Acquisition of gender agreement in L3 Spanish among L1 Russian learners. Is naturalistic acquisition the same as instructed?

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Keywords: naturalistic exposure, classroom setting environment, L3 Spanish, L1 Russian, morphological gender agreement

There has been an ongoing debate on whether non-native speakers are able to attain native-like competence. Specifically, studies show that learners with less than nine months of naturalistic exposure tend to transfer features from their first language (L1), while learners with over five years of residence in the target language community can resemble the speech of native speakers (e.g., (Dussias, 2003; Flege & Liu, 2001; Frenck-Mestre, 2002). However, instructed learners have been observed to have higher accuracy rates with certain grammatical structures (e.g., plural forms, third person agreement) (Ellis, 1989; Pliatsikas & Marinis, 2013). In our project, we investigate Spanish gender agreement (e.g., *la*-**FEM** *casa*-**FEM** *blanca*-**FEM** 'the white house') among L1 Russian learners living in Canada and Mexico whose L1 also exhibits a gender system ([6]). A total of 40 adult Russian (L1) learners who were proficient speakers of English, as a second language and learners of Spanish as third language took part an online study. Out of 40 participants, 20 were beginner learners (separated into 10 classroom learners in Canada and 10 naturalistic learners in Mexico without classroom instruction), and 20 advanced learners (10 classroom and 10 naturalistic without formal classroom instruction). All four groups completed two tasks: an oral Russian to Spanish translation task and a picture identification task where participants saw three images and had to pick one based on the provided gendered article (e.g., *Quiero los* ____ ***lápices*** *de este color* 'I want the **pencils** of this color'). A total of 1,960 tokens were analyzed according to the linguistic variables of noun gender class (masc./fem.), morphological gender (canonical/noncanonical), number (singular/plural), and social variables (learning environment and proficiency level), as well as reaction times. Our results indicate that the advanced learners, regardless of the learning environment, accurately produced gender agreement, but differences were detected with the beginner speakers. Specifically, the beginner classroom learners were more accurate in gender agreement but took longer to respond and seemed to sound less confident, when compared to the naturalistic beginner learner group. These results suggest that while learning grammar, classroom instruction is beneficial for accuracy at the initial stages, but native-like competence in gender agreement can be achieved at the advanced level, irrespective of the setting.

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