Teaching Spanish Grammar through Proverbs according to the Teachers-to-be

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an overview about the way the undergraduates (experts in teaching) and graduates (experts in Spanish language and literature) consider the fact of teaching grammar through proverbs. After explaining both didactic sequences and letting the informants do some of the designed activities, a survey with some questions about the importance of grammar, proverbs and teaching was handed out to each group. According to the answers, the results let us know a lot of differences as well as similarities between their expectations and their conceptions of the teaching process. Amongst the differences, it is to be noticed that the background of each group lets them think different, since the graduates find the idea innovative because they have not ever worked with proverbs in that way, whereas the undergraduates take the proposal useful but old-fashioned, because they relate proverbs to ancient language. As a conclusion, it is necessary, then, to spend time enough in class to do the activities properly in order to convince them, at least, that everything can be taught in an accurate way.

Keywords:
Paremiology.
Proverb.
Teacher training.
Grammar.
Spanish.

Resumen

Título: «La enseñanza de la gramática española a través de refranes según los futuros profesores»

El objetivo de este artículo es presentar una visión general de la manera en que los estudiantes de Magisterio y los filólogos estudiantes del Máster de Profesorado consideran la enseñanza de la gramática española a través de los refranes. Para ello, se analizan las respuestas que dieron a un cuestionario que les sirvió como reflexión sobre dos secuencias didácticas que empleaban los refranes como discurso lingüístico sobre el que estudiar gramática, de las que solo se llevaron a la práctica algunas actividades. De acuerdo con dichas respuestas, los resultados muestran una diferencia esencial en la concepción de la enseñanza de la gramática del español con refranes debida a la experiencia previa de cada grupo de estudiantes, pues lo que para unos –los filólogos– puede ser motivador por no haber trabajado nunca con refranes, para otros –los futuros maestros– resulta algo pesado por asociarse con un producto lingüístico tenido como antiguo. La principal conclusión apunta a la necesidad de dedicar tiempo en clase a la realización efectiva y detallada de la dinámica que se les pretende inculcar, con el fin, al menos, de convencerles de que todo se puede llevar al aula si se adapta al grupo de forma atractiva.

Palabras clave:
Paremiología.
Refrán.
Formación de profesores.
Gramática.
Español.

Résumé

Titre : « L'enseignement de la grammaire espagnole à travers des proverbes selon les futurs enseignants ».

L'objectif de cet article est de présenter un aperçu de la manière dont les étudiants en enseignement et les étudiants en philologie inscrits au programme de maîtrise en didactique de la langue espagnole considèrent l'enseignement de la grammaire espagnole à travers les dictons. Pour cela, on a expliqué le fonctionnement de deux séquences didactiques dont seules quelques activités ont été faites avec eux. Après, ils on été amenés à réfléchir à travers un questionnaire. Selon leurs réponses, les résultats montrent une

Mots-clés:
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Grammaire.
Espagnol.

différence essentielle dans la conception de l'enseignement de la grammaire de l'espagnol avec des dictons dus à l'expérience antérieure de chaque groupe d'étudiants, car ce qui pour certains -les philologues- peut être motivant parce qu'ils n'ont jamais travaillé avec des proverbes, pour d'autres -les futurs enseignants-, c'est un peu lourd parce que les pre-overbs sont associés à un produit linguistique tenu pour vieux. La conclusion principale souligne la nécessité de consacrer du temps en classe à la réalisation efficace et détaillée de la dynamique qui est censée inculquer, afin au moins de les convaincre que tout peut être emporté en classe s'il est adapté au groupe d'élèves d'une manière attrayante.

INTRODUCTION

Following partially the papers, which offer information about the way students and teachers see the process of teaching (Alonso Belmonte 2012), for instance, regarding the intercultural competence (Garrote Salazar and Fernández Agüero 2016), the aim of this paper is to present an overview about how the undergraduate and graduate students attending the subject *Spanish Language Teaching* at a Spanish university consider the fact of teaching grammar through proverbs.

