CORPUS-BASED FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: USING THE COGNITIVE RESOURCES OF OLDER LEARNERS EFFICIENTLY

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Abstract: The presence of older learners (60 years old and over) in the foreign language (FL) classroom is increasingly common. However, although these students differ from younger ones in a variety of cognitive, physical and psychological aspects, textbooks have not yet been adapted to the characteristics of the former. This lack of teaching materials entails either that older learners be unable to study an FL with a textbook that addresses their needs and interests, or that teachers must constantly collect materials from different sources, which is exceedingly time consuming. The objective of this article is to start a debate on potential modifications to Spanish teaching materials that respond to older learners' needs, specifically for initial level learners. This study discusses modifications that address two significant issues: the introduction of vocabulary, and the introduction of grammar tenses and conjugations. These two issues generate important challenges in the learning process of the cohort under discussion (Ramírez Gómez 2016). The framework for this work is the analysis of the *Corpus del Español* (Davies 2002), which includes more than 100 million entries. The study explores the most frequently used content words of Spanish (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives) and contrasts these data with how current and popular Spanish textbooks introduce this information. The analysis indicates that textbooks present vocabulary and grammar tenses and conjugations in a manner that fails to reflect actual Spanish use, despite this being one of the main objectives of the functional-approach, which is followed by most of the textbooks revised here. Also, drawing from previous studies on age-related cognitive transformations, transitivity, aspect, among others, we argue that textbooks for initial level learners – particularly for *older* learners – should centre on the acquisition of highly frequent and relatable vocabulary to elevate their exposure to relevant structures and foster memorization. Additionally, textbooks should also present verb tenses and conjugations in a balanced fashion that pays more attention to prototypical structures of Spanish. The conclusions of this article are relevant because they question the status quo regarding how to introduce structures and vocabulary to

initial level learners. Also, they suggest textbook modifications that may help older adults make more efficient use of their cognitive resources, enhance memorization and thus overcome some of their most important challenges when learning an FL.

Keywords: Older adults; corpus; textbook; frequency; foreign language learning; vocabulary

1 – Introduction

Studies on age-related cognitive decline have suggested that older adults (60+ years old; partially or entirely retired) experience physical, cognitive and psychological changes that differentiate them from younger adults (for a summary, see Ramírez Gómez 2016). Such developmental transformations influence these individuals' foreign language (FL) learning process, and they justify the empirically based creation of teaching materials that adjust to their characteristics (cf. Ramírez Gómez 2016). Nonetheless, although older adults as an FL studentship are increasingly common, most textbooks are directed at learners whose ages range from young adulthood (e.g. high-school) to middle age (Ramírez Gómez 2016).

Drawing from Ramírez-Gómez (2016) and the *Corpus del Español* (Davies 2002), in this work we discuss potential modifications to teaching materials regarding two main themes: (i) vocabulary and (ii) grammatical tenses and conjugations. Concretely, we argue that textbooks that follow the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) fail to align to the reality of Spanish use in L1 contexts. Indeed, even at initial levels of proficiency, these textbooks include highly infrequent vocabulary and introduce tenses and conjugations in a manner that fails to reflect language use.

Although these problems are detrimental to FL learners of all ages, they have a particular and negative impact on older learners: a most concerning challenge for older adults who are learning an FL relates to difficulties in memorizing and recalling information (Gómez Bedoya 2008; Ramírez Gómez 2016). In order to overcome such challenges, these individuals require high exposure to – and relatability toward – vocabulary and grammar structures, and they also need a focused input that leads them to efficiently use their cognitive resources (cf. Ramírez Gómez 2016).

The discussion in this work is relevant for two main reasons. First, the decisions made in current didactic-material creation regarding the themes explored here are not empirically based, which makes re-assessment pertinent. Second, a corpus-based approach may lead to the creation of textbooks that reflect the real use of Spanish, or: it may increase exposure to relevant structures and thus enhance memorization. Although such a rigorous approach would benefit any Spanish

learner, in this article we focus on its potential to help older learners overcome the challenges usually associated with old age that may influence the FL learning process.

