Controlling Contexts and Clarifying Intent: Instrument Design and the Study of the SLA of *Estar* with Adjectives

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1. Introduction

Previous research on the acquisition of the Spanish copula verbs *ser* 'to be' and *estar* 'to be' has shown how difficult it is to confidently assess learner choice between these two verbs in pre-adjectival contexts. One obstacle is native speaker (NS) variation that allows either copula to be used with certain adjectives. For instance, *es grande* and *está grande* are increasingly interchangeable among Mexican native speakers (Gutiérrez 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1986), though the latter example would most likely be marked grammatically incorrect by a Spanish language instructor. Another challenge is that it is sometimes difficult to tell what a speaker intended in a particular situation and, thus, a correct answer exists but cannot be determined. This is especially true for second language acquisition in that if a learner describes a photograph stating *la chica es feliz*, it is hard to determine whether the speaker intends to say, for instance, 'the girl is happy' (emotional state) or 'the girl is a happy person' (inherent characteristic).

In an effort to address both of these challenges, a new approach to the study of the SLA of the Spanish copula has been developed (Geeslin 2000), one that moves away from assessing accuracy and instead focuses on describing the 'bundle of features' (Falk 1979) that predicts learner second language use of the copula with adjectives. In order to do this effectively, however, the approach must find ways to reduce the amount of ambiguity in contexts and provide opportunities to confirm speaker intent, particularly in those contexts with adjectives that can be used with either *ser* or *estar*. The current project, therefore, develops and evaluates a new research instrument that uses a picture-description task to create unambiguous contexts for the appropriate use of *estar* with adjectives, and employs an English repetition task to help confirm learner intent within these contexts. This instrument was administered to thirteen university students in a third year Spanish conversation course during the spring semester of 2004. Results from the project demonstrate the success of the research instrument in controlling for contextual variables and in providing insight into speaker intent.

2. Background
2.1 Early research on the acquisition of ser and estar

VanPatten (1985, 1987) is most often cited as the first to establish stages of acquisition for *ser* and *estar* using student data. Ryan and Lafford (1992) confirm several of these stages, expand them and challenge the order of acquiring *estar* + locatives and *estar* + adjectives of condition (Figure 1).

Despite the differences in the order of acquisition of *estar* + locatives and *estar* + adjectives of condition, these stages have generally been confirmed by other studies examining different kinds of learners – study-abroad students (Ryan & Lafford 1992), Peace Corps volunteers (Gunterman 1992) and adult classroom learners (Briscoe 1995, Dekeyser 1990) – as well as different types of tasks – oral interviews (Finnemann 1990) and compositions (Ramírez-Gelpi 1995).

A limitation in early studies on the acquisition of the Spanish copula is the binary categorization used to assess 'copula + adjective' contexts. The general assumption was that *ser* was required with characteristics and *estar* was required with conditions. However, Geeslin (2000) argues that assessing

appropriate use in 'copula + adjective' contexts using this binary distinction is not practical. There are at least two causes for this difficulty. The first is that native speaker variation has led to the existence of contexts where there is more than one 'acceptable' response and copula choice interacts with linguistic and social variables (Geeslin 2001, Gutiérrez 1992, Silva-Corvalán 1994). Thus, there are adjectives with which *ser* and *estar* are both appropriate, even according to native speakers. In fact, Vañó-Cerdá (1982) estimates that 80% of all adjectives can be used with either copula. The second issue that arises is that it is sometimes not possible to tell what a speaker intended in a particular situation and, therefore, a correct answer exists but cannot be determined. This is especially relevant when examining second language learners. For example, if a learner describing a photograph intends to say 'the girl looks happy (in the picture),' *estar* should be chosen to reflect the referent's current emotional state. If a learner intends to say 'the girl is a happy person,' *ser* should be chosen to highlight the inherent nature of this characteristic.

VanPatten (1987	Ryan and Lafford (1992)
(1) absence of copula	(1) absence of copula
(2) use of *ser* for most copula functions	(2) use of *ser* for most copula functions
	(3) absence of copula in *estar* conditional contexts
(3) appearance of *estar* with progressive	(4) appearance of *estar* with progressive
	(5) *estar* replaces zero copula as preferred error for *ser*
	(6) *estar* replaces zero copula in conditional contexts
	(7) appearance of *estar* with adjectives of conditions
(4) appearance of *estar* with locatives	(8) appearance of *estar* with locatives
(5) appearance of *estar* with adjectives of conditions	

Figure 1: Original stages of acquisition of *ser* and *estar* and subsequent additions

