

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Emotional connection and ease of learning the Spanish language among young adult Chavacano speakers

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**Abstract:** Chavacano was the product of early Spanish colonization. It was able to adapt to the dynamic of the Philippine culture for centuries. Then, it later became a separate language spoken mostly in Cavite and Zamboanga Peninsula. This study was exploratory research that contextualize the ease of learning Spanish language based on linguistic, cultural, and emotional domains. Eight students who are native Chavacano speakers in Zamboanga City were interviewed for the study. The findings indicated that the close resemblance of lexical and phonological components of Chavacano to Spanish influenced the learning of the native speakers. Cognates played an essential role in cognition and interpreting basic words from Spanish to simpler ideas in Chavacano. Cognition guessing was determined to be a major contributor to language learning for orthographies. For native Chavacano speakers, cognition guessing was a mechanism for language learning in Spanish where learners happened to deduce the meaning of a word by comparing it to a language they know. Additionally, social-cultural relatedness between Chavacano and Spanish mediated the learning in certain manner. Learners were able to emotionally relate themselves to the culture of their target language which in turn influenced language transfer. Such mechanism was firstly observed in learning the second language but later also applied in bilingualism and foreign languages. This study established theoretical connection of ease of learning the Spanish language through phonology, lexical similarities, and its sociocultural resemblance to Chavacano.

**Keywords:** Chavacano; culture; lexical similarities; phonology; Spanish language; sociolinguistics

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## 1. Introduction

Language teachers understood that learning another language necessitates knowing about another culture. One of the main draws of language study is the opportunity to immerse oneself in a new culture, broadening one's perspective and enhancing one's capacity to understand and connect with people from other backgrounds. The purpose of this study was to determine which aspects of Spanish language learning the Chavacano native speakers were at ease of learning. Providing a theoretical perspective in this sense integrates the understanding of language transfer, especially in the context of creoles.

Successful language learners acquire both linguistic and cultural competence concurrently, suggesting that teachers must integrate instruction in both domains (Ho, 2009; Kim, 2020; Valdes, 1986). Essentially, learning a language requires mastery of vocabulary and syntax. But oftentimes language instructors undervalue the importance of teaching culture, and the promise of language acquisition to foster cultural awareness is not fulfilled (Kim, 2020; Rao, 2002).

Additionally, in the bio-cultural perspective of Armour-Thomas and Gopaul-McNicol (1998), language is a “social institution that both shapes and is shaped by society”. This indicates that language is not an autonomous entity, but rather a social practice that is simultaneously generated and produced by the structures and dynamics of the social structures in which individuals’ function (Kuo and Lai, 2006). The relationship between language and culture is one of constant “transfusion”, and that language cannot sprout out of nowhere (Fairclough, 1989). This indicates that acquiring a new tongue will necessitate an understanding of how culture affects the way words are used.

Reading words is an essential component in developing excellent reading and writing skills. Using the Lexical Quality Hypothesis of Perfetti and Hart (2002), word knowledge is made up of interwoven relationships between the sounds of words, what those sounds mean, and how those meanings are represented orthographically (Perfetti and Hart, 2014). Children expand their mental word representations by acquiring an orthographic element and correlating it with progressively fine-grained phonology and lexico-semantic components as they learn to read (Perfetti and Hart, 2002; Sun et al., 2022).

Learning a language requires similarities between the native tongue to a new language. Van der Slik (2010) indicated that, cognates are important to language learning. To take picture of this, Van der Slik (2010) looked at the language similarities of Dutch and English languages showing that the Dutch demonstrated high proficiency in English because of the presence of cognates. Similarly, Chavacano had lexico-grammar interfaces that show similarities with some Asian Portuguese creoles (Parkvall and Jacobs, 2018). Some of these include *bira* “to (re)turn” (< Sp. *virar* “to tack” or Port. *virar* “to turn”) and *banda* “side, place; somewhere” (< Sp./Port. *banda* “side”). Considerably, cognates were also prominent in English and Spanish (Himoro and Pareja-Lora, 2022) as well as between Spanish and Chavacano as it shares common Spanish borrowings.

