SpanishDict: A Tribute to learners of Spanish from curiosity media

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Abstract

Spanish is the second most spoken native and the third most spoken foreign language. Despite the wide currency it enjoys, Spanish might sometimes pose problems to its learners concerning grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, technological advancements have proposed workable solutions and fostered learning through products tailored to specific learner needs. In this respect, this review sought to evaluate SpanishDict following Kohnke & Moorhouse's recommendations. It demonstrated that the application's most potentially powerful aspect was the interactive grammar instruction practice supported by contextualized videos that fostered an immersive language learning experience. It also found that the situational, thematic, and visually endorsed drills might encourage vocabulary learning. It was further discovered that the audiovisual input supplied through captioned pronunciation videos in Castilian and Latin American, which are the two mainstream varieties of Spanish, might foster prospective learners' phonological awareness.

Keywords: Bilingual dictionary; digital learning; educational YouTube; online resource; SpanishDict

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1. Introduction

Spanish has as many as 543 million speakers globally and is the second most common language in the U.S. (Szmigiera, 2021). According to the 2021 yearbook published by Cervantes Institute (Cervantes Institute, 2021), nearly 493m speak Spanish as their mother tongue, which soars up to 591m when including the potential users of Spanish. Given these statistics and the preference for its use in various fields, including education, politics, and communication (Flores & Coppock, 2018; Petrovčič, 2018), it is plausible to advocate the learning and teaching of Spanish. The advent of technology has expedited the achievement of such goals and manifested itself in many fields, including language education. Technology-enhanced language education has justifiably riveted scholars and educators worldwide extending the reach and effect of face-to-face learning (Jiang et al., 2021; Stoesz et al., 2023). Given the manifold benefits of mobile and computer technologies in language education, such a trend might be considered somewhat predictable (Kessler, 2018; Bernacki et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2021; Kohnke, 2019).

Utilizing technology in language education, in a way, pertains to digital language learning, which also entails such digital learning resources as e-textbooks, interactive media, and online dictionaries (Richards, 2015; Anongnad, 2021; Rahmati et al., 2021). As stated by Levy (2010), technology can be exploited for language teaching at five levels: physical (e.g., mobile phones and laptops), management (e.g., learning management systems), applications (social networking sites), resource (e.g., online newspapers and websites), and component technology (e.g., grammar checker and electronic dictionaries). In this respect, online dictionaries might be leveraged at the resource level, considering the gains that might be reaped (Nerlinger, 2021).

1.1. Purpose of study

This review critically evaluated SpanishDict, an online language resource that serves more than a bilingual dictionary. Thus, it intended to assist with learning and teaching Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) by concisely presenting its descriptive characteristics and deliberating on its pedagogical merits and considerations.

2. Materials and Method

This study used a review method. Resources were gathered from related studies and learning websites. Three Spanish learning websites were reviewed, with SpanishDict, being the major Spanish learning website that was considered. The researcher reviewed the SpanishDict while comparing it to three other websites.

The study was ethical and did not pose harm to learners or designers of the websites reviewed. There was no need to seek permission since there were no direct participants in the study. The websites reviewed are also available to the public, hence, they do not require special permissions to use the information they provide. Other resources were duly referenced.

3. Results

3.1. SpanishDict: A Concise Description

SpanishDict (SpanishDictionary.com, n.d.) is one of the three learning websites created by Curiosity Media, Inc. (Curiosity Media, n.d.) and aims to provide learners with resources for learning English and Spanish. Beyond merely an online bilingual dictionary, SpanishDict is more of a learning resource offering various online materials. The website welcomes users with a search bar where they can look for a specific word or expression or translate a complete sentence into English and Spanish. Nine tabs are presented to users on the website: learn Spanish, translation, conjugation, vocabulary, classrooms, grammar, cheat sheets, conjugation drill, and pronunciation. In the *Learn Spanish* and *Grammar* sections, users are provided with bit-sized and situational practice in Spanish in four levels (i.e., introduction, beginner, intermediate, and advanced). From an easy to difficult point of view, users are presented with 21 themes and 81 lessons in the introduction, six themes and 48 topics in

beginner, 20 themes and 129 lessons in intermediate, and 17 themes and 102 lessons in advanced levels. In these lessons, learners are taught vocabulary, formulaic expressions used in certain situations, grammar, and pronunciation. More precisely, the introduction lessons are typically basic introductory lessons on various topics, from greeting someone to information about Spanish spoken in Spain, while the beginner, intermediate, and advanced lessons are all about level-appropriate grammar teaching and practice.

