

Using Spanish in the ESOL Classroom: Which Spanish Do You Choose?

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Abstract

Using the L1 in an ESOL classroom is a controversial choice. Yet more and more research is coming forward showing that it can be used to improve classroom outcomes. However, using the learners' L1 may not be a straightforward and simple matter when sociolinguistic variations are taken into consideration. For example, the word for *swimming pool* is primarily translated as *piscina*, but appears as *alberca* in Mexico and *pileta* in Argentina (Martínez, 2002). Herein, I present examples of Spanish/English translation ambiguities that can arise in the L2 classroom and propose some teaching principles that optimize implementing L1 use in the face of these variations. The lexical items discussed have varied meaning, use, and appropriateness depending on location and context.

Introduction

Using the students' native or first language (L1) in an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom is a controversial topic in the areas of foreign and second language teaching. This has been a debate for the past several decades (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Many researchers in the field of applied linguistics argue that little to no L1 use should be allowed in the second language (L2) classroom because students and teachers alike should maximize their time with the target language (Ellis, 1984, 2008; Nation, 2013). The no-L1 policy stems from methodologies such as Direct Method and Community Language Learning that were in response to the widely-disputed Grammar-Translation Method, which heavily overused translation. The advocacy against the use of students' L1 when teaching an L2 continues all over the world (Cook 1998; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

Despite the debate, there are many who still claim that there are positive outcomes of using the L1, for example, when it comes to teaching L2 vocabulary, comparing grammars, or even student-teacher rapport and classroom management (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Cook, 2010). Nation (2013) reminds us that "maximizing L2 use does not mean L1 exclusion" (p. 199). But, Martínez (2002) posed the question: what if students are taught the word *mesero* in Spanish class to mean 'waiter,' then, on their trip to Uruguay they find that the word is not used there at all and instead, the word *mozo* is used? As this example illustrates, there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between words in an L1 and L2, especially when variables such as



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dialects are introduced, and while this fact may seem obvious in retrospect, the implications of this fact are not always spelled out or accounted for in the L2 classroom. Explaining to students that there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between a term and its equivalent in the L2 may open their eyes and urge them to research further on their own, which may inspire them to add additional linguistic resources useful for navigating a broader array of local contexts to their repertoire.

Here we shall find out how simple, everyday words can be problematic for a learner when going between English and Spanish. Even when the United States and Puerto Rico are not counted, Spanish is spoken in twenty different countries (Dalby, 2004), so one can only imagine how many word variants there are among so many different dialects. Moreover, the use of one variant rather than another may determine whether a phrase is offensive or complimentary to someone, as we shall see in the latter half of the words that will be discussed. The point here is to show the difficulty and importance of translating even simple, everyday words. In turn, this suggests the importance of using the learners' L1 and exploiting simple translations.

Take a simple word like *box* for instance, which is translated into *caja* or *cajón* by wordreference.com. In many South American countries, Spain, and Mexico *cajón* means 'drawer' (Martínez, 2002). What is more, the primary translation for *drawer* is *gaveta* according to Agustín Martínez (2002), editor of the *Multicultural Spanish Dictionary: How Everyday Spanish Differs from Country to Country*. This dictionary is where the majority of the information on varying words will come from herein. The dictionary was created by a large group of translators and interpreters that met and came up with a large number of common, everyday terms which obviously differ, sometimes drastically, from country to country (Martínez, 2002). Such language variation by dialect has been an ongoing problem for interpreting.

This paper will examine closely a number of examples of Spanish translations of English which illuminate the extent to which exploiting L1 use in the language classroom can be tricky. Based on this discussion, some teaching implications will be suggested afterwards.

Problems in Finding English-Spanish/ Spanish-English Equivalent

Following en route with the topic, we shall see how heterogeneous Spanish equivalent terms can really be by taking a look into a number of common words and how varied meaning of a word can be, depending on which country a speaker is from. Strikingly, some words which may have no negative usage or even a positive one in one dialect can be highly offensive in another.

