

## Exclusively reflexive verbs in Spanish

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Terrón Barroso, A 2015, 'Exclusively reflexive verbs in Spanish: a study of its acquisition among English speaking students at university level', *MarcoELE: revista de didáctica*, vol. 20, pp. 1-9.  
<<https://doaj.org/article/370bdd9c863f41438d607cf739400d77>>

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ANTONIO TERRÓN BARROSO

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## EXCLUSIVELY REFLEXIVE VERBS IN SPANISH: A STUDY OF ITS ACQUISITION AMONG ENGLISH SPEAKING STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

### BIODATA

Antonio Terrón Barroso es licenciado en traducción e interpretación (Universidad de Granada), licenciado en publicidad y relaciones públicas (Universidad Oberta de Cataluña) y diplomado en turismo (Universidad de Granada). Cuenta también con el máster en formación del profesorado con especialización en lengua extranjera inglés (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos) y actualmente cursa estudios de doctorado dentro del programa "Lenguas, textos y contextos" de la Universidad de Granada. Durante el curso académico 2014-2015 ha sido lector de español en la Universidad de Massachusetts Amherst. Anteriormente ejerció la docencia en España tanto en formación profesional como en bachillerato durante varios años. Entre sus intereses investigadores se encuentran la didáctica del español, la traducción audiovisual y el análisis crítico del discurso.

### RESUMEN

A lo largo de este artículo se presenta un estudio sobre la adquisición de los verbos obligatoriamente reflexivos en español realizado mediante un test de gramaticalidad en el que participaron diecisiete estudiantes estadounidenses nativos de lengua inglesa con nivel avanzado e intermedio y un grupo control de siete hablantes nativos de español.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Spanish as a second language, Spanish acquisition, quasi-reflexive verbs in Spanish, mandatory reflexive verbs in Spanish, grammaticality judgement test

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze whether the syntactic and semantic behavior of the so called quasi-reflexive or mandatory reflexive verbs in Spanish such as *enterarse*, *quejarse*, *burlarse*, *acordarse*, *fijarse* or *jactarse* can be learned and assimilated in a native-like manner by English native speakers who have reached an advance or an intermediate level of Spanish. The experiment carried out consisted of a grammaticality judgment task with six *quasi*-reflexive verbs forms and eighteen fillers. Three different groups of participants performed the task: a control group of native speakers of Spanish, a graduate student group with a high level of Spanish and an undergraduate student group with an intermediate level of Spanish. The data gathered and their statistical analyses seem to prove that there is a significant difference in the way native and non native speakers of Spanish judge grammatical and ungrammatical quasi-reflexive verbs constructions in Spanish.

The acquisition of clitics in Spanish, especially those related to reflexive verb forms, has been widely studied in second and foreign language acquisition. Some examples are the experiments carried out by Brunh de Garavito (1999a, 1999b), Montrul (2004), Trembaly (2004), Pineda & Mesa (2006), Santoro (2011) or Olsen (2013) among many others. However, not that much attention has been paid to exclusively reflexive verbs forms, which can also be referred as quasi-reflexive verbs.

According to Holt, Rineheart and Winston (2009), transitive verbs are those that can have one or more direct objects receiving the action that is being expressed. Among this group of transitive verbs, two types of verbs can be distinguished: pronominal and reflexive verbs. On the one hand, reflexive verbs are characterized by the fact that they always appear in clauses where both the subject and the direct object involved in the action are the same animate being. This reality implies that, in all reflexive verb forms, the subject performs the action and receives it at the same time as the direct object. On the other hand, pronominal verbs express an action performed by a subject that does not match the direct object, that is, the subject and the direct object are not the same being.

TABLE 1. REFLEXIVE AND PRONOMINAL VERBS IN ENGLISH & SPANISH

	REFLEXIVE	PRONOMINAL
ENGLISH	I comb myself. Subject: I Object: myself	I comb her. Subject: I Object: her
SPANISH	(Yo) me peino. Subject: Yo Object: me	(Yo) la peino. Subject: Yo Object: la

Within the group of reflexive verbs, there are some of them that are able to express reflexive, pronominal and non-reflexive actions while others, known as *cuasi-reflexive* verbs or mandatory reflexive verbs, cannot. In this research, all the attention is paid to this second group that can only function as exclusively reflexive verbs in which both the subject and the object are always the same animate being performing and receiving the action expressed.

