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Didáctica de la gramática: una experiencia con tutores pares en modalidad virtual

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the pedagogical potential of a didactic sequence for teaching grammar in virtual mode with the support of peer tutors in a course for future language teachers. The research, designed as a case study with pre- and post-test measurement, analyzes the academic performance of two parallel sections of the course Morphosyntax I, one of which had the implementation of a didactic module designed and implemented with the support of peer tutors in virtual modality. The main results show that, although the academic results between one section and the other do not show significant differences, the analysis shows that the course that was supported by tutors showed less dispersion in performance, a lower failure rate and a greater mastery of previous content, while the section taught exclusively by the teacher showed a better performance in the acquisition of new content.

Keywords: grammar didactics, grammar teaching, peer tutors, virtual teaching.

Resumen: El presente trabajo se propone indagar en el potencial pedagógico de una secuencia didáctica para la enseñanza de la gramática en modalidad virtual con el apoyo de tutores pares en un curso para futuros profesores de lengua. La investigación, diseñada como un estudio de caso con medición de pre y postest, analiza el rendimiento académico de dos secciones paralelas del curso Morfosintaxis I, uno de los cuales contó con la implementación de un módulo didáctico diseñado e implementado con el apoyo de tutores pares en modalidad virtual. Dentro de lo principales resultados se destaca que, si bien el resultado académico entre una y otra sección no presenta diferencias significativas, el análisis de este da cuenta de que el curso que contó con el apoyo de tutores presenta menor dispersión en su rendimiento, menor tasa de reprobación y un mayor dominio de contenidos previos, mientras que la sección a cargo exclusivamente del docente evidenció un mejor desempeño en la adquisición de nuevos contenidos.

Palabras clave: didáctica de la gramática, enseñanza de la gramática, tutores pares, enseñanza virtual.

Introduction

For some years now, education has been undergoing a paradigm shift, where the development of competencies has become increasingly important García and López, (2011). Teachers should not only be concerned with teaching the contents of their discipline, but are also responsible for generating work sequences based on skills.

Despite this new context, the mastery of disciplinary knowledge, a key support for competency-based work, cannot be left aside. Therefore, in this research we propose to investigate the pedagogical potential of a didactic sequence for teaching grammar in virtual modality with the support of peer tutors. This, to address one of the weaknesses of the specialty (Bosque, 2018), delivering tools for distance work with undergraduate students in Pedagogy in Spanish.

Taking as a reference the teaching of Language and Literature in Chile, there are a series of obstacles when it comes to adapting to this new skills-based panorama. One of these is the difficulty in regulating the different curricula in teacher training, due to the wide range of private offerings in higher education (UNESCO, 2012). This suggests that, despite the existence of a new educational paradigm to which institutions should adapt, there is neither a regulatory framework nor a cross-cutting work plan.

Despite this, in Chile there is a mandatory measurement instance for student teachers, the Diagnostic Evaluation of Initial Teacher Training, which considers a measurement of disciplinary knowledge. Regarding its 2019 results, there are two indicators related to the area of linguistics that we should consider:

1. Has mastered fundamental knowledge of linguistics necessary for the teaching of reading, writing and oral skills. (53% achievement at the national level).

2. Is able to teach the process of writing texts of various genres with elaborated ideas and mastery of linguistic resources. (47.3% achievement at the national level).

These results indicate that, in this new educational context, students who are about to graduate from the Pedagogy of Spanish in Chile may present formative weaknesses that hinder their adequate performance when guiding reading and writing processes. This situation could be expected, since they are part of a process of change that has not been systematically defined.

Although the percentage of achievement is very similar, the low mastery of linguistic knowledge is even more worrisome, since it is a content that belongs to school training and to their university specialization. Previously, UNESCO (2012) warned that students entering higher education do not have the necessary language skills to face this new context (p. 49), which is reflected in this assessment, both from their role as students and as future teachers.

Linking these results, the outlook is discouraging, since if future Language and Literature teachers do not have minimal knowledge in the area of linguistics, they will hardly be able to design learning instances on a content they do not master, even more so when the teaching of grammar has a practical purpose and not only a scholastic one (Calzadilla, Barzaga and Sanchez, 2020).

Undoubtedly, we are facing a problem that is unlikely to be solved in the short term. However, it is imperative that university teachers design mechanisms to

address the most immediate needs with respect to the training deficiencies in the area of linguistics and the few tools they have for teaching in this new context of distance education.

Face-to-face teaching has been the protagonist for much of history; however, in the wake of the health crisis, virtual education took on a sudden and forced protagonism due to the health emergency.

