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Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Learning English as a FL: a preliminary overview of the cognitive processes of Spanish native speakers

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July, 2017

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1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS/RESUMEN Y PALABRAS CLAVE

ABSTRACT

This Final Degree Project is intended to analyse the complexity which entails the process of learning English as a foreign language for Spanish natives, as well as to highlight its importance.

In order to fulfil this purpose, this essay focuses on the main aspects concerned with the learning process. First, it focuses on the relevance of the mother tongue and the first language culture, two elements that considerably affect the way learners learn a foreign language. Then, it goes deep into the main topic of this project making a comparison between Spanish and English focusing on the grammar, sound, vocabulary, and writing systems in order to show the main aspects of the learning process for Spanish natives who are learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: language, mother tongue, foreign language, acquisition, learning, transfer.

RESUMEN

El presente Trabajo de Fin de Grado pretende analizar la complejidad que conlleva el proceso de aprender inglés como lengua extranjera para los nativos de español, así como resaltar su importancia.

Para alcanzar este propósito, este ensayo se centra en los aspectos más destacables que rodean el proceso de aprendizaje. Primero, se dirige la atención a la relevancia de la lengua materna y su cultura, dos elementos que afectan considerablemente la manera en la que los aprendices estudian una lengua extranjera. Después, se profundiza en el tema principal de este proyecto haciendo una comparación entre el español y el inglés, centrándose en sus sistemas gramaticales, fonológicos, de escritura y de vocabulario para mostrar los aspectos principales del proceso de aprendizaje para los españoles que están aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: lengua, lengua materna, lengua extranjera, adquisición, aprendizaje, transferencia.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. MAIN OBJECTIVES

This essay aims to go into detail about the learning process and how it takes place in each learner's brain. For this purpose, first it pays attention to the learning process and to its relationship with the mother tongue (henceforth, MT) and the first language (henceforth, L1) culture. Then, it focuses on how the different aspects of language influence and take part in the process.

This subject can be considered worth studying because it is something that happens in learners' lives without exception when learning a FL and that is why it is convenient to know more about it. The more knowledge the better, since learners can control the learning situation and see what aspects are improvable.

The main purpose of this final Degree Project is to make a general analysis of the process of English language learning for Spanish natives, taking English as a FL. Within this process, the different difficulties that learners must overcome in order to learn the language are presented. Needless to say, this process is described always keeping in mind and highlighting the importance it has on the learners' mind.

Since its main objective is also to compare English and Spanish in some aspects, it is essential to show how these different aspects within the learning context can exert some kind of influence to a certain extent.

2.2. JUSTIFICATION

Throughout these four years of my English degree I have become aware of the importance and global influence of the English language. I have been feeling that it is increasingly growing every day.

As I was making progress in my degree, I became aware of how I was learning this FL as years passed by. Therefore, I used to wonder how this incredible learning process was taking place little by little because I was fascinated by all the functions that the brain has to perform.

However, it was not until I was given an Erasmus scholarship that I became fully interested in all these mechanisms and how they worked in different learners speaking other different languages. I met people from different cultures and I noticed that your MT influences so much when learning a language that it can make that process easier or more difficult according to the characteristics of the languages involved.

In my opinion, all these differences are very interesting since people learning languages can identify them and be interested in them at some point of their lives. Furthermore, according to the *LOMCE* (97865):

El dominio de una segunda o, incluso, una tercera lengua extranjera se ha convertido en una prioridad en la educación como consecuencia del proceso de globalización en que vivimos, a la vez que se muestra como una de las principales carencias de nuestro sistema educativo. La Unión Europea fija el fomento del plurilingüismo como un objetivo irrenunciable para la construcción de un proyecto europeo. La Ley apoya decididamente el plurilingüismo, redoblando los esfuerzos para conseguir que los estudiantes se desenvuelvan con fluidez al menos en una primera lengua extranjera, cuyo nivel de comprensión oral y lectora y de expresión oral y escrita resulta decisivo para favorecer la empleabilidad y las ambiciones profesionales, y por ello apuesta decididamente por la incorporación curricular de una segunda lengua extranjera. [underlying is due to my own emphasis].

In this quotation the great importance of learning a FL is clearly mentioned. Needless to say, English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and it has been becoming more and more relevant in the last few decades.

Because of globalization nowadays English must be included in any curriculum so people can learn it in an adequate way and use it in their everyday life. Furthermore, it is an essential element to include in your curriculum vitae because it undeniably encourages employability, and so it increases your opportunities of getting a job.

Bearing all these ideas in mind, it could be said that English is a key element for people's success in life. For me, it is a topic that is worth studying and that is why I have chosen it.

2.3. STRUCTURE

This essay is divided into two different parts: the first part is focused on two specific surrounding aspects that affects the learning process, concretely, culture and MT, as stated above. The L1 is analysed in terms of its importance and influence, that is to say, why it is important to maintain your MT and how it affects the learning process. Then, a brief introduction to culture is presented, as well as its great influence in the way people see reality.

In the second part, four different aspects of language are analysed: listening, writing, grammar and vocabulary. All of them are examined in terms of their influence when learning a FL, making a comparison in between English and Spanish language. Therefore listening, writing, grammar and vocabulary Spanish systems are compared with the English ones to

show how the process is developed in the case of Spanish natives learning English as a FL, and of course the difficulties to what they are exposed.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE L1 AND CULTURE

When focusing on the learning process of a FL it is essential to analyse the relevance of the L1 as well as the culture “attached” to it, and also their enormous influence on the learning process.

First, it is important to start with a profound review of the MT itself. Then, it is convenient to move from that language to its culture, which accompanies and is closely related to that MT. Both are interconnected, that is to say, they always go together and one influences the other.

3.1. The importance of the L1 when learning a FL

It goes without saying that the L1 plays an essential role when learning a FL. In fact, its influence is indispensable and highly notable.

However, before paying attention to that influence, it is convenient to focus on the relevance of the MT in itself and on its preservation, which cannot be forgotten.

Nelson Mandela once said: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." This sentence fully expresses how unique the L1 is for people living in a community which does not share their MT or which has a different language which is considered as “official”. For example, an immigrant may feel like home whenever someone speaks to him/her in his/her MT.

