

# The Acquisition of Copula Choice in Instructed Spanish: The Role of Individual Characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

The current project addresses the effects of native language, and length of exposure and type of input, on the acquisition of copula choice in Spanish. Specifically, we investigate two sources of learner variation: knowledge of languages other than the second language (L2) (both first (L1) and additional languages), and characteristics related to the input. The features of this second source of variation to be examined are exposure to Spanish in a study abroad setting (in addition to the classroom experience that all participants have had) and the length of time of study. This study tests some generally held assumptions that have not been examined for copula choice in the research conducted to date. First, it is assumed that the research conducted on American English speakers' acquisition of the Spanish copula contrast will generalize to learners with different L1s. Secondly, it is generally assumed that learners benefit from study abroad experience and that increased length of study will affect a learner's developing grammar. These assumptions will be examined in a critical review of previous work prior to the report of our findings.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Review of literature

Acquiring the use of the Spanish copular verbs (*ser* and *estar* 'to be'), including the semantic and pragmatic features that constrain such use, constitutes a complex and time-consuming task for the learner. Consequently, second language acquisition (SLA) research has devoted attention to the study of this structure as a way to examine generalities of the acquisition process. For example, early research on the acquisition of copula choice extended research on developmental stages to the acquisition of Spanish. VanPatten (1985, 1987) showed that learners pass through five stages in the process of acquiring the functions of the two copulas. This research provided information about the path of learning this particular contrast, and connected research on the SLA of Spanish to a wider field of investigation. Later work demonstrated that these stages are similar to those for learners in a study abroad context (Ryan & Lafford, 1992) and for Peace Corps volunteers (Gunterman, 1992). In general it was agreed that learners omit a copula in very early stages, and then overgeneralize *ser* to most contexts. Learners then begin to use the progressive with *estar*. The most difficult structures to acquire are the use of *estar* with locatives and with adjectives of condition (i.e., those that go with *estar*), though studies differ as to which of these two functions is acquired first.<sup>2</sup>

Recent research on the SLA of copula choice has focused exclusively on the [copula + adjective] structure, as in *ella es bonita* 'she is pretty'. Geeslin (2000) hypothesized that the diverging results of the studies on the stages of development may have resulted from the categorization of 'adjectives of condition'. It was argued that several of the features of the discourse context interact to determine whether *ser* or *estar* is the appropriate choice for a particular adjective in a specified context, making a binary categorization of this context (i.e. condition vs. characteristic) impossible. Geeslin, in a study of interview, picture-description and written preference data, elicited from 72 beginning and intermediate learners of Spanish, demonstrated that the relative importance of these discourse features varies across groups of learners at different levels of course enrollment. In sum, each level of enrollment demonstrated different combinations of discourse features that were significant predictors of the use of *estar*.<sup>3</sup> A final result is that the frequency of use of *estar* increases steadily with proficiency. This corroborates the findings of the studies of the stages of acquisition since the overgeneralization of *ser*

necessarily indicates a low frequency of use of *estar*. As *estar* is gradually worked into the grammar, the overuse of *ser* decreases. Although some studies show the overgeneralization of *estar* in contexts that require *ser* (Ryan & Lafford, 1992) this does not occur to the same extent as the overgeneralization of *ser*, and there is some disagreement as to whether or not it does occur at all (see VanPatten, 1987 and Gunterman, 1992 for alternative views).

Research on copulas in pre-adjectival contexts has also been conducted on advanced learners. Geeslin (2003) elicited data using a written contextualized preference task from 28 English-speaking graduate instructors of Spanish and found that the frequency of use of *estar* was no longer an indicator of differences between learners and native speakers. Instead of frequency, it was the discourse features that predicted the use of *estar* that provided evidence that learner use was not native-like. In general, it was found that non-native speakers were more willing to override semantic constraints in favor of pragmatic ones. For example, non-native speakers responded to a feature such as a frame of comparison regardless of the semantic constraints on a particular adjective. To summarize this body of research, all learners of Spanish were speakers of American English. No study distinguishes between differing L1s. In addition, no study examines the differences between learners who know additional languages. Finally, although most of the participants in Geeslin (2003) had some experience in a naturalistic setting, this feature was not the focus of that study, and was not found to be a significant predictor of *estar* use when considered in combination with other individual characteristics (e.g., the number of years of study). The following sections review research on these learner characteristics.

