Second Language Acquisition studies have focused mainly on the instruction, learning and acquisition of grammatical gender (Clahsen & Felser, 1998). However, little to no research has focused on the processing—perception and interpretation—of grammatical gender in learners of Spanish as a second language. This study fills this gap by examining the processing of gender by second language (L2) learners of Spanish to resolve potential ambiguities between noun-adjective agreement in relative clauses (RCs).

Previous research on ambiguous RCs reveals that there are crucial differences in the attachment preferences between native speakers of English and Spanish. Take, for instance, the ambiguous Spanish RC in (1) and its respective English translation in (2):

(2) ‘The professor teaches in gyms of schools that are clean.’

In (1) and (2) the adjective at the end of the RC can potentially agree with both, the higher (i.e., high attachment) and the lower noun (i.e., low attachment). Interestingly, when presented with a sentence like (1), Spanish speakers consistently prefer the high attachment option, whereas when presented with (2), English speakers prefer the low attachment one.

Spanish is a language with a binary gender system (e.g., masculine, feminine), where gender can be morphologically marked in the inflection of nouns and adjectives (e.g., -o for masculine, -a for feminine) or in the determiner (e.g., el/la). This is illustrated in the unambiguous Spanish RC in (3):

   ‘The professor teaches in gyms of schools that are clean.’

When (3) is presented aurally to learners of Spanish, they must be able to perceive and understand (i.e., process) that the masculine adjective limpios modifies the masculine noun gimnasios in order to correctly interpret the RC. Failure to do so will result in the application of the English attachment preference by default, erroneously linking the meaning of the adjective limpios to the lowest noun, which is feminine. Based on this assumption, we propose the following research question: Do L2 learners of Spanish aurally process gender to resolve the attachment in unambiguous relative clauses?

In order to answer this question, we recruited 31 beginner and 19 intermediate L2 learners of Spanish from an American public university. Participants completed a Spanish proficiency test and were divided according to proficiency level (beginner, intermediate, and advanced). The target stimuli consisted of 32 RCs, in which the adjective inside of the RC matched in gender (masculine, feminine) with either the lower noun (n=16) or the higher noun (n=16). The target stimuli were presented aurally and were followed by a question to determine participants’ accuracy in adjective-noun gender agreement. The study was administered entirely via Qualtrics.

Analysis of preliminary data revealed that L2 learners of Spanish have difficulties processing gender in RCs regardless of their level of Spanish. In general, participants performed at chance or below chance regarding their accuracy in gender assignment in the RCs presented in the target stimuli. However, we did observe an effect by proficiency, where advanced participants were more accurate in their assignment of gender in cases of high attachment as well as in the presence of a determiner. These results point to emergent L2 strategies for aural processing of gender that have important pedagogical implications.
Foreign language practitioners often focus on providing meaningful language input to students; however, little is known about whether the students process that input. To this end, Taylor’s research highlights the importance of teaching gender processing strategies to L2 learners of Spanish in order to facilitate input comprehension. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Auburn University (protocol number:19-045 EX 1902)

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References