No matter how many languages we learn, we have to preserve our MT because it is where our origins reside. A MT is the element that identifies a nation, the place where the cultural identity inhabits. Anybody’s L1 is essential to connect him/her with their culture because it determines the way people think, communicate, and express their opinions. Therefore, it is the key to fully understand the culture of a nation. It is not so difficult to imagine that without it we can feel disconnected from our culture and community.

Not only your L1 helps to strengthen your cultural identity and family ties, but also it helps to learn how to value your heritage: students who have English as a FL and tend to neglect their L1 often end up suffering from alienation from their parents and grandparents. Losing your L1 is more than just losing your language: you are losing a connection you have with your relatives.

Furthermore, it encourages the expansion of diversity so that different languages do

not vanish because all of them are valuable in a society.

It is undeniable that our L1 is our best vehicle for communicating: we are able to perform any task and also to get informed faster than in other languages, even in the case of bilingual speakers. Furthermore, mastering your L1 is really helpful when learning a FL because you are more able and ready to succeed.

Related to this, there are two different concepts that should be taken into account: “acquisition” and “learning”. According to McIntosh (2013⁴), the former is defined as “the process of getting something” and “learn”, the verb from which the latter is derived, means “to get knowledge or a new skill”. However, when dealing with languages both concepts can be seen from a different and wider perspective. Palmer (1974; mentioned in Harmer, 2007:50)¹ makes a distinction between these two concepts. He distinguishes between “spontaneous” and “studial” capabilities stating that “the former described the ability to acquire language naturally and subconsciously, whereas the latter allowed students to organise their learning and apply their conscious knowledge to the task in hand”. Therefore, acquisition is seen as an unconscious process which gives the capacity of embracing a new language and this capacity helps us, in a future process, to learn a second or FL.

Dealing with language learning, it is important to take into account all the different strategies used because they take part in the construction of knowledge by using previous experiences.

Despite the fact that there is not a complete agreement on the exact strategies that are used by learners because they depend on many different factors, Rubin (1975; mentioned in McLaren, 1996: 88) focused on the behaviour of learners who were successful in the learning of a language and on their mental processes and mechanisms for achieving it. This investigation denied the idea that some people were born with “special capacities” for learning languages and encouraged the idea that effort and motivation were two important factors in the process.

Rubin reached the conclusion that good learners used strategies based on what they already know from the process of acquisition of their MT and put them into practice. Then, she proposed a classification which divided learning strategies into two different sections which she called “Primary strategies”, within which a group called “Strategies that directly affect learning” can be found, as well as another group including “Processes that contribute indirectly to learning”. In the first group we can find strategies such as clarification, memorization, guessing, etc. The second group mainly helps in the creation of opportunities

¹Page numbers will not be provided when they are not available in the primary source.

for practising the FL and it also provides some tricks to help learners, such as the use of circumlocutions and synonyms.

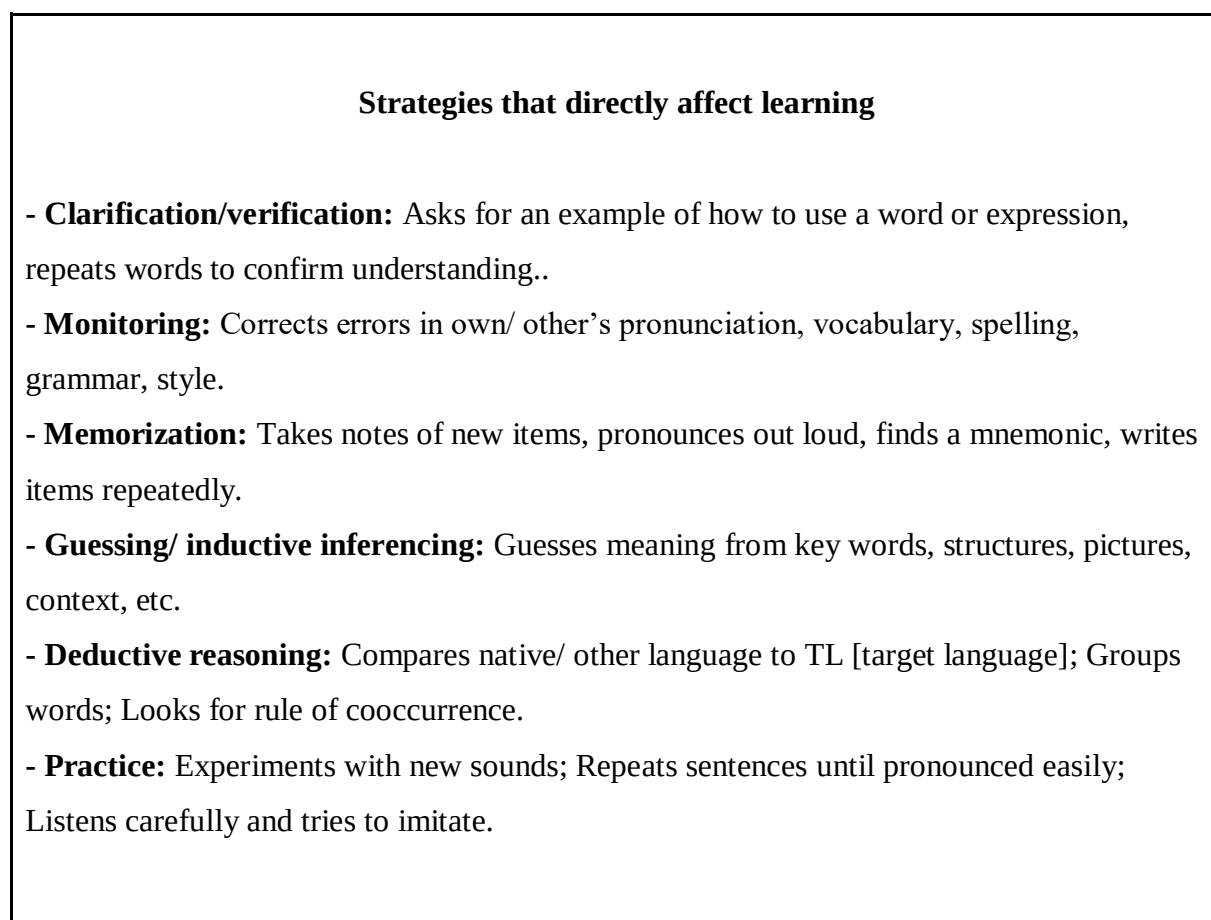


Fig. 1. Strategies that directly affect learning (Rubin 1975; mentioned in McLaren, 1996: 89)