2 –The vocabulary in Spanish textbooks for initial-level learners

Vocabulary rendered as *highly frequent* in frequency dictionaries is more likely to be encountered in L2 practice and interaction, and a higher exposure to certain vocabulary increases the probability of recall in future use. Thus, it is logical to hypothesize that initial level learners would benefit from using textbooks containing items that rank high in frequency dictionaries: acquiring highly frequent vocabulary in the first learning stages will enable them in a short time to understand a high percentage of any text they encounter. In other words, they will *maximize* their learning time (Zenuk Nishide 2011).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), initial level learners of an FL – namely, levels A1 and A2 – should be able to communicate in the target language so as to fulfil daily-life related tasks. An A1 learner, for example, should be able to

> understand and use *familiar everyday expressions* and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type, (…) introduce him/herself and others and (…) ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has, [and] (…) interact *in a simple way* provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. (Council of Europe 2009: 24, italics are ours)

An A2 learner, in turn, should be able to

> understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas *of most immediate relevance* (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), (…) communicate in *simple* and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information *on familiar and routine matters*, (…) describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. (Council of Europe 2009: 24, italics are ours)

As shown in the citations, there is an insistence on appealing to the concepts of "simple", "familiar", and "immediate relevance" when characterizing A1-A2 learners' L2 abilities. Nonetheless, these are not linguistic concepts and cannot be straightforwardly related to any grammatical consideration. Despite this lack of descriptive rigour, however, Spanish textbooks that follow the CEFR parameters usually include vocabulary of topics that align to this reasoning, such as self-introductions, the classroom, the house, the family, groceries, hobbies, professions, the weather,

clothing, nationalities, colours, body parts, among others. These topics seem closely linked to our daily lives; therefore, they are deemed relevant. However, how accurate is this idea?

2.1 – Exploration of the *Corpus del Español*

According to Matos (2008), most Spanish speakers use an average of 300 words; highly verbal or educated speakers – e.g. novelists and scholars – use a vocabulary of approximately 1,000 words; and outstanding users of the language (such as Miguel de Cervantes) use 3,000[1]. Although not explicitly stated by the scholar, an exploration of the frequency analysis of the *Corpus del Español* (Davies 2002)[2] – which includes more than 100 million words – suggested that Matos most likely referred to *lemmas*, not inflected words. This suggests that mastering the 300-1,000 most frequently used lemmas should allow A1-A2 learners to interact at their level more than competently.

At this point it is important to consider the difference between *passive* and *active* vocabulary and how these concepts are viewed in our discussion. Passive vocabulary constitutes the vocabulary that individuals can *comprehend*, and it tends to be much larger than their active vocabulary, which is understood as the vocabulary that individuals *use* (Laufer 1998). Matos' reference to novelists and scholars suggests that his 300-3,000 estimation refers to active vocabulary, i.e., words that novelists have produced in their works. Corpora are essentially *produced* vocabulary, as well; consequently, we consider that Matos' statements and Davies' data can indeed be contrasted even though Spanish speakers may have a much larger passive vocabulary.

The first issue to be addressed is the frequency of vocabulary commonly included in A1-A2 level textbooks. The following is a list of 35 randomly chosen nouns, adjectives and verbs that recurrently appear in these materials as targeted vocabulary.

As shown in Table 1, out of 35 common words taught to initial level learners of Spanish, 12 (37.14%) were not found among Davies' 2,000[3] most frequently used words. Among the remaining 23 words, seven were found within the 300 most frequently used entries. This indicates, for instance, that some verbs taught to A1-A2 level students – such as *ser* ("to be"), *hacer* ("to do") and *decir* ("to say") – are indeed what according to the corpus could be deemed "basic vocabulary."