The grammar lessons follow the same format: interactive grammar formation, comprehensive review, and extra practice. In both the introduction and other levels, learners are provided with additional materials and ancillary information depending on the lesson content in each theme. For instance, the lesson titled *Happy Birthday* that was given in the introduction explains the cultural element "quinceañera" (i.e., a celebration of a girl's 15th birthday) supported with audiovisual materials. Likewise, learners are also provided with additional terms and collocations (e.g., árbol genealógico) about the studied topic (e.g., family). Similarly, the other three levels present extra information (e.g., sentence formation formula, bilingual sentence examples with audio support, and explanations) about the practiced grammatical form (e.g., present progressive). Learners are also allowed to practice grammar via multiple-choice items supported audio-visually. They are further provided explanations and feedback about the practiced form at the bottom screen. 49 Spanish textbooks are also available on the app for learners to practice the target grammar points within and beyond the textbooks.

The translation feature of the website allows users to search for some common expressions in English and Spanish. Most colloquial words, phrases, and expressions can be found with bilingual dictionary definitions, examples, and pronunciation. The pronunciation of the query item is in two common varieties English (i.e., American and British) and Spanish (i.e., Latin American and Castilian). Additionally, learners can view word-by-word translations for their search items. The translation feature also allows users to get feedback from machine translation powered by Microsoft, SDL, and Prompt. These translations, however, sound robotic and lack bilingual translations. Users can also type accents (e.g., í and é), hear the pronunciation of query items, and check their grammar and spelling (via SpellCheckPlus, n.d.) on the translation bar.

The conjugation tab, as the name implies, presents learners with conjugations in the following grammatical moods: indicative, subjunctive (present, perfect, and future), imperative (affirmative and negative), progressive (present, preterit, imperfect, conditional, and future), perfect (present, preterit, past, conditional, and future), and perfect subjunctive (present, past, and future). Alongside this, learners are also supplied with dictionary definitions, examples, pronunciation, synonyms, and antonyms of the searched verb. In the case of searching for a word in English, this feature replaces the thesaurus (i.e., synonyms and antonyms) function with phrases, wherein learners are provided with fixed phrases or collocations of the query item (e.g., commit, commit suicide) in addition to the previously mentioned ancillary information (e.g., definition and examples).

Another tab on the website is vocabulary, wherein users can create new lists based on the searched words or import new ones from Quizlet or Microsoft Office. The number of reviewed words, those that need revision, and the remaining ones can visually be seen using this tab. Learners are further provided featured vocabulary lists, such as word of the day and thematic vocabulary items. The *word of the day* category has introduced an average of 30 words per month since February 2018. Upon clicking on one of these words, learners are exposed to audio-visually supported materials, sample sentences, and pronunciation. In addition to the daily words, learners are presented with more than 50 categories divided into more than 900 themes and topics, ranging from arts to idioms. This amounts to thousands of thematic and target-specific lexical items to benefit from. This part of the app also presents learners and teachers with 49 Spanish textbooks by which vocabulary can be practiced. From A1 to B2, these textbook series help introduce learning materials in context.

SpanishDict also allows users, more precisely teachers, to set up classrooms on the website and via Google Classroom. It enables teachers to present learners with vocabulary and grammar assignments that can be selected from various lists appearing or searched in the bar. Teachers might opt for open-item or multiple-choice questions when assigning vocabulary and grammar exercises. Both learners and teachers are provided instant feedback on learners' achievement in the given practice. Teachers might also preview and edit assignments and copy and share their links with learners.

The website also supplies learners with cheat sheets in grammar and phrasebooks, albeit for premium users only. The cheat sheets include a concise set of notes on eight grammar points (i.e., Spanish grammar overview, Spanish pronunciation, verb conjugations, preterit vs. imperfect, imperative, *por* vs. *para*, *ser* vs. *estar*, and indicative vs. subjunctive). On the other hand, the phrasebooks contain relevant, practical, and conversational information (e.g., wordlists) in eight categories (i.e., food words, medical words, music terms, Spanish slang, legal words, common idioms, regionalisms from Mexico, and regionalisms from Spain). All these ancillary materials are visually supported.

Another feature of the website is conjugation drills, wherein learners can practice conjugation in Spanish by selecting the tenses or moods from the drop-down menu, which enables learners to make preferences concerning tenses (i.e., 20 tenses), categories (i.e., verb endings, stem-changing and irregular verbs, and reflexive forms), pronouns (e.g., *vos* and *vosotros*), verbs (i.e., most common verbs, all verbs, word lists, and word of the day), and length (e.g., between 10-500 verbs). An additional feature in this tab is that it allows users to get a quick snapshot of the practiced grammar points and verbs by simply moving the cursor on either.