### 2.1. *First language effects*

The study of language transfer has an extensive history in the field of SLA, starting as early as the 1950's with Lado's Contrastive Analysis (1957). Since that time, volumes have been dedicated to the investigation of which elements transfer from one language to another (for example Andersen, 1983). In the case of copula choice, the effects of L1 characteristics are less studied. To our knowledge, only one study has addressed this issue by including learners who are not native English-speakers. Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) examined 11 speakers of Portuguese who had learned Spanish in Spain, comparing their copula use to that of 19 native speakers. Portuguese is a language that possesses a copula contrast similar to that found in Spanish. It was hypothesized that these learners might exhibit native-like use, unlike the advanced English-speaking learners examined in Geeslin (2003), because their L1 also possesses a copula contrast. However, results showed that the Portuguese speakers, who were proficient enough to pass for native speakers of Spanish, used copulas in a significantly different way from native Spanish speakers. Like the learners in Geeslin, these L2 speakers were more willing to override semantic constraints in favor of pragmatic ones.

Because there is only one study that has included learners with an L1 other than English, there are several aspects of this research that require further attention. One key issue is the interaction of proficiency with native language. It is possible that language learners whose L1 possesses a copula contrast show initial gains but that this similarity does not lead to native-like proficiency. Likewise, it is possible that what is currently understood to be the universal process of language acquisition for learners whose L1 does not possess a copula contrast is merely the process for English-speaking learners. This latter concern will be addressed in the current study.

### 2.2. *Effects of additional languages*

The issue of the effect of additional languages (i.e., a well-established L2 or even L3) on the acquisition of a new one is immensely complex. One study that examines this phenomenon, Lozano (2002), investigates the acquisition of two pronominal constraints (i.e., the Overt Pronoun Constraint and the Contrastive Focus Constraint). The participants were 19 English-speaking learners of L2 Spanish and 20 Greek-speaking L3 learners of Spanish, all of whom had English as an L2. Data were collected through an acceptability judgment task. According to Lozano's findings, the L3 Greek learners of Spanish behave in a native-like way, since Greek and Spanish share both types of constructions, and therefore '[...] it could be argued that Greek speaker's knowledge [...] derives from their L1' (Lozano, 2001: 63). English native speakers, however, behave in a similar fashion in relation to the Overt Pronoun Constraint, but not in the case of the Contrastive Focus Constraint. Thus, L2 and

L3 learners of Spanish seem to show knowledge of one of the constructions under investigation which is constrained by a UG principle. Nevertheless, properties which are specific to the Spanish language (namely, Contrastive Focus Constraint) may not have been acquired because of the mismatch between L1/L2 features as English learners' data indicate. Similarly, Bialystok (1991) reports on evidence which comes from several studies of bilingual children who are able to solve problems in three language domains better than their monolingual counterparts due to different levels of mastery of analysis and language processing based upon their experience of using two languages. Finally, Cenoz (2000) analyzes the individual and contextual factors involved in SLA and their influence on an L3 (factors such as creativity, metalinguistic awareness and setting) emphasizing the role of linguistic interdependence (L1-L2-L3) and cross-linguistic influences in the existing studies. That is, one extreme of thought is that the three languages form separate language systems; the other extreme, however, supports the idea of a single unified system and consequently evidence for crosslinguistic influences.

The research mentioned here is important to our study since many of the participants possess knowledge of an L2. In fact, a small number of participants possess knowledge of Portuguese, which shares the same semantic and pragmatic features in copula choice. This research suggests that it will be interesting to examine whether or not the presence of a well-established L2 (which may or may not share features with Spanish) interacts with the process of acquisition.

