

Vocabulary Acquisition in L2

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Abstract: We focus on how linguistic attitudes influence in the increase of lexical competence depending on two constructs: the sex of the student and the link between the affective component and lexical learning. Using a mixed research approach, we investigated the effect of two instructional approaches on lexical learning among 12-13 year old students, learning Catalan as a L2. Specifically, a quasi-experiment involving three groups was implemented: two treatment groups that received vocabulary instruction with active creation of a lexical corpus along with a strategic use of music as a boost for positive attitudes towards Catalan (group A), or as just an additional recreational resource, peripheral to the instruction (group B). The third group, which studied decontextualized vocabulary without any attitudinal encouragement, served as a comparison group. The results show group differences in vocabulary learning, indicating the potential effect of instructional strategies designed to increase positive linguistic attitudes. Additionally, gender difference was found in this effect: compared to male students, female students in the attitudinal support condition had slightly learning outcome rather than those in the non-attitudinal support group.

Keywords: linguistic attitudes, lexicon, semantic learning, secondary education, gender studies.

I. Introduction

The objective of the present work is to investigate how the treatment of linguistic attitudes influence the secondary school classroom in the development of lexical-semantic competence for boys and girls in second language learning.

In language learning we find a strong determination depending on the attitudes shown by the learner that has been studied across decades (Webber, 1979; Teimouri, 2016) such that a mutual influential relationship has been found. This interrelationship translates itself in the fact that positive attitudes facilitate acquisition, while at the same time the linguistic attitude improves in the learning process of a language. It is worth noting that the increase in favorable attitudes towards languages present in a society can be determined largely by positive learning experiences in those language classrooms (Huguet-Canalís, 2005).

While other studies draw from the idea that negative attitudes can obstruct the vitality of the language, they prove that this is not always the case: for example, the Guaraní language (Choi, 2003) or Dariya (Ayora & Chaib, 2014). The same case could occur with the Catalan that is spoken in Valencia (Spain), given that many speakers could include themselves in a self-hatred that occurs especially when the language hasn't been studied.

These findings demonstrate that a positive attitude reinforces the use of a language; it never decreases, and the same occurs with studying: it improves attitude, and at the same time, it increases its use.

Our study focuses on a vocabulary didactic teaching method. Specifically, we investigated whether an active student work, along with an affective component that encourages positive attitudes towards L2, boosts lexical learning much more than more traditional instruction that lacks such foci. Furthermore, we investigated whether there was noticeable gender differences in student linguistic attitudes and their effect on learning, as suggested by Gardner & MacIntyre's work on integrative motivation (1991) and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's on relations between language and gender (2003). At the time, our purpose was not to measure how much positive attitudes increased with different tasks, but to what extent lexical competence improved, favoring those attitudes.

We began with a methodological proposal for vocabulary classwork that allowed us to know what the group weaknesses were in order to focus on them (Saneleuterio, 2015). Our objective was to demonstrate that overall, the concern for linguistic attitudes particularly improved the process of lexical acquisition in the L2. Therefore, we had carried out a contrastive study between the results of two groups of similar characteristics where the only variables manipulated would be the methodology employed and the approach of the attitudes towards the language being learned. We took one variable and connected the learning content with the listening and reading of a particularly emblematic song, which cultivates affection and identification with the minority language in diglossia situations.

The context where these experiments were developed was in the subject of Catalan with two sample groups of fifteen students, 12-13 years of age, and a third group that we added on as a control measure. The 45 students mentioned belonged to Spanish-speaking families, therefore they learned Catalan as a second language. This was also the general profile of the center where they are schooled, even though Catalan is the co-official language in Valencia, the city where they are from and where Catalan is given the name Valencian. No more

than 2 out of 100 families from the school speak Valencian on a regular basis; moreover, the majority of them reject the literary and linguistic Catalan tradition that surpasses the borders of the Valencian Community, in other words, anything produced in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, or any dialect different from their own.

One of the key factors that have an impact on student attitude and interest is precisely the importance that the school gives to the languages that are taught (Huguet-Canalís, 2005; Huguet & Madariaga, 2005). Even though efforts have been made recently, the educational center in Spain did not show any special interest in promoting the Catalan language at the time of our study. In fact, it was the English language that headed the innovations during the years that the participating students studied primary education. Such hegemony of the English language inevitably influences students' attitudes toward Catalan.

