

Application of the Ideas Assessment Matrix Technique to Determine Strategies that Facilitate the Learning of the Spanish Language

Raul José Martelo Gómez¹, Jeimy Vélez Ramos², David Antonio Franco Borré³

¹Specialist in Networks and Telecommunications; Master in Computer Science. Systems Engineer. Full-time Research Professor of the Systems Engineering Program at the Universidad de Cartagena. Leader of the INGESINFO Research Group. Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. E-mail: rmartelog1@unicartagena.edu.co

²Professor of the Systems Engineering Program at the Universidad de Cartagena, Colombia. Corporation CORCiEM, Montería, Colombia. Email: jeimy.velez.ramos@gmail.com.

³Master in Computer Science. Systems Engineer. Full-time Research Professor of the Systems Engineering Program at the Universidad de Cartagena. Cartagena Colombia. E-mail: dfrancob@unicartagena.edu.co.

Abstracts

Language is a fundamental mean of communication, however, difficulties may come up when trying to transmit a message using another language than the mother one. An example of the above is the Spanish language, in which different difficulties appear when learning it, such as the pronunciation of new phonetic sounds for the learner. Therefore, the objective of this research was to determine strategies that facilitate the learning of the Spanish language. This research was mixed because the qualitative and quantitative approaches were taken into account when carrying it out. A sequential exploratory research design was applied because qualitative data are processed to obtain numerical results. Regarding the results, different strategies were obtained, such as “Learn Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country”, “Use of tongue twisters”, and “Interact with local people”. In this way it was determined that there are learning strategies that can be applied in a complementary way and not individually because they do not offer an effective solution to improve the learning of the Spanish language and only work in particular contexts.

Keywords: learning, languages, Spanish, learning strategies.

Introduction

A language is defined as a code in which ideas are expressed through a conventional system of signals that allow communication [1]. These signs can be represented through letters and sounds, through which concepts can be described. Taking into account the above, there are elements that serve as guidelines when implementing a language such as syntax, which defines the rules to follow in order to accomplish with the structure of the language; semantics, which indicates the syntactic meaning of an expression used; and pragmatics, which details how semantics and syntax are used to achieve communication [2].

The importance of languages as a mean of expression has been reflected in different studies such as [3], where the feminine and masculine grammatical forms and the possible interpretations they may have according to the context in different languages are analyzed; in [4], where the role played by the personal pronoun “we” is analyzed when formulating sentences or conjugating verbs in different languages of the world; in [5], in which the influence of the repetition of phrases in Chinese language students when learning new words is analyzed; in [6], where the way children learn words that belong to other languages than their native language is studied; and in [7], where phonetic sounds are analyzed in particular cases of people who speak English and French, such as “um” and “uh” (fillers) that are used to fill in spaces of silence in a conversation while the person think of a suitable word, phrase or expression to convey the message correctly.

Based on the above, a language is a fundamental mean of communication, through which people can clearly express their ideas orally or in writing, and they can feel comfortable using the native language, however, difficulties may come up when trying to transmit a message using another language than the mother one [8]. An example of the above is the Spanish language, in which different difficulties appear when learning it, such as the pronunciation of new phonetic sounds for the learner; learning the language in a geographical location where it is not spoken or the native language is different; the pronunciation of phonetic sounds [9]; and grammatical aspects such as the modes of a verb, reflexive verbs [10], direct and indirect objects [11], or various grammatical structures that do not exist in the student's native language.

Taking into account what has been described, the objective of this research is to determine strategies that facilitate the learning of the Spanish language. In this way, the strategies in question are processes that can be applied by learners according to the needs or difficulties that come up in different contexts of the Spanish language learning process [12].

Materials and Methods

This research was mixed because the qualitative and quantitative approaches were taken into account when carrying it out [13]. A sequential exploratory research design was applied because qualitative data are processed to obtain numerical results [14].