### 2.3. *The effect of study abroad*

There has been some research on the effects of study abroad regarding copula choice in Spanish. For example, Ryan & Lafford (1992) studied learners in a study abroad environment and compared these learners to those described in VanPatten (1987). It was claimed that the input in the study abroad environment differs and this accounts for the variation in the order of acquisition of the locatives with *estar* and the use of adjectives with *estar*. Whereas in VanPatten (1987) the locative was acquired first, in Ryan & Lafford (1992) the adjectival contexts were acquired first. The latter explain this result as a consequence of the high frequency of expressions such as *está abierto* 'it is open' in the input that language learners adjusting to a new daily schedule receive. Thus, there is some evidence that study abroad provides a different type of input for language learners.

In a related study, DeKeyser (1990) examined whether or not there were differences in learner processing, specifically the use of the monitor in learner production, according to the environment in which language was acquired. DeKeyser analyzed the language development of American learners of Spanish, some of whom were studying in Spain and others who were receiving classroom instruction in USA. Although DeKeyser found that both groups of learners were able to monitor the language they produced, there were differences in gains between the two groups. According to DeKeyser's claims, there are no significant differences among the two groups regarding their grammatical skills, but this was not case for fluency and lexical development. The study abroad learners showed significant development in fluency and lexical development. This result suggests that the process of learning a language does not differ but the quantity of input does, and this in turn leads to varying rates of acquisition.

Although no other studies of copula choice have dealt directly with experience abroad as a distinguishing learner characteristic, studies in general have found support for the benefits of study abroad (Freed 1995, Lafford & Ryan, 1995). For example, Díaz-Campos (forthcoming) found that while study abroad did benefit language learners' production of specific phonological variants (e.g., the fricative /d/) this was not the only characteristic that determined success. Instead, learners with social access to native Spanish speakers, even those who had not studied in a Spanish-speaking environment, showed greater gains than the other learners. The current study compares learners with the same classroom experience but varying degrees of experience abroad.

## 3. Current study

The current study investigates L2 learners' developing knowledge of the Spanish copular verbs *Ser* and *Estar* (both mean 'to be'). In particular, we focus on the relationship of individual variables to

copula selection in the [copula + adjective] construct. The description of the current study begins with the research questions that guided the investigation.

### 3.1. *Research questions*

It will be recalled that the current investigation examined the effects of several individual characteristics related to input. These characteristics distinguish learners in terms of the knowledge they bring to the language learning task (e.g., L1, knowledge of other L2s) and the type of input they have received (e.g., study abroad experience, length of study). The following research questions guide the current investigation:

1. Does background knowledge, both L1 and knowledge of other languages, influence learner copula choice?
2. Do the length of exposure and type of input a learner receives influence learner copula choice?

The only study to date that has examined the effect of L1 on copula choice showed that learners with a similar L1 (i.e., one with a copula contrast) did not reach a state of native-like use, even after many years in the target culture (Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2004). Nevertheless, this study focused on near-native speakers and, thus, it is not clear whether the lack of influence of L1 exhibited in that study will also be demonstrated for learners with less language learning experience. Moreover, it is not known whether what has been found for the acquisition of Spanish by English-speaking learners will generalize to learners with different L1s that also lack a copula contrast. Thus, regarding the first research question, it is not possible to predict the outcomes of the current study. Although there is a lack of consensus among researchers (See 2.2 above) working on the acquisition of an L3, we can expect that L3 Spanish learners may benefit from knowledge of another L2.

The second research question joins a wide body of research that has examined the effects of various types of input on acquisition. In general, research has shown that study abroad experience has improved language proficiency (Freed, 1995). Consequently, it is expected that additional experience in a Spanish-speaking environment will influence copula choice. It is also expected that time spent learning, regardless of context, will aid in acquisition. This hypothesis, however, may be limited to certain stages of acquisition such that after a certain number of years there is no direct relationship between time spent learning and copula choice (Guijarro-Fuentes & Geeslin, in press). Each set of predictions will be addressed in the discussion that follows the description of the current study.