Academic attendance involves socialization between peers and teachers, where bodily interaction is essential to communicate with the other in a space predisposed to carry out the teaching-learning process. For its part, virtual training does not contemplate the latter, that is, there is no common physical place to develop this exchange; it does not contemplate the contextual, corporal, kinesic and proxemic, since everything is sustained through technology (Anarella, 2019, p. 32).

With the rise of technology in the new generations, it is not strange to assume that this educational model is here to stay, because, despite the closure of schools, universities, and education centers as a result of COVID-19, a large part of the educational processes have relied on this modality to, to a certain extent, maintain continuity in academic training.

Given the above, it is essential to incorporate technological tools in the teaching methodology, so that students are able to relate this new context with the education they already knew. In the words of Anarella (2019), "working on new pedagogical proposals does not only imply conceptualizing on the disciplinary contents of academic practice but also intervening on those contents that are implicit in everyday practice" (p.37). This invites us to reflect on the need to generate a link between a characteristic element of people's everyday life, such as technology, and education.

Campos, Ramos and Moreno (2020) y Barros-Bastidas, Gebera, (2020) state that the new education must be oriented towards virtuality. This forces teachers to take into consideration how to awaken interest in academic tasks, having to considerably diversify teaching proposals and make students perform in them. In addition, it is possible to mention that this distance reality allows another type of relationship, which can be motivated by several factors, such as, for example, knowing other areas of ICT, tools that were considered as a complementary resource, but that, nowadays, have become the main support for teaching.

One of the greatest challenges of this new context is that it disengages both students and teachers from the time and space factor, an aspect that traditional teaching necessarily implies. In addition, this system of classes and teaching through virtuality involves greater freedom and autonomy for the learners, who have almost absolute responsibility for their learning. Therefore, it would be expected to be an active subject, either in the teaching process explicitly exercised by the teacher, or in his responsibilities related to it, trying to form an autonomous pupil (Maureira, Vásquez, Garrido and Olivares, 2020).

This point, although it could be key in the development of autonomy, presents a risk in the area of linguistics, since we have seen that even with teacher supervision, there are low results that lead to scarce resources when it comes to teaching Language and Literature. Faced with this and the context of virtuality, we propose the possibility of generating dual learning instances, i.e., work spaces between teacher and students and, subsequently, regulated moments of work

between a student who acts as a tutor for his classmates in a manner regulated by the teacher in charge.

Peer tutoring has become an effective strategy in the teaching of various subjects. Sánchez, Rentería and Roldan (2019) point out that this dynamic is a collaborative work between a student who has presented success in a particular discipline and pre-trained, who "accompanies in processes of orientation and reinforcement of learning to another student or a group of students with low academic performance; both under the tutelage and leadership of teachers specialized in accompaniment processes. (p. 156)

Studies on working with peer tutors (Valdés-León, Mendoza, Galaz, 2017; Hernández and Roselli, 2019; Valdés-León and Sánchez, 2020) have shown that students who fulfill this function, having an active role in the learning of others, enter into the cognitive process of the learner that facilitates the generation of positive dynamics in teaching, as they fulfill both pedagogical roles.

With the advancement of educational psychology and neurosciences, the perspectives about the role of the student in their learning have changed. These paradigmatic transformations have considered the needs of the new generations when establishing relationships in the teaching and learning process, giving students an active role in their learning (Santiviago and Pasturino, 2020). This has also resulted in a shift in the role of the teacher or tutor, as he/she is no longer the only transmitter of knowledge in the classroom.

The difference between the latter type of tutoring and tutoring with specialized teachers lies mainly in the horizontal relationship between the tutor and the learner, since the inexistence of the expertise gap would decrease the social distance and promote, therefore, uninhibited and critical participation in the process (Hernández and Roselli, 2019). Although the literature studied in general accepts and highlights the benefits of this process in both the tutor and the tutored, different means have been described that increase the benefit and final satisfaction, In this line, Sanchez (et. al. 2019) states that:

personal relationship, as a common starting point to establish efficient forms of support; trust, knowing that the other will give a prompt and meaningful response; perseverance, since constant work is essential for effective study and learning; identification of the personality and talents of the person being tutored, to identify his/her needs, strengths, and areas of opportunity and thus offer effective tutoring. (p. 159)

Results in this type of studies have been very mixed. For example, Song, Loewenstein and Shi (2017) obtained good results in the tutored, but poor results in the tutors. This contrasts with what was presented by Monteiro (1998), where the effect was the opposite. This could be due to the conditions in which this accompaniment was carried out and the methods for case analysis. In any case, it is advisable to choose a methodology that favors the development of all students in their learning, taking into account the predispositions, development and satisfaction of both tutors and tutored.