TABLE 2. VERB EXPRESSING NON-REFLEXIVE, REFLEXIVE AND PRONOMINAL ACTIONS: LAVAR AND LAVARSE

	NON-REFLEXIVE	REFLEXIVE	PRONOMINAL
ENGLISH	She washes the clothes. Subject: she Object: the clothes	She washes herself. Subject: she Object: herself	She washes you. Subject: she Object: the door
SPANISH	(Ella) lava la ropa. Subject: ella Object: la ropa	(Ella) se lava. Subject: ella Object: se	(Ella) te lava. Subject: ella Object: te

TABLE 3. QUASI-REFLEXIVE VERB: QUEJARSE

	NON-REFLEXIVE	REFLEXIVE	PRONOMINAL
ENGLISH	I complain. Subject: I Object: N/A	<del>I complain myself.</del> Subject: I Object: myself. <i>* I complain about myself.</i>	<del>I complain you</del> Subject: I Object: you <i>* I complain about you.</i>
SPANISH	<del>(Yo) quejo.</del> Subject: she Object: N/A	(Yo) me quejo. Subject: yo Object: me	(Yo) te quejo. Subject: yo Object: te

As the previous examples show, exclusively reflexive verbs in Spanish follow a grammatical pattern that does not exist in English. Apart from that, not all the verbs that can be reflexive or pronominal in Spanish act the same way in English. These circumstances show that this kind of verbs could represent a problematic input to be processed and produced by learners of Spanish as a second or foreign language whose native language is English.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

Many authors such as Hernandez Terres (1984), Montrul (2004) or Pineda & Mesa (2006) have studied the acquisition of clitics in Spanish as a second or foreign language and, as the same time, the problems associated with them, especially for those learners who are native speakers of non romance languages. Due to the inexistence of similar structures in English, we can apply to the learning process of exclusively reflexive verbs in Spanish what Santoro (2011:56) points out about native-like use:

“complete development and native-like use may not be reached in those areas where two languages differ in terms of the categories and the features they realize”.

Unlike in the case of clitics, very few studies have been conducted on L2 acquisition in the specific field of reflexive verb forms in Spanish and even less on *cuasi*-reflexive forms. Bruhn de Garavito (1999a, 1999b), carried out an experiment that dealt with the L2 acquisition of reflexive passive, reflexive impersonal, and alternating causative/inchoative constructions in advanced English- and near-native French- and English-speaking learners of Spanish. Her research was based on grammatically judgments that the

participants had to make about the chunks of language that were presented to them. The results stated that L2 learners' grammaticality judgments were almost identical to those of the native speakers of Spanish in the control group. Bruhn de Garavito claimed then that L2 learners must have acquired the correct use of reflexive verb forms in passive structures.

Tremblay (2005) replicated the experiment carried out in 1999 by Bruhn de Garavito. This author argued that the problem with the conclusion that the previous study reached resided in the fact that the participants of the control group were from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries and the grammaticality judgment task included items that are subject to dialectal variation. Tremblay (2005:268) carried out her replication experiment avoiding this dialectal variation but she chose an identical group of participants: advanced English- and near-native French- and English-speaking learners of Spanish. Her results differed from those reached by Bruhn de Garavito and she concluded claiming that:

“the results of the grammaticality judgment task indicated that L2 learners have not (yet) acquired the structural and thematic properties underlying *se* and the internal argument in either construction”.

Both Bruhn de Garavito and Tremblay studies focused on reflexive passive structures but they did not take into consideration *quasi*-reflexive verbs forms in their researches. Apart from that, I personally believe that the fact that all their participants were native speaker of English with a very high command of French can significantly have a biasing effect on their results as similar reflexive verb forms coexist in French and Spanish.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

Can advance and intermediate students of Spanish distinguish between exclusively pronominal verbs forms and non exclusively pronominal verbs forms in a native-like manner?

## HYPOTHESIS

Native English students of Spanish as a Foreign Language with an advance or intermediate level cannot distinguish between exclusively pronominal verbs forms and non exclusively pronominal verbs forms in a native-like manner due to their conceptual and pragmatical complexity.

## LOGISTICS

The experiment took place at the University of Massachusetts Amherst during the fall semester of 2014. The participants were provided with a sheet of printed paper to answer a short questionnaire and all of them performed the grammaticality judgment task after a short training session about how to complete the test.

## PARTICIPANTS

There were three groups of participants in the experiment: the control group, the intermediate level group and the advance level group.

- Control group: seven native speakers of Spanish, all of them graduate students in Hispanic Studies.

- Undergraduate student group: twelve native speakers of English with an intermediate level of Spanish, all of them undergraduate students in Hispanic Studies.