### 3.2. *Participants*

A group of twenty-seven speakers of L2 Spanish whose L1 backgrounds are English (N=11), French (N=4) and German (N=11) participated in the present study. It should be noted that none of these first languages possesses a copula choice like the one in Spanish. The participants were Spanish students at the University of Plymouth (U.K.), and all were studying Spanish as part of their degree programs. Three of the participants had additional professional training as a teacher, a lecturer and an engineer respectively. All other participants were full-time students, enrolled in at least second year instruction. All participants took a proficiency test, based on the University of Wisconsin Spanish Placement test (Test Form 96M), so that level of enrollment was not the sole indicator of proficiency. Learner scores ranged from 63 to 100 percent, on the 43-item test. For inclusion in the study, it was agreed that only the data collected from those learners who scored a 75 percent or better would be analyzed. After making this modification, participant scores ranged from 77 to 100 percent (total points = 43, mean score = 38.92, s.d. = 2.99). Relating this group to previous research, the Portuguese-speakers in Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) all scored above 90% so this group can be said to be less proficient than the near-native group. Nevertheless, the group is capable of interacting effectively in Spanish and is no longer in the beginning stages of acquisition.

Participants in the study ranged in age from 21 to 60 years (mean=26.35, s.d. = 8.50). Learners began the study of Spanish between the ages of 11 and 24 (mean=16.62, s.d. =3.82). The group of participants was comprised of 22 females and 4 males. Of the 26 participants, all but four had at least some experience in a Spanish-speaking country and this experience ranged from two weeks to three years (mean = 8.12 months, s.d. = 8.02 months). Participants had studied Spanish for as few as three years and as many as 47 (mean = 9.73 years of study, s.d. = 8.89 years). This information was elicited

by asking participants how many years they had studied Spanish. Nevertheless, given the wide range of responses provided, it can be inferred that some participants interpreted ‘studied’ as including both formal and informal use of Spanish over time. Twenty-four of the participants had experience with an L3. This is not surprising because participants with an L1 that is not English, who are studying Spanish in an English-speaking environment necessarily have experience with at least three languages. However, 18 participants had experience with an additional language that was not English, Spanish or their L1. These languages included Italian, Portuguese, French, German, and Turkish (See Appendix A).

### 3.3. Data elicitation (instruments and procedure)

All participants completed a background questionnaire and a placement test (see above). The background questionnaire posed questions related to learners’ experience with Spanish, including the onset of learning, experiences abroad, and knowledge of an L3. In addition, personal information about gender, ethnicity and occupation was elicited.

In order to answer the research questions posed for the current study, a 28-item written contextualized preference instrument was also devised (See Appendix B). There are arguably several linguistic factors involved in the choice of copula verbs in Spanish. Features of the referent (e.g., animacy), the adjective (e.g., semantic class), the relationship between the two (e.g., whether or not the quality attributed to the referent is susceptible to change), and of the larger pragmatic context (e.g., whether a referent is being compared to itself at another point in time) all interact to determine the appropriate copula choice in a given context. Furthermore, native speakers may chose to highlight different features of the context and, thus, do not always agree on the best copula choice for a single context. In order to incorporate these insights in the research design, these discourse features were varied throughout the instrument and each was controlled in a paragraph-length context. Following each paragraph-length context, a character in the story asked a question and two possible responses were provided. These responses were identical except for the copula provided. Participants were asked to indicate which response they preferred or that both were acceptable. The order of presentation of *ser* and *estar* in the responses was randomized. The instrument was piloted using native speakers to ensure that each item reflected a potential context for copula use.

All participants volunteered to take part in the study, and each participant did all tasks during class-time. First, they filled out the background questionnaire and placement test. Then, each of the participants filled out the contextualized preference task. No participants were aware of the character of the study. A time limit of 30 minutes was imposed in order to prevent participants from reviewing or modifying their answers.

### 3.4. Coding procedure

Each [copula + adjective] structure was identified as a single token. Because all participants completed the same elicitation task, the number of tokens provided by each participant is identical. Each token was coded for the variable response type, which contains the category *ser*, *estar* and both. Each token was also coded for several independent variables. The variables, and their respective categories, are provided in Table One.

**Table One. Coding scheme for individual variables**

Variable	Categories
Level	Scores (0- 43) on proficiency test
L1	English, French, German
Knowledge of an L3?	Yes / No
Additional Languages? (not English, Spanish, or the L1)	Yes / No
Study abroad (time in a Spanish-speaking country)	Yes / No
Length of time abroad (months)	0-36
Years of study	0-47

### 3.5. Methods of analysis

Once the data were coded for response type and for the independent variables, several cross-tabulations were run, along with  $\chi^2$  tests to examine the relationship between the dependent variable (response type) and each independent variable. The cross-tabulation data show how responses are distributed across the categories of the independent variable and the chi-square tests demonstrate whether or not there is a significant relationship between the two variables. The results of each of these tests will be discussed individually.