1 - Thresholds of lexical knowledge of Spanish speakers were exceedingly difficult to find in the literature, and this was the only accessible information. It is unclear, however, what the source of Matos' statements was. More research is necessary to agree on definite numerical thresholds for Spanish vocabulary knowledge.

2 - The latest version of the Corpus was released in Summer 2016. However, the entire data could not be accessed by the researchers by the time of this submission.

3 - Matos' statement regarding the vocabulary size of a native Spanish speaker is an estimation. Therefore, this discussion explores the 2,000 most frequently used lemmas in Spanish in order to compensate for the potential imprecision of this estimation.

	Word	Category	Position of Lemma in Frequency Ranking
1	*alto*	adjective	563
2	*delgado*	adjective	614
3	*azul*	adjective	1159
4	*argentino*	adjective	1187
5	*amarillo*	adjective	1829
6	*colombiano*	adjective	-
7	*chileno*	adjective	-
8	*nublado*	adjective	-
9	*púrpura*	adjective	-
10	*soleado*	adjective	-
11	*delicioso*	adjective	-
12	*casa*	noun	99
13	*padres*	noun	174
14	*cabeza*	noun	313
15	*profesor*	noun	543
16	*brazo*	noun	559
17	*pregunta*	noun	707
18	*película*	noun	771
19	*médico*	noun	822
20	*lluvia*	noun	983
21	*cocina*	noun	1593
22	*dormitorio*	noun	-
23	*cantante*	noun	-
24	*cuaderno*	noun	-
25	*lápiz*	noun	-
26	*televisor*	noun	-
27	*estantería*	noun	-
28	*natación*	noun	-
29	*ser*	verb	10
30	*haber*	verb	15
31	*estar*	verb	19
32	*hacer*	verb	26
33	*decir*	verb	28
34	*estudiar*	verb	332
35	*comprar*	verb	514

TABLE 1 – Vocabulary items from Spanish textbooks for A1-A2 levels, their lexical category and position of their associated lemma in the frequency ranking in Davies' corpus

Conversely, others – such as *estudiar* ("to study") and *comprar* ("to buy") – are less frequently uttered. A similar phenomenon is observed among nouns and adjectives: although nouns considered of daily use such as *casa* ("house") and *padres* ("parents") appear within the first 300 most frequent lemmas, others such as *lluvia* ("rain"), *película* ("movie") and *televisor* ("television") – as well as practically all adjectives – appear after entry 500.

In our view, nationalities, parts or elements of the house, colours and other vocabulary associated with the CEFR parameters for A1-A2 level learners are uncommonly used in conversations or texts in Spanish. Thus, prioritizing the study of these lexical items may not be as convenient as fathomed. This statement does not entail that words such as those included in Table 1 are unnecessary; evidently, students of a language *do* need to learn some of these words early. However, would it not be more beneficial to limit the time spent learning these words and rather focus on vocabulary that is more common in Spanish interaction? Furthermore, textbooks tend to approach new vocabulary holistically and fail to clearly suggest a distinction between words to be learned for production and those to be learned only for comprehension at the learners' current proficiency level. Again, it is crucial to assess whether this is the most efficient use of time and memorization resources, particularly regarding older adults, many of whom experience memory challenges.

Studies on older FL learners' characteristics (Alvarado Cantero 2008; Gómez Bedoya 2008; Ramírez Gómez 2016) have reported that memorizing new vocabulary is one of these individuals' most concerning aspects of L2 learning. Ramírez Gómez (2016) indicated that these difficulties might be palliated by limiting the number of lexical items introduced in class, by increasing the practice with new vocabulary, and by elevating its memorability and relatability. Although older learners may be exposed passively to several lexical items, *targeted* vocabulary instruction should be more limited. This may help them use their memory resources more efficiently and may liberate time for activities that allow exploring personal experiences and collecting *relatable* vocabulary (i.e., relevant to each learner).