- Graduate student group: five native speakers of English with an advance level of Spanish, all of them graduate students in Hispanic Studies.

## DATA ELICITATION

The method followed to design the experiment carried out in this research is the Latin square. Tabakoli (2012) points out that this method, also called *counterbalancing*, consists of having at least two versions of the same experiment presenting all an equal number of items but expressed in a different way. Thus, two different sources of variation can be isolated and mixed with as many types of filler as necessary to avoid participants to realize what it is being tested.

This research is based on two different versions of the same experiment created by taking into consideration two conditions. While condition one always shows a grammatical verb form, condition two does the opposite, that is, it presents an incorrect context where a mandatory reflexive verb cannot be used. The six items that were tested during the experiments in both versions are shown together with the condition that was applied to every sentence in the following table.

TABLE 4. ITEMS TESTED IN BOTH VERSIONS OF THE EXPERIMENT

	VERSION 1	VERSION 1
ITEM 1	Item 1 (Condition 1): <i>Me entero de lo ocurrido.</i>	Item 1 (Condition 2): <i>Te entero de lo ocurrido.</i>

ITEM 2	Condition 2: <i>Le queja de la situación.</i>	Condition 1: <i>Se queja de la situación.</i>
ITEM 3	Condition 1: <i>Se burlan de su acento.</i>	Condition 2: <i>Le burlan de su acento.</i>
ITEM 4	Condition 2: <i>Os acordamos de aquel verano.</i>	Condition 1: <i>Nos acordamos del aquel verano.</i>
ITEM 5	Condition 1: <i>Nos jactamos de nuestra superioridad.</i>	Condition 2: <i>Os jactamos de nuestra superioridad.</i>
ITEM 6	Condition 2: <i>Te fijo en como mueve los labios al hablar.</i>	Condition 1: <i>Me fijo en como mueve los labios al hablar.</i>

As it can be deduced from the items of the experiment presented in table 1, data were obtained through a grammaticality judgment task that participants performed individually and without using any material such as dictionaries, electronic devices, etc. Schütze and Sprouse (2014) state that judgment tasks can be divided into two categories: non-numerical (or qualitative) tasks and numerical (or quantitative) tasks. For these authors, non-numerical tasks such as the correct-incorrect task used in this experiment should be designed to detect qualitative differences between conditions. Although with this type of tasks some of the information about the size of the difference between conditions must be sacrificed, they can be very useful to approach the study of very specific topics or properties of a language in which data could result difficult to obtain through another elicitation method.

With regards to the presentation of the experiment to participants, the presence of three fillers among every item tested would not allow participants to identify that the use of mandatory reflexive verb forms was what was being tested. These different types of fillers would dismiss that the learning effect could take place and had a negative influence on the data. Every sentence to be judged was presented in a separate line and the participants decided whether it was grammatical or ungrammatical by circling "correct" or "incorrect" at the end of the line.

Apart from taking this short test described in the previous paragraphs, the participants answered as well a brief questionnaire in which they were asked about the years of instruction received in Spanish and the number of years they lived in a Spanish speaking country.

## CODING THE DATA

In both versions of the experiment there were six items corresponding each to one of the verbs that were being tested: *enterarse, quejarse, burlarse, acordarse, jactarse and fijarse*. Each correct answer provided was counted as one point so that if a participant answered all the six items correctly, he or she got the maximum possible score, that was, six points. Incorrect answers did not deduct any point so the minimum score that a participant could have obtained was zero.

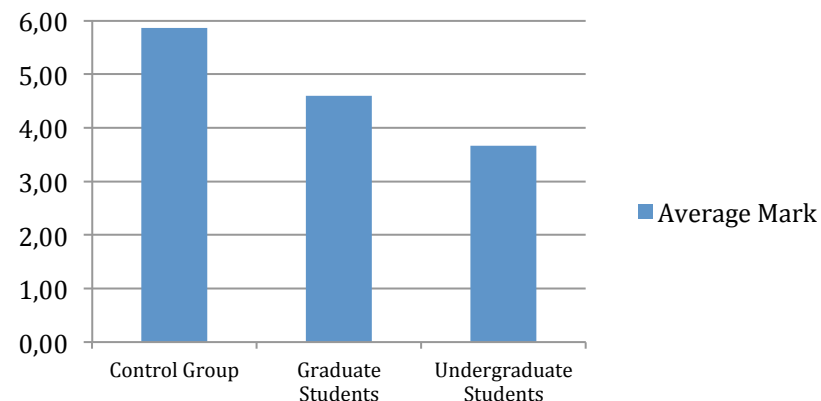
Once all the tests were marked, the following step was to classify the number of mistakes of each participant into two categories: acceptance of incorrect sentences as correct and rejection of correct sentences for considering them incorrect.

