

One size fits all?

Rethinking assessment at the crossroads of teaching+learning+research

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Applying Cognitive Linguistic (ACL)-inspired principles to the teaching of L2 grammar considerably enhances student comprehension and access to the representational world afforded by the target linguistic system (De Knop, Boers & De Rycker 2010, Tyler, Huang & Jan 2018, Piquer-Píriz & Alejo-González 2020). Classroom experience tells us that an approach of this nature is pedagogically more effective than a more classical-prescriptive instruction (Llopis-García 2010, Alonso-Aparicio & Llopis-García 2019), which often gives students a set of pre-established rules to practice with. Yet, why aren't there, in general, more successful studies and empirical data to ratify what the classroom experience shows?

With this presentation, our aim is to contribute to the understanding of the shortcomings and challenges afforded by the frequent notional-functional (NF) assessment design used in empirical studies for L2 Pedagogy. To this end, we will discuss the results of five classroom quasi-experimental studies and their assessment tests. The first three studies were conducted with A2 level (CERF standards) US-based students at the university level in their learning of the aspectual contrast in Spanish (preterit vs. imperfect). Three groups were compared: a control group, a cognitive instruction group (with the perspective of an embodied prototype within a mental space), and a NF group with a more traditional approach for the tense comparison, which associates each verb tense with a set of temporal markers. Through a pretest/posttest design, each study introduced slight changes to the instruction but most importantly, to the assessment tasks (grammaticality judgment and gap-filling tasks, pedagogical translation tasks, or degree-of-understanding vs. mastery-in-the-use tasks). Overall, results revealed no statistical differences between instructional groups with only one of the studies showing empirical superiority of the cognitive group in just one of the data-collection instruments. Our conclusions point to generalizable shortcomings in the design of assessment tests, which usually employ tasks that are more in line with notional-functional instruction and no doubt favor it. However, we argue that the cognitive group should still be afforded the merit of performing at least as well as its counterpart, even after having been exposed to a completely different pedagogical approach.

For the other two studies (Martín Gascón, Llopis-García & Alonso-Aparicio forthcoming, Martín Gascón 2023) we pose a new question: would results differ if alternative testing tasks explicitly factoring in a cognitive-based approach are implemented? In a pilot study (n=59) and a larger replication (n=160), we address the complex Spanish psych-verb construction (i.e. *gustar*-type verbs) at the A1 level with a pretest/posttest/delayed posttest design for three research conditions (control, cognitive/CG, and notional-functional/NF). Data collection entailed ACL-based assessment for interpretation and production tasks. Results showed that after instruction, the CG significantly outperformed the NF in both tasks. These findings lend support to the effectiveness of cognitive instruction and open up new avenues of research where L2 teaching, learning and research may find common ground to build on.

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