HERITAGE AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF SPANISH: THE ROLES OF TASK COMPLEXITY AND INHIBITORY CONTROL

Scholars in language education have called for a research agenda that examines how heritage language (HL) learners re-learn their family language since their experience learning the heritage language differs from that of second language (L2) learners. This dissertation study explores how increasing cognitive demands on tasks, as predicted by the Cognition Hypothesis, may have an impact on the development of the Spanish present subjunctive in adjectival relative clauses in both HL and L2 learner populations, and how individual differences in inhibitory control may mediate learning outcomes. The study also examines how prior language experience across different contexts shapes inhibitory control abilities.

Participants in simple and complex conditions were engaged in a one-way computerized language-learning (CALL) task manipulated differentially by intentional reasoning demands in the complex task. A subset of the participants also completed a stimulated recall session. Following a split-block design, participants completed three versions of an oral and written production task (pretest, immediate and delayed posttests) as measures of learning outcomes. Also, results from an ANT or Attentional Network Task were analyzed to gauge inhibitory control ability.

Overall, and contrary to expected, participants in both experimental conditions performed similarly on the oral production task. However, the learners in the simple condition demonstrated larger net gains and superior performance on the delayed posttest for the written production task, possibly due to how learners allocated their overt attention during task completion as stimulated recall episodes suggest. HL learners in the simple condition benefitted most from the treatment task. In line with previous literature, HLs were significantly faster at suppressing distracting information during the first block event on the ANT; they also lacked explicit knowledge of the target form, whereas L2 learners verbalized being more aware of the target form as a result of task completion. These findings have implications for task-based approaches for HL development and how different bilingual experiences may lead to various learning and cognitive outcomes.