This research considers the new digital context and addresses the need to retake instances of socialization among peers and the active role of students, who acquire the role of students and tutors. Based on our objective, this enhances not only the conceptual competences of linguistics, an area that has declined

according to the NDT reports, but also favors the design of pedagogical dynamics based on the use of ICTs for teaching grammar.

Materials and methods

Detailed information regarding the methodological decisions that support this research is presented below. The design of this research is defined as descriptive, correlational and comparative. The academic results of two sections of the Morphosyntax I course were studied, one of which included peer tutoring, while the second section used a traditional classroom methodology.

The participants in the study were 55 university students who, at the time the research was carried out, were taking the course Morphosyntax I, which corresponds to the third semester of the Pedagogy in Spanish degree and which, in addition, is part of the core studies in the field of linguistic training of the learners. Of this total, 25 students correspond to the experimental group (i.e., accompanied by peer tutors), while the remaining 30 correspond to the control group.

The didactic experience that shapes this research was conditioned by the health crisis that, for more than a year, has forced many university institutions, both national and international, to implement teaching-learning processes virtually. In this context, it was chosen to integrate in the development of the course the methodology of peer tutors in order to enrich the educational experience of students (Valdés-León, Mendoza, & Galaz, 2017; Bustos-González, 2018; Araneda-Guirriman, Obregón, Pérez, & Catari-Vargas, 2020).

In general terms, the experience corresponds to the development of the second unit, which was carried out in four weeks. During this time, students are expected to be able to strengthen their analytical skills by identifying grammatical functions in incomplete sentences (a topic addressed in Unit 1), but also to do the same with complex structures, i.e., with the presence of clauses (following the grammatical terms proposed by Juan Castro in 1992). For this purpose, two short stories were delivered per week, taken from the text Minimalario (Pinto and Chinto, 2017), one of which was analyzed synchronously, while, the second, asynchronously, through a learning capsule. The details of the experience are presented below in Table 1.

1

Organization of the didactic proposal

Week	Story	Format	Responsible sec.1	Responsible sec.2
Pretest	anteater	deliverable	teacher	Teacher
1	crab	synchronous	teacher	teacher
	elephant	asynchronous	tutors	teacher
2	dog	synchronous	teacher	teacher
	dormouse	asynchronous	tutors	teacher
3	ladybug	synchronous	teacher	teacher
	mouse	asynchronous	tutors	teacher
4	rooster	synchronous	tutors	teacher
	spider	asynchronous	teacher	teacher
Posttest	flea	deliverable	teacher	teacher

Data collection was carried out through two grammatical analysis evaluations, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the didactic sequence, which have been used as pre-test and post-test, respectively. In each of them, one point was assigned for the correct delimitation of each sentence, one point for the identification of the elements subject, predicate, verb and complements, and one point for the correct construction of the basic sentence/clausal scheme. An example of this is shown in the following example Table 2:

2

Scores assigned in grammatical analysis

Analysis	Example	Score
Delimitation of the sentence	He spun a web and waited patiently O1: /weaved a spider's web/.	1
Elements	[the spider] spun a web S: The spider P: spun a spider web V: knitted CD: a spider web	1
Basic sentence outline	EOB: something knitted something	1
Basic clausular scheme	ECB: not applicable	–

The first story, which deals with an anteater, had a total of 15 points, while in the last one, which corresponds to the post-test, it was possible to obtain a maximum of 22 points. However, due to the logical progression of the contents, the second evaluation took into account the identification of sentences and clauses, while in the first one, only the sentence level was worked on. Because of the above, we will perform the analysis in three instances:

a) Overall results between section 1 and 2 (pre-test and post-test)

b) Results between section 1 and 2, considering only the sentence level.

c) Results between section 1 and 2, considering only the intra-orational level (identification and analysis of clauses).

This decision responds to our interest in investigating the pedagogical potential of the methodology used, i.e., the accompaniment of peer tutors in virtual classes, considering the possible incidence of this in the reinforcement of previously addressed content and in the acquisition of new content.

Results

In this section, we will present the results of the work considering the following points: first, the comparison of the percentage of global achievement in the pretest, which evaluated only the orational analysis; then, the posttest, where we took as a basis both the orational, previously reviewed in the course, and the intra-orational, new content for this second instance. Finally, the results of each group are disaggregated, identifying whether there was improvement, what was the performance in each item and the comparison between students accompanied by tutors and those who only had the support of the teacher.