2.1. Population and sample

The population was made up of students who are learning the Spanish language in Spanish schools located in Cartagena de Indias. Taking into account the above, a group of 10 students was taken as a sample because they had time available, and their willingness to participating in the process was counted on.

2.2. Information gathering techniques

The documentary review was applied in order to collect information related to the subject through different sources of information such as scientific papers, books, and any document, in general, that could be useful for the process of investigation.

2.3. Data analysis

The Ideas Assessment Matrix technique was applied as a tool to analyze the data. The objective of this technique is to evaluate different elements to select the most convenient. Regarding the evaluation of the elements, the following activities must be fulfilled: 1) define an adequate numerical scale for the qualifications; 2) establish the evaluation criteria and their levels of importance reflected in percentages, which must add up to 100%; 3) assign quantitative qualifications to the elements according to the criteria in order to obtain averages and fulfill the purpose of the technique [15]. Additionally, a scale of qualifications was defined, configured as follows: Very High (5) High (4), Moderate (3), Low (2) Very Low (1), and Null (0).

2.4. Proposed conceptual model

A conceptual model was defined consisting of the following phases: 1) Identification of difficulties when learning Spanish; 2) Determination of evaluation strategies and criteria; and 3) Determination of the best strategies.

2.4.1. Identification of difficulties when learning Spanish

In this phase, the members of the sample were in charge of carrying out a debate on the most common difficulties that appear when learning the Spanish language in order to get a consensus and identify them. The results of this activity are shown in Table 1.

Table1. Most common difficulties when learning the Spanish language.	
Difficulties	
1	Lack of grammatical knowledge of the student's native language
2	Learning the Spanish language in the student's country
3	Phonetic sounds
4	Learning the affirmative imperative mode
5	Shyness when speaking the Spanish language
6	Interact with tourists who speak the same language in the visited country
7	Learning the use of direct and indirect object
8	Learning reflexive verbs
9	Differentiate between the past and imperfect tenses

With the above, a basis was obtained for the identification of possible strategies that can serve as a solution.

2.4.2. Determination of evaluation strategies and criteria

This phase had the support of 4 experts in the area, who were in charge of talking about the possible strategies that can be applied to solve the difficulties identified in the previous phase. The above allowed the definition of different strategies, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Possible strategies to facilitate the learning of the Spanish language.

Difficulties		Strategies
1	Lack of grammatical knowledge of the student's native language	Read grammar books in the student's native language
		Watch videos where the grammar of the student's native language is discussed
		Request the advice of experts in the grammar of the student's native language
		Use of web forums related to the grammar of the student's native language
2	Learning the Spanish language in the student's country	Learn Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country
		Use audiovisual Spanish language material
		Interact with people who speak the Spanish language who are in the student's country of residence
3	Phonetic sounds	Constant repetition of the sounds
		Displacement of the tip of the tongue
		Use of tongue twisters
4	Learning the affirmative imperative mode	Use the third person verb for the informal imperative
		Use the present subjunctive
5	Shyness when speaking the Spanish language	Find people of the same age as the student who speak Spanish
		Propose personal interest topics
6	Interact with tourists who speak the same language in the visited country	Interact with local people
		Perform daily activities using the Spanish language
		Attend dance schools where teaching is taught in Spanish
		Use the national television service
7	Learning the use of direct and indirect object	Use direct and indirect objects without being replaced
		Use pronouns to replace direct and indirect objects
8	Learning reflexive verbs	Determine if subject and object are the same
		Determine if the action carried out by the subject affects it
9	Differentiate between the past and imperfect tenses	Make a comparison chart
		Read stories where the difference between the past and imperfect tenses is evident

Likewise, the evaluation criteria and their levels of importance reflected through percentage values were defined, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Evaluation criteria.

Criteria	Percentages
Ease	35%
Cost	25%
Effectiveness	40%

Where the Ease parameter refers to the level of complexity that characterizes a strategy when it is applied; Cost refers to the financial investment that must be made to carry out the strategy, which is inversely proportional, that is, the higher the rating, the lower the investment; and, finally, the Effectiveness criterion indicates the effectiveness of the strategy.

