



# Spelling in Spanish Acquisition: a Thirty-Minute Design

**Elia Saneleuterio**

Department of Language and Literature Teaching, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain

**Email address:**

[elia.saneleuterio@uv.es](mailto:elia.saneleuterio@uv.es)

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**Abstract:** At Higher Education, spelling problems can be raised in extracurricular proposals through voluntary training offered as a complementary course or seminar. The paper presents a design for Spanish language learners, which can be answered in 30 minutes. It arises from a deep understanding of the reality of the student through a study of the most common faults, which are concentrated in sections. At the same time, being designed as a questionnaire, may assume prior knowledge of the student, removing his or her misconceptions and going to the root of the problems. The learning during the answering time should be multiplied by different types of feedback: for example, putting it together in small or large group, the number of phases depending on the time available for the activity. As a result, the design is quick and efficient at the same time for improving written Spanish skills.

**Keywords:** Spanish Spelling, Quick Learning Design, Linguistic Education, Academic Writing

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## 1. Introduction

At Higher Education, professors often find a problem among students: the misspellings. Correct spell in the teaching language is considered a basic requirement or a prior skill supposedly already acquired [1]. Educational institutions should consider the impossibility of including the improvement of spelling in most of the subjects' syllabus. However, they cannot stay inactive, but face the problem by extracurricular proposals [2]. Many approaches defend that students can improve their writing skills through voluntary training offered as a complementary course or seminar.

There are also other situations that do not help, for example the fact that professors in the same grade have different criteria. This reality contribute to maintain some students' beliefs about misspelling: they usually think it is a failure that will not mean an obstacle to progress in their studies.

To be truly effective, in extracurricular spelling courses or similar activities the enrolled students should really engage in improving their spelling. Moreover, if teachers do not only attend to the achievement of the objectives and specific contents of the subject, but also to the way to expose them and to give feedback at classroom or through virtual tutorials [3] [4], if they include in their timetables co-writing activities [5] and involve everybody in learning-oriented assessment of

writing tasks [6] [7] [8], including reviewing [9] [10], students will improve their spelling competence, since the challenge will be perceived as less difficult and the importance given to correct writing will increase [1].

## 2. Accentuation as an Important Part of Spanish Spelling

The rules of graphic accentuation are some of the most known Spanish orthographic issues. Nevertheless, most people apply them thoughtless or in an incomplete way. These rules configure a closed and coherent system, simple enough to be remembered easily. In fact, they are useful enough to make the writer verify its relevance, and without unexpected considerations or exceptions.

The main content of the methodology presented in this paper is therefore the accentuation. Several facts justify this choice. On the one hand, most spelling errors when writing in Spanish are due to the erroneous placement of accents. On the other hand, accentuation is the most common question and the most cumbersome issue to be checked in written Spanish: all the Spanish words can arise the question of whether any of their syllables should be accentuated or not. Moreover, it must be considered that there are doubts not

always solved by the dictionary: a plural, a compound word or a neologism, a recently adapted barbarism, a conjugation of a concrete verb. Finally, accentuation is still the easier part of the Spanish orthography to be implemented: if the writer knows how a word is pronounced, he or she will be able to deduce its accurate accentuation.

The rest of the selected contents are focused on several common failures about phonemes representation, about words separation, about capitals use, about foreign words adaptation, about using signs of punctuation and abbreviations.

In summary, the main point of the design is to focus on the Spanish spelling rules that can be applied mostly in a reflective and unequivocal manner.

### 3. Objectives

This method is intended to serve students as a quick and efficient reminder of the Spanish spelling rules that they once learned and many of them confuse currently, as well as to teach them about novel issues—approved recently, during the last years—but also older ones that may be ignored because of its specificity.

The design aims to solve some of the most common problems on the basis of their previous knowledge and to promote the self-reflection. It is not an integral solution of course, but it constitutes a first step consciously structured. The objective is the learner increases sureness in own decision-making capacity when writing a word or a phrase in Spanish, being able to identify in any word or expression their misspelling possibilities [11].

### 4. A Solution Design

In the process of designing the material and the teaching approach, linguistic attitudes [12] and students' motivation [13] have been considered, in order to connect to their interests and achieve better results [14].

The questionnaire is designed for students who are required to use correctly the Spanish language in a C1 level, or maybe B2 in some cases, according the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [15]. These students could be learners who have Spanish as their first language or non native speakers, but with good level, who learn Spanish as a second language and also learn other subjects through Spanish: both content and language learning (CLIL).

The reference book recommended to the students in this proposal should be the new edition of *Ortografía de la lengua española* [16] or its manual: *Ortografía básica de la lengua española* [17]. Lecturers must also share with students the most reliable tools available to resolve an unexpected spelling question. In Spanish language, manuals by the Real Academia Española (RAE) are the best accepted ones among users and the community of speakers takes them even as a set of rules. Thus, it is suitable to familiarize students, for example, with online consultation of the

*Diccionario de la lengua española* [18] and of the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* [19], both available in RAE's web site (<www.rae.es>). There are lots of dictionaries and websites about Spanish language available in the Internet, but not all are reliable, so it is very important to warn the learners about that, and to provide tools to distinguish the reliability of each source, for instead regarding the entity of the authorship.