Thus the research was initially conducted in a context that was not especially favorable; therefore, the development of linguistic attitudes that we detect throughout the research were related to the design of instructional methods, which were different for the three groups, as detailed below.

We chose clothing apparel in order to delimit the semantic field and to be coherent with the main centers of interest dedicated to the study of lexical availability (López Chávez & Strassburguer Frías, 1987; Ayora, 2007). Moreover, according to the linguistic profile described, the semantic field of clothing has been especially interesting in regard to belonging to the group with more non-regulation occurrences as recent Catalan-available lexicon studies show (Gómez Devís & Llopis Rodrigo, 2010: 24). It should be noted that these studies have proven to be in recent years an indispensable source of information to optimize the educational task of teaching vocabulary (Samper Padilla & Samper Hernández, 2006) because they give clear evidence to linguistic education professionals, from teachers to the authors of teaching materials and textbooks, about which units are the ones where the learners would have to train themselves more in terms of acquisition: what vocabulary and to what extent should it be taught according to educational level, student linguistic profile and the overall fluency of the language being learned.

On the other hand, it has been proven that the study of decontextualized vocabulary is not effective (Ulanoff & Pucci, 1999); however, neither is the objective of this paper. The design of the research has reserved the use of oral texts or written works for lexical learning; the objective is not framed in the "contextual vocabulary acquisition" (CVA) (Rapaport & Kibby, 2007), but it transcends into a claim of motivation. This research has aimed to measure the impact of the approach perspective of these texts.

"El tio Canya," the song selected to increase awareness towards the language learned, speaks of the frustration, along with a mixture of sorrow and helplessness that an elderly Valencian man feels when he realizes that the only language he has ever known and transmitted is disappearing among the descendents of his own family. The song narrates in third person his painful experiences with the Spanish language; a language that is imposed on at his son's school, and that his grandchildren have taken on as their own. However, the new generations will surprise him at the end of his life, and the last stanza ends with that ray of hope.

The choice of this theme is based on previous studies that have demonstrated or suggested their effectiveness for affective identification with certain values and feelings, and specifically with regard to promoting positive linguistic attitudes towards the Catalan language (Saneleuterio, 2011). The influence of attitudinal factors in learning, particularly in learning a language, has been the focus of study of numerous research work for decades (Janés, 2006, pp. 117-126). From our experience it is essential to make an impact on the formation of these attitudes for the optimization of language learning, especially when we are speaking about second languages.

II. Materials and methods

The study is framed within the qualitative model, a Socio-critical paradigm, since it aims to analyze the educational reality, studying it in its natural context in order to be able to understand it and modify it (Sierra, 2003); concretely, the method employed has to do with research-action. In addition, the study involves a comparative quantitative analysis of the data, which makes us place ourselves in another perspective closer to experimental methods: variables were measured from three different groups in order to draw relationships between them.

Thus, the sample is composed of 30 students in active groups and 15 in the control group. In total: 45 subjects, 12-13 years of age (20 boys and 25 girls), living in Valencia (Spain) and attending a school where most families have Spanish as their first language, which was the case for these 45 subjects.

These 45 students were divided into three groups:

Group A: is the most active group, which carried out a task of lexicon collection and study that arose from listening and reading the song "Tio Canya," by the music band Al Tall, a composition strongly inspired by a love for the Catalan language and historically used since it saw the light in 1976 as an emblem of linguistic awareness.

Group B: the core group, where the same task was carried out, but starting from a literary text that does not thematically have an impact on attitudes towards the language: a fragment of a *rondalla* (traditional folk tale)

by Enric Valor where vocabulary appears that pertains to the same semantic field. This group also heard "Tio Canya," but only in a recreational way, without linking its content to the learning tasks.

Group C: the control group, which responds to the same tests as the rest. They simply studied the vocabulary list for the exam without having received any pedagogical intervention in the directions indicated.

The vocabulary actively studied by the three groups was the same: a small set (Nakata & Webb, 2015) of 24 words related to clothing apparel. The manner of evaluating its acquisition was also the same: an activity with six questions which were resolved in pairs, specifically about the vocabulary studied and a question of individual identification and correction of general barbarisms through a pretest-posttest system.

