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Teaching Gender in Spanish as a Foreign Language: Gendered Occupational Nouns

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Abstract

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In a world that is constantly changing, speakers need to keep up with current trends in the language they are choosing to interact in, be it their native language or a foreign one. More often than not, learning a foreign language means learning a second culture and understanding the social changes that represent the cause behind each and every innovation that occurs in that language. Seeing as how the topic of gendered occupational nouns has proven to be highly debatable in recent years, and given the fact that it represents a major and undeniable change in modern-day spoken and written Spanish, its importance as an educational topic is evident. The aim of this paper is to present a systematization of some of the issues that may be encountered in the process of teaching gender to students that are learning Spanish as a foreign language, particularly when it comes to studying gendered nouns in professional settings. The second focus of the study is to provide a list of relevant themes and topics that could prove useful when designing syllabi for a Spanish language and gender course, in order to achieve optimal results by selecting proper and adequate curricular content according to the students' educational needs.

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1. Introduction

The study of language in relation to gender is a prevalent topic for many scientists and researchers, including but not limited to linguists, sociologists and educationists. The feminization of occupational nouns is considered to be the biggest transformation that has occurred in Spanish in the past three centuries, therefore it represents a subject that cannot be ignored when teaching a Spanish as a Foreign



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Language class. Changes that occur in society are constantly being reflected in language, and the addition of a significant amount of female nouns that designate job titles or professions in Spanish is a perfect example of this. Given their short existence in this language, however, the use of such nouns is still quite debatable, as it can cause confusion for native Spanish speakers that have not yet grown accustomed to hearing them in spontaneous oral speech. Up to this date, official Spanish dictionaries have included a massive amount of feminine occupational nouns by comparison with their previous editions where only the male equivalent of these nouns had been included. However, a great many words that are being used to some extent have not yet been added to this lexicon. All things considered, learners that are aiming to study Spanish as a foreign language need to be informed of the current situation regarding the formation and use of such feminine nouns, and it is the teachers' responsibility to take these matters into consideration when designing the course material best suited for their students' needs. Thus, the present study emerged as a need to identify the most advantageous approaches to teaching this topic in a Spanish as a Foreign Language class.

2. Paper Theoretical Foundation and Related Literature

Spanish linguists have often approached the connection between language and gender, either through sociolinguistic studies, dialectology, discourse analysis or other research fields. The importance of gender or sex as an extralinguistic social variable has been discussed in some of the most important sociolinguistic studies (Labov, 1972) and is accepted by most linguists (Moreno Fernández, 2008; Blas Arroyo, 2008). However, the debates started by the feminist movement are a very problematic topic, especially when dealing with language in relation to gender. There have been numerous claims and complaints issued by feminist groups that have denounced the use of a politically incorrect language in public speech simply because it included the generic masculine, or the use of a masculine noun to refer to groups of people including both men and women. (García Meseguer, 1984) Such claims have, in turn, been criticized by linguists and scholars on the basis of a lack of scientific reasoning. (Moreno Benítez, 2012) The analysis of gender bias in language has also been a topic of research since the 1970s, starting with Lakoff's study on the derogatory nuances of female terms in speech. (Lakoff, 1975) Still, whether or not sexism in language is real, one thing is certain: teaching gendered occupational nouns to students learning Spanish as a foreign language raises several problems regarding content and teaching methodology.

One of the most famous studies on gender in relation to foreign language education dates from the year 2000. In this paper, Sunderland addresses not only the process of gender and language learning, but also different approaches and strategies in the classroom, course materials, and teachers' and learners' attitudes towards the topic of sexism in language. By raising the question of the importance of gender bias in textbooks, the author explains that this issue may not matter as much as previous studies had suggested, in the sense that focusing too much on gender bias in text may not be the most relevant point of interest for teachers and learners. The assumption of a certain attitude from a teacher based only on an analysis of the text is insufficient. In other words, the interpretation given by the teacher that

approaches the course book in one way or another can enhance the pedagogic value of that text or it can diminish it. (Sunderland, 2000)