It is necessary to take into account two starting points –the discursive conception of the proverb itself (Conca 1987) and the difficult question of teaching Spanish grammar to native speakers (Camps and Zayas 2006, Ribas 2010, Camps and Ribas 2017).

As far as the discursive conception of the proverb is concerned, we are particularly interested in the features, which can lead us to understand it as a speech act. First, it is clear that, as a linguist product, each short and sententious statement consists of a simple or a complex sentence, relatively fixed in the speech and with an undoubtedly relation to the sociocultural heritage of the speaker community (Sevilla and Crida 2013). Second, each proverb includes as a speech act three dimensions: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act, i.e. respectively, the performance of the utterance, the hidden intentions of what the utterance implies and the further results of the previous acts (Conca 1987).

Thus, we are not here paying attention to the proverbs as representations of each culture, but to their discursive characteristics, which might be used as perfect tools to teach pure Spanish grammar, similarly to the way this can be taught either through the traditional workbooks and student's books (Ribas Seix 2010) or through the new inductive techniques of teaching grammar, based on the usage of new technologies, research and cooperative working (Camps and Zayas 2015; Camps and Ribas 2017). In other words, what we bear here in mind is the need to utilize the proverbs as teaching grammar material, not exclusively to make the students develop their paremiological competence (Fernández Martín 2020).

Then, since our interest has to do with the future teachers' conceptions, a double sample of alumni was chosen to ease the comparison between two very different groups of teachers-to-be: those, who are trained exclusively to work with children in the future (group A) and those, who are instructed to work with texts, language and literature, who have decided to study a master's degree in order to learn how to teach Spanish to (native) teenagers (group B). Both of them were told to analyze, answering a questionnaire, the same two didactic sequences which had been previously proved in several groups of native speakers of Spanish with ages between 12 and 16 years.

The essay has been divided into four parts, including the conclusions. In Section 1 the methodology is explained taking into account the main features of each group as well as the way the survey was handed out. In Section 2, the results are presented according to the answers to the questionnaire. Section 3 offers a discussion comparing the way one group views teaching with the way the other group views it. In the final Section some general conclusions are formulated.

1. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this section is to describe the employed research methodology in detail. As above-mentioned, the same survey was provided to two different groups. The first one (group A) is composed by undergraduates who were studying the second course of a specific degree to become teachers in the Spanish primary school –that is, to handle children from 6 to 12 years. The members of this group, all of them experts in teaching approaches, were used to studying subjects belonging to Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Psychology. The second group, graduates who wanted to become teachers in the Spanish secondary school, i.e. to work with teenagers between 13 and 18 years, were accustomed to coping with Spanish Linguistics and Literature. Regarding the amount of informants, the first group was composed of 77 students, out of whom 45 answered the survey, whereas in the second group, 10 out of the 16 graduates did. In both groups most of them were women –41 in the former, 9 in the latter.

Apart from the divergent interests they have, there is another crucial difference between the groups. The members of the first one responded to the survey after having fully experienced one of the sequences and half of the other one, and listened to the explanations about both of them as a whole. The activities were done individually and corrected by themselves with the help of the solutions projected on the board. In contrast, those ones who answered the survey from the group B, did not experience either of them due to a question of time, therefore, they were only allowed to analyze the material critically but without a real option to work on it.

As far as the two sequences are concerned, the first one dealt with some general aspects of the Spanish morphology. It consisted of three double activities. Number 1 and number 2 were made to work on the paremiological competence of the students, making them firstly rebuild several proverbs, which have been previously split up. Secondly, they were asked to write if each proverb refers to a child or to a teacher. All the chosen proverbs were extracted from the web *Refranero multilingüe*, using as keywords in the search engine the words ‘teacher’ and ‘child’. With the two following activities the pupils should reflect on Spanish grammar by analyzing morphologically the verbs appeared in the proverbs and, later, painting in different colors the words according to their categories –nouns in red, adjectives in green, prepositions in yellow, articles in orange, adverbs in pink and pronouns in purple. The two last tasks requested the learners to analyze syntactically the proverbs paying attention to the structure of the phrase (noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase), as well as to its function within the sentence, i.e. the proverb (subject, direct object, indirect object). Together with the sheet with the activities, a synthesis-table of the Spanish grammar was also handed out, as it is shown in Fernández Martín (2017: 138-140; 2019: 100).

