False Cognates: A Study of the Relationship Between Their Use and Education Level

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Introduction:

A "cognate" refers to a word in one language that contains an identical or similar linguistic derivation in another language. In relation to a set of cognates, both words contain the same meaning. Conversely, "false cognates" refer to words that contain similar or identical derivations but consist of different meanings.
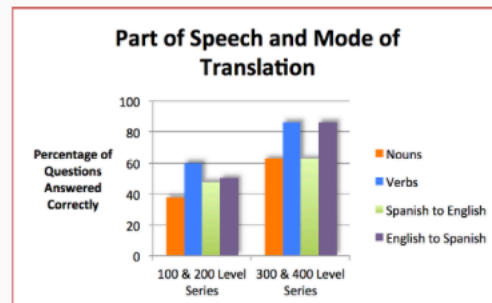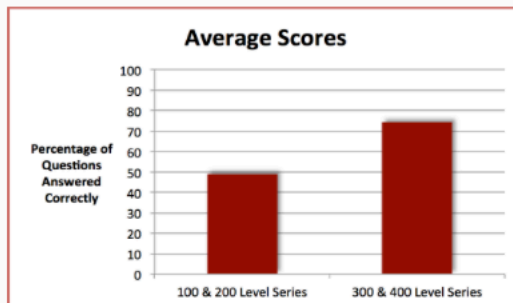
Objectives:

This research study was conducted to identify whether advanced learners of Spanish at Miami University can recognize false cognates more easily than beginner level students. Students currently enrolled in a Miami University Spanish class were tested on their ability to distinguish between true and false Spanish-English cognates.

Methods:

- 8 questions required Spanish to English translation.
- 8 questions required English to Spanish translation.
- Half of the questions tested knowledge of cognate nouns.
- Half of the questions tested knowledge of cognate verbs.
- Some true cognates were used to avoid participant identification of the study's objective. These questions have been omitted from my results.

Results:

- Average overall score of beginners (49%) was significantly lower than the score of advanced learners (74%).
- Advanced learners' ability to recognize false cognate nouns was 25% greater than that of beginners.
- Advanced learners' ability to recognize false cognate verbs was 26% greater than that of beginners.
- Average score of advanced learners' ability to identify false cognates being translated into English was 15% higher than that of beginners.
- Average score of advanced learners' ability to identify false cognates being translated into Spanish was 36% higher than that of beginners.

Conclusions:

- These findings indicate that Spanish education level significantly impacts the ability of Miami University students to recognize false cognates.
- For participants at all levels, false cognate verbs are more readily recognized than false cognate nouns.
- Recognizing false cognates in English being translated into Spanish is easier for participants than Spanish to English.

Acknowledgements:

Lalor, Erin, and Kim Kirsner. "The Representation of "False Cognates" in the Bilingual Lexicon."
    Psychonomic Bulletin & Review 8.3 (2001): 552-59. Web.