The formation of working pairs allowed, whenever possible, the grouping by student gender and level of general competence in Catalan, so that students with similar skills could solve problems together.

The aforementioned activity stimulated the vocabulary learned through various techniques of lexical recollection: lexical unit identification of the incorrect word; word evocation based on the definition or description of the model; lexicon activation in context with fill in the blanks; lexicon classification by spatial order; discrimination according to the use of a double or a single piece of clothing, accessory, or footwear. The design intended to demonstrate the level of development of lexicon fluency, and in fact it is consistent with many suggestions on teaching vocabulary, proven valid for measuring lexical competence (Gómez Molina, 1997; Gomez Devís & Rodrigo Llopis, 2012).

Two data collections took place with groups A and B that were not experienced by group C, given that they were related to the methodology employed: brainstorm ideas about clothing lexicon (instant, through the use of classical lexical availability study techniques) and share together in class the vocabulary outlines done at home. Both groups of data were recorded by the teacher on the whiteboard and in her daily journal.

The technique of collecting data for the quantitative analysis, carried out in an identical time and manner for the three groups, consisted of the following:

- a) The resolution of the same test before and after the intervention we are analyzing.
- b) The data gathering of the activity with the six questions resolved in photocopies provided by the teacher.

The tasks used for collecting data were assessed on a scale from 0-10; all the words being studied could be employed in the activity, while in the pretest - posttest question up to 12 barbarisms could be corrected.

The answers were tabulated with Microsoft Excel®, and SPSS® was used for the statistical part. The validity and reliability of the study are assured respectively by the coherent design of the tests with evaluation studies on lexical competence (Gómez Molina, 1997; Gomez Devís & Rodrigo Llopis, 2012) and coherent consistency of the results in the control group (Delgado & Prieto, 2010).

The comparison and study of the answers aim to demonstrate different increases in vocabulary acquisition by learners belonging to different groups and by gender, regardless of the level of general competences presented in the fluency of Catalan.

III. Results

The answers to the 6 question activity about the lexicon studied that were resolved in the photocopies provided by the professor, demonstrate the level of lexical acquisition that each working pair has been able to attain. In a qualitative analysis of the content, we focused on the lexical and spelling barbarisms present in questions 2 and 3 (the only ones that allowed one to respond freely), regardless of the correct lexical-semantic answer. The results were similar in groups A and B while the presence of barbarisms reaches close to being triple in presence of the control group:

Table 1: Absolute data taken from questions 2 and 3.

The distance of the control group in comparison to the other two groups is maintained in the quantitative analysis of the correct responses. If we notice the first question (Figure 1), we can see great differences depending on the group to which the students belong. Figure 1 represents the number of words employed correctly with a maximum of 4:

Figure 1. Answers to question 1. Personal compilation

No significant differences are perceived according to sex in question 1. However, we find that the women obtain significantly better results than the men in the case of the active groups (A and B) in the overall evaluation of the refresher evocation activity (Figure 2). The overall results of the 6 activities vary depending on the sex and the group as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Lexical activity: correct answers (questions 1-6; scale 0-10). Personal compilation.

The difference between the active groups and the control group (C) is representative; it remains low in both sexes, and it doesn't differentiate the students, but all of them are situated at a short distance.

If we visualize the results of the identification question and change of barbarisms (posttest), we can also observe that the girls are the ones who obtain a better score (Figure 3). When comparing it to the pretest (Figure 4), we obtain several evidences: that there are no great differences from the start; the groups are similar, including between sexes; that while the control group remains less altered, the active groups (A and B) have better scores; and that among these the result from B in the posttest is in correlation with the sex in the pretest. As expected, the same thing happens in the control group.

Figure 3. Posttest: changing activity. Personal compilation.

Figure 4. Pretest: changing activity. Personal compilation.

What occurred in group A deserves a separate comment: we see that after the intervention the girls improve much more than the boys. Figure 5 shows the distribution of the difference in the scores between the pretest and the posttest.

Figure 5. Difference pretest-posttest in changing activity. Personal compilation.