2.2 Recent approaches to the study of the Spanish copula

One creative solution to the challenge of assessment has been to classify adjectives according to inherent properties (Geeslin 2000, 2003, Ramírez-Gelpi 1995). For example, Geeslin (2002) used the variable Semantic Transparency (Silva-Corvalán 1986) to distinguish between contexts that allow a copula contrast and those that do not. Semantic Transparency represents the degree to which adjective meaning changes as a result of copula choice (Figure 2). In her study, Geeslin used an informal interview and a picture description task to elicit copula use with adjectives, and followed these activities with a grammatical preference task. Appropriate use of the copula was assessed in those contexts where *ser* was required or where *estar* was required, based on sentence-level properties. Adjectives categorized as meaning change, modality shift or synonymy were left unexamined because both copulas are allowed with these kinds of adjectives. However, many of these adjectives may have been analyzable if clues in the larger discourse context had been considered, clues that demonstrated that only one copula choice was possible.
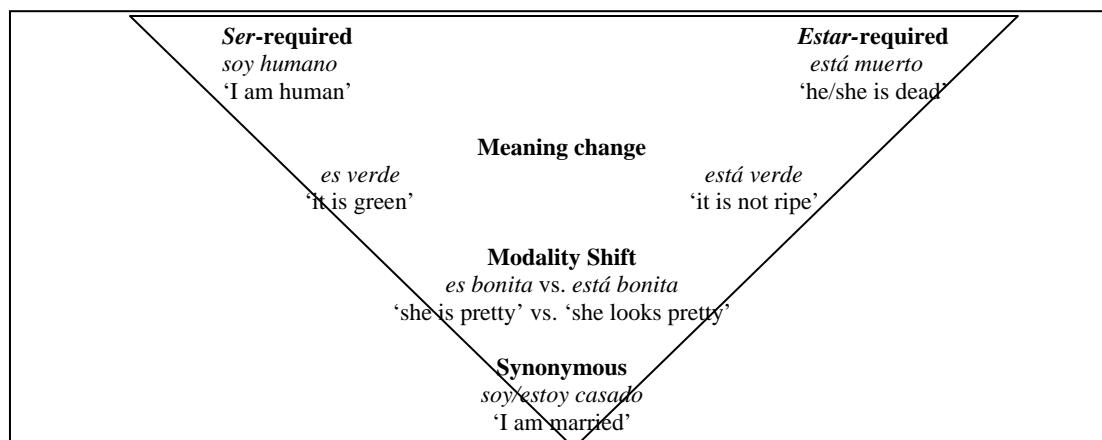

Figure 2: Semantic transparency: Degree of copula contrast

In order to examine contextual clues beyond the sentence level, Geeslin and Woolsey (2004) reanalyzed data from Geeslin (2002) making full use of the discourse context. Findings from the reanalysis suggest that even an examination of contextual features in the discourse does not provide enough information to confidently assess the accuracy of student copula choice. Though the categories of meaning change and synonymy could generally be assessed given contextual clues in the discourse, they represent only a combined 11% of the 3697 total 'copula + adjective' tokens in Geeslin (2002). Modality shift adjectives, however, could generally not be assessed despite the use of broader discourse clues. This is significant because modality shift adjectives represent 61% of the tokens in the data. It can be seen, therefore, that assessing appropriate use of the copula with adjectives continues to face the two challenges mentioned earlier, namely, that most adjectives can be used with either copula and that it is difficult to determine what the learner's intention is when choosing between *ser* and *estar*.

Notwithstanding the limitations in assessing learner copula choice, Geeslin and Woolsey (2004) did succeed in identifying two contexts in which *estar* could be used appropriately. First, learners may use *estar* to highlight a comparison within an individual frame of reference, that is, comparing the referent to itself at a previous point in time (Falk 1979, Geeslin 2000, Silva-Corvalán 1986). For instance, if a formerly thin person gains weight, this change may be expressed by using *está gordo* 'he is fat' instead of *es gordo* 'he is fat,' thus comparing the present person with the past person. In Geeslin (2002), contexts of comparison within an individual frame of reference emerged from the picture-description task, as participants were asked to describe a sequence of illustrations of the same person or persons. Thus, learners had opportunities to initially describe referent characteristics and later comment on changes in those same characteristics. By using *estar*, the speaker can draw attention to these changes in the referent, effectively establishing a comparison within an individual frame of reference.

Second, learners may use *estar* to highlight speaker reactions that result from direct experience with the referent (Clements 1988, Geeslin 2000, Silva-Corvalán 1994), including an immediate encounter or ongoing experience (Geeslin 2003). A typical example of a direct experience reaction might be when someone exclaims that the soup *está caliente* 'is hot' after tasting a spoonful. However, direct experience reactions can occur with other kinds of adjectives and in other types of situations as well. For instance, if two friends get together after not having seen each other for several years, one of them could highlight his or her reaction by stating *¡estamos viejos!* 'we're *so* old!' A young man picking up his date might whisper *está bonita* 'you *look* pretty.' Using *estar* in contexts where a direct experience reaction is feasible helps emphasize and communicate this reaction to the listener. By using a picture-description task, Geeslin (2002) created contexts in which a direct experience reaction was possible. In fact, with picture-descriptions in general, a speaker reaction is always possible as the visual cue inherently creates a context in which direct experience with the referent occurs.