When children begin to read, teachers can provide tailored instruction by encouraging sound-to-print and meaning-to-print linkages. In English, it is recognized that phonology-based approaches increase the word reading ability and sound-to-letter mappings (McCandliss et al., 2003; Sun et al., 2022; Vadasy et al., 2008) although lexicon- or meaning-based interventions are frequently beneficial at enhancing reading comprehension of the learners (Beck and McKeown, 2007; Marulis and Neuman, 2013; Sun et al., 2022).

Typically, language transfer is measured in one of two ways in research on bilingual literacy. Initially, bilingual transfer helps develop specific reading skills in children. Bilingual speakers of English and Italian exhibited superior English phonological strength in comparison to monolingual English children (D’Angiulli et al., 2001; Sun et al., 2022). This effect was shared by both average and poor readers. Additionally, bilingual transfer is frequently researched based on literacy skill connections between the two languages of bilinguals. For example, researchers found significant correlations between Chinese and English morphological awareness among bilingual children (Pasquarella et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2022).

In addition, outside of within-language considerations, children's competence for one spoken tongue may explain unique variations in their reading competency in the other (Sun-Alperin and Wang, 2011; Sun et al., 2022). Chavez (2022) argued that learners can improve their learning of new language by having competency in their own language. For instance, Sun-Alperin and Wang (2011) discovered that even after accounting for differences in English vocabulary and phonology, the linguistic competence of the Spanish-speaking children in the United States accounted for a significant amount of the remaining variance in the children's English word reading. Additionally, the study of Magno and Maxilom (2016) indicated that the transfer of reading methods from Japanese to English overcomes the challenges of learning English as foreign language. Similarly, this current study used such theoretical context to assess how Chavacano speakers are at ease learning the Spanish language.

Kuppens' (2010) findings indicated that watching television increases vocabulary retention and usage. The study of Webb (2015) found that children learned new vocabulary by watching short films with subtitles. Specifically, Puimège and Peters (2019) investigated how time spent in front of the TV affected young students' ability to understand and retain words and phrases. On the meaning recognition test, they discovered that viewing television was a significant predictor. Both the word association test and the meaning recognition test revealed that significant learning gains were achieved after eight or more exposures to the word through reading or hearing.

Considering how the first language influences language acquisition for other languages, this study examined how efficient were native Chavacano speakers in learning Spanish. There was limited study conducted on language transfer in the context of creoles and native dialects. This study used the phonology and lexical components to describe how language learning happened for native Chavacano speakers.

## **Research questions**

1. What aspects of learning Spanish are easier for Chavacano speakers?
2. How can Chavacano speakers learn the Spanish language easier compared to learning other languages?
3. How does the connection to Spanish language make the learning easier?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Cognates and language learning**

Van der Slik (2010) demonstrated the significance of cognate linguistic distance in the acquisition of a new language. The number of shared words or phrases between any two languages can be used as a benchmark for how similar they are linguistically. For instance, apple-appel in English and Dutch are examples of cognates because of their shared morphology and semantics. Van der Slik (2010) looked at the acquisition of Dutch by nearly 6,000 people of varying linguistic backgrounds, the difference in cognate linguistic distance accounted for about 20% of the range in proficiency levels among those people. Such condition might explain why native Chavacano speakers were able to learn Spanish faster because of the morphological and lexical similarities these languages have.

It is important to note that cognates are common in language. Cognates can be used to describe the similarities of languages based on their word forms, and sometimes pronunciation. According to Van der Slik (2010), cognates are significant for someone to learn a language as it provides similar interpretations to the same words. Oftentimes, this applies to translations and word equivalents.

## **2.2. Language similarities and learning**

Based on the Interactive Transfer Framework, the two languages of bilingual children interact, and literacy skills obtained in one language can then be imported and utilized for literacy advances in the other (Chung et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022). Such transfer effects had been observed in orthographies or similar languages, e.g., in the study of Hipfner-Boucher et al. (2016) for French and English. Interactive Transfer Framework also reflects the relationship between two very different languages, e.g., English and Chinese in the study of Luo et al. (2014).