IV. Discussion

If we focus on the type of text based on the lexical activity designed for groups A and B, we consider that recent studies in preliterate children show that there is no difference between songs or stories input when learning vocabulary (Lesniewski & Pichette, 2014; Larrain, Strasser & Liss, 2012). We have focused on older learners and consider the hypothesis that one of the components that influence is the simultaneous work of the attitude towards the language, but with differences in case it should be included as formal or recreational. If we compare the song with the narrative text, both have clothing lexicon present, which favors the first task of collecting lexicon both in group A as well as B. However, the lists obtained that are based on the processes of qualitative and quantitative improvement from brainstorming and subsequent home research show a further problem in learning L2 lexicon: lexical and spelling insecurity. The relationship between the awareness of linguistic prestige and the security or insecurity in the use of minoritized languages is also significant (Baldaquí Escandell, 2011).

If we look at the activity of lexical recollection, the spelling instability (in questions 2 and 3 mentioned) is especially evident in the control group: it seems that, as shown by Ricketts, Bishop and Nation (2009), the spelling issue is related to more robust vocabulary learning. In the responses, however, the presence of interferences in the results should be noted: there is vocabulary that they know in an active manner, spelling which they have internalized, but they don't trigger it at the right time for a reading comprehension problem. Overall, the control group is observed as having less care for the property or semantic accuracy in reference to each word. However, in the three groups, in general, amore encompassing question appears that is along the same lines as the studies on grammatical interpretation (Sanoudaki & Spyridoula, 2015); we can think that the activity of lexical recollection poses comprehension problems. At times it incorrectly triggers vocabulary for a poor comprehension of grammatical hints, mainly, the need for pronoun agreement in gender and number with the noun it evokes.

Regarding the quantitative data, the results clearly show that linguistic attitudes influence lexicon learning, given that the participating groups show a significant change that does not occur in the control group. If we look at the sex variable, we can also find interesting relationships: for example, the introduction of the affective component significantly influences the girls, while it doesn't seem to affect the boys as much. In any case, perhaps males respond better when content is presented only in a recreational manner (group B), although the results do not affirm this. We also saw that generally if women respond positively to attitudes, this becomes especially evident when the work on attitudes is linked with the linguistic task in class (group A). Indeed, the methodology used in group A is that which has caused the most difference in gender.

Regarding the answers to the activity of lexical recollection (Figure 2) the control group remained low in both sexes. In addition, it does not differentiate the students, but all are situated in a range lower than one point, being that the starting profile behaves in a similar heterogeneity in the three groups in general, and specifically a matching range of seven points in the three groups, somewhat lower between sexes, but in any case, a wide range (Figure 6). Figure 6 shows the distribution of students by group and sex according to their grades in the subject up to the moment of beginning the intervention.

Figure 6. Students' profile in Catalan. Personal compilation.

Once again, the comparison between Figure 6 and Figure 2 seems to confirm the idea that it is women who are more responsive to the link between language attitudes and homework, even with the worst starting level, as in group A. This was already shown in the contrast between the pretest and posttest (Figures 5 and 6). In fact, if we focus on the girls, they are better adapted to the system used in group A, which is not so suitable for the males who, as we said before, seem to learn more with the system from group B. Moreover, the thorough, explicit attitudes and the grammatical contents become counterproductive for some boys.

Regarding the study of the purely rote lexicon, we find no indication in the results that point out if it better adapts itself to the girls' or boys' learning style. In any case, the scores that are slightly higher among females in the control group and maintained in all the tests are consistent with the starting level (Figure 6) and can be interpreted as an indication of the reliability of the study (Delgado & Prieto, 2010, pp. 67-70).

V. Conclusions

Given a linguistic context of diglossia and some subjects with L1 dominance that learn an L2 in a school reality that is generally not very favorable for linguistic awareness, our study shows different relationships that can exist, according to sex, among the care for linguistic attitudes with two perspectives of conduct and lexicon learning.

Once the vocabulary lists obtained were analyzed, the instability was apparent, mostly in spelling, with errors in the available vocabulary they already had that improved after the intervention; the rate of barbarisms was almost three times lower than the control group. However, the activity of lexicon recollection seemed to raise some comprehension problems or careless grammatical mistakes that hinder proper lexical activation. Nevertheless, the pretest-posttest, where neither semantic accuracy nor grammatical interpretation play any role, confirmed the obtained results.