It is important to note that the  $\chi^2$  test is not used to assess accuracy. Instead, it measures whether or not the frequency of use of one response type varies according to the categories of an independent variable. This does not mean that one group is more accurate than another is. This method of analysis follows earlier studies which have shown that there is considerable variation among native speakers, such that it is not possible to identify a correct answer for each test item. Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) found that native speakers agreed unanimously on 14 of the 28 questionnaire items and Geeslin (2003) found that only 9 of the 28 items on that research instrument produced unanimous native-speaker responses (See Geeslin (2001) for accuracy and copula choice).

Although it is not a measure of accuracy, frequency of copula use is sometimes a reliable indicator of differences in proficiency. For example, Geeslin (2000) showed that learners do not use *estar* very frequently and the gradual increase in use of *estar* corresponds to increases in language ability. Likewise, Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) showed that differences in frequency were significant between the Portuguese learners and the native Spanish speakers. In sum, the current study will evaluate the frequency of use of each copula as an indicator of differences between groups.

### 3.6. Results

A total of 728 tokens were collected and coded for the dependent and independent variables in the current study. The distribution of responses is illustrated in Table Two. The percentage of the responses represented by each raw score is also reported.

**Table Two. Distribution of response type for all participants<sup>4</sup>**

Response	Number	Percent of total responses
Ser	339	46.6
Estar	379	52.1
Both	10	1.4
Total	728	100

It is immediately clear from Table Two that the both response was not a popular choice. This is consistent with earlier studies conducted in an academic environment. Comparing these results to those of the native speakers on the same instrument, Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) found that *ser* was used 51.7 percent of the time, *estar* was used 43.8 percent of the time and the both response was used only 4.5 percent of the time. It can be concluded that this group of learners is more advanced than the group studied in Geeslin (2000) because they are no longer at the stage of working *estar* into the grammar. Instead, they are more similar to the groups of learners examined in Geeslin (2003) and Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) in that they tend to use *estar* more frequently than native speakers do. While Table Two indicates that *estar* was a slightly more frequent choice than *ser*, it remains unknown what individual characteristics may correlate with a higher use of *estar*. Specifically, it is not known whether language background or length and type of input significantly correlate with copula use. Analyses of each of these sets of variables will be reported individually.

#### 3.6.1. $\chi^2$ tests and language background

There are several variables that may be linked to language use that describe an individual's language learning background. One such variable is the L1 of the participant (English, French or German). A  $\chi^2$  test was conducted in order to see whether or not there was a relationship between

copula use and L1. A second set of tests was conducted to see whether knowledge of additional languages might also play a role. It will be recalled from the description of the participants (see Appendix A for more details) that the only additional language spoken by the participants that contains a copula contrast is Portuguese (N=2). Thus, all but 2 of the participants have knowledge of additional languages that do not possess this grammatical structure. To examine this, two different variables were examined. The first, named L3, distinguishes those participants who have only studied English and Spanish from all others. Thus, this variable separates a subset of the group of English-speaking participants from all others because the French and German participants know at least three languages. A second variable follows-up on this idea by distinguishing those participants who know only Spanish, English and their L1 from those with additional language learning experience. A final variable that is related to language background is the level of proficiency of the participant. This variable was measured by the score on the placement test and was the subject of a fourth  $\chi^2$  test. The results of each of these tests, along with the  $\chi^2$  value, the degrees of freedom, and the effect size (i.e., Cramer's V) are reported in Table Three. Because the  $\chi^2$  test assumes that no cell will have fewer than 5 tokens, those tests that did not meet this requirement are also indicated.