What should be noted at this point is that the aforementioned contexts of comparison (within an individual frame of reference) and speaker reaction (due to a direct experience with the referent) are by no means the only contextual variables the speaker must consider when choosing between *ser* and *estar*, and neither are they mutually exclusive. As mentioned earlier, recent research focuses on the 'bundle of features' that affects copula choice, and in some contexts a speaker may have to choose between two features, whereas in others the features will not be in competition. Take, for instance, the dating example given earlier. In a context where there is previous knowledge of but no direct experience with the referent, *está bonita* could be used to highlight a comparison within an individual frame of reference instead of a speaker reaction. In another context where comparison and speaker reaction are possible, both features could be highlighted together by using *estar*. In relation to the present study, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the two contexts under investigation represent only two variables within the 'bundle of features' that predict copula choice, but that these two contextual variables have yet to be examined successfully due to limitations of previous research instruments in controlling contexts and clarifying speaker intent.

2.3 Limitations of previous research instruments

Previous elicitation tasks in studies of the copula, such as the guided interview and the picture-description activity used in Geeslin (2002), were not designed to control for contextual variables nor to

confirm speaker intent. As a result, speaker intent is difficult to ascertain, and the study of contextual variables is unsystematic. In order to address the challenge posed by adjectives with which either copula can be used, and in an effort to create unambiguous contexts and opportunities to confirm speaker intent, a new research instrument needs to be developed.

The limitation of the guided interview can be seen in the following exchange, which is typical in this kind of format.

(1) Interviewer: *Describe a tu familia*. 'Describe your family.'
Participant: *Mi hermana es bonita*. 'My sister is pretty.'
Mi hermano es alegre. 'My brother is happy.'

What is limiting about this exchange is that, since the interviewer does not necessarily share experience with the referent (i.e., does not know the sister nor the brother) and a photograph is not being used to elicit the description, it is impossible to tell whether the learner is intending to communicate, for instance, that the sister is always pretty (group frame of reference), is just presently pretty (individual frame of reference), is inherently pretty or temporarily pretty. Likewise the description of the brother could be interpreted as, for example, 'he is always a happy person', 'he is presently happy,' or even that 'he is happier now than he was yesterday.'

On the other hand, the picture-description task poses a different kind of limitation. When presented with a picture of an unknown referent (in this case a picture of a family), and asked to describe it, an exchange might look like the example below.

(2) Interviewer: *Describe a la familia*. 'Describe the family.'
Participant: *Son alegres*. 'They are happy.'
Son rubios. 'They are blond.'

What changes in this situation is that the learner does not have previous knowledge about the family being described, but does have a visual stimulus which naturally creates a possible context of speaker reaction resulting from direct experience with the referent. Therefore, the learner could be expressing a reaction to the picture as a viewer of the photograph (direct experience) or distancing the description by grouping this family with other people who are happy and blond.

However, when two or more pictures are used together, there is greater potential to isolate and control for a comparison context (individual frame of reference). In Geeslin (2002) this occurred when participants described a series of pictures that showed 'before and after' drawings of the same people. For instance, four pictures showed the life story of a couple, as children, as young married adults, as parents, and, lastly, as a widow. The following descriptions were given by two learners for the final drawing.

(3) Participant A: *...40 años más tarde el mujer es muy triste porque el hombre va a un muerto.*
'...um 40 years later the woman is very sad because the man is going to dead.'

(4) Participant B: *...muchas flores no es alegre está cansado él muerte posiblemente.*
'...many flowers is not happy is tired he dead possibly.'

Although it is obvious that these utterances are far from perfect, what can be seen here is that despite a very low level of discourse proficiency, the learners' descriptions can be contextualized as comparisons within an individual frame of reference given the sequence of visual cues. In some cases, the comparison can be argued from the context as well, as with Participant A, who uses discourse features such as temporal anchors (*cuarenta años más tarde*) and justification for the emotion (*porque el hombre va a un muerto*) to establish the individual frame of reference comparison context. However, in the description from Participant B, given the absence of discourse clues, the researcher must rely almost exclusively on the pictorial sequence to establish the individual frame of reference comparison present in the description. Therefore, finding a way to systematically create clear contexts of comparisons within an individual frame of reference, as well as designing a method to confirm

speaker intent within these contexts by means other than discourse features, would greatly aid the researcher's ability to interpret learner descriptions. By providing these added measures of triangulation, the researcher could more effectively examine the use of the Spanish copula in pre-adjectival contexts, particularly with adjectives that can be used with either *ser* or *estar*.