Indeed, the results of the two parts of quantitative analysis confirm the starting hypothesis: in the development of lexical competence, one of the components that influences is the simultaneous work of the attitude towards the language. This variable also presents different results depending on the sex of the learner if it's included as formal or recreational. In the case of the girls, we can affirm their relationship with the explicit work of the affective component in learning activities; in the case of the boys, however, it is more complex. Although the study does not allow to reach clear conclusions about boys, future research could measure it: perhaps there is greater diversity among them, or perhaps there may be a need to perfect the analysis tools in order to find some type of relationship.

Finally, the findings of this study lead us to recommend active vocabulary work for a true increase in the lexicon availability and its spelling stability. Above all, the benefit of the interest for the development of language attitudes as an explicitly motivating tool for lexicon learning is obvious, especially among female students.

Tables

Table 1: Absolute data taken from questions 2 and 3.

Group	Spelling Barbarisms	Lexical Barbarisms
A	5	5
B	8	5
C	17	12

Note. Personal compilation.

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Figures

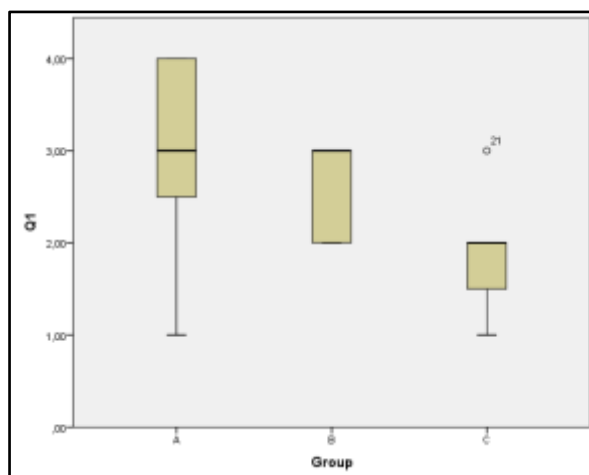


Figure 1. Answers to question 1. Personal compilation

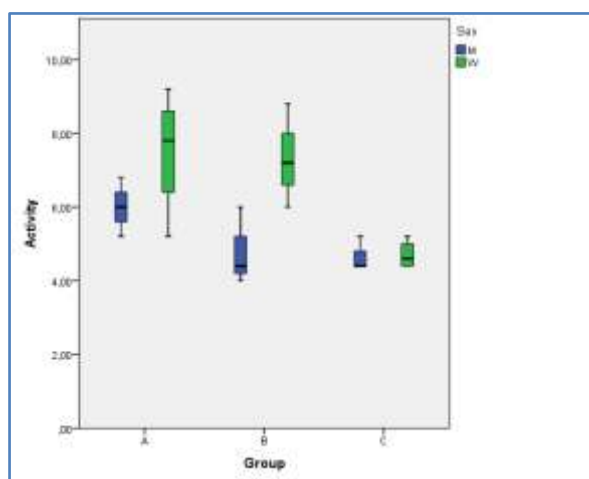


Figure 2. Lexical activity: correct answers (questions 1-6; scale 0-10). Personal compilation.

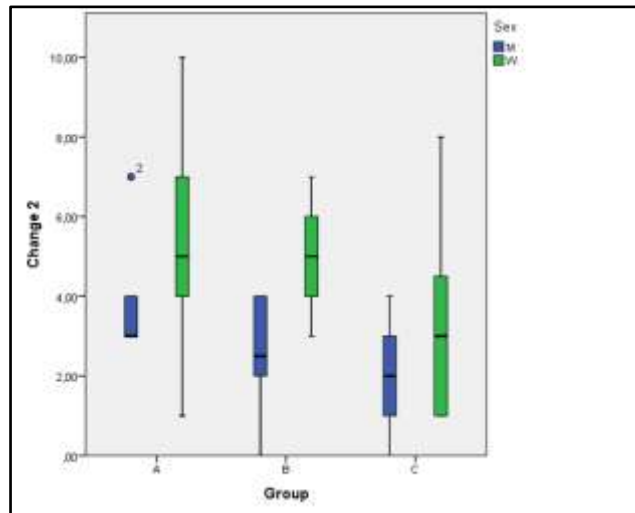


Figure 3. Posttest: changing activity. Personal compilation.