3. Results

3.1. Determination of the best strategies

This phase had the support of 2 teachers dedicated to teaching the Spanish language and 3 people who have learned the language in Spanish schools, who acted as experts to assign numerical qualifications anonymously.

3.1.1. Difficulty 1

Table 4 shows the results obtained for difficulty 1.

Table 4. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 1.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Read grammar books in the student's native language	1	4	4	5	4.4	4.51
	2	4	5	5	4.65	
	3	4	4	4	4	
	4	5	4	5	4.75	
	5	5	4	5	4.75	
Watch videos where the grammar of the student's native language is discussed	1	4	3	3	3.35	3.45
	2	4	4	3	3.6	
	3	3	4	4	3.65	
	4	3	3	4	3.4	
	5	3	4	3	3.25	
Request the advice of experts in the grammar of the student's native language	1	3	3	4	3.4	3.47
	2	3	3	4	3.4	
	3	4	2	4	3.5	
	4	3	3	4	3.4	
	5	3	4	4	3.65	
Use of web forums related to the grammar of the student's	1	4	5	3	3.85	4.01
	2	4	5	4	4.25	
	3	4	5	3	3.85	
	4	4	5	3	3.85	

native language	5	4	5	4	4.25	
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Taking into account the above, the strategy "Read grammar books in the student's native language" was selected because it obtained the highest average result. In this way, the experts considered that one of the best sources to learn grammar are specialized books in that field because these facilitate learning through the dissemination of grammar rules and application examples where its usefulness is evidenced. In addition, with the use of this type of source, truthful and good quality information is acquired because the books must be evaluated by professionals in the area for their publication. Therefore, the student can improve their grammar knowledge effectively.

On the other hand, the strategies "Watch videos where the grammar of the student's native language is discussed", "Request the advice of experts in the grammar of the student's native language", and "Use of web forums related to the grammar of the student's native language" were not selected because they obtained average results of 3.45, 3.47, and 4.01, which are lower than the average obtained by the chosen strategy. Regarding the first strategy, it was determined that it is possible that in free video grammar topics are explained with inappropriate pedagogies, which could generate confusion in students and make learning difficult. However, the student can opt for courses on the web where information is provided through audiovisual content with adequate pedagogies, but investment could be required to acquire the service. Regarding the second strategy, it was found that on several occasions it can be an alternative that is difficult to apply because the expert may not be available, besides, since it is not a free service, the student must make financial investments. In the case of the last strategy analyzed, it was determined that the information could have reduced levels of truthful due to the lack of experts and the informality that characterizes this type of web mechanism.

3.1.2. Difficulty 2

Table 5 shows the results obtained for difficulty 2.

Table 5. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 2.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Learn Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country	1	3	3	5	3.8	3.67
	2	4	2	5	3.9	
	3	3	2	5	3.55	
	4	3	2	5	3.55	
	5	3	2	5	3.55	
Use audiovisual Spanish language material	1	3	3	4	3.4	3.59
	2	3	3	4	3.4	
	3	4	3	4	3.75	
	4	3	3	4	3.4	
	5	4	4	4	4	
Interact with people who speak the Spanish language who are in the	1	3	4	4	3.65	3.41
	2	3	4	3	3.25	
	3	3	4	3	3.25	
	4	3	4	4	3.65	

student's country of residence	5	3	4	3	3.25	
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Based on the above, the selected strategy was "Learn Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country" because it got the highest average result. In this sense, although many people do not have the economic facilities to travel to other countries, the experts considered that this strategy is the most appropriate to learn Spanish because the person will need to put into practice the knowledge acquired about the language Spanish to carry out activities of daily life and interact with people who only speak Spanish and who can offer a service of particular interest such as food, hotels, and shopping.