Regarding the data extracted from the questionnaires, they were treated separately from those extracted from the grammaticality judgment task. Data from the questionnaire was measured by years of instruction received in Spanish and years residing in a Spanish speaking country. This way all participants had at the end of the experiment five different scores. The score number one referred to the number of points obtained from the grammaticality judgment task while the scores number two and three reflected the number of mistakes accepting incorrect sentences or rejecting correct answers respectively. Finally, the scores number four and number five reflected the number of years of instruction or residence in a Spanish speaking country respectively. Both the questionnaire and the grammaticality judgment task can be found in the appendix.

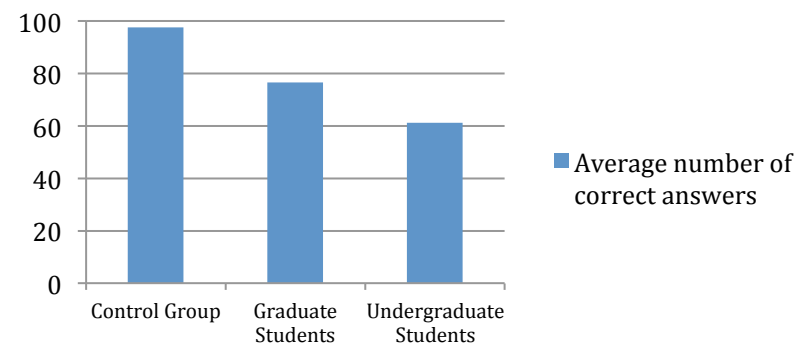
## DATA ANALYSIS

As it was expected according to the hypothesis of the experiment, the group that made the highest number of mistakes was the undergraduate one. The participants in this group got an average grade of 3.7 points out of six. On the other hand, the graduate group ended up with an average grade of 4.6 points out of six and all the native speakers in the control group judged correctly all items that were being tested except for one person who had an isolated mistake.

**Average marks among groups**

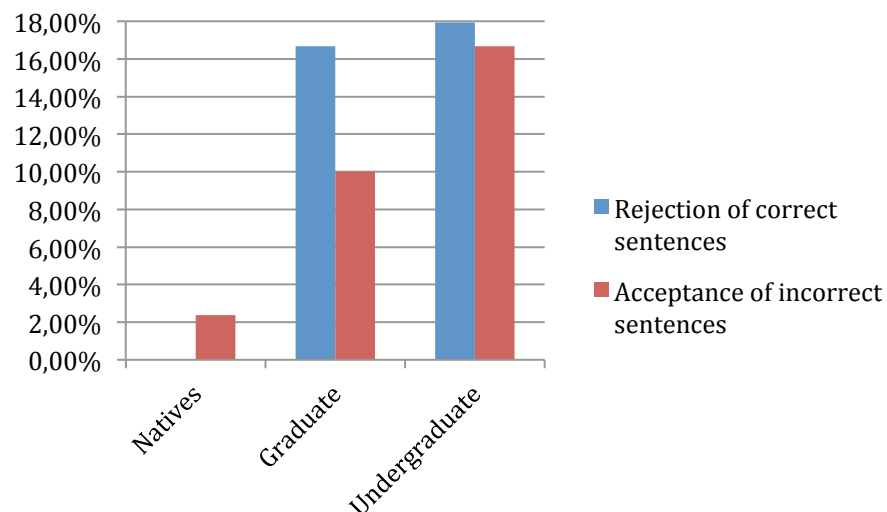


**Average number of correct answers among groups**



The mistakes made by non native speakers were classified into two categories: acceptance of incorrect sentences as correct and rejection of correct sentences. The particular analysis of this data

show that while advance students tended to reject correct mandatory reflexive verb forms, intermediate students did not show any pronounced preference for accepting agrammatical constructions as correct or rejecting those which were correct.



After carrying out the pertinent statistical analysis, some significant differences between groups' performances were found. All of these differences prove the hypothesis of the study to be true as they all show that non native speakers cannot judge mandatory reflexive verb forms in a native-like manner.