Last but not least, learners are presented with pronunciation materials by which they can practice tricky pronunciations of thousands of words and learn how to pronounce words or place stress in Spanish. Learners are provided with eight pronunciation lessons: pronunciation of /c/ and /z/, tongue twisters, onomatopoeia, pronunciation of /r/, syllables and syllabification rules, alphabet, vowels, and word stress. In addition to the pronunciation of tricky words, learners might wish to search for the articulation of other vocabulary items as well, upon which they are supplied with video pronunciations of the search items (both as separate words and sentences) as well as the spellings (in SpanishDict phonetic alphabet, international phonetic alphabet, and Spanish alphabet) in Latin American and Spanish varieties.

3.2. Pedagogical Utilities and Shortcomings

The traces of such methodologies as the lexical method (Lewis, 1993), audiolingual method, and specific characteristics of CALL and MALL might, by and large, be observed in the learning resources accessible on SpanishDict. With the materials available for manifold skills, the app promotes self-paced learning via a personalized learning environment. The easy-to-use interface and the availability of web and mobile versions enable learners to utilize SpanishDict anywhere, anytime, which might foster out-of-class learning. The bite-sized lessons prepared following micro-learning principles might also prevent learners from getting overwhelmed. Additionally, the graded format of learning materials might contribute to effective learning and practice. It is also safe to say that the nature of the app might allow for the promotion of learner autonomy since it is learners who determine their learning goals on the app. Being more than an online and mobile, bilingual dictionary, SpanishDict offers, to varying degrees, instructive resources for vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, translation, spelling, and culture.

The app might be claimed to contribute to vocabulary learning thanks to its interactive, situational, and thematic vocabulary drills that are audio-visually supported. Previous studies support the teaching and learning of vocabulary through audio-visual input (Hsu, 2014; Montero-Perez et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2023). The app also provides familiar and situational contexts for vocabulary learning, such as *At the Market* and *Coffee Time*. Such a method was also endorsed in earlier studies. For instance, Hwang and Chen (2013) found that familiar situations improved learners' listening, speaking, and vocabulary

skills. Learners are also granted the chance to create their vocabulary lists for practice. Chen and Li (2010) discovered that their proposed method (i.e., personalized context-aware ubiquitous learning system) assisted learners with vocabulary learning. In addition, learners might practice customized vocabulary lists (e.g., restaurant words and phrases) already available on the app. The literature supports vocabulary learning and teaching through word lists (e.g., bilingual word lists) since they help learners focus on the target-specific lexical items and bridge their knowledge gaps (Coxhead et al., 2020). Presenting learners with many international textbook series in Spanish, the app further allows them to practice textbook-specific and contextualized vocabulary items. Textbooks contain high-frequency and level-specific vocabulary items, thus contributing to learner uptake (Alsaif & Milton, 2012).

Along with vocabulary, grammar is another skill viewed as the "building block of language proficiency" (Richards, 2015). It is a highlighted skill on the app, with verb conjugations, definitions, pronunciations, and model sentences. Given the number of tenses and moods in Spanish, such mechanical drills might be deemed necessary. Captioned video lessons and contextualized practice provide learners with a supporting learning environment to practice grammar. It was shown in previous studies that captioning aided the learning of grammar structures (Cintrón-Valentín et al., 2019). The benefits of contextualized grammar teaching, "such as improved command of lexicogrammar, increased critical understanding of grammar, and enhanced discovery learning skills," were also advocated in the literature (Liu & Jiang, 2009). Additionally, learners are presented with the formation of grammatical structures explicitly. The gains for explicit grammar instruction were also cited in previous studies (Larsen-Freeman, 2015), notwithstanding the differing views about implicit-explicit dichotomy. The conjugation drills provided on the app might be claimed to promote learners' grammatical accuracy. An earlier study examining the effect of an app on enhancing the conjugation of Spanish verbs yielded positive and encouraging results on behalf of verb-conjugation activities (Castañeda & Cho, 2016).