The Interactive Multilingual Model (MacSwan, 2017) extends this idea, arguing that bilingual language proficiency includes both cross-linguistic and language-specific abilities. When taken as a whole, these models offer a prism through which to examine the role that cross-cultural and linguistic competencies play in the development of literacies in bilinguals.

## **2.3. Familiarity and similarities between languages**

Shirzadi (2015) investigated the effect of cultural background information on the reading ability development of Iranian intermediate English learners. The findings demonstrated that participants who received cultural training in English performed higher on the reading post-test (Mashudi et al., 2022). In addition, the results demonstrated that there was no statistically significant difference between males and females regarding the usage of text familiarity and cultural schemas (Mashudi et al., 2022; Shirzadi, 2015). Using this context, learning Spanish also has similar mechanism. This made Chavacano speakers able to learn the language faster because of how culturally related the Spanish and Chavacano are. To generalize, the heritage language learners are language students who have a deeply personal or familial history with the target language, who are frequently immersed in the language at home through interaction with family members, and who might or might not already be proficient in the language (Fishman, 2001; Kelleher, 2010). Theoretically, the emergent language familiarity of a person can influence their capacity to learn the language.

## **2.4. Phonological awareness and morphological knowledge**

Phonological awareness is the capacity to recognize and manipulate phonological components of a language (Sun et al., 2022). Phonological awareness aids literacy development which in turn helps children establish the crucial connection between spoken and written language (Sun et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 1994). Phonological awareness often includes cognitive processes that can be shared across languages, such as eliminating or merging sound units. As a result, phonological awareness is frequently regarded as a relatively universal cognitive mechanism responsible for bilingual transmission (Geva and Wang, 2001; Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg, 2011). In Spanish-English (Sun-Alperin and Wang, 2011) and Chinese-English (Luo et al., 2014) bilinguals, for example, phonological awareness in their ancestral languages accounted for additional variation in the English literacy of learners.

While both vocabulary and morphological knowledge aid in reading comprehension, they func-

tion in different ways for beginning English readers (Marks et al., 2022). Children with a larger vocabulary are more likely to infer morphological and phonological regularities of their language, and children who are familiar with these patterns have an easier time learning and reading new words (Carlisle, 2010). Such mechanisms of language transfer induce the learning of native Chavacano speakers. Similarities in lexical and phonological between Spanish and Chavacano aid the learning.

### **3. Methods**

This study explored the emotional connection and ease of learning Spanish through the lens of students. The narrative data gathered in this study was imperative in integrating components of new theories to be set in language learning. The narratives of the participants served as a theoretical base for representing minor dialects as pieces of globally recognized languages. Hence, such theoretical perspective explains how conceptual and thematic ideas can serve as components of language, communication, and linguistics.

#### **3.1. Research design**

This study was qualitative research that used the methods of case study. Extensive analysis on how emotional connection to Spanish language harnesses the learning of students. The narrative data were processed and analyzed using coding and thematic analysis. Themes were contextualized into more concise and meaningful interpretations. Such method of processing narrative data maximizes the use of theoretical components drawn from the interview.

#### **3.2. Population and samples**

Purposive sampling was carried out in the study to gather the participants of the interview. Eight students participated in the study—four of them attended senior high school, and four were in college. The students were native speakers of Chavacano who also had units for Spanish language learning.

Fundamentally, this study used purposive sampling as it maximizes the sampling of the participants. It is commonly used to access a particular subset of population (Vijayamohan, 2023). Certainly, purposive sampling enables the researchers to pick samples based on their specific characteristics, i.e., students who attended either high school or college who had Spanish classes. It helps the researchers to map the characteristics of their participants, which is essential in analyzing the narratives from interviews.

#### **3.3. Data gathering procedure**

Initially, the researcher requested permission from the institutions that the participants were affiliated. An approval letter was provided to each of the participants signed by the president and department heads. The approval letter sufficed information on the purpose of the study, the terms of confidentiality, and the voluntary clause for the participation. Upon acknowledging the terms, the participants were interviewed through phone calls. Data gathering was carried out last November 2022 to March 2023.