Figure 1 shows the overall results of both sections. The achievement in the pretest was homogeneous; however, the posttest showed that section 1 maintained the achievement in the previously evaluated contents, but did not reach 50% accuracy in the new item. On the contrary, section 2 slightly decreased its accuracy in the orational part, but obtained better numbers in the intra-orational part.

Figures 2 and 3 show the variation in the results of each section between the pre- and post-test, considering only the sentence level. This had a maximum of 15 points on both occasions and had greater complexity in its second measurement.

Section 1 (Figure 2) obtained positive results in the pretest, with an average of 74.7% achievement. However, there was a large gap between the highest (15) and lowest (3) achievers. Although the average achievement of the posttest did not improve significantly, reaching 75.1% achievement, it did yield much more homogeneous data than in the first instance, as the scores fluctuated between 9 and 15 points despite the increase in difficulty.

The results of section 2 (Figure 3) were similar to its peer in the pretest, having an average of 75% achievement. However, this decreased to 67.8% in the posttest. As in the previous case, there is a gap between the minimum (4) and maximum (15) scores. However, this did not narrow as in section 1, on the contrary, it worsened (min. 5, max. 15), as those students who performed well in the first instance tended to maintain or improve their scores, while those who were in the average 60% or lower remained or dropped.

When comparing the overall results of the pre- and post-test in the orational level, it can be concluded that the first group, supported by peer tutors, tended to homogenize their results in the contents previously reviewed, thus reducing the gap evidenced in the first instance, while in the second group, supported only by the teacher, the percentage of achievement decreased due to the accentuated difference that increased between those who obtained the best and worst results.

Figures 4 and 5 summarize the results of the posttest in both sections. This evaluation had a total of 22 points and considered the analysis at the orational level (maximum 15 points) and the intra-oral level (maximum 7 points). Regarding section 1 (Figure 4), the percentage of achievement was 41.3%, while that of group 2 (Figure 5) was 56.5%.

Only 15.7% of the students in section 1 exceeded 50% achievement in the exclusive exercises of the post-test. In this line, the work in the group with peer tutors allowed homogenizing and strengthening previously seen contents (Figure 2), but did not materialize in the work of new contents.

As can be seen in Figure 5, students in section 2 performed better than their peers in the intra-rater analysis. Of the total of 24 students, 62.5% exceeded 50% achievement on this item.

Figure 6 summarizes the overall results of both sections, considering the percentage of total achievement in the post-test, in which group 1 obtained 58.2% achievement, while group 2 achieved 62.2%. From these data, it is evident that the section that worked only with the teacher obtained better results with the new contents, while those who were accompanied by peer tutors strengthened the concepts and skills previously evaluated, but not with those considered exclusively in the post-test.

Discussion

One of the most valuable aspects of working with peer tutors has to do with the richness that this type of experience usually represents: on the one hand, they represent an effort to contribute to the development of specific competencies or contents, generally related to a particular subject; on the other hand, they also become an instance that strengthens transversal competencies, such as, for example, communication skills and critical thinking. Rubio (2009), in addition to highlighting the contribution that this methodology represents at the academic level, points out that "it improves their self-esteem, develops social communication skills, independence and commitment to their own development, which clearly contributes to their process of insertion into the university context" (p.10).

The formative-integral character that this modality acquires often explains why it is a widely used pedagogical strategy to accompany students during their first years of tertiary education (e.g., Bustos-González, 2018; Araneda-Guirriman, Obregón, Pérez, & Catari-Vargas, 2020), a period that is usually very challenging in the academic and socioemotional spheres.

In this sense, the research presented here takes on special relevance, since it not only focuses on newly enrolled students, specifically, third semester students, but also addresses a content that usually represents a major challenge for future language teachers: learning grammar (Cisneros, Chan & Druet, 2015). This focus favored that the students' results in both instances (pre and posttest) evidenced an improvement, but, above all, it allowed narrowing the gap between the students who were part of this study, which coincides with the findings of Made, Hasan, Burgess, Tuttle and Soetaert (2019).

In relation to the virtual nature of the experience, some recently published works -and, therefore, framed in the health crisis- have highlighted the importance of some aspects that are basic for success in this modality, and that this research has taken into consideration: existence of synchronous and asynchronous channels of communication (Cotán, Martínez, García, Gil-Mediavilla, Gallardo-López, 2020; Area-Moreira, Bethencourt-Aguilar, Martín-Gómez, 2020), proposal of tasks for autonomous work (Area-Moreira et al., 2020;) and permanent and effective feedback (García-Peñalvo, Corell, Abella-García, Grande, 2020), among the main ones.

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