The second didactic sequence was related to the different meanings of the pronoun *se*. As in the other unit, the first three activities serve to improve the paremiological competence of the students –joining with lines the pairs of the split up proverbs, reflecting on the topics treated by the proverbs and filling four gaps with proverbs in context. After asking them which word appears in all proverbs except in one (which is the pronoun *se*), the fourth activity is divided into two parts. First, they have to fill in the gaps of a table which is a synthesis of all the meanings of *se* according to Lozano Jaén (2012). Second, they have to put each type of *se* on a group of proverbs. For the last activity, they are required to work on the syntax analyze of some of the chosen proverbs, some of them freely selected by the students from the *Refranero multilingüe* web. As in the previous unit, they were also handed out a synthesis-table with the meanings of *se* (Fernández Martín, 2019: 102), which summarized what Lozano Jaén (2012) brilliantly explains.

Lastly, the questionnaire was divided into three parts containing each one the same questions. The difference between them consisted of the fact that the first part and the second one referred to the first and the second teaching sequences, respectively, whereas the third group of questions serves to obtain a general vision of the activities. For every sentence, there were three emoticons among them they had to choose with an X –happy, 'I do not know what you are talking about' and unhappy.

1.	He aprendido nuevos refranes.	I have learned new proverbs.
2.	He comprendido su significado.	I have understood its meaning.
3.	He comprendido su uso en contexto.	I have understood its usage in context.
4.	He {repasado la morfología del español/profundizado en los valores de *se*/ repasado parte de la gramática del español}	I have {gone over Spanish morphology/studied in depth the meanings of *se*/gone over part of Spanish grammar}
5.	La actividad me ha resultado motivadora.	The activity has been motivating.
6.	El aprendizaje ha sido entretenido.	The learning process has been entertaining.
7.	La actividad me ha dado ideas para la enseñanza de la lengua española.	The activity has provided me with ideas for teaching Spanish language.
	Observaciones.	Comments.

2. RESULTS

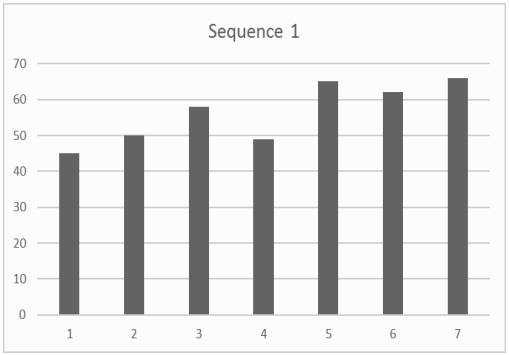


Figure 1. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group A). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one.

In this section we present the answers to the questionnaires attending, firstly, to the quantitative data of both groups and, secondly, to the qualitative information from the statements provided by our informants. From a quantitative point of view, a 'happy' answer counts 1 point, the neutral one 2 points and the negative one 3 points, which means that the more soaring the answer, the worse their conceptions on teaching grammar through proverbs. In fact, taking into account that idealistically the maximum per item should be 45 points for the group A, Figure 1 illustrates that the only perfect item is the one which refers to the learning of new proverbs. The rest of them exceeds the 50 points, except the fourth item, which has to do with the knowledge of grammar.

Moreover, number 6 reaches 62 points, whereas number 5 achieves 65 and number 7, 66 points. This leads to the fact that the activities have not offered the undergraduates new ideas to teach Spanish (item 7) as a result, perhaps, of a lack of motivation (5) and entertainment (6) in the contents.

