordings and self-analysis, completed by students within the course management system and spread out throughout the semester. During the first week of the project, students recorded themselves reading a word list and short paragraph. The second week of the project, students listened to short instructional videos, each on a separate sound or group of sounds in Spanish. These videos, recorded by the researcher who was not the course instructor, included comparison of English and Spanish sounds, examples of words with each sound, and oral practice for students. Each video was followed by a comprehension quiz. Students then listened to oral recordings of native speakers repeating word lists or sentences using familiar vocabulary words. They recorded themselves in the pauses made by the native speakers, attempting to imitate native speaker pronunciation (Elliott, 1995). Learners then listened to their own recordings and analyzed their pronunciation in a follow-up recording each week of the project. For the final project recording, students re-recorded the initial word list and paragraph and analyzed their own pronunciation changes from beginning to end of the semester.

Analysis

The analysis was quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analysis reports mean participant scores from pretest and posttest PAIs and compares changes using a paired-samples t-test. The qualitative analysis examines responses to open-ended questions from the debriefing questionnaire. For the PAI, the highest possible score was 40 (8 items x 5) and the lowest, 8 (8 items x 1). Following Elliott (1995), the 3 items written in the negative were reversed for analysis so that higher scores reflected more positive attitudes regarding pronunciation, and lower scores, more negative attitudes. For example, for the item, "I will never be able to speak Spanish with a good accent," if a participant responded with a 1 ("never or almost never true of me"), it was changed to a 5 for scoring, because this person strongly believes they will be able to speak Spanish

with a good accent. For the debriefing questionnaire, the highest possible score was 35 (7 items x 5) and the lowest, 7 (7 x 1).

RESULTS

Pronunciation attitude change over time

For the first research question, regarding whether participants changed their attitudes toward pronunciation after the project, a paired-samples t-test was run on mean scores from pretest and posttest PAIs (31.24 and 30.90, respectively, out of 40). No significant difference was found between scores, $t(28) = .537, p = .595$. Examining the data at the individual level, 16 participants' scores stayed the same or improved from pretest to posttest and 13 decreased. Most changes in score (both increases and decreases) were only between 1-4 points, indicating that PAI scores did not change much over time even at the individual level. One notable exception, who had by far the lowest pretest score, increased from 18 points on the pretest to 30 points on the posttest.

Responses to the open-ended statements of the debriefing questionnaire also revealed positive attitudes toward the oral recordings project. Responses to the first statement, "I believe I have improved my pronunciation over the semester," were overwhelmingly yes ($n = 23$). One of the common themes mentioned in response to the specific improvements the participants noticed was the sounds covered in the instructional videos ($n = 11$). A few students mentioned learning rules that they will be able to transfer to pronunciation of new words ($n = 3$), and one student mentioned increased confidence in speaking Spanish. Most other responses were simply positive "I did improve" comments with no details or were related to grammar or improved understanding of vocabulary. A couple of representative responses to this statement are shown below.

"I have improved on pronunciation of specific sounds such as words with the letter v. In addition, I have learned how to correctly pronounce words with o in them by rounding the sound out."

"Increasing my vocab has helped along with all the pronunciation rules we learned this semester. I now know how to pronounce d's, v's, z's, and many other letters that the rules change for when speaking Spanish."

Perceived usefulness of the project

Results for the second research question, regarding the posttest debriefing questionnaire on learner attitudes toward the project, were positive. The mean score for these 7 items was 31.1 (out of 35). Participants thought the project was useful and should be implemented in future semesters (mean 4.7/5) and they became more conscious of their pronunciation through this project than by just taking a Spanish class (4.8).

They also reported enjoying the project (4.2) and felt that they were able to give themselves useful, constructive comments by comparing their pronunciation to that of a native speaker (4.1). They reported being able to generalize what they learned to their everyday speaking (4.2), and that they had learned a lot about their own pronunciation strengths and weaknesses (4.3).

Some of the themes that emerged from participant responses regarding their favorite parts of the project were: the (short instructional) videos (n = 8), comparing themselves to native speakers (n = 8), the pretest-to-posttest self-analysis/general feeling that they had improved or learned something (n = 8) and the manageability of the project (n = 4). Some of the most salient comments from participants are presented below.

“I didn’t realize how much I had improved until I listened to my recording from the beginning of the semester. What a difference!”

“I think when you are learning Spanish online and not in a traditional classroom you have to have some type of pronunciation project.”

“It was short, sweet, and to the point without a lot of extra work assigned.”

Regarding their least favorite parts of the project, students reported that they would have liked feedback from the instructor regarding their work (n = 4). They did not enjoy recording or analyzing their own speech, though many admitted that it was helpful or necessary (n = 11). Finally, applying what they learned in the videos to their own speaking was difficult (n = 3). Other comments were mainly housekeeping related—they wanted the video information also in writing, for the project to be open for two weeks, or more conclusion to the project/more integration of the project into the course. Below are a few representative participant responses.