However, through attending session students will work mainly with a photocopy; they will be allowed to advise with the Internet—even print dictionaries or manuals if accessible, referred above—but not an equal, at least at the beginning; the professor could guide the emerging doubts, caring about not giving directly the solutions. After individual answering, learners could share their provisional results and ideas with each other and then all together will try to solve each question. Professor's explanations will be schematized on the blackboard, while students will take notes and ask for further information if necessary.

This single photocopy, improved trough several years [20], is the key text of the method: it consists in a brief questionnaire where are concentrated the research questions whose answers will confirm or modify the previous spelling ideas that students have embodied therein. The proposed questions and order are included in the following tables (Table 1; Table 2; Table 3; Table 4; Table 5):

Instruction 1: Put the graphic accent when appropriate and explain the rule that justifies your decision.

*Table 1. Exercise about Accentuation.*

la	veis
mi	este
examenes	felizmente
leyo	languidamente
balon	curriculum
tutus	pua
obviedad	amarais
examen	amareis
anuncia	traeis
virrey	huis
tictacs	albums

Source: personal compilation.

Instruction 2: Pseudowords. Put the graphic accent when appropriate and underline the stressed syllable.

*Table 2. Exercise about Accentuation II.*

Palabras agudas:	meos	trisc	sian
	mios	frea	fria
Palabras llanas:	mion	frea	siam
	meol	trisis	sian
Palabras esdrújulas:	agraitois	emianoc	atrailo

Source: personal compilation.

Instruction 3: Explain the spelling problems related to these words.

**Table 3.** Exercise about Some Spelling Points.

comportamiento	hóseo	mancita	pizza
tramvia	garage	cazeria	ballet
escribir	girafa	pinguino	piercing
cantavan	telephono	paragüas	futbol
acia	ex-presidente	questión	curriculum
ielo	súper primer ministro	quales	béicon
ueso	sobretudo	chímica	dossier

Source: personal compilation.

Instruction 4: Write the abbreviation corresponding to the following terms.

**Table 4.** Exercise about Abbreviations.

aire acondicionado	editores
historias	señora
doctores	página

Source: personal compilation.

Instruction 5: Correct on the text all found spelling problems.

**Table 5.** Exercise about Mixed Spelling Mistakes, Including Capital Letters, Foreign Words, Use of Spaces and Punctuation.

Que verguenza! Los 1 <sup>os</sup> enqüestados acerca de la ermandad automobilistica [probablemente solo aquíyos serios, cayados, y imaginativos (me informado superbién)], no hallan consenso jamas, empero sienpre consiguen aprovar la ejemonía de los garages automaticos, los quales, podrian ser gobernados sin recurrir a ningun best-seller de autoayuda –segun preevén los expecialistas en proveerles–. Quien me digera, a mi o a ti que ésto pudiera hacerse sin echar de menos 4 nociones de Economía; Por eso urjen soluciones: e-videntemente seria necesària una transacción anterior al Setiembre de 2.012 para que se corijan las herratas del dossier, ¿ No hos parece que abría mas armonía economica y conprometida y etica, si sigieran un guion cordinado por la asociación de conducción y parquin (ACP)?.
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Source: personal compilation.

The simple search for information to solve the questionnaire encourages autonomous student learning, first, and discussion between equals, afterwards, although both must be complemented or nuanced by the teacher's checking to avoid confusion. Moreover, for a teacher that dominates the Spanish spelling, these questions permit explaining those rules in a clear and ordered manner, applied without exception.

## 5. Kinds of Possible Feedback

There are different kinds of giving feedback [3] depending on timetable design. Professor could send students a photocopy of the questionnaire of spelling with enough time so that they can prepare and complete it individually at home. Otherwise, they could do that task face-to-face during the first thirty minutes at attending session, always warranting access to consult the Internet and print manuals or dictionaries.

Once students have made some provisional decisions—and have written them down as a way to show their previous spelling knowledge—they will put them in common, to take

advantage of collaborative learning [21] [22]. The order of the questions allows teachers to start their explanations with basic accentuation rules, and go skipping content that already has been consolidated previously, by putting an emphasis on those most controversial issues related to them.

The method is completed with a virtual short questionnaire, based in previous items, where learners can verify that the method used and the time spent have been helpful. This virtual instrument enables automatically immediate feedback, and, moreover, provides results that can be taken into account by professor to self-evaluation of the activity design, the teaching approach and the global performance.

## 6. Results and Conclusions

The results of this quickly method of spelling improvement are usually satisfactory, especially considering the short time in which it is implemented at classroom. If learners participate actively and motivated in the process, the objectives will be gotten.

In previous experiences, students were aware of basic rules applicable in all situations: since several resources were presented and used, they felt that it is actually not complicated to consult any doubt and, in addition, that this is necessary and source of continuous learning.

In this sense, they learned to detect problematic expressions from the point of view of spelling and to start not worrying about doubts, since these ones were felt as part and condition of personal improvement.

Students perceived that the design of the activity went to the root of some Spanish spelling problems and to the typical questions that they actually ignored or did not use to resolve properly. Finally, those perceptions made them feel that they had fixed quickly new learnings in Spanish spelling.

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