In sum, textbooks for older learners of initial level Spanish (or any other language) should include vocabulary-related activities that (i) target some highly frequent vocabulary units, (ii) expose learners to additional vocabulary that is clearly introduced at this stage as passive and (iii) lead them to identify and memorize vocabulary that is personally relevant.

3 – The grammar of verbs in textbooks of Spanish
3.1 – Tenses

The manner in which textbooks have introduced grammar topics until now has been motivated by a variety of teaching methods, such as the grammar-translation method, the structuralist approach, the communicative approach, the natural approach, among others. Even though there is extensive research on how all these methods conceive grammar instruction (for an overview, see Ramírez Gómez 2016), there is no equal amount of research on the *rationale* that supports the manner in which grammar tenses are introduced.

Although textbooks of Spanish often follow the guidelines of the CEFR, they do so in their own style. This generates a diversity of textbook methods or collections. However, most of them show similar patterns. Table 2 summarizes data collected from a revision of popular Spanish textbooks for adults at the A1-A2 levels[4]. This revision specifically explored the *order* in which grammatical tenses are introduced.

As shown in Table 2, these 18 methods introduce tenses in a similar order: present, present progressive or perfect preterit (the compounded form that uses the auxiliary verb *haber* in the present tense followed by a participle), indefinite preterit and imperfect preterit. Finally, only three methods include future tense. Such a strong correspondence is puzzling because in education and other human/social sciences there is rarely such degree of agreement. A possible explanation is that following a similar order in their textbooks allows publishing companies to respond to market conditions and remain competitive (Folse 2016). Also, Folse (p.c. 2016) pointed out that these kinds of decisions are often motivated by tradition, not by logic or research. Another explanation may relate to a matter of functionality. According to the CEFR, initial level learners of an FL need to receive grammatical tools that allow them to talk about simple and relatable topics (e.g. their families, lifestyles and surroundings). In this line, intuition may lead authors to believe that this kind of L2 interaction is mostly exercised through present tense structures, which are consistently the first structures addressed in initial level textbooks. However, is this idea supported by data? Exploring the *Corpus del Español* revealed that the answer to this question is not straightforward.

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4 - All the textbooks revised in this article were published by Spanish publishing companies. Due to inaccessibility issues, textbooks from publishing companies in countries of Latin America were not included. It is important to point out, however, that these textbooks are not only use in Spain, but that they are used to teach Spanish all over the world.

Publishing company	Method	Tenses in order of appearance					
Edinumen	¡Adelante!	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	
	Espacio joven	PT	PF	IND	PP	IMP	
	Etapas	PT	PP	PF	IND		
	Método de español para extranjeros	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	FT
	Nuevo Prisma	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	FT
Difusión	Aula	PT	PF	IND	PP		
	Bitácora	PT	PF	IMP	IND		
	Gente hoy	PT	PF	PP	IND	IMP	
	¡Nos vemos!	PT	PF	PP	IND	IMP	FT
	Rápido, rápido	PT	PP	PF	IND		
	Vía rápida	PT	PF	IND	IMP	PP	
Edelsa	Código ELE	PT	PF	IND	IMP	PP	
	Joven.es	PT	IND	PF	IMP		
	Meta ELE	PT	PF	IND	PP	IMP	
	Pasaporte ELE	PT	PP	IND	IMP		
	Vente	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	
Santillana ELE	Español Lengua Viva	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	
	Mochila ELE	PT	PP	PF	IND	IMP	

TABLE 2 – Popular textbooks and the order in which they introduce tenses. PT: present tense; PP: present progressive; PF: perfect preterit; IND: indefinite preterit; IMP: imperfect preterit; FT: future tense

The 6,000[5] most frequently used words in Spanish include 1,586 instances of verbs, both inflected and in the infinitive form. The following table presents the proportion of occurrences of verbs in the present, indefinite preterit and imperfect preterit tenses. The conjugations for present progressive and perfect preterit were also included based on the incidences of verbs in gerund and participle forms, respectively.