In summary, therefore, it can be seen that current approaches to the study of the Spanish copula have moved away from assessing accuracy to describing the 'bundle of features' (Falk 1979, Geeslin 2000, Silva-Corvalán 1986) that predict learner copula use. Assessment in 'copula + adjective' contexts has been found to be impractical not only because a majority of adjectives can be used with either *ser* or *estar*, but also since it is very difficult to ascertain speaker intent, particularly when dealing with second language learners. This is true despite taking into consideration broader discourse features present in learner output. Additionally, research instruments currently used have not attempted to control for contextual variables or to find ways to confirm speaker intent. The current study, therefore, examines a new elicitation instrument, one that controls contextual variables by creating unambiguous contexts, and one that finds means to confirm speaker intent within those contexts. In this way, future studies may be able to more confidently examine the acquisition of the Spanish copula according to contextual features, such as those of comparison within an individual frame of reference and speaker reaction resulting from direct experience with the referent.

3. The current study
3.1 Instrument design

Given the limitations of previous research methods and the current challenges of investigating the acquisition of the copula in pre-adjectival contexts, an instrument was designed with the following goals in mind. The instrument in full is available in Appendix 1.

First, the instrument targets adjectives with which either copula is allowed, which, as Vañó-Cerdá (1982) has pointed out, is actually the majority of adjectives. However, of particular interest to this study are adjectives of emotion and physical descriptors, which, according to Geeslin and Woolsey (2004), represent current challenges in the research on the acquisition of *estar.*

Second, the methodology creates clear contexts of comparison within an individual frame of reference and speaker reaction to a direct experience, thus accounting for these variables in the research design itself. These contexts are created via a picture-description task in which participants are presented with slides asking them to describe famous celebrities. Some of the slides contain side-by-side photos and others do not contain photos at all. Celebrities were used in an effort to ensure that both the participant and the researcher were familiar with the referent, thus facilitating the creation of contexts of comparison and speaker reaction. For instance, Oprah Winfrey was selected in an effort to elicit physical comparisons related to weight loss; Harrison Ford was chosen to bring up contrasts in age. At the same time, atypical photos of these celebrities were readily available and easily incorporated into the task in order to create contexts of speaker reaction. These humorous or surprising photos enhance the naturally occurring opportunities for the speaker to express their reaction using *estar*. Photos such as Harrison Ford in his bathing suit (see Appendix 1) is an example that frequently elicits an especially humorous reaction from participants.

Finally, speaker intent within these contexts is explored by using an English repetition task. After each slide, participants are prompted to repeat their descriptions as closely as possible in English. In this way, even if discourse clues in the Spanish data are insufficient to establish intent to compare or react, the English repetition task may provide alternate means to confirm this intent. Thus, the English data offers an additional method of triangulating interpretations based on the controlled contexts created by the instrument design as well as the learner-produced contextual clues of the Spanish descriptions.

3.2 Research questions

The following research questions emerged from the goals for the instrument design. These questions guide the present study.

    1.   Does the instrument elicit adjectives with which both copulas are allowed?

2. Does the picture-description task create clear contexts of comparison and speaker reaction?

3. Does the English repetition task provide insights into speaker intent within contexts of comparison and speaker reaction?

3.3 Participants

Participants for this study were 13 learners in a third year university Spanish conversation course during the spring semester of 2004. As such, grammar was not the principal focus of the class, though all learners had previously taken the third year grammar and composition course required of majors and minors. Exposure to the uses of *estar* in contexts of comparison and speaker reaction varied from individual to individual, given that some students had taken more course work than others, or had traveled abroad to study the language while others had not. However, *ser* and *estar* were at no time reviewed during the semester, and previous instruction within departmental courses tends to present the contrast as inherent characteristic (*ser*) versus condition or behavior (*estar*). Furthermore, all participants were native speakers of English and none was a bilingual or heritage Spanish speaker.

The study took place during a 50-minute regular class period, halfway through the semester. However, the activity only took 15 minutes to administer and complete. The class was held in a language laboratory equipped with individual computers. Each student sat at one computer and digitally recorded the task using the Divace Duo recording program (now Sanako). No notes, dictionaries or other forms of outside language help were provided or used during the activity. Upon completion of the task, all students successfully saved their recordings as mp3 digital audio files.

Participants paced themselves through the picture-description task, clicking to advance the slides whenever they were ready to continue. As a result, some learners finished the six slides in 5 minutes, whereas others took up to 12 minutes to complete their descriptions. The activity took on average 8 minutes and 27 seconds per student. Also, participants had control of the audio record button, which meant that they were able to pause the recording when needed, and potentially erase previous descriptions.