## 4. Results

### Question 1. *What aspects of learning Spanish are easier for Chavacano speakers?*

Eight of the participants see vocabulary as the easiest to be learned as a Spanish language learner. One participant highlighted that most of the words in Chavacano creole have resemblance to the Spanish language and that some of them differ only in the pronunciation and spelling. Another remarkable theme for the ease of learning presence of influence from other dialects that shaped the vocabulary of Chavacano. This is also an essential aspect of learning Spanish because it provides a new avenue for nurturing the language and improving literary transfer. Nevertheless, it shows that vocabulary is a fundamental component of learning the Spanish language.

“As a Chavacano speaker, it is easy to learn the Spanish language for me because 80% of the vocabulary in Chavacano is like those of Spanish. For example, we have “agua” which means water. These two languages are very similar.”

“When it comes to the vocabulary, there is ease in learning the Spanish language because they are fluent in speaking the creole. Most of the vocabulary originated to the Spanish language. Although, some of the words were influenced by the presence of different regional dialects. For instance, basic cite words, we have *cosina, plato, cuchara*.”

“As a Chavacano speaker, it is an advantage for me to learn Spanish because Chavacano and Spanish are very similar in many aspects. While learning Spanish, it was easy to me to understand the words that were given to us. The easiest aspect of learning Spanish is the vocabulary. What I just needed to take note is the difference in spelling and pronunciation.”

### Question 2. *How can Chavacano speakers learn the Spanish language easier compared to learning other languages?*

One participant was exposed to both learning Spanish and Mandarin. Reflecting on his personal experiences, he sees Spanish as easier because of several factors, i.e., pronunciation, spelling, and writing. With his background in Chavacano, he acknowledges that being a Chavacano speaker helps him learn the Spanish language. Chavacano serves as his “language of convenience” which enhances his capacity to acquire the language more quickly than those who are not Chavacano speakers. Additionally, one participant is pointing out *culture as a driving force in learning the language*. Because of the long history of Spanish colonization, the Chavacano speakers are able to acquire their culture and values. Consequently, unlike other states that do not have a direct influence on the localities, Spaniards were able to embark their culture onto the minds of Zamboanguenos. This strong influence dated back centuries ago made a drastic change in how Chavacano speakers are able to learn the Spanish language easier today.

“I have better experience when learning Spanish than other languages. When I was learning Spanish, there was convenience because I know how to speak Chavacano. There was an accommodation of the foreign language. In learning Mandarin, it was a little bit difficult like one syllable word that sounded differently would have different meaning. Unlike Spanish, the sound may change but the meaning is the same.”

“It is also remarkable to say that the new generations are interested in learning the language. It

is easier for them because they are exposed to different historical practices. There are also other subsets of culture that can widely help the learning of Spanish.”

Question 3. *How does the connection to Spanish language make the learning easier?*

Four participants consider other external factors that aid the learning of Spanish. One major contributor to language learning is the exposure to the history or culture. This integrates the learning especially in terms of knowing the use of their language to different cultural aspects. One participant highlighted that the documents used in early Zamboanga were written in Spanish which increases the connection of the localities to the actual Spanish culture. For another participant, early exposure to Spanish music helped her learn the language in her later life. It is a notable context that connection to the culture drives the interest of the learners.

“I think, one of the factors that Chavacano speakers can easily learn Spanish is because of the history. Documents written in Spanish are used by the churches for baptismal. Because of these historical connections, the Chavacano speakers are closer to the Spanish language.”

“Ever since, when I was young, my father used to play Spanish music. It is easy for me to memorize songs because I’m a Chavacano speaker. I have that inclination to Spanish even before. I’m more appreciative in terms of learning Spanish because I have connection to the language. I am familiar in vocabulary. It’s easy for me to have interest in learning Spanish.”