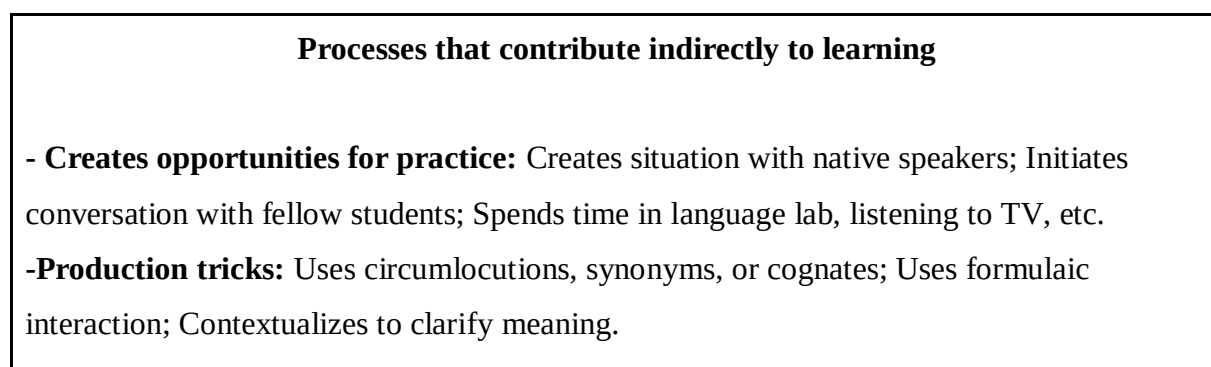


Fig. 2. Processes that contribute indirectly to learning (Rubin, 1975; mentioned in McLaren, 1996: 89)

As far as the process of language acquisition is concerned, there is an interesting teaching philosophy called “Learning for Life” developed by Miño-Garcés (2009: 81): “In the Learning for Life philosophy, the learner is the center of the process and becomes the creator of his/her own knowledge. To get to this new dimension in learning, acquisition is emphasized, and the principles of this philosophy are applied in the EFL classroom.”

According to this, here the main focus is on the acquisition stage because the learner becomes the main protagonist in the language learning process. In the “Learning for Life” philosophy the learner is considered a unique individual and all areas of knowledge are integrated and interrelated. It also gives prominence to the facing of the different communicative situations for learning a FL: the learner needs enough exposure to the FL in order to learn it.

Therefore, learning requires enough exposure because it involves underlining the need to communicate a message in the FL. So, rather than saying a message correctly, it is preferable to make sure that the listener understands it.

From Palmer’s point of view, as it has been mentioned above, acquisition and learning were two interconnected notions. However, they are not always seen as a unified whole. Krashen (1984; mentioned in Harmer, 2007: 50), for instance, claimed that

[...] language which we acquire subconsciously (especially when it is anxiety free) is language we can easily use in spontaneous conversation because it is instantly available when we need it. Language that is learnt, on the other hand, [...] is not available for spontaneous use in this way. Indeed, it may be that the only use for learnt language is to help us to *monitor* (check) our spontaneous communication [...].

As stated in this quotation, language acquisition and language learning may be considered as opposite terms: the former is really useful when having a conversation because it is used spontaneously as an essential tool for communication.

Thus, that could explain why we sometimes tend to switch to our MT (which is the language we acquired) in an unconscious way when we begin a conversation in a FL (the one we learn/are learning). Therefore, language learning will not be valid for spontaneous conversations but for controlling our speaking production. It can be clearly seen that Krashen compared these two terms positioning one above the other.

Bearing all these ideas in mind, the following step would be to focus on the influence your L1 has when learning a FL. It is undeniable that it plays a crucial role in the whole

process as it influences all the areas language learning consists of: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc. For example, while speaking a FL, more often than not our L1 may rule over our accent. Therefore, this could make it sound like we were speaking our MT although we are obviously not.

Another common example could be the moment at which we try to express our thoughts and we end up translating them from our MT into the FL when speaking because we obviously have been doing our thinking in our MT. Of course, both influences can be reduced if we work very hard on them, but it is undeniable that the presence of our L1 is always there and it will always influence the FL. Needless to say, once a high level of proficiency is achieved in the FL, more often than not even the thinking processes are done in the FL. One proof of that immersion is the fact that language learners may reach the stage when you use the FL even in your dreams.

As can be proved, the previous language knowledge that your MT offers you as a learner is an important source of influence. This influence has its starting point in the concept of “interlingual identification”, which may be defined as “the judgment that something in the native language and something in the target language are similar” (Odlin, 2003; mentioned in Ortega, 2013:33). From this point, the learner starts thinking about possible similarities between his/her MT and the language that is being learned. On many occasions, these phenomena occur in an unconscious way on the part of the learner.

Later, language transfer occurs. It takes place when “sentences in the target language may exhibit interference from the mother tongue” (Richards, 1980: 5). This transfer can be positive or negative. Normally, positive transfer is very difficult to identify but it is essential for the understanding of the foreign language because it definitely provides knowledge which helps the learner in the language learning process. For example, a native speaker of English who is learning German can benefit from his/her MT because both languages come from the same Indo-European family (both are Germanic languages) and may share some features.

However, there are cases in which similarities between languages do not seem to help and then, negative transfer occurs. A clear example can be the choice in the use of articles: we can imagine that for speakers of languages which there is a lack in the use of articles it will be very difficult to use and understand them. In languages in which articles can be found, like Spanish, the phenomenon of overgeneralization of the article “the” is very frequent. Thus, for example, Spanish speakers may say *“I like the young people” (“*Me gusta la gente joven*”) instead of “I like Ø young people”). Therefore, the difficulties depend very much on the L1.