3.4 Data collection

The task is presented via PowerPoint slides. Vocabulary words are not provided, nor is the use of *ser* and *estar* ever modeled. Instructions are given in English so that even the lowest level proficiency learner can understand the task. Complete sentences are encouraged and participants are asked to try to give at least three sentences per slide. Immediately following each L2 description and as a result of clicking to advance to the next slide, participants are prompted to repeat as much of their L2 description as possible in English. This second description represents the L1 repetition component of the task. These prompts occur following each and every slide.

For slide 1, a general description is requested from the participant with the prompt of *'Describe a Oprah Winfrey.'* This first picture-less slide is designed to elicit a general, abstract description of the famous person, both providing the speaker with the opportunity to use *ser* throughout the slide, as well as establishing the individual's default conceptualization of the celebrity. As previously discussed, the presence of a picture naturally creates an opportunity for speaker reaction. This is especially true of pictures of famous people, since the speaker may react to the photo in terms of his or her preconceived notion of what that person should look like. Thus, if Harrison Ford is a handsome young Indiana Jones in the abstract, a picture of him looking older might elicit a speaker reaction. In this way, the first slide helps establish a description devoid of comparison and speaker reaction, a description that may later be compared with subsequent descriptions in contexts of comparison and reaction.

Slides 2 and 3 contain two pictures each of Oprah Winfrey. Pictures are put together to highlight certain differences and create contexts of comparison of the same referent. In slide 2, for instance, there may be the happy/tense or older/younger contrast. Hairstyles and clothing may also be compared. In slide 3, students may mention the thin/heavy or standing/sitting difference, or they may compare the different expressions on Oprah's face.

In addition to providing individual frame of reference comparison opportunities between pictures, slides 2 and 3 also create opportunities to express speaker reactions to the referent. For instance, if participants think of Oprah as older, the young Oprah may cause a reaction to that assumption. Likewise the heavier and more subdued Oprah may create the opportunity to use *estar* to express surprise. Speaker reaction can be confirmed by comparing the present picture description to the previous abstract general description as well as by obtaining data on speaker intent through the L1 repetition task.

3.5 Methods of analysis

An examination of the frequency and distribution of elicited adjectives will help answer the first research question. The frequency of all adjectives will be compared to the number of 'copula + adjective' tokens, since this syntactic construction is of particular interest to the study of the Spanish copula. Additionally, adjective class will be tabulated, especially to see if the instrument elicits physical descriptors and adjectives of emotion.

The second research question will be addressed by analyzing the contexts of comparison and speaker reaction that are created by the instrument, focusing on the discourse clues present in learner production that confirm the presence of these contexts. It will be especially important to examine the difference between the picture-less slides and slides containing pictures, to see if comparisons and reactions occur exclusively in the latter and seldom, if ever, in the former.

Finally, parallels between the English repetition task and the Spanish descriptions may reveal ways in which the English repetition can help confirm speaker intent within contexts of comparison and speaker reaction. Ambiguous Spanish descriptions, in which discourse clues are either lacking or insufficient to establish clear contexts, may become clearer by looking at the English verbs used (such as 'to seem' or 'to look') as well as the manner in which the descriptive context is reconstructed.

4. Results
4.1 Frequency and distribution of adjectives

A total of 313 adjectives were elicited by the instrument, 191 (61%) of which occurred within 'copula + adjective' contexts. Of these 191 adjectives, 85% were used with animate referents (i.e., Oprah Winfrey or Harrison Ford), whereas 15% described inanimate objects, such as *la ropa* 'clothing' and *la foto* 'photograph,' as well as *la condición emocional general* 'general emotional condition' and *los ojos* 'eyes,' to name a few examples.

The categorization of adjectives used in this study follows Geeslin (2000). It should be noted, therefore, that 'description of person(ality)' and 'description/evaluation' were used as catch-all categories for animate and inanimate referents respectively. That is to say that whenever possible, an adjective was categorized as 'mental state,' 'physical characteristic,' 'age,' 'color' or 'size.' Whenever an adjective could not be categorized as one of these types, it was put in either 'description of person(ality)' or 'description/evaluation.' Also, certain adjective types applied to animate referents (A), inanimate referents (I) or both (A/I). Thus physical descriptions of inanimate referents fell under 'description/evaluation' and not 'physical appearance,' whereas colors used for inanimate objects were listed under 'colors.'

As can be seen from Table 1, in addition to eliciting a fair number of adjectives, the instrument successfully elicited a wide variety of adjective types. Not only were mental state adjectives used frequently throughout the task (28%), but also adjectives of physical appearance (17%), adjectives of age (14%) and color (8%) were quite often produced. These four adjective types can be combined to show that 129 (67%) adjectives within the 191 'copula + adjective' contexts can be categorized as either adjectives of emotion or some kind of physical descriptor. Thus, the instrument proved successful in eliciting numerous tokens of the kinds of adjectives originally targeted by the research design.