The second sequence is even worse considered than the previous one (see Figure 2), given that the first item keeps itself at 45 points whereas the rest of them goes up. The worst one is number 4, which, with 79 points,

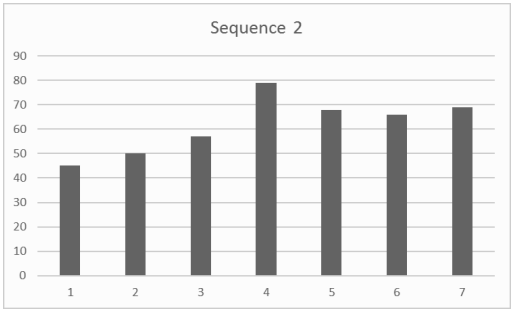


Figure 2. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group A). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one.

refers to the meanings of the pronoun se. The values of the items in an intermediate position are very similar, since they fluctuate between 66 (item 6), 68 (item 5) and 69 (item 7). This means that, once again, the undergraduates find these activities neither motivating nor amusing. In addition, they reckon that this proposal does not make them better teachers, as the seventh sentence states. The best considered features, so to speak, are number 2 and number 3, the former related to the comprehension of the meaning of the proverbs and the latter linked to their contexts of usage. Following this tendency towards expressing disagree on the motivation of the activity, as well as on its usefulness for teaching language, its amusement and its usage in context, the general questionnaire shows that the highest scored utterances according to Figure 3 are, respectively, number 5 (63 points), number 7 (62 points), number 6 (60 points) and number 3 (53 points). The best ones, then, are items 1 (42 points) and 2 (44), and, perhaps, 4 (48 points), that is, most of them are of the opinion that they had learnt new proverbs (1), understood their meaning (2) and that they had gone partially over the Spanish grammar (4). It is to be highlighted, anyway, that there are three students who have left the third part of the survey blank, i.e. the maximum ideal in this case would be 42 points instead of 45.

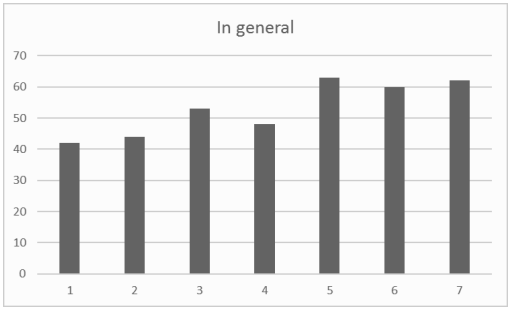


Figure 3. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group A). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one

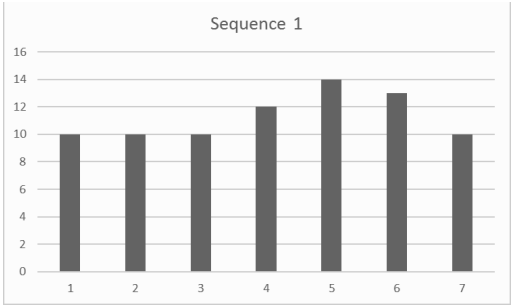


Figure 4. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group B). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one.

As far as the group B is concerned, there are three items that achieve more than 10 points for the sequence 1: number 4, related to the review of grammar contents; number 5, regarding the motivation; and number 6, concerning the enjoyment. This result leads to the idea that they probably feel that they have learned new proverbs and even a new way of using them to teach language but, at the same time, they are familiar with the difficulty and even the tediousness of employing morphological and syntax analyze as an advantageous resource for the teenagers.

Surprisingly, there are different answers for the sequence 2, as Figure 5 shows. In this case, the second and the third items increase to 12 points whereas the sixth rises to 13. Besides the lack of amusement detected by the graduates (item 6), they have also discovered the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the proverbs if they have not been explained through a context (items 2, 3).

Finally, the general review of the facts shows that the statements 3 and 5 are on the rise to 13, which means that they have not understood the proverbs in context and they have not considered the sequences motivating either. Similarly, the statement 2 soars to 12 points and the number 6 reaches 11 points, i.e. they have the feeling not to have grasped the whole meaning of the proverbs and, once again, to have worked with a shortly attractive material (see Figure 6).