The English Word *Cracker*

The word *cracker* denotes a small, usually round or square, flat and baked type of biscuit which is typically salty. The main translation in Spanish is *galleta* (Martínez, 2002). However, in the Dominican Republic it is a *galletica*, while in Venezuela it is a *galleta de soda* (Martínez, 2002). An English biscuit can also be called a *galleta* or more appropriately a *bizcocho* (Martínez, 2002). To make things a little more confusing, *bizcocho* can refer to cake in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Moreover, a biscuit is called *bizcochito* in the Dominican Republic, a *bisquet* in Mexico, and *panecillo* Puerto Rico (Martínez, 2002). Now, according to Martínez (2002), as a general rule of thumb, *galleta* is both a cracker and a cookie; therefore, in almost all Spanish

speaking contexts cookies and crackers are the same thing until further defined as either salty or sweet. This inclusion of the sweet side might explain why it is also refers to cake in many places; exceptions to this are in Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay where *galletita* is used, and in Cuba *galletica* is used (Martínez, 2002). Additionally, cake is called *galleta dulce* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras while it is oddly enough called *pasta* in Spain.

If this does not prove to the reader the multitude of variants that arise, take this: in Argentina *galletita* is used for not only referring to crackers but biscuits and cookies as well. In Argentina, they also have the word *masita* for cookie. On another note, Bickerton (2009), world-class linguist on pidgin and creole languages, explains that “when words are lost from the vocabulary, other words move over to fill the gaps...the original meaning of one word can be preempted by a change in another word’s meaning” (p. 34). This is possibly why in the Dominican Republic *bizcochito* is used for biscuits, since *bizcocho* was already taken to mean ‘cake.’ Although this explanation by Bickerton (2009) was used in explaining what happens to languages’ lexicons when adopted into pidgin/creole languages, it is safe to believe that non-creole languages borrow from others in a similar manner as well: to fill where there was once a gap.

The English Word *Glasses*

Eyeglasses are essentially the same no matter where you go; however, which word we use to refer to them may be a whole other story. Martínez (2002) uses *anteojos* as the primary translation but also lists *espejuelos* in Cuba and Puerto Rico, *lentes* in Venezuela, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico (Kenneth Cook, personal communication, August 16, 2012), and *gafas* in Spain. In Colombia, they use both *lentes* and *gafas*. Some of these countries use these words for sunglasses or bifocals as well, but *lentes bifocales* is the more common noun phrase for bifocals across Latin American countries, while in Argentina they stick to *anteojos* in *anteojos bifocales* (Martínez, 2002).

The English Word *Pen*

Another example of a common, everyday word that would not necessarily be expected to vary so much is *pen* in Spanish. While *pluma* or *bolígrafo* are commonly used in Spain, *lapicera* is used in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, and *lapicero* is used in Peru (Martínez, 2002) and Mexico (Kenneth Cook, personal communication, August 16, 2012). The term *pluma* in Peru actually refers to a quill, or an old feather that used to be dipped into a vat of ink in order to not run out of ink while writing (Angie Isa, personal communication, May 25, 2012). Despite these variants, *Bolígrafo* is commonly accepted as the translation for English’s *ball-point pen*, as is *pluma* (Martínez, 2002).

However, in Bolivia, *punta bola* refers to ball-point pens, while Chileans use *lapicera de pasta*, Columbians use *esfero*, and Peruvians continue to use *lapicero* (Martínez, 2002). Lastly, the generally accepted translation for *fountain pen* is *pluma de fuente*, although simply *pluma fuente* suffices in Bolivia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela (Martínez, 2002). Argentines use *lapicera fuente*, while Chileans would say *lapicera a fuente* (Martínez, 2002). In Peru, they keep the same word, *lapicero*, but follow it up with *de tinta* (Martínez, 2002). The Spaniards keep *pluma* or *pluma*

estilográfica, while in Uruguay they just simply use *estilográfica* (Martínez, 2002). These many variant equivalents to *ball-point pen* and *fountain pen* can be overwhelming for nearly anyone, but simply knowing that there is such a complex array of words which correspond to these English words is half the battle for a student learner.