“My least favorite aspect was recording myself, but I understand the need and reasoning for it for this project.”

“My least favorite part of the project was the actual act of making the recordings as it was slightly anxiety inducing.”

“My least favorite part was recording myself after watching the videos. Trying to remember how to pronounce everything was difficult for me.”

Interestingly, regarding suggested changes to the project, the most common response was N/A or no changes needed (n = 10). Other answers included providing more instructor feedback (n = 3), more in-class time devoted to pronunciation (n = 3), more paragraphs for students to practice reading aloud, more review of what they had already learned, more pronunciation resources (n = 1 for each of the above), and information from the video lessons in writing (n = 2). Some of the more salient student comments are presented below.

“I think more professor feedback on what can be improved upon would be extremely helpful.”

“I think that the concept is really cool. Focusing on the individual little tricks is nice. I would do more of that in the actual classroom instead of just online.”

“I’m certain as a student that the benefits of this project are significant enough to become a part of the curriculum.”

Although students did not significantly change their attitudes toward pronunciation over the semester, they did report overall that the project was a positive experience for them and that they found it helpful and not too overwhelming.

DISCUSSION

For the first research question, results did not show significant change in participant attitudes toward pronunciation throughout the semester. However, this is not entirely inconsistent with previous research. Lord (2008) found a statistically significant improvement on learner attitudes toward pronunciation. Yet, Lord reported mean attitude scores of 46.9 on the pretest and 48.9 on the posttest, which is an increase of only 2 points. In a follow-up to Lord (2008), Ducate and Lomicka (2009) did not find significant pretest-to-posttest changes in terms of learner improvement in attitudes toward pronunciation. A possible reason for this lack of change, that may have also affected results of previous research, relates to the wording of some items from the PAI. For example, for the statement “I’m concerned with my pronunciation of Spanish,” it is not clear whether being concerned for one’s pronunciation is positive. For example, assuming learners interpreted concern as meaning *worried*, reporting less concern about their pronunciation on the posttest (3.5 mean score on the pretest and 3.3 on the posttest) could mean that they believed they had improved and were therefore less worried. Alternatively, they could have interpreted concern as *interest*, indicating that they were less interested in pronunciation at the end of the semester.

Another possibility is that as participants began to understand more about pronunciation throughout the semester, they were better able to judge their own abilities and shortcomings. Answers to the open-ended questions included many statements like, “I believe that my pronunciation has improved over the semester, though it is still far from perfect” or “I think that my letter pronunciation has 100% gotten better but I still feel like a novice. There has been a lot of information as I am studying for the final and it is kind of overwhelming.” At posttest time, learners were simply more equipped to judge their own abilities than on the pretest.

Regarding the second research question, which asked whether learners found the project helpful, responses were positive overall, as found in previous research (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009; Lord, 2008; Lord & Harrington, 2013). Participants perceived that they had improved over the semester, they reported enjoying the project, found it to be manageable in terms of timing, and believed it should be implemented in future semesters. In addition, most suggestions for improvement involved providing more instructor feedback, also reported in Lord (2008), more integration of the project with the course, and more detailed examples or follow-up videos, rather than less of anything. This provides further evidence that they found the project useful. However, participants did report feeling overwhelmed with the amount of information as well as anxious about recording and listening to their own voices. This has not been reported in the research on intermediate learners. Although in the present study, the positives outweighed the negatives, future research should be sure to keep videos short, and to stick to one or two main concepts each week, particularly for beginners. Another suggestion that may help students to remember and integrate

concepts comes from Counselman (2015), who repeated the concepts learned each week when adding new concepts.

One caveat to the second research question is that the average project score of participants who consented to include their data in the study was 97% (range 83%-100%), so it could be that those participants who agreed to participate in the study were those who were already predisposed to enjoy the project. However, it is impossible to verify this speculation as the remaining participants either did not agree to participate or simply did not complete the posttest survey which contained the consent form.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although learner attitudes toward pronunciation did not significantly change from pretest to posttest, results of the present study did find positive attitudes toward pronunciation in general and this project specifically among beginning learners in a first semester online Spanish course. Participants particularly enjoyed the pretest/posttest self-analysis portion of the project, as well as the short instructional videos and comparing themselves to native speakers. The manageability of the project was another benefit. Learners reported spending 33 minutes on average each week that the project was assigned (range 15-90 minutes), so that the project, while at least affectively helpful, can also fit into the busy schedules of our students without taking up too much of their time.

Given the positive attitudes of participants in this study toward the oral recordings project, the next steps for this research are to analyze any segmental or overall production changes in participants' pronunciation from pretest to posttest time. It would also be best to include a control or comparison group who complete the pretest and posttest text reading and attitudes surveys but not the oral recordings project.

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