Facultad de Humanidades
Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata

IV Jornadas Nacionales del Profesorado de Inglés

2 y 3 de agosto de 2024 - Mar del Plata

ACTAS DE CONGRESO

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Organizaron e Invitaron

ASAP Lenguas Modernas

GRADUADES ORGANIZADES EN LENGUAS MODERNAS

[PÁGINA INTENCIONALMENTE EN BLANCO]

Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata - Facultad de Humanidades - Departamento de Lenguas Modernas
IV Jornadas Nacionales del Profesorado de Inglés : Actas de Congreso ; Compilación de Bauzada Arbelaiz Sofia ... [et al.]. - 1a ed. - Mar del Plata : Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2024.
Libro digital, PDF

Archivo Digital: descarga y online
ISBN 978-987-811-206-0

1. Inglés. I. Sofia, Bauzada Arbelaiz, comp.
CDD 420

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Mar del Plata – Buenos Aires – Argentina
1° edición, 2024
Publicado en Argentina - Published in Argentina
Mar del Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina

[PÁGINA INTENCIONALMENTE EN BLANCO]

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Lexical stress awareness in native Spanish adolescent speakers

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Research shows that prosodic awareness, which involves the ability to perceive and produce variations in pitch, rhythm, and stress patterns in speech, is closely linked to reading fluency and comprehension in primary school children. Prosody, or the rhythm and intonation of speech, is crucial for segmenting speech, identifying syntactic structures, and conveying meaning. Despite the known connection between prosodic awareness and literacy skills in young children, there is a scarcity of studies on prosodic awareness in secondary school adolescents. This is significant because prosodic skills continue to develop through adolescence and are essential for advanced language processing and academic success both in highschool and higher education.

Stress is one of the main prosodic features. In stress-timed languages, such as English, stress is also the rhythmic unit. In syllable-timed languages, such as Spanish, the rhythmic unit is the syllable. Unlike English, Spanish has an orthographic mark that indicates lexical stress, so it offers a great opportunity to assess the role of lexical stress awareness (Defior et al., 2009).

This pilot study aims to explore how Spanish adolescent listeners identify lexical stress in Spanish. Lexical stress refers to the emphasis on a specific syllable within a word, which can change the word's meaning and function. In Spanish, lexical stress can occur on any of the last three syllables of a word, and incorrect stress placement can cause misunderstandings. Perceiving and producing lexical stress are key aspects of prosodic awareness, and difficulties in these areas can hinder communication and literacy

development. We hypothesize that teenagers will struggle with lexical stress perception due to the complexity of Spanish stress patterns and the potential lack of orthographic cues.

To investigate this hypothesis, we conducted a perceptual identification task with ten 1st-year female students aged 12-13. This age group represents early secondary school adolescents, a demographic not extensively studied for prosodic awareness. The task assessed the participants' ability to detect the stressed syllable in three-syllable pseudowords read by three different adult native Spanish speakers (two female and one male). Pseudowords, which follow the phonological rules of a language but are not real words, ensured that participants relied solely on their prosodic skills rather than on prior lexical knowledge.

Participants identified the word they heard from sets of three orthographically identical words that differed in stress placement. These words were presented in written form, with stress on the first, second, or third syllable (e.g., 'sémapa', 'semapa', 'semapá'). This design allowed us to isolate lexical stress and examine its perception independently of other linguistic factors. Before carrying out the identification task, participants had a trial session to familiarize with the task and clear out possible doubts before starting with the actual task.

Our study found that adolescents had significant difficulties identifying stress on the second syllable ('semapa'). Stress was predominantly perceived on the first syllable ('sémapa'), and to a lesser extent on the third syllable ('semapá'). This suggests that participants defaulted to the first syllable when uncertain. This tendency, despite the native stress pattern favoring the second syllable, indicates potential confusion or lack of confidence in their prosodic judgment when orthographic cues are absent.

We hypothesize that the absence of an orthographic mark on words stressed on the second syllable may have contributed to this confusion. In Spanish, stress is marked orthographically with an accent mark if it does not follow the default penultimate syllable rule. Therefore, words like 'sémapa' and 'semapá' have clear orthographic indicators of stress, whereas 'semapa' does not. The lack of a visual cue may have made it more challenging for participants to accurately identify stress placement, leading them to incorrectly perceive stress on the first or third syllable.

These findings have important implications for understanding prosodic skill development in adolescents. While research has focused on primary school children, our results indicate that secondary school students also face challenges that could affect their language and reading abilities. The difficulties in stress perception suggest that prosodic

skills continue to develop during adolescence and that specific interventions could enhance these skills.

One intervention could be incorporating prosodic training into the language curriculum for secondary school students. Activities focusing on identifying and producing correct stress patterns could improve prosodic awareness and, consequently, reading fluency and comprehension. Educators could implement auditory discrimination exercises, where students listen to words with different stress patterns and identify the stressed syllable, to reinforce prosodic skills.

Technology can also play a crucial role in enhancing prosodic awareness. Interactive software and mobile applications that provide immediate feedback on stress patterns could be beneficial tools for students. These technological aids can offer engaging and personalized practice, helping students develop their prosodic skills more effectively.

The broader implications of prosodic awareness extend beyond language learning. Prosody is essential for effective communication, influencing how we understand spoken language and convey meaning and emotion. Adolescents with strong prosodic skills are likely to be better communicators, positively impacting their social interactions and academic performance. Therefore, fostering prosodic awareness should be considered an integral part of comprehensive language education.

The role of orthographic representation in lexical stress perception should also be considered. Our findings suggest that the absence of visual cues, such as accent marks, significantly impacts stress perception. It seems that visual aids help students make more accurate judgments about stress placement.

In conclusion, our pilot study highlights the prosodic awareness of secondary school adolescents, specifically their ability to identify lexical stress in Spanish. The findings reveal difficulties in perceiving stress on the second syllable of pseudowords, likely due to the lack of orthographic cues. These results underscore the importance of continuing to develop prosodic skills beyond primary school and suggest that targeted interventions could support adolescents in improving their language and reading abilities. Further research is needed to explore the factors influencing prosodic awareness in this age group and develop effective educational strategies for enhancing these crucial language skills. By addressing the challenges identified in this study, educators can promote the development of other forms of metalinguistic awareness such as stress awareness to improve the acquisition of written language (Gutiérrez-Palma et al., 2016).

Future studies could also expand the sample size and include both male and female participants to examine potential gender differences in prosodic skills. Investigating various factors, such as linguistic background, cognitive abilities, and exposure to different languages, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how prosodic awareness develops during adolescence.

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