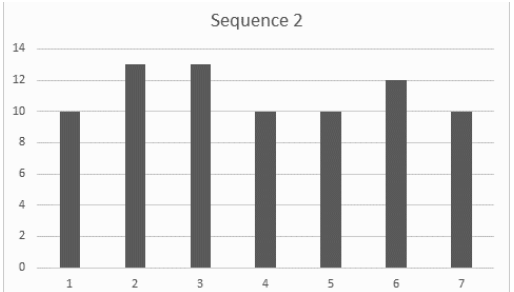


Figure 5. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group B). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one.

As for the opinions of the group A, only a few statements have been compiled. Amongst them, there

are positive points of view, which focus on the usefulness of the activity for teaching ("Me parece muy buena opción para enseñar a los niños"[1] [sequence 1], "Puede ser una actividad motivadora en la que participen los alumnos y sus familiares (abuelos, padres, etc.)"[2] [in general]) as well as for learning ("Al igual que la anterior, muy buena también para reforzar el *se*"[3] [sequence 2], "Me parece una gran actividad debido a que se aprende cultura española, además de gramática y otras partes de la lengua"[4] [sequence 1]) and on the pleasure of doing them successfully ("Es la que más me ha gustado de todas" [5] [sequence 1], "Esta me ha gustado mucho"[6] [sequence 1]).

In opposition to these optimist utterances, there are some negative viewpoints which remark the problem of working with proverbs in the primary school ("Son refranes muy antiguos y puede que la forma en la que hemos realizado la actividad en Primaria no sea muy eficaz, ya que la mayoría de los refranes no los conocerán"[7] [sequence 1], "Hay que tener en cuenta la construcción de los refranes (no todos llevan verbo, por ejemplo)"[8] [sequence 1]). Perhaps the reason can be found in the fact that the time spent to let them get familiar with the proverbs and their grammar was not appropriate ("Buena idea, algo pesada; cambiaría la forma de corrección"[9] [sequence 1]).

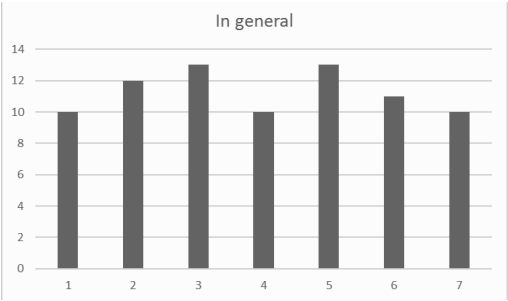


Figure 6. The horizontal axis represents the items according to the questionnaire (group B). The vertical axis shows the total score of each one.

Furthermore, there are some neutral opinions concentrated on the innovation of the activities but aware of the idea that they can be more exploited than they were ("Me ha parecido una actividad diferente al resto, y es la primera vez que lo he realizado, por lo tanto, innovador, aunque la forma en la que se ha hecho no me ha gustado mucho"[10] [in general], "No me ha motivado tanto como creo que podría haberme motivado, pero no ha estado mal"[11] [sequence 1]). Regarding the comments of the students belonging to the group B, it is to point out the interest developed by the activity ("Me parecen actividades interesantes que ellos van a acoger con curiosidad"[12] [in general]), its usefulness ("Me han encantado los ejercicios con refranes, los veo muy útiles para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de diversas cuestiones de la lengua y cultura española"[13] [sequence 2]), the possibility of trying new ways of teaching supplied by the proposed sequences ("Se pueden realizar muchos