Adjective type	Examples	#	%
Mental States (A)	alegre, feliz, triste, enojado, preocupado	54	28%
Physical Appearance (A)	bonito, guapo, flaco, delgado, gordo, muscular, alto, bajo	33	17%
Age (A/I)	joven, viejo	27	14%
Color (A/I)	negro, blanco, rojo	15	8%
Size (A/I)	grande, pequeño	2	1%
Description of Person(ality) (A)	normal, famoso, similar, diferente, divertido, optimista, simpático, informal, elegante	43	23%
Description/ Evaluation (I)	bueno, diferente, extravagante	17	9%
TOTAL		191	100%

Table 1: Frequency and distribution of adjective type in 'copula + adjective' contexts

4.2 Analysis of contexts of comparison and reaction
4.2.1 Contexts of comparison

It is not hard to show that all slides containing photos elicited comparisons from the learners. Both the explicit cues to compare and the side-by-side positioning of the pictures created unambiguous contexts of comparison. Comparisons occurred 131 times in the data, averaging two and a half comparisons in the 52 slides that contained pictures. The following examples are typical of the kinds of descriptions produced in these slides.

(5) *al derecho mira muy contento también*
   'on the right (she) looks happy too'

(6) *en las dos ella está bonita*
   'in both she is pretty'

(7) *Oprah es un poquito más guapo en el segundo foto*
   'Oprah is a bit more handsome in the second photo'

However, what is more interesting still, is that of the 131 comparisons produced during the task, only 8 occurred in picture-less slides. That is, 94% of comparisons occurred when participants were explicitly prompted to compare and given side-by-side pictures to describe. Additionally, of the eight comparisons occurring in picture-less slides, only two of these establish explicit individual frame of reference comparisons, that is, they state two characteristics, establishing a comparison in time between the two. Four comparisons represent implicit individual frame of reference comparisons, where a previous characteristic is alluded to in the discourse. And two comparisons fall under class frame of reference, in which the referent is compared to a group of people. Examples of these three types are given below.

(8) *era gordo y ahora después de su dieta es más flaca*
   'she was fat and now after her diet she is skinnier'

(9) *ahora es más viejo*
   'now he is older'

(10) *es un poco más gordo que otras personas*
   'she is a bit more fat than other people'

Another form of evidence showing that comparisons were much more frequent in slides containing pictures can be seen by the frequency of the word *más* (more). *Más* is used sixty times in the data, appearing 88% of the time in slides with pictures.

4.2.2 Contexts of reaction

Contexts of reaction were more difficult to ascertain through discourse clues than were contexts of comparison. This occurred for two reasons. First, as discussed in the instrument design, a direct visual sighting of the referent will naturally create the possibility of a speaker reaction. This, therefore, was true of all slides containing pictures. Second, because the possible reaction contexts were also comparison contexts, it was difficult if not impossible to separate the two. That is, in a comparison slide of Oprah Winfrey, a participant describing weight changes in the pictures could simultaneously be comparing the pictures and reacting to them as well. In this regard, the instrument failed to create unambiguous and separate contexts of comparison and reaction, though it did succeed in combining the two.

Nevertheless, possible contexts of speaker reaction could be identified by comparing participants' initial description of the referent with subsequent picture descriptions. For example, several participants initially described Harrison Ford as *viejo* 'old,' but then used *joven* 'young' to describe one of the pictures. Though this contrast does not confirm a speaker intent to highlight that reaction, the change in adjective does suggest that a speaker reaction is possible in that context. Unfortunately, few pictures seemed to challenge participants' preconceived notions and only 13 (10%) of the 127 'copula + adjective' uses in slides with pictures explicitly contrasted with initial general descriptions, the most common one being the old-young observation mentioned above.

However, one slide in particular did elicit direct experience reactions consistently. Interestingly, this became evident not by comparing descriptions across slides as done above, but through an unexpected discourse clue provided by the learners. The slide with Harrison Ford in a bathing suit frequently caused participants to laugh or giggle, thus providing an oral clue that the speakers were reacting as a response to direct experience with the photograph.[1] Eight of the thirteen participants laughed out loud when encountering this slide. Though not directly related to the use of 'copula + adjective,' participant laughter helped confirm that this picture in particular was effective in eliciting a speaker reaction.

4.3 Parallels between the English repetition and the Spanish description

In general, the English repetition task was successful in accurately reconstructing the Spanish description. Ninety percent of the adjectives in the 191 'copula + adjective' tokens were reproduced in English, showing that learners were able to retain their Spanish descriptions long enough to repeat them accurately. That said, what then becomes of interest to this study is whether the English repetition task helps confirm speaker intent to compare or react. To this purpose there were two ways in which the task was helpful.