Needless to say, there are some notions that tend to be more transferable than others and that is reflected on the term “transferability” which is defined by Ortega (2013: 38) as “the claim that L1 transfer is partly a function of learners' (conscious or unconscious) intuitions about how transferable certain phenomena are”. Ortega also highlights the term “avoidance”, which occurs when there are no noticeable ungrammaticalities in the target language (henceforth, TL). The learner takes fewer risks in order to be more accurate by avoiding the use of certain structures. However, this only delays the development in their learning proving that sometimes it is necessary to make errors.

Sometimes, even the TL can influence the learning process and this is called “intralingual interference”, defined by Richards (1980: 6) as “items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the MT, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the TL”. Therefore, errors are produced due to the TL influence. For instance, the overgeneralization in the use of the regular verbs (*“goed” instead of “went”).

James (1998: 1) went deeper into the issue of errors and defined “Error Analysis” as “the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language”. According to him, errors are defined by ignorance and incompleteness. Whereas “ignorance” refers to specific notions that people really do not know yet and their way to overcome the difficulties it can produce, “incompleteness” refers mainly to an insufficiency which expands to all areas of the TL.

Taking all these ideas into account, there are two different ways of seeing errors: on the one hand, they can be considered as negative because they are evidence of failure in teaching. However, on the other hand, we may have a positive view of errors if they are considered as a natural part of the learning process. Therefore, according to our opinion as FL learners and teachers, it is better to see them from a positive perspective in order to learn from them, analyse them, and take some remedial work so that we do not repeat our mistakes.

3.2. The importance of the native culture

When dealing with languages, culture is an issue which apparently does not take part of the language learning process. It normally goes unnoticed because it does not seem to have enough power to influence the learning process. However, it is surprising how culture and language are merged forming an important unity. This relationship should be fully understood in order to appreciate the process that takes place when learning a FL because both are essential in the creation and interpretation of meaning.

To understand a language it is important to learn about our own culture and that

involves knowing how it also influences our perception of the world and the relationships with others. Of course, it is impossible to know all aspects of culture because there are many different ones and all of them very diverse and variable. We do not forget that each country has a different culture but we recognise that culture is what makes countries unique and that is why we pay attention to it.

Culture “is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” and it also includes “the way people think and understand the world and their own lives” (Choudhury, 2014: 3). Language is the essential element learners use to express themselves and, as it can be seen, culture always implies language because is in language where culture finds its expression.

Brown (1994:165 mentioned in Choudhury, 2014: 3) describes the relation between language and culture: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. Consequently, both notions are inseparable and should be taken into account jointly because they complement each other in the formation of meaning.

In order to prove the importance of culture, it is convenient to show how much it influences the different components of language learning, such as vocabulary, listening, speaking, and reading.

It can be said that language is what carries the culture of the country and vocabulary forms a great part of it. Colours can be taken as an example. In the western countries, when people want to express their grief they usually dress in black as a sign of mourning. However, if we move to Chinese culture we find that the colour that was chosen to express grief was the white one. In British culture, they do not even have a colour to express mourning nor special clothes for the occasion. Therefore, when learning a new language it is important to not just focusing on the denotative meaning of words but on the meaning a given culture gives to the vocabulary.

Moreover, culture can also influence listening. It is quite frequent to notice how learners complaint about their low marks in listening comprehension tests. More often than not, this is due to a lack the essential cultural background knowledge of the FL they are learning. It is important to focus not just in the comprehension of the sentences but also in the sense the culture of that language gives to those sentences in order to fully understand them. On the contrary, the learner will find it very difficult to get the internal meaning of the language. So when the learner is doing a listening test it is better to be closely related to its

cultural background.

In speaking, the case is quite similar. If the learner wants to communicate successfully in the TL, he/she must know in deep about its culture in order to defend and talk about any kind of subject. In addition, when learners are having a conversation they must pay special attention to the context in which conversation is taking place, that is to say, they have to focus on what they are saying , to whom, when, where... etc.

Culture also acquires an important role in the reading process. Apart from the linguistic difficulties, learners may find different kinds of obstacles due to the lack of cultural background knowledge. Cultural differences are spread throughout the whole text, including words, text structures, sentences... And so, it is convenient to identify their cultural meaning if the learner wants to find coherence in the text.

There are other aspects in which culture plays an important role, for example in the translation of a text. A text cannot be correctly and fully translated in the translator does not have enough knowledge about the cultural background of both target and MT.

After explaining the influential role the culture plays in the learning process, it is also important to highlight the importance of language too. As it has been said before, culture influences language but it can be the other way around because language has a magnificent power.

There are several studies which focus on this perspective, but there is a very well-known one called the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”. “The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proclaimed the influence of language on thought and perception. This, in turn, implies that the speakers of different languages think and perceive reality in different ways and that each language has its own world view.” (Hussein, 2012: 642)

According to this theory, it is language which influences people's point of view in life and thought. As a consequence, a person's perception of reality will be different from another one who speaks a different language. For example, a German speaker would consider certain values in a different way from an English speaker would do, and all just because they speak different languages. To sum up, a particular language reflects a particular culture.

Language is a powerful tool to express our thoughts and these thoughts are the ones which influence perception, creating the real world and the context in which our MT develops.

This hypothesis generated a lot of controversy but it is quite interesting because it can be seen how culture can also be influenced by others elements, such as languages. Also, it demonstrate how powerful language is and how much it conditions our way of appreciating

reality.

To expand the subject of culture, it is fascinating the way Lado (1957: 111) built his own concept of culture. He said that cultures are “structured systems of patterns behaviour”, and such systems have form, meaning and distribution:

Forms “are identified by the members of that culture, although the same individuals may not be able accurately to define the very forms that they can identify.” For example, breakfast is generally considered a morning meal but if a person's schedule is altered because he/she works during the night, probably they will be eating breakfast in the evening.

Meanings “are culturally determined or modified. They represent an analysis of the universe as grasped in a culture.” For example, if we take the example before, breakfast will be included within the groups of meals, such as dinner and lunch. Therefore, breakfast, lunch and dinner are put together because they all imply the action of providing food for the body. Consequently, they are grouped together giving them a concrete meaning.

