Learners of Spanish improve in their expression of grammatical gender during a stay abroad

What this research was about and why it is important
One important part of learning another language involves learning the grammar of that language. Among the many different grammar points that have been researched, much attention has been given to how learners acquire grammatical gender. In Spanish, for example, learners must determine whether each noun is masculine or feminine and must also learn how to mark gender on determiners (e.g., articles) and adjectives (as in un_masc viaje_masc fabuloso_masc “a fabulous trip”). Past research on the acquisition of Spanish has suggested that learning to use grammatical gender may be impacted by many different variables, with higher accuracy rates occurring with masculine nouns or with learners being generally more accurate with determiners than adjectives. In this study, the researchers investigated grammatical gender marking among English-speaking university students who were learning Spanish as a second language. The authors examined their language use over a period of 21 months, which included an academic year abroad in a Spanish-speaking country. The researchers found that the learners exhibited a high level of ability with grammatical gender marking before, during, and after their stay abroad. By investigating a broad set of potentially influential factors, the researchers uncovered complex patterns of use, showing that learners are influenced by a range of characteristics when marking gender.

What the researchers did
- The researchers analyzed the data from the publicly available corpus LANGSNAP (http://langsnap.soton.ac.uk) containing language use data from study abroad learners of Spanish from several tasks before, during, and after their stay abroad experience.
- They analyzed the data from 21 British learners of Spanish who were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in Spanish, examining the data before the participants spent an academic year abroad in Spain or Mexico, at the end of their stay abroad, and 21 months after the first data collection period (after they had returned to the United Kingdom).
- At each data collection period, the learners completed an oral interview in which they talked about their lives, an oral picture-based narration task, and a written argumentative essay.
- The analysis centered on instances in which the learners used a noun and a determiner or an adjective that was clearly marked for gender. The researchers focused on how often the gender of the noun and the modifier matched, what characteristics promoted this use, and whether their use changed over time.

What the researchers found
- The researchers found that the learners matched the gender of the modifier with the gender of the noun frequently.
- The learners showed improvement in accuracy of grammatical gender marking during their stay abroad, and this gain was maintained after they returned to the United Kingdom.
- The learners’ use of gender marking on determiners and adjectives was complex; the researchers identified numerous characteristics—such as the gender of the noun, the elicitation task being used to elicit learner language, and the learners’ initial proficiency in the language—that encouraged the use of modifiers that matched nouns in gender.

Things to consider
- An academic year abroad appeared to promote the acquisition of grammatical gender in Spanish, at least for language learners who had a high level of proficiency with grammatical gender before their stay abroad.
- Even with high rates of accuracy, learners of Spanish showed complex patterns of grammatical gender marking in Spanish. This finding suggests that accuracy rates are limited in what they show about language use and development.
- It is important to examine characteristics internal to language (e.g., noun gender, modifier type) and those that are external to language (e.g., elicitation task), as both can influence the use of grammatical gender marking among second language learners of Spanish.


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