First, discourse clues present in the Spanish description were also confirmed in the English repetition, as can be seen in example (11). However, when discourse clues were absent or infrequent in learner data, the repetition task became even more valuable as the learner clarified and at times elaborated on the context in English. This can be seen in (12) when the student uses 'for her.'

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[1] I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer of this article in directing me to Labov's work on channel cues and the 'observer paradox' (see discussion in Labov 1970, 1972). Laughter, along with an increase in volume, pitch, tempo, and breathing are listed as channel cues that help identify casual speech (Labov 1972:113). Thus the attention the interviewee pays to language use is reduced and the effect of the observer's presence lessened. However, it should be noted that the objective in Labov's work at that time was to elicit samples of the vernacular and to find ways to reduce the formality of speech due to the presence of the interviewer. The current study is different in that no interviewer is present during the elicitation instrument, nor is vernacular the desired product since all participants are non-native speakers and classroom learners. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that Labov sought greater control over the context created during an interview by posing specific questions that had proven to elicit the vernacular, as in the case of the "Danger of Death" question (Labov 1972:47). In a similar way, the current instrument attempts to create and control specific contexts that help elicit appropriate uses of *estar* with adjectives.

(11)   L2 description: *ella parece muy delgada para ella*
                                    'she seems very thin for her'
      L1 repetition: *she seems really skinny for her*

(12)   L2 description: *ella es más delgado*
                                      'she is thinner'
      L1 repetition: *she looks thinner <u>for her</u>*

The present study in no way makes the argument that the English repetition task parallels the Spanish description word for word. However, what is suggested is that the context built around comparison or reaction will be present in both English and Spanish, so that the English repetition may provide insight into the original intent, in this case, to compare or react.

    Second, the English repetition task helps at times to clarify who the referent is. For instance, in (13) the researcher is able to determine that Oprah is the referent of *triste* 'sad,' when the referent could have been the situation itself. On the other hand, example (14) clearly shows that Harrison Ford is not the referent, but rather it is the picture that is being described.

(13)   L2 description: *es una foto de su película Beloved y ella es una esclava y es muy triste*
                                      'it's a picture of her movie Beloved and she is a slave and she/it is very sad'
      L1 repetition: *it's a picture from her movie Beloved in which she's a slave and <u>she's</u> sad*

(14)   L2 description: *y es muy serio y urgente*
                                      'and he/it is very serious and urgent'
      L1 repetition: *<u>it's</u> very angry, dramatic and urgent*

Thus the English repetition task not only helps clarify speaker intent with regard to contextual variables such as comparison and reaction, but it also aids in clarifying potentially confusing syntax in learner discourse.

5. Conclusions
5.1 Successes of current design

    All three research questions met with varying degrees of success. First, the instrument did successfully elicit numerous tokens of adjectives with which either copula is allowed. What's more, a majority of the tokens (67%) corresponded to adjectives of emotion and physical descriptors, two groups of adjectives that have been identified as holding potential for future research in the Spanish copula (Geeslin & Woolsey 2004).

    Second, clear contexts of comparison within individual frames of reference were successfully created by the instrument design. This success was evident not only in the presence of learner-produced comparisons in slides containing both explicit prompts and celebrity photos, but also in the near absence of learner-produced comparisons in picture-less slides. Of the 131 comparisons elicited in the task, 94% occurred in slides with pictures. Also, 88% of the tokens of the word *más* 'more,' a word commonly used in comparisons, appeared in slides with photos.

    Third, the English repetition did help confirm speaker intent in a couple of ways. At times, learners elaborated on the context they were constructing in their descriptions, adding discourse features that were not present in the Spanish production. In this way, the English repetition helped confirm the comparison context. At other times, the repetition helped clarify ambiguous yet correct learner syntax. This was especially true when trying to identify the correct referent, which often could have been either the celebrity him- or herself, or objects such as the picture, the clothing, or even the situation itself.

5.2 Remaining challenges and redesign of the instrument

The remaining challenge for the instrument design is to create clearer contexts of speaker reaction. Given the positive response to the picture of Harrison Ford in his bathing suit, choosing humorous pictures might be important for future redesigns. The discrepancy between the learners' preconceived notions of the celebrity and the photo presented on the slide needs to be more fully exploited in order to ensure the possibility of a speaker reaction.