With distribution “all of these meaningful units of form are distributed in patterned ways”. This simply means that all these forms can be categorized into different groups according to time cycles and space locations. For example, to have dinner presents a time cycle because it is done every day, every day of the week, and every day of a whole year. In addition, it presents an exact space location: at night.

He also points out a very interesting fact: “our inability to describe our culture ways parallels our inability to describe our language, unless we have made a special study of it”. If we think about it we have to admit that Lado is right: we can say or write complex structures in our own MT but when someone asks us a specific grammatical aspect we may not be able to answer it. The same happens with culture, it is very difficult for us to analyze what we do in our cultural environment because we do it almost unconsciously, thought habit since we are children.

Lado's point of view can be quite analytical and also a little bit complicated but it is a good way to see cultural aspects in deep because it disintegrates each of them, providing a wider view.

With all this, it can be proved that MT and culture are two important key factors in the development of FL learning because both influence it from its very beginning.

4. LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FL FOR SPANISH NATIVES

After generally describe the influence and importance of both culture and MT, the aim of this essay is to describe the learning process of English as a FL from the point of view of a

Spanish learner, focusing on the main aspects of the language: listening, writing, grammar and vocabulary.

4.1. Two different sound systems

Before introducing the different aspects of both sound systems, it is convenient to remember or clarify some notions.

There is an important unit in the sound system of all languages called the phoneme defined by Macmillan Dictionary as “an individual speech sound that makes one word different from another”. It forms a complex part in the system of a language.

Also it is important to know that although a sound system is a very complex one, the learner uses it with great speed. When learning a FL, it is usually to transfer the learner's L1 sound system during the process, including rhythm, intonation, etc. Therefore, on many occasions it is easy to identify a Spanish native speaking English just because of the accent and pronunciation.

It is convenient to compare English and Spanish sound systems in order to monitor the learning of the FL and also to identify possible problems.

Within the sound system it can be found many different sounds in both languages. Those phonemes are learned by transfer from the L1 to the foreign one (normally transfer occurs just in one direction). However, there will be other phonemes which do not occur in the sound system of the L1 and so, learning them is more difficult because the learner does not have an exact reference. What normally occurs is that the learner transfers those phonemes from its MT, and therefore an error can occur. For example, Spanish does not have the /v/ sound (vacation) or the /z/ sound (zoo) and so it would be difficult to pronounce them.

Although it can be found similar phonemes, it is also important to focus on its variants because they can be also problematic. For example, /d/ English phoneme has two variants in the Spanish language and, according to Lado (1957: 14) one of them is a stop variant (as in the word *dos*) and the other one is a fricative variant (as in *lado*). The first one resembles to English /d/ in the word *day* and the other one resembles /ð/ English phoneme as in *they*. Consequently, we have two different English phonemes for just one in Spanish.

Also it is important to notice the relevance of cluster when talking to a sound system, especially if the FL is English because they are very frequent. They are normally problematic to Spanish speakers because they are not so frequent in their language. For example, final cluster /-rd/ does not exist in Spanish but it is very common in English. Therefore, Spanish would tend to say *car* instead of *card*.

It is not the same having a difficulty in pronouncing a word or just a single phoneme. Sometimes, the learner pronounces a word wrongly although he/she knows how to pronounce its different phonemes. This only shows a problem in pronouncing a complete word.

Related to this, there are words that are similar in both languages, and therefore the learner tends to mispronounce them because he/she transfers from its MT. Example: in Spanish the word *pino* is pronounced with /i/ and its translation in English *pine* is pronounced with /ai/.

Dialects are also important to take into account because they can be found in all languages. The term “dialect” expresses “a manner of speaking showing pronunciations, words, expressions, and grammatical constructions used more or less uniformly throughout an area or group of speakers”. Both English and Spanish have many varieties of different dialects and it is important to take them in consideration when analysing the pronunciation of the two languages.

Stress and rhythm are two essential aspects concerning pronunciation. English has four different types of stress: primary, secondary, weak and sentence stress (the movable stress). However, secondary stress is not as usual as primary or weak stresses.

English rhythm is usually introduced by a primary stress and then it is followed by a secondary and weak stress. There is always a syllable which receives the major stress and therefore, it is longer than the other. However, the length of the different syllables is always compensated within the sentence thanks to the different stresses, forming the English rhythm.

Spanish, on the other hand, has three different types of stress: two of them are fixed and functions in words and phrases. The other one, functions within the sentence and it is movable in order to express different points of attention. As opposed to English, Spanish rhythm is more compensated because each syllable has approximately the same duration.

In the comparison of English and Spanish stress, it is important to take into account that Spanish does not have a weak stress, so there will be a phonemic substitution of secondary stress for a weak stress.

Nevertheless, both languages present similar definite stress patterns in the position of the primary stress but “some English's patterns are describable from the beginning of words and others from the end” (Lado, 1957: 35). Contrary, Spanish location of the stresses is ruled from the end of words. Therefore, Spanish usually have a problem when they realize this pull towards the beginning of words.

Intonation is the last aspect included in the sound system. First of all, it is not the same intonation and tone. The difference can be explained using the term “pitch”: “the voice quality

we describe as high or low on a musical scale, is used in two distinct ways (...): when pitch is used with phrases and sentences, we call it intonation. When pitch is used to identify and differentiate words, we call it tone.” (Lado, 1957: 36). English only uses pitch as part of the sentence and phrase but as part of words.

The possible problem which can occur within the intonation system depends on whether they are intonation or tone languages. In this case, both English and Spanish are intonation languages. Therefore, and according to Lado, it is convenient to first compare the number of pitch phonemes, and later the intonation patterns.

As it is known, English and Spanish have the same number of pitch phonemes. Four, in particular: low, mid, high and extra high. Consequently, it is normal to assume that the learner will not have many difficulties in the learning and production of those English pitch phonemes.

However, this fact does not get the learner away from other possible problems. If we compare intonation patterns of English and Spanish, difficulties can be found although both languages have a similar kind of pitch. These difficulties arise from that similarity because it can be found intonation patterns that are similar in form but have different meanings. The learner chose unconsciously the pattern from his/her own MT and tries to express the meaning using it, instead of using the one of the FL.