## **5. Discussion**

Question 1. *What aspects of learning Spanish are easier for Chavacano speakers?*

Many opportunities are offered for children to learn a foreign language outside of school, even in the absence of a teacher who could facilitate extension activities (De Wilde et al., 2020a; De Wilde et al., 2022; Kuppens, 2010; Lindgren and Muñoz, 2013; Puimège and Peters, 2019; Sylvén and Sundqvist, 2012).

The strongest determinant for listening and reading scores was cognate linguistic distance (De Wilde et al., 2022). Lindgren and Muñoz (2013) showed that exposure outside of school, parental involvement, and linguistic distance all contributed to the positive outcome.

Receptive multilingualism is how people can use their native language to converse with speakers of a similar but unfamiliar language (De Wilde et al., 2022; Gooskens et al., 2018). Cognates also play a fundamental role in receptive multilingualism (De Wilde et al., 2022). Cognition guessing, wherein one attempts to deduce the meaning of a word in an unfamiliar language by comparing it to words in one’s language, is one method used by speakers (De Wilde et al., 2022; Vanhove and Berthele, 2015). These literatures further support how native Chavacano speakers learn vocabulary from Spanish. Chavacano speakers used words with similar sounds in their native dialect, compare them to Spanish counterparts, and attempt to decrypt the message. Through this approach, learning the Spanish language became easier to do.

Contextual vocabulary learning studies have consistently shown that cognates are more readily learned. Peters and Webb (2018) looked into the impact of cognateness on the acquisition of contextual vocabulary when watching television. The likelihood of learning a cognate was shown to be

2.5 times greater for meaning identification and 8 times higher for meaning recall. Similarly, Vidal (2011) discovered that listening to spoken input also increases the learning of cognates. De Wilde et al. (2020b) and Puimège and Peters (2019) discovered that early learners frequently use cognates to acquire fresh vocabulary through exposure outside of the classroom. Lastly, Muñoz et al. (2018) discovered that Danish and English have more cognates in common than Spanish and English, which helped Danish learners to learn English faster. Danish learners and Spanish learners performed equally well on an English meaning recognition test, though it is noteworthy that the Spanish learners have several years of instruction and none for Danish learners.

In contrast to the generally described the universal transfer of sound-based skills, “meaning transfer” is relatively more challenging and frequently influenced by several circumstances (Chung et al., 2019). Linguistic similarities exhibited in shared morphemic structures and vocabulary items are an important aspect of “meaning transfer” (Chung et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022). Several morphemic units, the processes by which these units interact, and the orthographic forms of words like “communication and comunicación” are shared between the Spanish and English languages. As a result, it stands to reason that Spanish-English bilingual children will acquire a level of proficiency in both languages’ lexicons and morphologies (Kuo et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2022). This was equally true for native Chavacano speakers. The morphological similarities between Spanish and Chavacano, i.e., *agua*, provided the gateway for easier language learning.

*Question 2. How can Chavacano speakers learn the Spanish language easier compared to learning other languages?*

There are distinctions between the ways in which sound and meaning-based skills are related to word reading depending on the language. Units of sound map directly onto the corresponding units of text in alphabetic languages like Spanish (Kremin et al., 2016) and Korean (McBride-Chang et al., 2005). Because these languages are not difficult to decode phonologically, phonological awareness is a crucial component in the reading development of young children. For instance, phonological awareness was the most significant factor in determining Korean word reading ability for elementary native Korean learners, whereas meaning-based skills such as vocabulary were not significant (McBride-Chang et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2022).

Although both meaning- and sound-based literacy skills are required for learning to read the language, their respective contribution differs between orthographies. In languages like Chinese, meaning-based literacy skills are better predictors of literacy of children, whereas in Spanish language, sound-based literacy skills served as the better predictors (Sun et al., 2022). In the context of Chavacano, sound-based skills were the dominant traits of the learners which indicates why some learned faster in Spanish than Chinese. Because sound cognition for Chavacano speakers happened well in Spanish, learners were able to learn new vocabulary.