	Number of incidences	%
Present tense	437	27.54
Indefinite preterit	293	18.46
Infinitive	292	18.40
Participle	205	12.92
Imperfect preterit	131	8.25
Gerund	58	3.65

TABLE 3 – Number and proportion of verbs among the 1,586 most frequent verb forms in *Corpus del Español*

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5 - Since this section of the discussion requires the analysis of conjugated forms (and not lemmas), we increased the number of words previously considered by three times.

According to the table, the most frequently used verb form in Spanish is indeed the present tense. Therefore, introducing this tense before any other is compatible with the logic that a higher exposure to – and practice with – a certain structure increases the probability of mastery. However, under a corpus-based approach, the indefinite preterit should be introduced after the present tense; thereafter the infinitive (such as in some periphrastic structures), the participle (such as in the perfect preterit), the imperfect preterit, and lastly, progressive forms. Nonetheless, none of the textbooks analysed in this analysis follows exactly this pattern.

Another important aspect of the introduction of grammar tenses is the *point of the course* at which they are introduced. The following are the ten most frequently used verb forms in Spanish.

Verb form	Grammatical tense
es	Present
ha	Present (perfect preterit)
era	Imperfect preterit
son	Present
fue	Indefinite preterit
está	Present
hay	Present
había	Imperfect preterit
ser	Infinitive
tiene	Present tense

TABLE 4. Ten most frequently used inflected and non-inflected verb forms in Spanish

The table shows that even a group as limited as the *ten* most frequently used verb forms in Spanish includes a variety of tenses. This suggests that Spanish interaction at the most basic level requires learners – even initial level learners – to be exposed to all these structures early in the learning process. However, this is rarely the case. The following table presents the lesson number where each grammatical tense is introduced in the textbooks revised.

As shown in Table 5, out of an average of 15.22 units in textbooks for initial level learners, the present tense is generally introduced in the first unit[6], followed by the progressive form and the perfect preterit forms, which are introduced after more than 60% of the content of the textbook has been studied. Subsequently, these textbooks introduce the indefinite preterit (after three quarters of the textbook has been covered). In other words, there is a tendency in textbooks for initial level learners to introduce the present tense and spend most lessons practising this form, most likely,

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6 - A few textbooks include a "Unit 0" that addresses phonetics and classroom language. This unit has not been considered in this analysis.

as a tool to introduce other grammatical points. This seems exceedingly imbalanced and unjustified because other grammar points (e.g. articles, gender, reflexive verbs, question structures, subordinate clauses and adjectival phrases) may be introduced and practised in conjunction with various grammatical tenses, and because – as suggested by the data in the corpus – A1-A2 students need exposure to other tenses, as well.

Method	Proportion (%) of the method in which the following tense was introduced				
	Present tense	Indefinite preterit	Imperfect preterit	Perfect preterit	Progressive
¡Adelante!	0	92.86	100.00	71.43	42.86
Aula	0	61.11	0.00	50.00	77.78
Bitácora	0	87.50	79.17	50.00	95.83
Código ELE	0	69.23	84.62	46.15	100.00
Espacio joven	0	84.62	100.00	76.92	92.31
Español Lengua Viva	0	84.62	92.31	76.92	61.54
Etapas	0	85.00	0.00	70.00	40.00
Gente hoy	0	83.33	100.00	58.33	58.33
Joven.es	0	66.67	94.44	88.89	55.56
Meta ELE	0	84.62	100.00	69.23	100.00
Método de español para extranjeros	0	58.33	66.67	58.33	41.67
Mochila ELE	0	81.25	93.75	75.00	43.75
¡Nos vemos!	0	43.48	56.52	26.09	34.78
Nuevo Prisma	0	40.91	72.73	59.09	36.36
Pasaporte ELE	0	66.67	91.67	75.00	50.00
Rápido, rápido	0	100.00	0.00	77.78	44.44
Vente	0	0.00	92.86	85.71	64.29
Vía rápida	0	75.00	87.50	62.50	100.00
	0%	**72.65%**	**84.96%**	**63.50%**	**61.68%**