**Table Three. Results of chi-square tests for language background**

Variable	$\chi^2$	df	Cramer's V	Small cells?
L1	8.51	4	.08	Yes (3)
L3	.86	2	.65	Yes (1)
Additional languages	4.88	2	.09	Yes(1)
Placement test	27.67	18	.07	Yes (10)

Note.  $*=p < .05$ , N=728

Table Three shows that none of the four variables linked to language background produced significant results. Nevertheless, in each test there were cells that did not meet the requirement that each cell have at least five tokens. The source of this problem is that the *both* response was used infrequently. This issue has been resolved in previous studies (Geeslin, 2000) by re-coding the dependent variable to include the responses *estar* and not *estar*. In this case, the *both* response would be grouped with *estar*. The justification for using this approach is that learners tend to overgeneralize *ser* initially (VanPatten, 1987) and, thus, frequency of use of *ser* is not a good indicator of acquisition (Cheng, 2002; Geeslin, 2002). Based on this logic, the dependent variable was recoded and the second set of  $\chi^2$  tests is reported in Table Four.

**Table Four. Results of  $\chi^2$  tests for language background and use of *estar***

Variable	$\chi^2$	df	Cramer's V	Small cells?
L1	.95	2	.04	No
L3	.00	1	.00	No
Additional languages	.14	1	.01	No
Placement test	8.70	9	.11	No

Note.  $*=p < .05$ , N=728

This second set of  $\chi^2$  tests confirms the results of the first, and does not suffer from the same weakness due to small cells. These tests demonstrate that none of the variables related to language background are significantly correlated with copula use. Although it is not necessarily surprising that L1 influence does not correspond to variation in frequency of copula use, it is somewhat surprising that knowledge of additional languages does not exert influence. During the analyses of these data it was hypothesized that the degree of knowledge one possesses in the third and subsequent languages must be of a certain depth in order to affect frequency of copula use. To test this, the French and German learners of Spanish were compared to the British learners of Spanish. This division is based on the fact that the former group demonstrated a high level of knowledge of English (given that they were studying in England) whereas the British learners with additional language experience may not have the same degree of proficiency in their additional languages. In fact, this comparison also fails to

show significant differences in copula use (dependent variable = *estar* allowed  $\chi^2 = .67$ ,  $df=1$ , Cramer's  $V=.03$ ,  $p=.42$ ).<sup>5</sup> These results will be assessed in the discussion that follows.

### 3.6.2. $\chi^2$ tests and variables related to input

The second group of variables examined is related to the length and type of input that each learner has received. Specifically, whether or not the participant had experience in a Spanish-speaking environment, how long that experience lasted for those who had it, and the number of years a participant had studied Spanish, either in a classroom or a naturalistic setting, were examined. The results for the  $\chi^2$  tests used to examine the relationship of each of these variables with the dependent variable response type are reported in Table Five. The value of the  $\chi^2$  test, the degrees of freedom, and effect size are provided. Tests that do not meet the criterion of having five tokens per cell are indicated.

**Table Five. Results of  $\chi^2$  tests for input variables**

Variable	$\chi^2$	$df$	Cramer's V	Small cells?
Study abroad?	.23	2	.02	Yes (1)
Time abroad (months)	12.73	18	.09	Yes (10)
Years of study	**39.81	20	** .17	Yes(11)

Note. \*=  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ ,  $N=728$

As was the case with the  $\chi^2$  tests reported in relation to language learning background, each of these tests suffers from the same weakness. No test meets the requirement that each cell have at least five tokens. Once again, the problem rests with the *both* response. The dependent variable was recoded as the variable *estar* allowed and these  $\chi^2$  tests were repeated and are reported in Table Six.

**Table Six. Results for chi-square tests for *estar* allowed and input variables**

Variable	$\chi^2$	$df$	Cramer's V	Small cells?
Study abroad?	.00	1	.00	No
Time abroad (months)	6.8	9	.10	No
Years of study	4.88	2	.09	Yes(1)