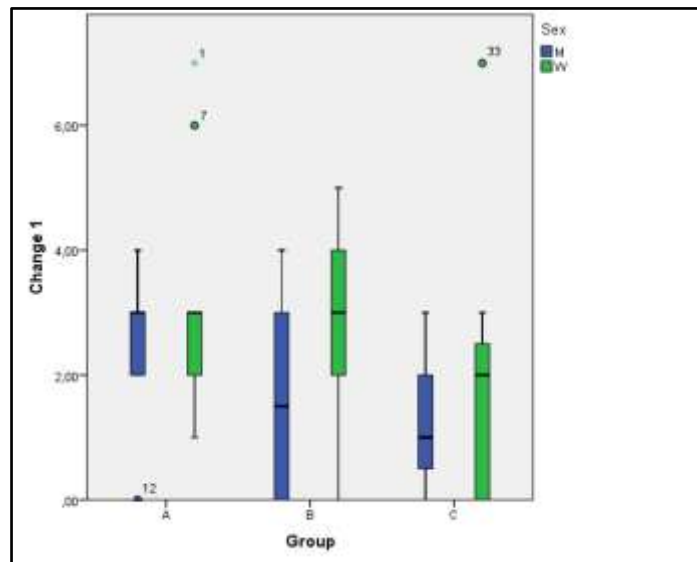


Figure 4. Pretest: changing activity. Personal compilation.

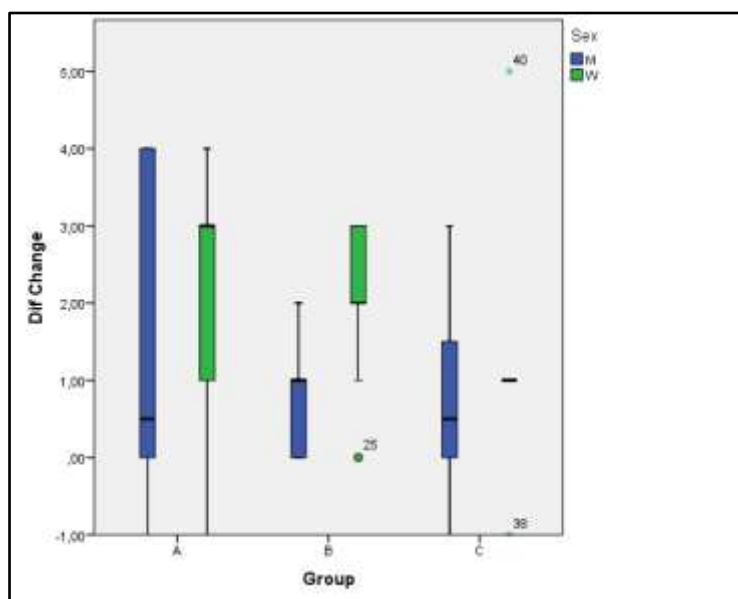


Figure 5. Difference pretest-posttest in changing activity. Personal compilation.

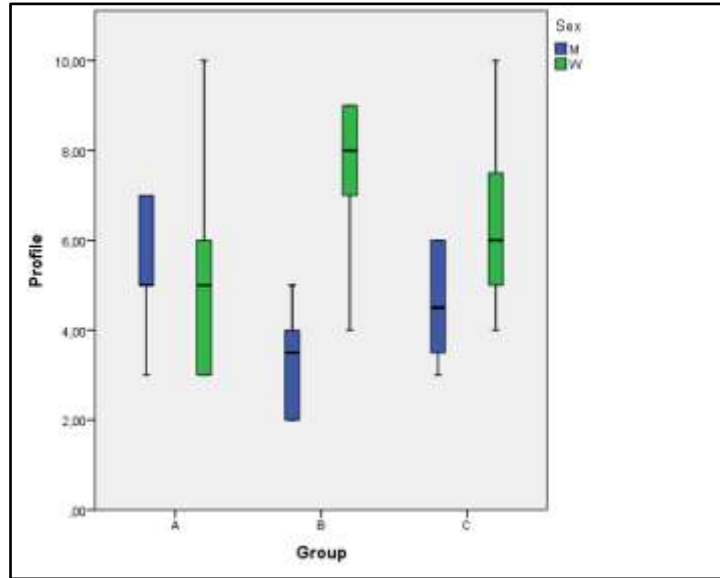


Figure 6. Students' profile in Catalan. Personal compilation.