The English Word *Banana*

Moving along with our theme, *banana* is another word with multiple equivalents in Spanish. Martínez (2002) notes that *plátano* is the most common translation for *banana*; however, most schools in the United States teach *banana* due to its obvious similarity and status as a cognate. However, according to Martínez (2002), only Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Colombia use the word *banana* even though Ecuador and Colombia also use the word *guineo*, as do the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Puerto Rico. Costa Ricans change up things with the word *banano*, as do Venezuelans with the term *cambur* (Martínez, 2002).

The English Word *Pimple*

This word once caused a mild dispute during a trip in Peru, highlighting the importance of recognizing the numerous equivalents that a word may have. Attempting to explain the pain on my face, I was told that *grano*, my word of choice, was incorrect. Based on my Spanish training up to that point, I ignorantly tried to correct a friend, a native of Lima, that my diction was correct. Although I might have been in the know elsewhere, it is not the case in Peru. *Grano*, says Martínez (2002), is the equivalent for *pimple*; however, it is also used to refer to a grain, such as a grain of salt or a grain of sand, and should not be used for *pimple* in Peru, where the “correct” word is *barrito* (Angie Isa, personal communication, May 28, 2012; Martínez, 2002). In Mexico, *pimple* is translated as *barro*, as it is in Colombia and Venezuela, although they too use *espinilla*, as do those from Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and Spain (Martínez, 2002).

The English Word *Pimp*

As promised, here is an example of a potentially offensive word which also has almost the opposite connotation somewhere else. Take the word *chulo*, which is the primary translation for the term *pimp*. It means ‘nice’ in the Dominican Republic and ‘cute’ in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela (Martínez, 2002). The reader can see the possible mistakes, confusion, and potentially offensive usage a learner could experience with this one word in English which means three completely different things according to place. Moreover, *chulito* also means ‘nice’ in Puerto Rico, and the term for a pimp in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is *alcahuete*, while *cafiche* is used in Chile (Martínez, 2002).

Chulo should not be confused with the term *cholo*, which although used in American English to mean ‘dear’ or ‘honey,’ can also be used pejoratively in the countries of the Andean region. Referring again to wordreference.com, *cholo* is used to describe or relate to a “local” indigenous person or someone of mixed race from the Andean region. While it is used more commonly to describe a person who does stereotypical, often funny, and embarrassing things, the term can be taken further to be derogatory and offensive, especially in the wrong context (Angie

Isa, personal communication, June 2, 2012). On the other hand, wordreference.com also lists one of its meanings for Chileans as ‘shy’ or ‘timid.’

The Spanish Words *Coger* and *Chingar*

Probably two of the most famous examples of words which have very simple, non-vulgar meanings which can be twisted into meaning something quite the opposite are *coger* and *chingar*. The word *coger* means ‘to get, take, catch, fit’ in Spain but means ‘to fuck’ in most of Latin America according to wordreference.com. This is a huge problem in the classroom setting because if teachers teach this very verb in the classroom as its original Spaniard meaning and leave out its use elsewhere, this could lead to a dangerous situation for learners. Is it not the responsibility of the educator to make the students at least aware? This is the perfect time to offer a translation and an accompanying explanation in the students’ L1.

A similar example is *chingar* or *chinguear* in Central America. According to wordreference.com, this means ‘to drink alcohol heavily and frequently’, ‘to annoy’ or ‘to bother,’ and ‘to inconvenience’ or ‘to disturb,’ but in Mexico and most of Latin America, this word takes on another meaning (also listed by wordreference.com but without specification on context of use), which has vulgar connotations: ‘to screw’ and ‘to fuck.’