Note. \*=  $p < .05$ ,  $N=728$

As was the case for the variables related to linguistic knowledge, it is somewhat surprising that none of the variables correlates with frequency of use. To ensure that this is not an artifact of the way the variables were coded, some additional  $\chi^2$  tests were conducted. First, the variable time abroad was recoded to distinguish between those learners with more than 1 year experience abroad and those with less. This dividing point was chosen because it represents a nearly even distribution of the participants and because there are no participants with more than 4 months but less than one year of experience. Again, the statistical analysis showed no correlation between experience abroad and frequency of copula use (dependent variable = *estar* allowed  $\chi^2 = .46$ ,  $df=1$ , Cramer's  $V=.03$ ,  $p=.50$ ). A similar examination of the variable years of study was conducted by re-coding the variable into three categories: 3 to 5 years, 6 to 9 years and 10 or more years of study. Again, the results for this variable were not significant (dependent variable = *estar* allowed  $\chi^2 = 1.61$ ,  $df=2$ , Cramer's  $V=.05$ ,  $p=.45$ ). The lack of significance for these variables will be discussed in the following section.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The first research question examined the effects of linguistic knowledge on the acquisition of Spanish copulas. Both the L1 of each participant (i.e., English, French and German) and knowledge of additional languages were examined. Regarding L1, it is not surprising that no effect was found for different groups. In fact, it has always been assumed that learners of Spanish whose L1 does not possess a copula choice, such as English, would acquire the copula contrast in a similar manner to the



English-speaking learners previously studied. One of the main contributions of this study is that this has been demonstrated to be true. This is significant because it demonstrates the universality of the process of acquisition as opposed to describing second language acquisition as a process based on the relationship between L1 and L2. The second variable, knowledge of additional languages was examined in several ways in the current investigation. Distinctions were made between learners who knew only Spanish and English, those who knew Spanish, English and had a different L1 and those who had additional experience with languages other than Spanish, English and their L1. In no case was a correlation with frequency of use found for additional linguistic knowledge. This result may be somewhat more surprising than the lack of influence of L1 given the prediction that the existence of a well-established L2 would interact with the process of acquisition. This may provide evidence for the existence of a separation between linguistic systems in multilingual individuals, but it may also be the case that copula use, being largely semantically and pragmatically constrained, does not show the influence of additional languages that syntactic properties do. To summarize the findings regarding the first research question, L1 does not seem to play a role, and even the fact that some of the participants possess knowledge of an additional language does not seem to influence their copula choice in Spanish. In this respect, we have not shown that the existent knowledge of additional languages, first or second, provides advantages in acquiring copula choice in Spanish.

The second research question investigated in the current study was whether or not the type of input a learner receives correlates to the frequency of copula use. Specifically, the effects of experience in a native-speaker environment as well as the number of years of language study were investigated. Although some studies have questioned this assumption, it is generally believed that the effect of naturalistic exposure is an important feature in SLA (Regan, 1998). Nevertheless, no effect was found for study abroad in the current study. However, our results are not surprising. Previous studies on the effect of study abroad have found the same results. Freed (1990) who investigated L2 learners of French - American learners of L2 French who did a six week study abroad program in France - found little development in terms of learners grammatical skills tested with the help of a general grammatical test. However, there was some evidence for the less advanced learners which implies that proficiency level may play an important role. In a latter study, Freed claims that, with regard to structural development, "there are some findings, at least for advanced learners, that significant changes do not take place within the study abroad context" (1995:27).

In addition to the lack of effect for study abroad experience, no effect was found for the number of years of study. In sum, the variables used to examine input in the current study did not explain the variation in frequency of use that was found. Frequency shows these learners are not native-like but the variables do not explain this difference. Although one could argue that frequency is not an appropriate measure of copula use, Geeslin & Guijarro-Fuentes (2004) showed that frequency alone was sufficient to distinguish the native from the near-native participants in that study. Moreover, because all participants saw the same items, a change in 'accuracy' as coded in earlier studies would also result in a change in frequency so this study can be said to be comparable while at the same time incorporating language variation into the design.

It is worth mentioning that one contrast between our study and those cited earlier (Freed, 1995; Dekeyser, 1990) is that previous studies focused on the learner's structural development paying particular attention to whether or not frequency of structural errors in the learners' interlanguage decreases due to the effect of input received in the natural setting. In contrast, our study looks at L2 learners' development of contextual use of copula choice of Spanish comparing study abroad and classroom learners. It may well be that the examination of 'obligatory contexts' produces different results from those based on analyses of use.