1 "I think it is a good option to teach children".
2 "It can be a motivating activity in which students and their relatives (grandparents, parents, etc.) could take part".
3 "As the previous one, this [activity] is very good, also to work more deeply on pronoun *se*".
4 "I think it is a great activity since it is useful to learn Spanish culture, grammar and other parts of the language".
5 "This is the task I liked the most".
6 "I liked this one a lot".
7 "The proverbs are very old. The way we have done the activity might be ineffective for children at Primary school, because they will not know most of them".
8 "It should be considered how the proverbs are linguistically structured –i.e. not all of them contain a verb".
9 "It is a good idea, maybe a little bit tedious. I would change the way of correcting it".
10 "I think this activity is different to others. Since this was the first time I did it, it seems innovative, although I didn't like much the way it was carried out".
11 "This activity hasn't motivated me as much as it could have, but it wasn't bad either".
12 "These activities are interesting. Our students will take them with curiosity".
13 "I have really loved the activities with proverbs; they are very useful to teach several questions on Spanish language and culture".

ejercicios como el que has planteado con refranes"[14] [sequence 1]) and the newness of the not-very-known chosen proverbs ("Son refranes muy específicos y quizás poco conocidos, por lo que me parece una actividad buena para trabajar el análisis sintáctico en los primeros niveles de la ESO"[15] [sequence 1]).

On the contrary, some of the graduates are perfectly aware of three weaknesses. First, the lack of a discourse context in the activities ("No tengo claro que asimilen el contexto en el que pueden utilizar todos los refranes a no ser que hagan ejercicios específicos sobre ello o nos aseguremos de que han comprendido su significado"[16] [in general]) as well as a sociolinguistic one ("Podría ser interesante alguna actividad sobre el valor sociocultural de los refranes y la variedad de los refranes en distintas partes de España"[17] [in general]). Second, the need of different classroom dynamics ("Sin embargo, creo que los mejores resultados se conseguirían trabajando en grupo, por superar el automatismo en el que se puede caer en algunos ejercicios"[18] [in general]), which could be very helpful to make students put up with grammar in a more comfortable way ("Las actividades que son más gramática pura no son demasiado entretenidas, pero las de contexto sí"[19] [in general]). Third, the amount of proverbs to work on ("funciona muy bien aunque considero que es mejor con un número más reducido de refranes"[20] [sequence 2]) should be probably reconsidered.

3. DISCUSSION

In this section, an interpretation on the previous data is exposed through a comparison between the way each group considers the described sequences. Thus, from a general point of view, it is necessary to draw the attention to the point that every student, graduate as well as undergraduate, agrees on the difficulty of the second didactic unit, whereas, in general, seems to reckon the usefulness of the first one. This fact is not actually surprising, because none of them really practiced the latter and all members in group A experienced only the former.

With regard to the first sequence, both groups nearly agreed on the fourth and fifth questions related to the review of Spanish grammar and the motivation of the activity, respectively. Nevertheless, they did not agree at all on the rest of the questions, especially on the third, about the context, and the seventh, about the suggested ideas to teach Spanish. There are two reasons which could possibly explain these differences. First, the graduates are likely to feel a simple explanation –as they were given– is enough to understand the proverbs in context, since they are used to getting in touch with language and its real use along their studies, whereas the undergraduates tend to choose the direct experience of the activity to value it properly due to a lack of language awareness. Second, most of the members in group A are familiar with didactical techniques and approaches, i.e. for them, the innovation consists of employing new classroom dynamics and technologies everywhere, instead of considering the proverb a full speech act in which language

14 "A lot of similar activities with proverbs can be done".
15 "Those proverbs are very specific and might not be very known, for I think it is a good activity to practice syntax analyze in the first years at Secondary school".
16 "I am not quite sure they can grasp the context where each proverb can be used, unless they do specific exercises about that or we assure they have understood their meanings".
17 "It could be interesting to carry out activities about the sociocultural value of proverbs and their dialectological differences all over the country".
18 "I think the best results would be achieved working in groups, in order to go beyond the automatism of some of the tasks".
19 "The activities with pure grammar are not as much entertaining as those ones about the context".
20 "It works very well, although I think it would be better with a smaller amount of proverbs".

perfectly shapes. In contrast, the graduates find this way of teaching grammar different because, probably, they have not faced something similar along their studies as students of language and literature nor as teachers-to-be.