On the other hand, the strategy "Use audiovisual Spanish language material" was not selected because it did not obtain the highest average result. In this sense, it was determined that not all types of audiovisual material are suitable for learning the Spanish language because colloquial language is used on various occasions in which it can be made grammatical mistakes that go unnoticed and could be taken as correct; therefore, the student could learn Spanish incorrectly. However, this strategy could be a complementary tool to the chosen strategy by allowing the learning of new words and contexts in which they can be applied. This finding is related to the study by [16] in which the importance of cinematographic material as a didactic tool in the methodology used by some teachers in China to teach new vocabulary to students of the Spanish language is expressed, where educational spaces are used to show films with audio and subtitles in Spanish. Likewise, it is related to [17] where an experiment was carried out that consisted of projecting videos with Spanish subtitles to increase the vocabulary of the students, with which results were obtained positive, and It was determined that this type of mechanism could be complementary strategies in the learning process of the Spanish language.

Regarding the strategy "Interact with people who speak the Spanish language who are in the student's country of residence ", the experts considered that its application is difficult in areas of difficult access because it is unlikely to find people who speak Spanish. Therefore, it obtained an average result lower than that obtained by the selected strategy and was not chosen.

3.1.3. Difficulty 3

Table 6 shows the results obtained for difficulty 3.

Table 6. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 3.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Constant repetition of the sounds	1	4	5	4	4.25	4.25
	2	4	5	4	4.25	
	3	4	5	4	4.25	
	4	4	5	4	4.25	
	5	4	5	4	4.25	
Displacement of the tip of the tongue	1	4	5	4	4.25	4.25
	2	4	5	4	4.25	
	3	4	5	4	4.25	
	4	4	5	4	4.25	
	5	4	5	4	4.25	

Use of tongue twisters	1	4	5	5	4.65	4.44
	2	4	5	5	4.65	
	3	3	5	5	4.3	
	4	3	5	5	4.3	
	5	3	5	5	4.3	

According to the above, the strategy "Use of tongue twisters" was selected because it obtained a higher average result than the other strategies analyzed for this difficulty. In this sense, the experts determined that the constant practice of tongue twisters in Spanish is the most effective alternative because it allows increasing fluency when speaking the language, incorporating in a practical way phonetic sounds difficult to pronounce in the case of people with reduced or null of the handling of Spanish. It also becomes a useful tool for people with speech problems, such as rhotacism, because it allows them to become familiar with how they should pronounce the sound. This strategy can be used as a complement in [18], where it is stated that the Danish language, compared to others such as French, Italian, and English, presents learning difficulties because it has a large set of vowel sounds compared to consonants, with a total of 29 different pronunciation vowel attributes, 18 descending diphthongs, 12 ascending diphthongs, and 19 consonants, so people learning this language may have learning difficulties of phonetic sounds. The above highlights the importance of teaching strategies such as tongue twisters to facilitate the pronunciation of various phonetic sounds.

Regarding the strategies "Constant repetition of the sounds" and "Displacement of the tip of the tongue" were not selected because they obtained averages of 4.25, and 4.25 which are lower than the average obtained by the selected strategy. However, according to the above, the experts considered that these strategies could serve as a complement for the application of the selected strategy. The previous is related to [19] where it is stated that repetition can be used as a complementary tool because it allows the person to become familiar with the different sounds of the Spanish language and improve pronunciation.

3.1.4. Difficulty 4

Table 7 shows the results obtained for difficulty 4.