Teaching Implications

Given the complexity of language variations, there can be two possible solutions: Teachers can ignore the variation because it is completely overwhelming to address everything, or they can select one dialect and stick to that. However, neither of these options fully addresses all the variables in every context. A better approach is to formulate some principles to follow in a given context. Below, I suggest some of these principles for the ESL/EFL teacher to keep in mind.

1. Understand your teaching context: ESL or EFL?

If you are in, let us say, the USA and teaching ESL, you might have a class of all Spanish speakers in which case you can use the L1 to your advantage to explain vocabulary, grammar, and common pronunciation errors. This goes for most EFL contexts as well when you have a homogenous classroom full of native speakers of the same mother tongue. However, most ESL contexts in the States along with many abroad will have a mixed-background classroom with many L1s. In this case, your best bet is to avoid L1 so that you do not unfairly aid only some of your students while leaving out the majority of the others.

2. Decide on which dialect to choose

This is a lot simpler than you might think. You want to be consistent in your teaching and examples. You might want to select a textbook which uses one dialect, for example, American or British English, and stick to the text in order to draw comparisons or examples. However, knowing your student body is most helpful. If you teach using that text’s prescribed vocabulary, you usually won’t run into problems. So, you should choose one and stick to it, but it may prove crucial to reference differences in equivalents so that students are made aware of other situations where there might be confusion based on

which dialect is being referenced. This remains true for teaching Spanish or just using it as the L1 in the classroom.

3. Be consistent

The biggest piece of advice is the following: throughout the lesson and especially the course of the class, be consistent with references, vocabulary origins, phrases and expressions, delivery of nuances, and grammatical structures. Only when switching from the norm would you have to note to the students that you are referring to another type of English/Spanish. This way there is less need to clear up any situation where students might be lost or need clarification on what is being provided to them from both you, the instructor, and the course material.

4. Avoid Overuse

You should never ‘teach,’ or conduct lessons, in the students’ L1. This means that if you are teaching ESL, you should not use Spanish to manage the day-to-day lessons and vice versa. Using Spanish vocabulary or sentences to show the difference between the two languages in order to better explain difficult content is a much better use of the L1. Just remember it like this. If you are planning to use the L1 in your lesson plan, go for it; but if you are using it on the fly to teach them or explain something that you cannot think of any easier way to explain in the target language to help them understand, it is probably not the best method. Use the L1 in the classroom, don’t speak to them in the L1.

5. Make it meaningful

Lastly, ask yourself as the educator, “am I using the L1 for a purpose or am I using it because I cannot seem to get my students to understand without it?” Be mindful that your class is helping them become more competent in the target language through critical thinking, not metalinguistically discussing the target language through the L1. Is there a benefit to this L1 use or could it be more of a crutch?

After a word has been given the prescribed translated equivalent, that usually suffices. However, if there are any words that you, as the teacher, or the text recommends to be proscribed from use in a particular region or context, this would be most beneficial to the student. We as language teachers should keep this in mind and make students aware of potential problems when necessary. Some might ignore any vulgar or inappropriate connotations when their explanations do not appear to fulfill any immediate purpose in the classroom, but at the same time, this must be brought up so that potentially harmful or embarrassing situations can be avoided in the future. Ultimately, using translation in a student’s L1 along with an explanation of the context around a term can save a whole world of trouble from occurring. Advocates, such as Guy Cook, have staked this claim about language use and translation in the classroom as a preventative measure against such confusion and have argued for its usefulness and effectiveness in language teaching (Cook, 1998, 2010). As shown in the examples above, there are numerous problems and confusions which go along with even simple, everyday words. One might not be ill-intentioned but nevertheless walk right into a sticky situation. Both in the classroom and the real world, being informed about language variation and being aware of the context of use is key. Ultimately, which Spanish to choose depends on where you are and who you are with during your interaction.

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