As far as the opinions about the second sequence are concerned, it was observed that the fourth item offered the biggest difference between them. This fact suggests that the group A did not have the impression of having gone over the subject appropriately, whereas for the group B the above-mentioned meanings of *se* could have been enough to recall them. In contrast to what happened with the first sequence, the undergraduates showed here an agreement on the items 2 and 3 related to the comprehension and usage of the proverbs, probably due to the fact that the first activities of the second unit were done in situ during the lecture. All things considered, the graduates felt that the examples given with proverbs in context were not enough to grasp the essence of the proverbs themselves, nor the meanings of *se* –known for its complexity as they perfectly know for first-hand experience.

In terms of the global overview the surveys show, the most captivating difference is to be found in the fifth item as well as in the sixth and the seventh. This leads to hold that both sequences are considered more entertaining, motivating and useful for teaching by the members of group B than by the members of group A. The possible reason which explains this fact is similar to the one given above –the background of each group is different and, as a consequence, so are their expectations on the things children or teenagers can learn through a concrete teaching material as the one we have presented.

As indicated by the showed statements, the participants in the two groups agreed, as a rule, on the positive opinions about the motivation, usefulness and innovation of both sequences, whereas it was more frequent to find different points of view when they referred to the nature of the proverbs –taken for ancient, difficult and unknown by their future students according to some informants from the group A–, the lack of context of use in the proposed activities and the need to exploit them with other several dynamics which are different from the individual ones –according to some of the graduates from the group B.

All in all, they all seem to have learned new proverbs and, mainly, new ways of using them for teaching language, regardless of all the disadvantages they found analyzing the teaching material we explained.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to compare the way undergraduates understand the fact of teaching Spanish grammar through proverbs to the way graduates do. In general terms, all of them took for granted the motivation, usefulness and innovation of both sequences of activities working grammar with proverbs as a complete discourse. The different conceptions were to be observed, however, in the nature of the proverbs, their context of use and the monotonous dynamic suggested.

It is interesting to note the different background each group had. The students who were to become teachers appreciated the different techniques and were more critical with the sequences because they were not as innovative as expected. In other words, they did not find anything special in teaching grammar through proverbs because, for them, proverbs were related to ancient people and old language and considered it therefore one more part of the language –nothing different.

On the contrary, the students in group B, used to working on language matters, were impressed by the possibility of teaching language through proverbs, since they had not ever experienced such a sequence. They were also perfectly aware of the role played by oral language in the classroom and the relevance of proverbs on it.

Perhaps, there are as a minimum two limitations of our study which should be noted and discussed. The primary one has to do with the teaching methodology followed, that is to say, the way of facing the activities each group had. Had we just made all of them fill in every single gap of the sequences and, besides, reflect on them in different lessons, letting them have a rest between tasks, maybe we would have collected more reliable data –or, at least, fewer biased. The lesson which can be learned from this experience, then, is that teaching proverbs needs *real* time in class.

Similarly, another limitation deals with the research methodology. It is evident that the different number of students from one group to another, as well as the interests, ages, times, etc., are sociologically relevant features which played a very important role into the data building and which only can be balanced in further researches.

Regarding this, there is a need to study the impact on the way the students understand their own experience as learners and apply it to their expectations for future jobs, i.e. the way they will really teach in the future in comparison to what they say now, as students, how they will do so. Of course, also of interest would be an investigation of up to what point the background has an influence on the considerations about teaching language that our teachers-to-be demonstrate. In other words, a quantitative as well as a qualitative research on the way our students deal with the profession of teacher before finishing their degrees could be necessary.

Anyway, the present study has implications for educational practice, given that it handles directly the expectations and conceptions of the teachers-to-be. As a result, it is crucial not to let proverbs die out and, with them, a very important part of our culture printed on the language. It behooves teacher trainers to keep on researching because, as it is known, our future lies in education.

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