Additionally, contexts of speaker reaction need to be separated from those of comparison. This was not done effectively in the instrument designed for this study. However, a redesign is underway that would more successfully separate the two contexts. A sample sequence of this redesign can be seen in Appendix 2. Each slide is coded for individual frame of reference comparison and direct experience reaction, creating four different possibilities. The first slide, therefore, would elicit descriptions devoid of comparison and reaction; the second, provide opportunities to compare but not react; the third slide creates a context of reaction but not comparison; and the final one includes them both. It should also be noted that other changes were made to provide consistency and control across slides. For instance, comparisons progress from left/past to right/present, and all slides provide the same explicit prompts requesting adjectives of emotion and physical descriptors. Additionally, all slides are timed and audio recording is controlled by the researcher. In this way, the redesign attempts to address some of the shortcomings of the initial instrument.

6. Future directions

The research instrument presented in this study holds potential for future studies in second language acquisition in several ways. The most obvious, of course, is that the instrument described above may be used to collect data on the Spanish copula and examine the use and development of *estar* across levels of proficiency in contexts of individual frame of reference comparison and speaker reaction to direct experience with the referent.

However, another use of this instrument is to examine the strategies employed by learners for descriptions in general. For instance, throughout the data, many students use what might be called a distancing move when choosing *ser*, such that they say *es una persona alegre* 'he/she is a happy person' instead of *es alegre* 'he/she is happy,' both of which are permissible in Spanish. It may be that learners use this distancing move to highlight the permanent nature of the adjective used, instead of relying entirely on the permanency encoded in the verb *ser*. On the other hand, with regard to *estar*, data from the Spanish descriptions showed an overwhelming use of the verb *parecer* 'to seem' in contexts where *estar* was possible. Of the 191 'copula + adjective' tokens, a surprising 48 (25%) used *parecer*, compared to only 15 (8%) uses of *estar*. Interestingly, verbs used in the English repetition might mirror this preference, as tokens of 'to look' and 'to seem' combined for 48% of the copula tokens in English. Perhaps, as their vocabulary expands, learners opt to use verbs like *parecer* and *mirar*, not realizing that these meanings can also be expressed adequately by using *estar*.

Another area that could be examined using data from this approach is to analyze learner discourse itself, specifically as it relates to description. At times, participants chose to ignore certain celebrity attributes, and highlight others. Learners dealt with flattering and unflattering attributes of the famous person in different ways. Some participants were severe while others were more forgiving. A study critically examining learner discourse describing male and female celebrities is possible using data from this instrument.

Finally, of course, the instrument itself needs to be more fully examined in an effort to validate this kind of elicitation device, as well as explore potential uses in other areas of second language acquisition.[2] If speaker intent can be confirmed to a satisfying degree, then the English repetition task

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[2] It has been suggested, for instance, that the research instrument be administered to native speakers of Spanish. However, though a native speaker sample would certainly be beneficial to examining the instrument, two observations must be kept in mind. First, little insight would be provided into the usefulness of the English repetition task, since speaker intent among native speakers does not need to be clarified; intent can be correctly deduced according to copula choice. Second, current research approaches do not emphasize comparison with a

could be used to explore other areas where contextual variables play an important role and learner production is insufficient to confirm speaker intent. One such area might be where subjunctive and indicative intersect in adjective clauses; another, in unclear contexts where *por* or *para* could be used, meaning 'because of' or 'in order to' respectively. If the picture description task is successful in controlling for contextual variables, it may be that the instrument could also have an instructional application in raising awareness of these contexts for learners at advanced levels of proficiency. However, these are mere conjectures and further study of this kind of instrumentation is needed to confirm its utility to investigate other areas of second language acquisition.

Appendix 1

Picture description task

- In the following slides you will be asked to describe several photos.
  - Please use complete sentences.
  - Try to give at least 3 sentences per slide.
- Following each slide you will be asked to repeat your description in English.
  - Repeat as much of the information you gave in Spanish as possible.

Oprah Winfrey

- Describe a Oprah Winfrey.
  - Describe su personalidad.
  - Describe algunas características físicas.
  - Describe su condición emocional general.

Now repeat your description in English.

Compara a Oprah en las siguientes fotos

Now repeat your description in English.

Compara a Oprah en las siguientes fotos

Now repeat your description in English.

Harrison Ford

- Describe a Harrison Ford.
  - Describe su personalidad.
  - Describe algunas características físicas.
  - Describe su condición emocional general.

Now repeat your description in English.

Compara a Ford en las siguientes fotos

Now repeat your description in English.

Compara a Ford en las siguientes fotos

Now repeat your description in English.

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native-speaker baseline but rather the study of the many variables that predict copula choice (Geeslin 2000). In fact, it has been shown that by using this approach it is possible to examine even the differences between groups that appear similar on the surface, such as very advanced NNSs and native speakers of Spanish (Geeslin 2003). Nevertheless, a native speaker sample, in addition to native speaker feedback regarding the instrument, would undoubtedly prove helpful in assessing the usefulness of the elicitation task, particularly in regards to the creation of contexts of comparison and speaker reaction.

Appendix 2

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