It has been established so far that the course material alone does not matter as much as the manner in which the teacher chooses to apply it in that particular educational context. This leads to the problematic of teaching approach in relation to learning style and communicational setting. This, in turn, leads to the following question: how do teaching, learning and setting make use of language skills, such as reading, listening, writing, or speaking? One answer to this questions is provided by the segregated-skill approach. Within this type of technique, the optimal way to learn is to become proficient in each separate type of language skill without combining them nor including the content that also needs to be learned. Most scholars agree, however, that this method is ineffective: "it is absurd to ignore the role of content in the language class, just as it is absurd to ignore the role of language as a medium of learning in the content class." (Mohan, 1986)

An alternative to the segregated-skill approach is the integrated-skill approach. This type of method involves using multiple skills in relation to content in order to improve students' learning experiences, as many strategies need to employ more than one language skill for them to be effective. In fact, in her *Language Learning Strategies* book, Rebecca Oxford argues that students use language learning strategies in order to develop foreign language skills that are imperative for developing communicative abilities. (Oxford, 1990)

Chamot and O'Malley's CALLA, or Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, puts an emphasis on combining content and language, distinguishing three different learning strategies: cognitive, accomplished by understanding the information; metacognitive, done by thinking about the learning process; and social or affective strategies, achieved by interacting with other members of the group. The authors also recognize the importance of group projects or teamwork in order to better develop these three types of strategies. (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994)

Stating from the theoretical foundation, the following sections will propose an application of the concepts previously discussed in Spanish as a Foreign Language classes.

3. Methodology

This study was based on the premise that, even though Spanish Language Teaching course books are useful tools for learning the basics of this foreign language and for familiarizing the students with a new culture, when dealing with such a complex and controversial topic, it may be best for the teacher to not only rely on standard course books, but also bring extra material in order to adapt the course to the students' educational needs.

A suitable uniformity between content and methodology was necessary in order to make the topic of gender in relation to language accessible for the students and to facilitate their understanding of it. There are several issues that can be discussed in regard to this, yet, as a general rule, the study started on the basis that it might be best to restrict the topics according to the level of interest the students have in this matter and their personal experiences and feedback. Undoubtedly, there is a significant difference between teaching a topic simply because it is there in the language and teaching it with a

specific purpose in mind, as different communicative needs of distinct groups of learners are very important.

3.1. Approaches to Teaching Gender in Spanish

As was explained above, there are different approaches to curriculum development, materials design, language testing, and research. However, for the purpose of this study, the main strategy of dealing with the problematic of teaching grammatical gender was the integrated skill approach, with a focus on both integrating content and language in the classroom and task-based instruction. Through content-based instruction, students studied content and applied language skills at the same time. By means of task-based instruction, they communicated using authentic language and interacted with one another.

The first step was to facilitate the establishment of trust and mutual understanding between the teacher and the students. In order for this to be achieved, it was necessary to view the pedagogic experience from the trainee's perspective as well.

Firstly, it was assumed that different types of students would provide the teacher with different challenges according to their learning needs. The undergraduate Spanish as a Foreign Language Students selected for this study belonged to four different specializations within the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures: Philology, Translations and Interpretation, European Studies, and Applied Modern Languages. It should be noted that each of these specializations approaches Spanish studies in a unique manner, therefore the teaching methodology needed to adapt to each particular context.

For instance, students that specialize in Applied Modern Languages generally focus on specific aspects of language in different professional environments, with an emphasis on economic and legal terminology. Therefore, they will not need to learn the same things as philology students, even though they will have to take Spanish Language Practice classes. Although the topics discussed during class might be somewhat similar, the approaches must differ and adapt to each context. Some groups of students, such as the example presented above, might benefit from a more pragmatic or practical approach of the learning-teaching process, as they are mainly interested in being able to do their job effectively after graduating. In other words, they are highly focus-oriented by comparison to other types of students whose major allows for a more generalized language learning experience.

A second significant aspect that needed to be kept in mind was the students' need to know exactly in what way this class was going to help them and why they should learn it. Therefore, one of the main concerns of the course presented in this article was the needs analysis of the target student group. Otherwise stated, by the end of the course, the students will have needed to identify the most effective ways of using language to achieve their educational goals. However, in order to do that, they first needed to establish those goals, they needed to be aware of them and they needed to be willing to achieve them. A needs analysis was also employed before starting the course by identifying the main objectives that the teacher would need to achieve. Other students were consulted that had taken a similar class in the previous years, coming from the same educational environments. As a result, the expectations, difficulties, and final results or achievements that emerged from their previous learning experiences were listed as reference for the upcoming course.