Table 7. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 4.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Use the third person verb for the informal imperative	1	5	5	5	5	5
	2	5	5	5	5	
	3	5	5	5	5	
	4	5	5	5	5	
	5	5	5	5	5	
Use the present subjunctive	1	4	5	3	3.85	3.95
	2	3	5	3	3.5	
	3	4	5	4	4.25	
	4	4	5	4	4.25	
	5	3	5	4	3.9	

Based on the above, the strategy “Use the third person verb for the informal imperative” was selected because it obtained a higher average result. In this sense, the experts determined that there is greater ease of application because the person does not have to make several declensions when using a verb, which is useful when expressing an idea affirmatively and informally during a Spanish conversation, for example: “¡baila!”, “¡camina!”, and “¡habla!”. Regarding the “Use the present subjunctive” strategy, it was not selected because it obtained a lower average than the one obtained for the chosen strategy, where the experts considered that it requires an advanced command of Spanish to make declensions of a verb, for example: “¡baile!”, “¡camine!”, and “¡hable!”, which is why it is complex to apply in the case of people who have a reduced command of the language.

3.1.5. Difficulty 5

Table 8 shows the results obtained for difficulty 5.

Table 8. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 5.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Find people of the same age as the student who speak Spanish	1	4	5	5	4.65	4.77
	2	5	5	4	4.6	
	3	5	5	4	4.6	
	4	5	5	5	5	
	5	5	5	5	5	
Propose personal interest topics	1	2	5	2	2.75	3.33
	2	4	5	3	3.85	
	3	2	5	3	3.15	
	4	4	5	2	3.45	
	5	4	5	2	3.45	

In this way, the strategy “Find people of the same age who speak Spanish” was selected because it obtained a higher average result compared to the other strategy analyzed. Thus, the evaluators considered that age is a relevant factor when selecting tutors to learn Spanish because this can generate empathy and affinity at the time of receiving lessons, which allows conversations on common interest topics where various aspects of the language can be applied, taking into account what has been learned in the classes, which is effective in reducing shyness in the student.

On the other hand, the option “Propose personal interest topics” was not selected because it could be ineffective when hiring a different age tutor with no common topics to talk about, generating an uncomfortable environment and shyness. In this way, this alternative obtained an average result of 3.33, which is lower than that obtained by the other strategy analyzed.

3.1.6. Difficulty 6

Table 9 shows the results obtained for difficulty 6.

Table 9. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 6.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Interact with local people	1	4	4	5	4.4	4.29
	2	3	4	5	4.05	
	3	4	5	5	4.65	
	4	3	4	5	4.05	
	5	3	5	5	4.3	
Perform daily activities using the Spanish language	1	4	5	4	4.25	3.97
	2	3	5	4	3.9	
	3	3	5	4	3.9	
	4	3	5	4	3.9	
	5	3	5	4	3.9	
Attend dance schools where teaching is taught in Spanish	1	3	2	4	3.15	3.26
	2	4	3	4	3.75	
	3	3	2	3	2.75	
	4	3	3	4	3.4	
	5	3	4	3	3.25	
Use the national television service	1	4	4	4	4	3.68
	2	4	4	3	3.6	
	3	4	4	3	3.6	
	4	4	4	3	3.6	
	5	4	4	3	3.6	

Based on the above, the selected strategy was "Interact with local people" because it obtained the highest average result. In this way, the evaluators considered that the interaction with native people when visiting a Spanish-speaking country allows the student to develop his oral and written expression in Spanish, with which the lexicon can be increased, to know the meaning of different words in different contexts and clearly transmit ideas when speaking with people who only speak the Spanish language, which is why it turns out to be the strategy with the highest level of effectiveness.

On the other hand, the strategies "Perform daily activities using the Spanish language", "Attend dance schools where teaching is taught in Spanish", and "Use the national television service" were not selected because they obtained results of 3.97, 3.26, and 3.84 which are lower than the average obtained by the chosen strategy. Regarding the first two strategies, it was determined that they present levels of effectiveness that are not higher than that obtained with the selected strategy because the language is only practiced in particular contexts, losing sight of various situations in which new words can be learned, and increase fluency when speaking. As for the last strategy, it was considered ineffective because the language is only put into practice when reading and listening, but there are no conversations where the person can express their ideas to an interlocutor.