For example, what is called “question tag” in English it is done with a falling high-low intonation. However, in Spanish it is totally the opposite: question tags ends in a rising intonation. So the Spanish learner will transfer the rising intonation into the FL.

Analysing the sound system of a language is a very complex task and that is why it is important to pay special attention to it when focusing on the learning process of a language. In this essay the analysis is done in a very general way as a kind of introduction.

4.2. Two different writing systems

A writing system cannot be considered equal to the learning of a language. Writing can be considered as a tool that records the different languages. Although it was practised since many years ago, it can be considered a very recent practice for some languages. In fact, until the printing came to light, literacy was restricted to certain people.

It is easily observable how learners can acquire its L1 without dominating its writing system. Moreover, it would make no sense to learn how to write a language without mastering it properly.

However, this clear separation between language and writing, dominating the former

first and then focusing on the latter, is usually forgotten when learning a FL. In fact, many learners begin with the study of its writing system. This mistake is usually more frequent when both languages have the same alphabet, as it is the case with English and Spanish.

Learning a writing system is very important if the learner really wants to master the language. Actually, “most of us benefit greatly from seeing the language written down” (Harmer, 2010:79). Therefore, the writing system helps us in the learning process. It is a basic language skill, just as important as listening, reading or speaking and that is why it is studied.

A writing system possesses different symbols which convey the meanings to express the language. They are all interconnected and cannot be studied separately. Normally, each of these symbols represent a same phoneme of the language. However, both Spanish and English present irregularities in this aspect, making it more controversial. There are some cases in which a single symbol can represent more than just one phoneme. It is important to note that the less irregularities the easier it is to learn the language.

Both English and Spanish languages use alphabetic writing, that is to say, they represent the phonemes of the language. Concretely, they use the Latin alphabet to convey the different meanings of their language.

In order to learn how to write adequately, the learner has to bear in mind that writing is a complex system and it is necessary to create associations between the writing symbols used in the L1 and in the foreign one. This always means a great effort from the part of the learner.

In doing this, transfer of native writing habits can occur, affecting the learning of the FL's writing system. In this case, the fact that both languages use the same Latin alphabet is beneficial because the learner will have no problem in identifying and learning all the different symbols of the FL. The real problem resides in those phonemes that can be considered strange for the learner because that is when negative transfer occurs.

Consequently, it is essential to compare the two writing systems in order to know more about them and to identify the possible problems learners can face in its learning process.

As mentioned above, English and Spanish have the same type of alphabet as it can be seen in Lado's (1957:98) table:

Spanish	English
a, b, c, ch, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, ñ, o, p, q, r, rr, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z.	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z.

¿ ? ¡ , . ; : - _ " ' () « »	? ! , . ; : - _ " () “ ”
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0.
Capitals, italics, bold face, etc.	Capitals, italics, bold face, etc.
Direction: From left to right.	Direction: From left to right.

Although it does not suppose much effort for the learner to identify the different symbols in the FL, there are Spanish symbols which are not found in the English language. For example, the Spanish “ñ” is not found in the English alphabet.

Furthermore, there is a different distribution in some symbols. The most important ones are the question and exclamation marks and how are they distributed in both languages. In Spanish, there is one question mark at the beginning of the sentence and then one at the end as well. The same happens with exclamation marks. However, in English just one exclamation or question mark is used at the end of the sentence.

This provokes a writing and a reading problem. The writing problem can be produced by an uncontrollable urge from the part of the learner to write a question or exclamation mark at the beginning of the English sentences. However, this is considered an insignificant problem because it is relatively easy to omit them.

The reading problem is more complicated in the sense that the Spanish reader will not notice that the sentence is a question or an exclamation until he/she reaches the end of the sentence.

In relation to the correspondence between symbols and phonemes, Spanish has a consistent representation of phonemes compared to English. However, a few exceptions can be found: “h” is silent; “v” and “b” represents the same phoneme, and therefore there is no way to identify them in oral production; the phoneme /k/ is represented by more than one symbol: “c”, “qu”, or “k”.

English connection between symbols and phonemes is quite complex because normally, it is written in a different way than it is spoken. That is why sometimes spelling is very difficult even for English natives nowadays. Therefore, it would be quite a hard process to learn how to read and write for Spanish people.

Furthermore, sometimes there are symbols which represents different sounds in both languages. In this case, it became a problem if the learner compares its MT with the FL because negative transfer can occur.

A good example of this is the letter “h” because it is velar in English but in Spanish it represents no sound. Therefore, Spanish learners will have a problem in both writing and

reading:

In writing, the learner maybe will chose the letter “j” in trying to represent the English sound /h/ because it is the nearest Spanish sound.

Also in reading, the Spanish learner will make no velar sound in saying for example the word “hotel” because of the negative transfer of the MT. Instead, the learner will consider this /h/ sound as mute.

With all this, the writing system needs to be considered as an important part of the learning process because it is what allows learners to express themselves. For its development, it should be complemented with the rest of the areas of language learning.

4.3. Two different grammar structures

When studying grammar, there is always an emphasis on the memorization of the different grammatical rules in order to learn a language. Therefore, grammar constitutes an important factor in the process of learning a FL.

Although grammar and grammatical structure are connected notions, they do not represent the same. Grammar usually means labelling the different elements of speech, as nouns, direct object, indirect object, verbs, etc. Furthermore, grammar also represents those different rules that language has that have to be followed in a strict way in the learner wants to be grammatically correct.

On the other hand, grammatical structure is “the systematic formal devices used in a language to convey certain meanings and relationships.” (Lado, 1957: 52) Therefore, it focuses on those structures that put together create meanings and relationships. For example, in English questions word order is essential to indicate that the sentence is a question: it is not the same *is she ill* and *she is ill* because the first one is a question and the second one is an affirmative sentence and all is indicated using the word order.

According to Lado (1957: 52), grammatical structure cannot be described without using three key elements: form, meaning and distribution.

Structures are always constituted by form and meaning. Both can be illustrated with a clear example: “Cat -> Cats”. Here, the implicit meaning in the comparison is the distinction between singular and plural. The form is seen in the use of the “-s” ending.