TABLE 5 – Proportion of the textbook after which several tenses have been introduced

Additionally, there is a linguistic argument that forces the re-assessment of practices concerning the introduction of grammatical tenses in A1-A2 level textbooks: the incidences of grammatical tenses in the corpus versus the relevance received by them in textbooks should be considered as in their relation with the *lexical aspect* of verbs.

Lexical aspect is a temporal feature of verbs that refers to their inherent duration and delimitation, and it conditions the interaction of the verb with other elements in the structure (Dowty 1991; van Valin 1990; see Sanz 2000). In short, there

are verbs that express *states,* and verbs that express *actions* or events (Morimoto 1998; Vendler 1957). Although the present tense can be applied to actions as well as states, as shown in Table 4, the most common verbs in the present tense constitute *stative verbs*. Also, they include auxiliary verbs (e.g. *ir* and *haber*) and copulas (*ser* and *estar*), which are also considered states. The table below shows the lexical aspect of 500 of the most frequently used verb forms in Spanish.

	Aux	%	Copula	%	State	%	Action	%
Present	8	4.94	12	7.41	38	23.46	104	64.20
Indefinite preterit	1	0.99	6	5.94	8	7.92	86	85.15
Imperfect preterit	2	4.88	6	14.63	9	21.95	24	58.54

TABLE 6 – Number and proportion (%) of (i) states – auxiliary verbs, copulas and stative verbs (states) – and (ii) action verbs, among the 500 most frequent Spanish verb forms

According to the table, copulas and auxiliary verbs are expressed mostly in the present tense. Also, a large proportion of the present tense forms (35.80%) contain stative verbs (states, auxiliary verbs and copulas). Social interaction requires establishing a physical or human context wherein various events may occur, which entails the use of stative verbs such as *ser* (e.g. My name *is*…), *haber* (e.g. There *is* a small town in Kenya where…), *estar* (e.g. How *are* you?) and *tener* (e.g. I *have* two siblings). This basic, functional role of stative verbs entails that they be more frequent. In addition, two frequently used auxiliary verbs in Spanish, *haber* (used with the participle form) and *ir* (used to create the compounded future tense) are produced mainly either in present or in imperfect preterit tense. In contrast, although present and imperfect preterit tenses co-occur mostly with action verbs, the indefinite preterit form shows a remarkable tendency to appear with these verbs. In sum, copulas, auxiliary and state verbs fulfil a fundamental *functional* role. Due to the high co-occurrence of these verbs with the present tense, it is logical that this structure appears as more commonly used in the frequency analysis. Consequently, if the relevance of present and indefinite preterit tenses depends on the lexical aspect of the verb being used, should indeed these forms receive such differing degrees of attention in textbooks?

The disproportionate focus assigned to the present tense also disregards a linguistic argument related to the transitivity of verbs and the main properties of the syntax/semantics interface. The notion of transitivity involves the saturation of all relevant constituents in a construction. In other words, and different from an intransitive construction, in a transitive (or ditransitive) sentence all syntactic positions are filled. Moreover, the more transitive a structure, the more marked the semantic prototypical features of subjects and objects (Dowty 1991; Hopper

& Thompson 1980; Kikuzawa & Sasaki 2000). In the following sentences, the symbols "¿?" indicate that the sentence is grammatical but *unacceptable*, i.e., that it is considered incorrect usually for reasons of usage (pragmatics) or meaning (semantics), while "*" points out that the sentence is *ungrammatical*, i.e., that the structure transgresses one or more grammar rules of the language under study.