Learners are also given aural and textual input to practice pronunciation in two predominant Spanish varieties (i.e., Castilian and Latin American). A study examining the attitudes of the Spaniards toward accents revealed a marked preference for the Castilian accent (Gallego & Rodríguez, 2012). Another study associated the standard variety with more prestige in bilingual classrooms (Morales, 2011). Learners using this app are also presented with video pronunciations of lexical items. Previous studies found pedagogical gains for captioned videos to teach pronunciation (Wisniewska & Mora, 2020). It might be argued that an analytic-linguistic approach (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996) was utilized for pronunciation practice on the app. Certain words with problematic pronunciations are also listed on the app and can explicitly be practiced by learners through video pronunciations and phonetic transcriptions. Explicit pronunciation instruction was found to be supportive in earlier studies (Zhang & Yuan, 2020). Several tongue twisters are also included to practice specific Spanish sounds. Previous studies found their effectiveness in increasing learners' motivation and included in teachers' pronunciation activities (Foote et al., 2016; Mu'in et al., 2017). Last but not least, explanations and practice on word stress are also accessible through this app. Previous research emphasized the importance of word stress and its contribution to decoding words, especially multisyllabic ones (Wade-Woolley & Heggie, 2015; LaCross et al., 2016).

Spelling is another area highlighted while practicing vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The app includes activities that require learners to type the accurate spellings of the words by also allowing them to type in the accents). It was found that spelling was predictive of written achievement, grammar, and punctuation (Daffern et al., 2017). Spelling might be considered essential, particularly in Spanish, since the language includes written accents (i.e., tildes) in specific words, which might cause confusion or misunderstanding in case of misuse or lack of use (e.g., comó and como). The orthographic complexities in Spanish, which relate to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, might be challenging for language learners. The presence of spelling practice on the app might, in this regard,

be considered significant. A study conducted in the Spanish context indicated the efficiency of explicit spelling instruction in noticing and awareness-raising (Pérez Cañado, 2006).

The app also allows users to translate between Spanish-English and English-Spanish, providing them with the closest and most proper equivalents for the query items. Further translations are also presented via artificial intelligence-powered software provided by Microsoft, SDL, and Prompt. This feature also urges learners to find similarities between the provided translations, double-check grammar and mechanics, and direct learners to the dictionary and model sentences to find the most accurate translation. Jiménez-Crespo (2017) investigated the role of translation technologies in teaching Spanish and discussed their role in aiding reading, writing, post-editing, and other potential gains. Translation might also be exploited in increasing learners' cross-linguistic and cross-cultural awareness (Zanettin, 2001). Colina and Lafford (2017) suggested the addition of translation as a fifth skill into the curriculum of Spanish language teaching.

A final pedagogical benefit that might be reaped from this app is the teaching and learning of cultural elements of Spanish. The app presents cultural information depending on the topic, such as conversational expressions used in Mexican or Castilian Spanish and background information about *quinceañera*. Therefore, it allows learners to be implicitly exposed to cultural fun facts and knowledge, albeit limitedly. A pilot study revealed the efficacy of web resources in contributing to learners' understanding of Spanish culture (Osuna & Meskill, 1998). The integration of culture in the instructive materials on the app might also be observed in the videos presented to practice grammar, which enables learners to understand the pragmatic usage of the language in the target culture as well.

Undoubtedly, SpanishDict has certain pedagogical and technical limitations. The app does not create a sufficiently competitive environment for language learning. The practical exercises, for instance, cannot be done in a game-like environment against other learners. Another concern relates to feedback and assessment. The app provides inadequate and visually-supported feedback and fails to include more than two-item multiple-choice exercises for assessment. The number of choices and practice options might be increased. A third issue could be the lack of authentic videos attached under vocabulary and grammar teaching themes and topics. This could be ameliorated by providing links to YouTube channels, such as Easy Spanish (YouTube, n.d.-a) and SpanishPod101.com (YouTube, n.d.).

Last but not least, the app fails to promote interactions on social media (e.g., Instagram and Twitter), although it has accounts on three social networking sites. Learning interactions might be endorsed through social networking sites. All in all, it must be noted that SpanishDict mainly serves as a bilingual dictionary. Thus, these concerns relate to its ancillary features. This seeks to determine if and how much the smart learning environment of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools like YouTube can help improve learners' fluency of language use and expression in their daily written communication (Alobaid, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This review examined SpanishDict, one of the most popular and pedagogically appealing applications with online and mobile versions. The descriptive and content analyses revealed potential pedagogical gains for SFL, with particular reference to the learning and teaching of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, translation, spelling, and culture. The application's portability, user-friendly interface, navigation buttons, granular learning resources, and bilingual nature contribute to creating personalized learning environments for autonomous learners. It was further revealed that additional features available on the app might be enhanced for better learning opportunities for Spanish learners.

Since this paper critically evaluated SpanishDict, further research is required to corroborate the conceivable benefits that might be reaped for learning and teaching Spanish. Prospective studies might therefore be conducted empirically, exploring the possible effectiveness of the app for learning and teaching vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, translation, spelling, and culture. Qualitative

studies might also be performed to discover the views of learners and teachers who have used the app.

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