Regarding the non-native speakers performance, any statistically significant difference was found between the intermediate and the advance groups. It seems that more data is needed to point out which factors can be playing an important role in the different levels of performance showed by not native speakers in the test. As the questionnaires filled out by the participants of the experiment show,

the number of year residing in a Spanish speaking country or receiving instruction in Spanish could have a potential impact on their performance.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Native speakers can recognized and correctly judge mandatory reflexive verbs while non native speakers cannot, no matter if their level of Spanish is advance or intermediate.
- Intermediate students do not show any preference for accepting or rejecting grammatical or agrammatical mandatory reflexive verb constructions in Spanish while advance students reject correct forms.
- Although according to the data gathered and analyzed for this research project the difference in the performance of judging mandatory reflexive verbs in Spanish among advance and intermediate students was not statistically significant, it seems that there might be some factors having an effect on it that could be explored through future developments of the study.

## FUTURE STUDIES

As it was pointed out in the bibliographical review, the studies about the acquisition of mandatory reflexive verbs in Spanish are practically inexistent. In this research project it has been demonstrated that reaching a native-like manner when dealing with quasi-reflexive or mandatory reflexive verb forms in Spanish is extremely difficult even for advance students. According to the data collected in the questionnaires together with the grammaticality judgment task



performed, it seems that some factors such as the length of time receiving instruction in Spanish or residing in a Spanish speaking country might be having a decisive effect on the way the students performed the task. This fact could be developed in future developments of the study.

## APPENDIX

### 1. Questionnaire

Initials:

Group (choose one):

*native speaker of Spanish*

*intermediate level*

*advance level*

Number of years of instruction received in Spanish:

Number of years residing in a Spanish speaking country:

### 2. Grammaticality judgment task

*Instructions: you are going to see 24 different sentences. They will appear separately so you are going to see one single sentence per slide. You should decide if every sentence that is being shown is correct or incorrect. If you think the sentence is correct you should press the green key in the keyboard. If you think it is incorrect then you should press the red key. Please, try to answer as soon as you can. You have a limited time (12 seconds) to judge every sentence.*

#### VERSION 1

Item 1: Me entero de lo ocurrido.

Filler: Me gustan comer manzanas.

Filler: Te las compro en la farmacia las pastillas.

Filler: Se hace vestidos a medida.

#### VERSION 2

Item 1: Te entero de lo ocurrido.

Filler: Me gusta comer manzanas.

Filler: Te los compro en la farmacia las pastillas.

Filler: Se hacen vestidos a medida.

Item 2: Le queja de la situación.

Filler: Les gustan el vino y el queso.

Filler: Se refleja en el espejo.

Filler: El libro se lo compra sus padres librería.

Item 2: Se queja de la situación.

Filler: Les gustan el vino y los quesos.

Filler: Me refleja en el espejo.

Filler: Los libros se los compran en la librería.

Item 3: Se burlan de su acento.

Filler: Lo que le gustan son los rojos y el azul.

Filler: Nos los llevan a Roma los muebles en un camión.

Filler: Se les ofrece a cualquiera la oportunidad de trabajar.

Item 3: Le burlan de su acento.

Filler: Los que le gustan son los rojos y el azul.

Filler: El mueble nos los llevan a Roma en un camión.

Filler: Se le ofrece a cualquier persona la oportunidad de trabajar.

Item 4: Os acordamos de aquel verano.

Filler: Me gusta comer manzanas.

Filler: Te los compro en la farmacia las pastillas.

Filler: Se hacen vestidos a medida.

Item 4: Nos acordamos de aquel verano.

Filler: Me gustan comer manzanas.

Filler: Te las compro en la farmacia las pastillas.

Filler: Se hace vestidos a medida.

Item 5: Nos jactamos de nuestra superioridad.

Filler: Les gustan el vino y los quesos.

Filler: Me refleja en el espejo.

Filler: Los libros se los compran en la librería.

Item 5: Os jactamos de nuestra superioridad.

Filler: Les gustan el vino y el queso.

Filler: Se refleja en el espejo.

Filler: El libro se lo compra sus padres librería.

Item 6: Te fijo en como mueve los labios al hablar.

Filler: Los que le gustan son los rojos y el azul.

Filler: El mueble nos los llevan

Item 6: Me fijo en como mueve los labios al hablar.

Filler: Lo que le gustan son los rojos y el azul.

Filler: Nos los llevan a Roma los

a Roma en un camión.  
Filler: Se le ofrece a cualquier  
persona la oportunidad de  
trabajar.

muebles en un camión.  
Filler: Se les ofrece a cualquiera  
la oportunidad de trabajar.

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FECHA DE ENVÍO: 20 DE FEBRERO DE 2014