Grammatical structures normally occurs in certain situations but not in others, and that is called distribution. For example, the last example of the plural English form can occur in nouns but it cannot occur in adjectives as in *nices cats** (“nice” cannot be put in the plural form).

There are many elements of form that appear in these structures, one of them is word order. Word order, as it was explained above, can indicate a difference between a question or a statement. Also, it is important to notice that every language has its own word order in sentences. For example, adjectives in English must precede nouns because they modified them. However, in Spanish is totally the opposite: adjectives come after nouns (*She is a beautiful girl* vs. *Ella es una chica guapa*).

Inflectional morphemes can also be elements of form because they can indicate different grammatical points. In English, “-ed” ending indicate the past tense of verbs like in *jumped*. However, in Spanish the past tense morphemes have a different ending because Spanish possesses many different types of verb tenses. For example, “-ar” for the infinitive or “-ando” for the gerundive. We can also mentioned the “-s” morpheme for plural forms, which exists in both English and Spanish.

Functions words are also important and can be considered elements of form too. For example interrogative pronouns can differentiate an interrogative sentence from a declarative one. Therefore, if the learner identifies an interrogative pronoun (who, what, when...) in a sentence he/she will know that it is a question because they are clear indicators. This happens in English as well as in Spanish.

Related to this, intonation can also signal interrogative sentences and therefore, it can be considered an element of form. For example, a falling intonation will indicate an English question tag. However, in Spanish it is a rising intonation what characterises question tags but both intonations indicate a type of question.

All these different structures form part of a complex network which conforms a concrete system for each language. This system makes languages unique and move some of them closer because of their similarities but also distance some others for their differences.

It is incredible how a person can acquire and manage this complex system with ease throughout the years. The use of this system depends primarily on habit, that is to say, it is acquired and used little by little since the speakers' childhood thanks to the daily use of their MT, because it is not a process they do consciously.

With all this, it is probable that learners find it difficult to learn the grammatical structures of a FL. In fact, the first problem can be transfer: grammatical structures are also transferred from the learner's L1 to the foreign one. This kind of transfer is very difficult to change because it occurs in an unnoticed way from the part of the learner.

Therefore, those grammatical structures that are similar in both languages can be transferred without problems and they will be easy to learn for the learner. However, those

grammatical structures which are presented differently in the two languages can be very problematic and very difficult for the learner to understand them because transfer cannot be successful in those cases.

Furthermore, L1 transfer cannot occur the same in listening and speaking. When the learner is speaking the FL, he/she will choose the grammatical form he/she believes which corresponds to his/her L1 and produces it. However, when listening the learner will hear the grammatical structure and associate the meaning with the L1.

Another problem that the learner can face is the case in which both languages have the same meaning but they differ in form. For example, in both languages interrogative pronouns are placed at the beginning of a sentence to indicate that it is a question. However, their form is different in each language. For example, *who* and *quién*: both indicate the same meaning (question) but they do not have the same form so the learner has to learn new words to express the same meaning.

In addition, the learner can find that the grammatical meaning expressed in one language is not the same in the other. For example, both English and Spanish have different pronouns which express gender: *he, she, it* vs. *él, ella, ello* (masculine, feminine, neuter). However, it cannot be said that all pronouns mean the same in both languages because the neuter in English is larger than in Spanish as can be appreciated in the word “table”: in English “table” is neuter and can be substituted by the pronoun “it”. However, in Spanish it is feminine and therefore, it can be accompanied by the feminine article “la”.

Furthermore, the article “the” in English is used for both masculine and feminine as in *the man / the woman*. Contrarily, Spanish language has two different types of articles: *el hombre* (masculine) / *la mujer* (feminine).

It is also important to take into account the possibility of not having any problem with form and meaning but with distribution. A clear example can be the plural inflection in both languages, Spanish and English. As it can be noticed, both have the same form for plural endings (-s) and also both indicate the same meaning: plurality. However, it does not occur in the same cases. For example, in English the plural form can only be possible in nouns but nouns, modifiers and determiners in Spanish can acquire the plural form (*los coches rojos* vs. *the red cars*).

To sum up, it is highly notable the complexity of the grammatical structures of both English and Spanish. When learning a FL, it is very important to take into account the grammar factor and all the problems it can cause within the learner's learning.

4.4. Two different vocabulary systems

Vocabulary constitutes an important part of a language and therefore, it plays an important role in the learning process. This importance resides in vocabulary as the key of communication: it allows learners to express themselves and at the same time it provides the essential tools to understand what other people are saying.

According to Lado (1957:76), in order to make a comparison of both English and Spanish vocabulary, it would be advisable to examine three different aspects: form, meaning and distribution.

In this case, the form of both languages is formed by sound segments and stress. Sound segments play an important role in the formation of vocabulary words because if just one of them is changed by another one, the meaning can totally change too. For example, in Spanish it is not the same *zum* (juice) and *sum* (sumo) or in English *bat* (murciélago) and *but* (pero). Stress is also important because if we change its position, the meaning can change too, as in Spanish *sumo* (noun) vs. *sumó* (verb).

Furthermore, English possesses forms which are made up of separate words whereas in Spanish this combination is not permitted. Example: *take off* vs. *despegar* (two-word combination versus one single word to express the same kind of verb).

Meaning is the second aspect to be considered because it is well-known that meanings are not the same in all languages. In fact, meanings are highly determined by the culture of each language: some meanings exist in one culture but not in another. For example, the meaning of “potato” does not exist in Europe until the discovery of America took place, where they grew up.

Furthermore, some other meanings differ or do not exist in other languages. For example, some languages differentiate different types of snow because of their habitat but in English and Spanish they only have one type of it.

According to Lado (1957:78), there are three different types of meanings according to the form to which they are joined: lexical meanings are connected to words as words, for example the form “car” is attached to the meaning “a vehicle running on rails or tracks”. In morphological meanings, the meaning is joined with one particular form, for example the morpheme “-s” to express plurality. Finally, the syntactic meaning unifies meanings with sentences, for example the sentence *shut up!* as an order or command.

This can be one possible classification but it is important to know that each language classifies their meanings differently, that is to say, morphological meanings in one language could be lexical meanings in another.