(1) a. The waiter broke the glass.
     b. ¿? The table broke the glass.
     c. *The waiter broke.

The examples above include a prototypical action verb of English, "break." A verb such as this requires an agentive subject (*The waiter*) and a complement (*the glass*), which is highly affected by the action and undergoes a change of state (i.e., from *not broken* to *broken*). Practice with verbs such as "break" helps students build the essentials of grammatical structure and learn about obligatory constituents in a way that practice with stative or intransitive verbs cannot.[7] For instance, if learners assimilate the features of a sentence in which a prototypical patient (i.e., the prototypical complement of an action verb) undergoes a change of state as the result of an action, they are more likely to understand what types of entities may enter as subjects into passive constructions. To summarize, action transitive verbs are the most useful in order to establish the settings of the syntax/semantic interface. The constructions that include this type of verb tend to have perfective lexical aspect and thus these verbs appear most frequently in the indefinite preterit, which has the same aspectual feature. Thus, L2 practice built on these verbs and, consequently, on the indefinite preterit, is a powerful reason to introduce this very tense much earlier in the learning process of A1-A2 students of Spanish.

Our argument to introduce the indefinite preterit earlier – or even before other tenses – may benefit learners of all ages. However, there is one reason that is particularly relevant for older learners of an FL. A focus on the present tense may disregard what many instructors view as these individuals' most valuable resource: their past experiences (Ramírez Gómez 2014). A keener dedication to the indefinite preterit may allow older learners to access their experiences in the past and, additionally, to practice with vocabulary that is relatable to them. As previously mentioned, this may help older learners overcome memorization challenges.

A study by Ramírez Gómez (2016) on the learning process of Japanese older learners of Spanish (A1-A2 levels) explored this idea by using lesson materials that introduced the indefinite preterit before any other tense. Although the focus of the research was not to measure the effects of such a method in terms of proficiency, the author affirmed that the results had been positive. As pointed out

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7 - Intransitive verbs include *unergatives* and *unaccusatives*. Unergatives constitute action verbs that have an agentive subject, and they are also frequently used in the indefinite preterit.

by the participants, studying the preterit indefinite had allowed them – early in the learning process – to engage in small talk by providing them with tools to answer simple questions such as *"And what did you do last weekend?"* This enabled them to build rapport with other learners and access relatable vocabulary, and it also increased engagement.

3.2 – Conjugations: person and number

There are two common panoramas regarding how verb conjugations are introduced. On one hand, many textbooks present the whole conjugation paradigm simultaneously (i.e., all the grammatical persons). Although there is no research – to our knowledge – that justifies this, it seems logical to assume that time constraints may prompt introducing all the conjugations of one verb at once so more material can be covered. However, there is one caveat: classroom interaction has shown that this practice leads many students to memorize conjugations as a set. This in turn causes initial – and even intermediate – level students to review the paradigm either mentally or in a low voice before being able to utter the correct verb form. This appears to slow down production and reduce fluency (Sanz & Fukushima 2003).

Also, textbooks may introduce the 1st person singular – as in self-introduction lessons – before other singular and plural conjugations. One possible explanation is that authors deem that talking about one's surroundings and daily life entails referring to oneself as the grammatical subject of the utterance. The corpus, however, suggests that this practice fails to reflect Spanish use.

	1 to 6,000 (819 inflected forms)	1 to 4,000 (518 inflected forms)	1 to 2,000 (250 inflected forms)
1st singular	11.11%	11.39%	11.60%
1st plural	5.13%	4.44%	4.40%
2nd singular	2.69%	2.90%	3.60%
2nd plural (*vosotros*)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
3rd singular	55.68%	58.11%	59.60%
3rd plural	25.40%	23.17%	20.80%

TABLE 7 – Proportion of entries for several verb conjugations among the 6,000, 4,000 and 2,000 most frequently used words in Spanish[8]