These preliminary results show that future research into this grammatical domain of L2 Spanish promises to be of significance not only for theoretical linguistics, but also for the understanding of the role of L1 and the role of input in acquiring an L2. It is our hope that future studies will expand the range of L1s examined, further investigate the role of manner of instruction, examine the issue of L1 and L2 influence at earlier stages of development and include participants whose L1 (e.g., Portuguese) contains a copula contrast to compare these two learner populations.

## Notes

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1. Although there are several related issues, such as the contrast between first and second language acquisition and the acquisition of other structures in Spanish by native speakers of languages other than English, the current review will be limited to the second language acquisition of copula choice in Spanish due to space limitations.

2. Neither VanPatten (1987) nor Ryan & Lafford (1992) demonstrate that learners reached 90% accuracy on both of these structures by the end of the study. Thus, the apparent order of acquisition in both studies may actually change as the process of acquisition progresses. Briscoe (1995) suggests that *ser* + locative is actually acquired late, whereas *estar* with locatives is acquired earlier. The differences between advanced learners and native speakers for copula use with adjectives suggest that this may indeed be the structure that is acquired last.

3. For example, the feature 'susceptibility to change' was a good predictor of the use of *estar* at early levels of acquisition, whereas the feature 'frame of reference' was a good predictor of the use of *estar* only at higher levels of development.

4. Table Two does not indicate the degree of individual variation between learners. These learners were unanimous in their response to 1 item, and showed 90% or higher agreement on 5 additional items. The numbers of items upon which participants agreed at a rate of 90% or higher for the different L1 groups is: British English = 11, French = 10, and German = 12. An item analysis and an analysis of individual learners in future studies may also be useful. Due to space limitations the current study will limit the analysis to group results across all items.

5. It was also hypothesized that learners with knowledge of Portuguese, a language that also possesses a copula contrast, would show different copula use. A  $\chi^2$  test comparing the two learners with such knowledge to the others did not produce significant results ( $\chi^2 = .66$ ,  $df=1$ , Cramer's  $V = .03$ ,  $p=.42$ ). Nevertheless, with a larger group of learners who know Portuguese these results might prove different.

## Appendix A: Participants' knowledge of additional languages and level.

Participant	Knowledge of additional languages			Level on those additional languages*		
French 1	English			Near-native		
French 2	English	Italian	Portuguese	Near-native	Adv.	Near-native
French 3	English			Advanced		
French 4	English			Advanced		
German 1	English	Turkish		Advanced	Near-native	
German 2	English	French		Advanced		
German 3	English	French		Advanced/Intermediate		
German 4	English			Near-native		
German 5	English	French		Advanced		
German 6	English	French	French	Near-native	Intermediate	
German 7	English			Advanced		
German 8	English	Portuguese		Advanced		
German 9	English	French		Advanced		
German 10	English			Advanced		
German 11	English			Advanced		
British 1	None			N/A		
British 2	French			Advanced		
British 3	French	Italian		Advanced		
British 4	French			Advanced		
British 5	French			Advanced		
British 6	French			Intermediate		
British 7	French			Advanced		
British 8	French			Near-native		
British 9	French			Advanced		
British 10	French			Intermediate		
British 11	Italian	French		Near-native	Advanced	

\*= Language level based on participants own assessment.

## Appendix B: Sample item from the contextualized preference task.

1. Paula y Raúl van a un restaurante esta noche. Paula habla desde su habitación mientras se viste y hace los planes con Raúl, quien está en la sala. Cuando sale de la habitación le pregunta a Raúl:

[Translation: Paula and Raúl are going to a restaurant tonight. Paula is talking from her bedroom while she gets dressed and making plans with Raúl, who is in the living room. When she comes out of the bedroom she asks Raúl:]

Paula: ¿Quieres que vayamos en mi coche? [Would you like to go in my car?]

A. Raúl: ¡Ay! ¡Qué bonita estás! [Wow! How pretty you are (*estar*)!]  Prefiero la frase A.

B. Raúl: ¡Ay! ¡Qué bonita eres! [Wow! How pretty you are (*ser*)!]  Prefiero la frase B.

Prefiero A y B.

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