3.1.7. Difficulty 7

Table 10 shows the results obtained for difficulty 7.

Table 10. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 7.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Use direct and indirect objects without being replaced	1	5	5	5	5	5
	2	5	5	5	5	
	3	5	5	5	5	
	4	5	5	5	5	
	5	5	5	5	5	
Use pronouns to replace direct and indirect objects	1	4	5	5	4,65	4,65
	2	4	5	5	4,65	
	3	4	5	5	4,65	
	4	4	5	5	4,65	
	5	4	5	5	4,65	

Based on the above, the strategy "Use direct and indirect objects without being replaced" was selected because it obtained a higher average than the other strategy analyzed. Thus, the experts considered that this strategy has a high level of ease concerning its application because it allows the message to be clearly expressed through the disclosure of the necessary information about the direct and indirect object, for example: "Ilévale el libro a María", the direct object being "libro" and the indirect object "María". On the other hand, the strategy "Use pronouns to replace direct and indirect objects" was not selected because the message could be transmitted with low clarity if the receiver does not know the context, for example: "Ilévaselo", where "se" is a pronoun that replaces the indirect object (Maria) and "lo" is a pronoun that replaces the direct object (libro).

3.1.8. Difficulty 8

Table 11 shows the results obtained for difficulty 8.

Table 11. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 8.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Determine if subject and object are the same	1	5	5	5	5	5
	2	5	5	5	5	
	3	5	5	5	5	
	4	5	5	5	5	
	5	5	5	5	5	
Determine if the action carried out by the subject affects it	1	4	5	5	4,65	4.86
	2	5	5	5	5	
	3	5	5	5	5	
	4	4	5	5	4,65	
	5	5	5	5	5	

The selected strategy was "Determine if subject and object are the same" because it obtained the highest average result. In this sense, the evaluators considered that it has a reduced level of complexity for its application, allowing identifying reflexive verbs and learning how they should be used. On the other hand, the strategy "Determine if the action carried out by the subject affects it" was not selected because it obtained a lower average, and the experts considered that the

strategy is more difficult to understand, which is why it can be complicated for people who do not have a high command of Spanish.

3.1.9. Difficulty 9

Table 12 shows the results obtained for difficulty 9.

Table 12. Evaluation results of the strategies defined for difficulty 9.

Strategies	Experts	Criteria			Results	Averages
		Ease	Cost	Effectiveness		
		35%	25%	40%		
Make a comparison chart	1	4	5	4	4.25	4.25
	2	4	5	4	4.25	
	3	4	5	4	4.25	
	4	4	5	4	4.25	
	5	4	5	4	4.25	
Read stories where the difference between the past and imperfect tenses is evident	1	4	5	4	4.25	4.71
	2	5	5	5	5	
	3	4	5	5	4.65	
	4	4	5	5	4.65	
	5	5	5	5	5	

According to what was obtained, the selected strategy was "Read stories where the difference between the past and imperfect tenses is evidenced" because it got a higher average than the other alternative evaluated. In this sense, the experts determined that this strategy is more effective because it allows learning the difference between the past and the imperfect tenses practically through different contexts exemplified in the story's concrete situations.

On the other hand, the strategy "Make a comparison chart" was not selected because it obtained an average of 4.25, which is lower than the one received by the chosen alternative. However, it can be a complementary tool for experts to strengthen the theory about the past and imperfect tenses and serve as support when applying the selected strategy.

4. Conclusions

According to the results, the Ideas Assessment Matrix technique is an appropriate tool when determining strategies that allow solving difficulties in Spanish language learning because different actors of the learning process such as the student and the teacher can intervene through the fulfillment of the role of experts, and in this way obtain qualifications that are assigned anonymously, taking into account different perspectives and experiences, which contributes to increasing objectivity in the process. Also, it was determined that there are learning strategies that can be applied in a complementary way and not individually because they do not offer an effective solution to improve the learning of the Spanish language and only work in particular contexts.

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