To show a few examples of different learning necessities, Philology students would need a more general theoretical approach on the grammatical aspects of forming gendered nouns. Translation and interpretation majors, on the other hand, would need to focus on the issues regarding the translations of such terms from one language to another, while European Studies majors might also need to analyze the social and political aspects of the formation of these feminine nouns from a European or even global perspective.

However, no matter which theoretical field the students are focusing on, language will still need to be viewed as more than just definitions, rules and theoretical data. Language needs to be viewed as a means of communication. Learners need to study not only the normative systemized description of grammatical rules, but also the way in which those rules apply in authentic formal and informal speech. In other words, they not only need to learn the ins and outs of the language that they are studying, they also need to know how to apply theoretical concepts in real communication contexts.

A third matter of interest was the usefulness of text analysis as a means of preparing the students to correctly apply the concepts that have been discussed in class, in order for them to communicate effectively. Therefore, the next step was to gather relevant course material that would be appropriate for each specific context. An inventory was made of the most typical situations in which native Spanish find themselves unsure of the appropriate use of a certain feminine occupational noun, as it was almost certain that these scenarios would need to be discussed later on during class. An open Glossary of words resulted, one that will constantly need to be updated in the future, given the fact that language and vocabulary naturally progress and evolve.

Another fact that needed to be considered were the possible differences in teaching approach that would be caused by learners' linguistic competences and other extralinguistic variables, such as age, gender, or cultural and social background. Another objective was then set: to make the students aware of the importance of these factors in learning and using a foreign language. This would be achieved through the recreation of real communication scenarios in the language class, as social and cultural issues in both formal and informal contexts represent very important issues that cannot be ignored.

Students that were studying Spanish as a Foreign Language had to work with tasks that they would most likely encounter in future possible work scenarios. In other words, some of the activities done in class were scenario building exercises that included the use of gendered occupational nouns from the area of professional and specialized terminology implied by their academic specialization.

3.2. Designing Activities

When designing the activities, several matters were taken into account. A topic pertaining to the use of gendered nouns in relation to their academic area of interest was first picked in order to teach and practice certain content items that would have to be integrated in the language class.

To develop skills in listening, reading, writing and speaking, the following materials were used: authentic samples of oral speech recorded in Spain, newspaper articles, and excerpts from public discourse such as political speeches given by Spanish government officials that included the use of occupational nouns or gender-neutral language. Each seminar had a specific outline: Introduction to the topic, Theoretical Concepts, Language Practice and Simulation, Conclusions and Feedback.

Students were often introduced to authentic texts, then they simulated practical application of the knowledge and vocabulary previously acquired, through real and authentic communication instances and scenarios. One such example was the following: the students were asked to read a text containing different types of formal and informal speech and decide which option would be better suited for each particular instance of communication: maintaining the male form of the noun, considering the noun invariable by changing only the article to feminine, or considering the noun variable by changing both the article and the ending. The audiovisual approach was also used through voice recordings, videos, images or prompts given to the students that were discussed in class, after which they had to apply specific terminology appropriate for that particular situation.

In order to practice their oral communication skills, students were asked to produce their own examples of speech where they would have the option to choose between the use of male and female occupational nouns or the avoidance of such gender-marked terms through the employment of what is considered to be gender-neutral language according to the type of communication context assigned to each case, be it formal or informal.

Their abilities to work together in teams, to build rapport and to solidify interpersonal communication skills were also stimulated through group projects, scenario building and role-playing. For instance, teams of Philology students had to devise an effective approach to analyze the use of gendered occupational nouns in native Spanish speakers after being provided with authentic recorded samples of speech. Students that were specializing in Translation and Interpretation were divided in groups and then asked to translate samples of official speeches or discourses that contained gendered occupational nouns in order to identify and overcome certain challenges or problems that they may face later on in their careers as official translators. Those that were focusing on European Studies were asked to present an overview of the manner in which the feminization of occupational nouns has been viewed by public Spanish institutions and organizations and to put this problematic into a broader perspective in comparison with other European countries. Finally, students of Applied Modern Languages were asked to analyze the use of such nouns in official legislature and in other formal contexts of communication such as tribunals, company meetings, or global business relations.