In the lexico-semantic system of a particular language, representation of meaning may be characterized in a variety of ways at any one time. The level of children’s awareness of terms and the meanings of those words is reflected in their vocabulary (Carlisle, 2010). Knowledge of vocabulary is closely connected to morphological awareness, which refers to children’s capacity to identify and modify the meaning’s most fundamental building blocks (Carlisle and Feldman, 1995; Sun et al., 2022). Perfetti and Stafura (2014) theoretical models of reading argue that morphology influences literacy on two levels—as part of the lexicon or vocabulary and as subtypes of learning of the lan-



guage system. Hence, these are two separate systems that interact with one another.

Question 3. *How does the connection to Spanish language make the learning easier?*

Mashudi et al. (2022) argued that teaching the culture has a positive influence on language learning. Hernandez et al. (2021) demonstrate the significant effect of cultural knowledge on the motivation to study a foreign language. Similarities in Chavacano and Spanish also aid the learning of native Chavacano speakers.

Vygotsky (2012) suggested that language and cultural similarities precede cognitive development and learning. Based on Vygotsky's, a child develops information through social interactions between people—seeing and learning from other speakers. Because of their culture, surroundings, and exposure to language models, some children enroll to school with superior cognitive skills (Garrett-Hatfield, 2022). The more opportunities children have to observe and imitate behavior, the better their cognitive and language development. In addition, Vygotsky thought that every culture has its own “tools” for social relations. This supported the setting in this current study. Because Chavacano speakers were exposed to a language similar to that of Spanish (i.e., Chavacano), it made the learning the target language easier. Like the lexical and phonological contexts, cultural similarities also induce language learning.

In early theories of language learning, Byram (1990) and Fleming (2006) believed that in order to successfully assimilate English language learners into the culture of English-speaking nations, it is essential that the teaching and learning environment for English incorporate elements of British language culture. Thus, English language instructors are tasked with imparting culturally appropriate instruction in the English language so that their students may effectively integrate into the norms of the target culture (Mashudi et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, Herawati (2014) demonstrated that teaching sociolinguistics can help teach language and also the culture of the language being learned. Through an empirical study, it was determined that the performances of both courses were virtually identical (Herawati, 2014; Mashudi et al., 2022). In contrast, the sociolinguistics class demonstrated greater performance in terms of language usage. Moreover, 79% of the students reported that learning sociolinguistics helped them be capable of using language elements that are suitable for foreign culture (Herawati, 2014).

As for the third non-academic activity, listening to music is an essential one. In contrast to television, this form of media exposure was found to have a favorable effect on students' listening and reading abilities (De Wilde et al., 2022; Lindgren and Muñoz, 2013). Specifically, Pavia et al. (2019) discovered that listening to L2 songs led to the acquisition of contextual vocabulary. Likewise, they did not find improvements in the form-meaning relationship, but they did find improvements in the recognition of spoken forms and collocations. In the situation of native Chavacano speakers, listening to Spanish-like songs helped in language learning during early adulthood.

As an implication of the findings, closely related heritage (i.e., Spanish and Chavacano) can influence the learning of native Chavacano speakers in speaking Spanish. This was also observed in different languages, even those that are not closely related (i.e., Dutch and English, Chinese and English). One major contributor was the cultural background that a learner has (Shirzadi, 2015) that aids phonological awareness. This indicates that language learning requires integrating into the culture of target language to optimize the learning processes.

## 6. Conclusion

Phonology, lexical similarities, and cultural resemblance contributed to the ease of learning Spanish language. These three components were the fibers of sociolinguistics that aided language transfer. This study was able to present the conditions that supported the Lexical Quality Hypothesis. Remarkably, this study observed that fine-grained phonology and lexico-semantic components induced language learning among native Chavacano speakers. Similarities in phonology and lexical semantics between Chavacano and Spanish became a mechanism for ease of learning.

Notably, heritage was the driving force in learning the Spanish language. Previous empirical studies indicated that understanding the culture of the target language increases the likelihood of language transfer. Because the Spanish language was used in different written documents in early colonialization, it also transferred important cultural heritage. This also became a major contributor to language learning in the present. This study was able to observe sociocultural entanglement in orthographies as another pillar of language transfer and language learning.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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