

Instruction in the Spanish Diphthong: Results Consistent with Monitor Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen

Abstract

Kilpatrick and Pierce (2014) present data showing that students of Spanish can learn and apply the rule for the diphthong. Their results are consistent with hypotheses about the limitations of applying consciously learned rules.

When two vowels appear together in a Spanish word, they are pronounced as a diphthong, not as two separate vowels (eg. "radio" is pronounced [ra.djo] and not [ra.di.o]). This is only true in English for back vowels; eg "cute" is pronounced [kyut]. Thus, English speakers acquiring Spanish sometimes pronounce [ra.djo] as [ra.di.o]. Kilpatrick and Pierce (2014) noted that explanations of this rule do not appear consistently in Spanish texts and provided direct instruction on this rule to 17 intermediate and beginning students of Spanish as a foreign language.

On the pretest, subjects were asked to reproduce words presented to them and to clap on each syllable while repeating the word. Thirty nonsense words were presented, along with 58 distractors.

The treatment took place immediately after the pretest. In the treatment, subjects heard an explanation of the difference between the English and Spanish pronunciation of two adjacent vowels with examples. Then, as in the pretest, subjects heard and read target words and stated the number of syllables they thought were in the words and then clapped for each syllable while saying the words. Finally, they were asked to produce each word using only two syllables and clap for each syllable and then generalize to new words. They received feedback on the accuracy of their efforts. This lasted for 30 minutes.

The post-test was given immediately after the treatment, and was the same as the pretest, with the order of presentation of items changed. Both pre- and post-testing lasted ten minutes.

There were clear gains on the post-test from the pre-test, with nearly perfect scores on the post-test.

The purpose of this note is to point out that Kilpatrick and Pierce's results are exactly what is predicted by the Monitor hypothesis. In Krashen (1999,

2003), after a review of studies of the effect of grammar instruction on accuracy, it was hypothesized that instruction will have an effect when the conditions for Monitor use are met: the subject knows the rule, there is focus on form, and there is time to apply the rule.

Know the rule: The experimenters had explained the rule to the subjects explicitly. In addition, they made sure the subjects could apply it: Subjects were not allowed to take the post-test until they reached a mastery level of 80% in the treatment (p. 295). Also, the subjects were college students who were quite familiar with this kind of pedagogy.

Focus on form: Subjects were undoubtedly aware that the goal of the entire enterprise was to learn the diphthong rule and that they were being tested on the rule. Before taking the post-test, they had taken a very similar pretest and had experienced 30 minutes of practice in applying the rule. Also, they were involved with nothing else during the entire 50 minute session.

Time to apply the rule: No time constraints were mentioned, and subjects had only one task to do. They were no other demands, no messages to understand or produce.

The impact of instruction in this study was stronger than seen in grammar studies, but the task was simple, the post-test similar to the pre-test and the treatment, and the post-test took place immediately after the treatment.

Kilpatrick and Pierce conclude that their treatment helped their subjects improve their knowledge of the Spanish sound system. All can conclude, however, is that it improved their conscious knowledge, their "learned" competence in Spanish. There is no evidence that it impacted their "acquired" knowledge.

This is not to say that direct instruction of this kind is harmful. It can be helpful when less advanced speakers have problems making themselves understood in conversations. They can then appeal to conscious knowledge to make their utterance more comprehensible. Whether application of this specific rule increases comprehensibility remains to be demonstrated.

REFERENCES

- Kirkpatrick, C. & Pierce, L. 2014. Focused instruction in Spanish syllabification. *Foreign Language Annals* 47 (2), 286-299.
- Krashen, S. 1999. Seeking a role for grammar: A review of some recent studies. *Foreign Language Annals* 32(2), 245-257.
- Krashen, S. 2003. *Explorations in language acquisition and use: The Taipei lectures*.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.