The frequency of the several meanings of words is also important. The same word can have different meanings, and each of them is more or less frequent than the others. For example, the word “action” (which is one of the most frequent words in the English language) in the sentence “He made an encouraging action with his hand” does not appear as recognisable as usually. In this sentence, “action” means “gesture” showing a very particular and infrequent meaning of this word.

Distribution is the last element to take into account. It is important to mention it because it highlights those moments of the history in which languages carried different restrictions in distribution. For example if we take the word “water” it is noticeable how it can function as a verb as well as a noun: *Please, bring me some water; Yesterday, I watered my plants.* In Spanish it is possible to find it as a noun but impossible to have it as a verb.

Related to distribution, dialectal areas are very important too because vocabulary can vary depending on the geographical area or social class in which they are found. Also, many words are restricted to particular styles, as in poetry.

It is also convenient to include within all this the L1 factor, because it is the most powerful one. The L1 is a factor of primary importance because it can help a lot in the learning of new vocabulary. For example, those Spanish words which are similar in form and meaning to the English ones are going to be easier for the learner to learn them. For example: action (acción), machete (machete), invention (invento), etc.

If we focus on this comparison between the L1's vocabulary and the foreign one, it can be appreciated that L1 helps but also complicates the learning of new vocabulary. Within this similarities and differences, we can find different types of words:

There are some cases in which words in both languages are similar in form and meaning. If we focus on English and Spanish vocabulary, we can find many examples of it: hospital, hotel, comfortable... Some of the words survived in Spanish because they came from Latin and were borrowed into English. Some others came from the common ancestor of both English and Spanish: Indo-European. Wherever the word comes from, this group does not present much difficulty because of the similarities of words. In fact, even Spanish students learning English will identify them.

Sometimes it happens that words are similar in form but they express different meanings. A clear example is the word “arena” in English which refers to a stadium, however in Spanish the word “arena” means “sand” in English. Due to their similarity in form, this group presents a very high difficulty because it not only implies the learning of a new word but also to classify reality in a new way, attaching a familiar meaning to a different form.

There are words that express the same meaning but they have a different form. Many of them can be found if we compare English and Spanish vocabulary. Both languages possess a large amount of words but they have a different origin: Spanish is a Romance language and English is a Germanic language. Therefore, they have words that differ in form expressing the same concept.

Their level of difficulty can be considered normal because the learner has to learn a new form for a concept already existing in the L1. For example, the corresponding meaning for Spanish “coche” is the form “car” in English.

Occasionally, words which differ in form also express "strange" meanings for learners of Spanish learning English as a FL. They can be considered very difficult to learn because they denote a different reality for the learner. For example, the concept of “first floor” seems a little bit controversial if we compare it with the Spanish “primer piso”. American English “first floor”, “first” refers to the number one at ground level but in Spanish it means above the ground level.

These “strange” meanings can be similar in form too, and so it increases their difficulty for learners. These distortions in the meanings are not easily noticeable for learners because they are not consciously aware of them. They only seem unusual when they do not fit in a specific sentence.

Some other words present difficulties in the way they are morphologically constructed. It supposes a great effort for Spanish learners to learn verbs such as "get in" (which is formed by a verb and a preposition) because they do not have the same construction in their MT. Instead, they only have a simple verb, in this case it is “entrar” for “get in”.

Idioms can be considered part of this group because they are specifically constructed for a particular language. Such expressions may be considered natural in the L1 but very strange for the other ones. For example, the sentence “por si las moscas” in Spanish is quite strange for English speakers, who simply say “just in case”.

It can also be found that words have different connotations in both languages, that is to say, some of them may be considered harmless in one language but in the other they can be seen as offensive, or vice versa. For example, the act of whistling at sport events for example, is seen as an act of support or agreement for the point of view of an English person. However, in Spain it is quite unusual to see somebody whistling as a sign of approval. Instead, people normally applaud.

In the last group we can find words that are geographically restricted to certain areas. They can be considered difficult because those restrictions must be learned by the learner

without exception. For example, American and British English differ sometimes in their vocabulary because they use different terms to designate the same concept. “Autumn” and “fall” refer to the same notion, but the first one is used in British English and the second one in American English. Therefore, it implies that the learner must learn two forms for the same meaning in order to communicate with both American and British native speakers.

All these differences constitute several difficulties to take into account when learning a FL. It is quite interesting to notice how both languages differ in a great part of the vocabulary but still, the learner is able to learn it with great ability. Vocabulary is irrefutably one of the most important parts of a language, and that is why it is worth studying.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Needless to say, the acquisition process is a very complex and important issue since it begins at the very early stage of people's lives. In addition, it develops so unconsciously that it is amazing to follow its progress.

However, it is impossible to put the learning process aside because it can be as complex as the acquisition process. Being a conscious procedure, it is what allows people to learn languages apart from the native one and it also fosters the different abilities of the learners.

The learning process is so connected to the acquisition process that it is undeniable the influence the MT has in the process. As it has been proved, it can be a great source of influence for the learner but this can act in a positive or negative way. From that point, an interesting process develops in the learner's mind, like a battle between its L1 and the foreign one.

Culture is something that, from my own point of view, is left apart sometimes and in this essay I wanted to give more importance to it because it is bound to the L1. Both are part of the learners' life since its very beginnings, affecting the way they appreciate reality. Therefore, it will also affects the way they see new languages.

Paying attention to the different aspects of language, it can be noticed that all of them take part in the process. All can be considered as equally important and that is why they are all taken into consideration. However, some of them can be more troublesome than others, and so they have to be studied from a different perspective. For example, languages' sound systems are normally more difficult to study than vocabulary systems.

Therefore, the learning process makes the different learner's skills to work as a unity throughout the whole process, and that is the reason why it is worth studying.

With all this, I firmly believe that this process is not given the due importance because of the complexity it implies, the one that learners have to face every time they are exposed to the FL. Furthermore, I can say as a student that it is as difficult as gratifying because one can notice how your brain and your skills are developing day-to-day.

To conclude, my deep intentions with this final Degree Project was to highlight the great importance of this process and how it affects our lives, analyzing it from a general point of view.

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