3.3. Designing Syllabi

Given the fact that any teacher needs to take into account the most effective methods that can be applied in order to meet students' educational necessities, interests, and expectations, curricular needs and instructional objectives were very important when choosing certain material to be discussed in class.

The topic of language in relation to gender is a potentially relevant topic for undergraduate students that are about to enter the professional field. For this reason, it needed to encompass not only the strictly morphological aspects of noun feminization through article change or gender-marked morpheme additions, but also a diachronic perspective on the creation and evolution of gendered nouns in Spanish, as it was extremely important for students to understand the way in which changes in society are constantly being reflected in language.

The course also needed to include open discussions on the topic of sexism in language and the proper use or avoidance of gendered nouns in professional settings, in order for the students to be able

to present their own opinions, their critical perspectives, and for them to be able to justify the reasoning behind their acceptance or rejection of certain forms of these nouns.

A language and gender class in Spanish as a foreign language would also differ according to their level of familiarity with certain linguistic topics, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, Corpus Studies, Linguistic Field Methods, Grammaticalization or Morphology. For instance, in the case of students already familiar with methods of investigation in linguistics, the course included practice field research focused on obtaining authentic data on the actual use of these words in public discourse and informal speech.

All in all, these matters needed to be approached in an accessible way without overlooking the course's focus on linguistic analysis and critical approach.

4. Results

It was highly important for the students to be able to put matters into perspective and for them to be aware of the fact that the feminization of occupational nouns is a very current topic in our modern-day society. Their project work based on authentic samples of speech and their research on recent debates involving the correct or incorrect formation and use of such nouns in modern day Spanish, along with their interpersonal communication skills, teamwork, improved reading, listening, speaking, and writing abilities proved very effective in this matter.

It was also crucial that both the teacher and the students set realistic goals and expectations at the beginning of the course, and that they maintained constant communication with one another. It was also beneficial for the students to be able to express feedback at the end of each seminar.

Adapting the content of the course to each unique group of students according to their academic specialization helped improve their understanding of the topics discussed in order to reach their desired learning objectives.

In the end, several possible guidelines were listed, as they could prove useful when designing syllabi for a language and gender course:

- Studying gendered nouns: Status quaestionis. Early studies from various fields, including social linguistics, morphology, applied linguistics, historical linguistics, sociology and anthropology.
- Research methodology. Understanding different linguistic approaches: Corpus analysis, Sociolinguistics, Critical discourse analysis, The psychology of speech, Anthropological studies.
- A shift in perspective. Synchronic and diachronic overview: how recent scientific articles have analyzed this topic in comparison with earlier studies.
- Sexism in language. Expressing gendered nouns in professional settings. The inclusion of gendered words in public discourse, in mass media and in written publications or texts.

Some of the topics may be extended or simplified as seen necessary, as it may be best to adapt the structure of the module according to the students' level of experience in linguistic studies and their educational needs.

5. Discussions

Foreign language learning is an ongoing never-ending process, especially when it comes to the feminization of occupational nouns. As society evolves, new communicational needs start to appear. As a result of these constant dynamics, this course needs to be recreated every time it's delivered, as it needs to adapt to the students' educational objectives that may be different from one generation to another. The Glossary of Female Occupational Nouns will also inevitably change with time, as new words are being added to official Spanish dictionaries and new jobs and professions are being created.

In addition, it may be that newer student generations encounter other difficulties than their predecessors, it may be that they show different learning styles which, in turn, will require constant attention and guidance from their teacher.

6. Conclusions

To summarize, it is interesting to note that gender in foreign language studies is becoming a very prevalent topic due to the high number of articles that are being focused on this. The interest that it has peaked from researchers and official institutions alike is proof of the fact that society is, indeed, changing, and language is being forced to adapt to these transformations. Naturally, each innovation that occurs in human communication has to be reflected in foreign language classes, and the study of Spanish is no exception. Certain approaches have proven useful when dealing with this subject from different perspectives according to students' learning necessities and objectives, proving once more the versatility of education and its ability to adapt to any given context.

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