According to the corpus, 55.68% of the verbal forms among the 6,000 most frequent inflected verbs (excluding participle, infinitive and gerund forms) are incidences of the 3rd person singular, followed by the 1st person singular with slightly over 11%. A similar situation is observed when only the first 4,000 words and 2,000 words are considered. Indeed, in the latter, the use of 3rd

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8 - Verb forms in the 1st person imperfect preterit can be used also for the 3rd person singular (e.g. "tenía"); thus, they have not been considered in the analysis.

person singular forms reaches almost 60%. In other words, the 3rd person singular is used more than four times as much as the 1st person singular. There are two possible reasons that explain this: First, although for a speaker there is only one subject that can be identified as *yo* ("I") and one who can be identified as *tú* ("you"- singular), there are limitless entities that can be identified with the 3rd person singular conjugation. Indeed, the conjugation for the use of 3rd person plural is also higher than that of 1st and 2nd persons, both singular and plural. Another reason is that the 3rd person singular coincides with the conjugation of the formal 2nd person singular (*usted*).

The data from the corpus indicates that the 3rd person singular conjugation should receive much more attention in textbooks for initial level learners than that received by the 1st person singular. Evidently, a switch of focus does not entail that the 1st person should not be taught. However, textbooks should provide a level of exposure to various conjugations that proportionally reflects language use and helps learners make better use of their time. The implications for older learners are even stronger. As previously mentioned, these learners need to use their cognitive resources efficiently, which entails being exposed to structures more likely to be used. These may facilitate memorization.

In addition, many older adults wish to interact in the L2 at the same level of formality in which they may do so in their own language, and instructors should address that concern (Alvarado Cantero 2008). As indicated above, the 3rd person singular is the same conjugation used for the formal 2nd person singular conjugation. Thus, by focusing on the 3rd person singular, older learners are more exposed to a structure useful not for one but for two subjects.

Finally, another notable aspect of the analysis of the corpus is the absence of verb forms in the 2nd person plural conjugation among the first 6,000 most frequently used words in Spanish. According to the corpus, this 2nd person plural conjugation refers to the Peninsular *vosotros*, and not *ustedes*, broadly used in Hispanic America. This phenomenon probably reflects that the corpus includes not only data from Peninsular Spanish but also a large amount of data from countries in the American continent that hold Spanish as their official language. The low frequency of conjugations such as the 2nd person plural *vosotros* (also the Argentinian or Uruguayan *vos*, among others) suggests that, although textbooks may include a certain verb form when relevant to the dialect where the textbook is produced, teachers should assess the real need for students to actively memorize it in other learning contexts. The fact that the Hispanic American conjugation of the 2nd person plural coincides with the 3rd person plural creates another advantage, particularly for older learners, because it reduces even more the number of conjugations to memorize.

5 – Conclusions

In this work, we have discussed a few practices that are consistently encountered in Spanish textbooks but are not supported by empirical data. An exploration of the *Corpus del Español* revealed that textbooks for initial level learners often include infrequent vocabulary and present grammar tenses and conjugations in a manner that does not reflect Spanish use.

Building on previous research and a corpus-based approach, we argue that textbooks should include vocabulary-related activities that target highly frequent vocabulary, indicate the attention that learners should pay to different words, and allow the identification of relatable vocabulary. Also, we indicate that a stronger focus on the indefinite preterit verb form may contribute to the learners' consolidation of the prototypical structure of Spanish, and consequently provide a more solid foundation for the study of other, more complex structures. Finally, more attention paid to the study of the 3rd person singular conjugation may also provide learners with a mechanism to use their cognitive resources more efficiently, as this conjugation is dramatically more likely to be encountered in real Spanish interaction.

These modifications to Spanish textbooks may benefit all learners and, particularly, older learners of Spanish (60+ years old). Many of these individuals experience memory challenges that impose on them a more efficient use of cognitive resources. Future studies should focus on the creation and evaluation of these materials.

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