

# The Acquisition of Past Tense Variation by L2 Learners of Spanish in an Abroad Context

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## 1. Introduction

Verbal aspect in past tense expression has often been identified as a difficult area for students learning Spanish, and other Romance languages, as a second language (Blyth, 1997; Dansereau, 1987; Frantzen, 1995; Westfall & Foerster, 1996). Not only does Spanish operate within an aspectual system that is typologically different from that of English (Comrie, 1976; Whitley, 2002), but the Spanish perfect (present perfect, *he comido*) and perfective (preterit, *comí*) morphological forms are also experiencing change in progress in that the present perfect appears to be replacing the preterit in at least some dialects of the Spanish-speaking world (Holmes & Balukas, 2011; Howe, 2006, 2013; Schwenter, 1994; Schwenter & Torres Cacoullous, 2008). At a bare minimum, the Spanish aspectual system consists of a perfective verb form, traditionally expressed using the preterit (Pret) (*yo comí*), and an imperfect verb form, expressed by the imperfect (Imp) (*yo comía*). At least in Peninsular Spanish, as the studies cited above indicate, the present perfect verb form also enters into a variable perfective system. English, on the other hand, has a simple past (*I ate*) and a past progressive (*I was eating*). These two aspectual systems allow speakers of their respective languages to express past time in quite different ways (Comrie, 1976). The English simple past can correspond to either Pret or Imp in Spanish while the past progressive corresponds to Imp (Slabakova & Montrul, 2003).

Given the differences between the aspectual systems of English and Spanish as well as the variation students most certainly hear in the input they receive, it is not surprising that this system is a difficult one to acquire. The current study seeks to examine the constraints that govern the selection of past tense morphology in the interlanguage of 30 high school students participating in an intensive summer study abroad program in Valencia, Spain as well as the constraints that govern the morphological choices of members of the students' host families, a group of native speakers (NS) that represent a partial measure of the input to which learners are exposed while abroad.

## 2. Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition

The use of sociolinguistic analysis, which allows for variation, as opposed to error analysis to explore and explain the interlanguage systems of second language (L2) learners is a relatively new approach in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Bayley, 2002, 2005; Bayley & Tarone, 2012; Geeslin, 2011a; Gudmestad, forthcoming; Regan, 1995, 2004; Tarone, 2007). This type of research differentiates between Type I variation, which is unique to learners, and Type II variation, which is variation produced by both NSs and non-native speakers (NNS). While Type II variation is acceptable to the majority of NSs, Type I variation is not. To date, a sociolinguistic approach has been used to analyze in L2 Spanish, on the morphosyntactic level, the acquisition of subject expression, copula choice, future time expression, the subjunctive mood, verbal objects, past-time expression, and the present progressive by speakers of L1 English (Geeslin, 2000, 2003; Geeslin & Fafulas, 2012; Geeslin, Fafulas, & Kanwit, forthcoming; Geeslin, Garcia-Amaya, Hasler-Barker, Henriksen, & Killam, 2010, 2012; Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008a, 2010, 2011; Gudmestad, 2006, 2012; Kanwit &

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Geeslin, forthcoming; Killam, 2011; Linford, accepted; Linford & Shin, accepted; Solon & Kanwit, accepted). For the sake of brevity, I will give a brief overview of only one of these studies as an example (Gudmestad, 2012), which offers an analysis of the acquisition of mood use, a morphosyntactic structure subject to NS variation (e.g. Silva-Corvalán, 1994). The reader is directed to Geeslin (2011b) for a more comprehensive overview of the variationist studies conducted in the field of SLA to date.

Gudmestad (2012) investigates the development of mood use in L2 Spanish in a cross-sectional study of five NNS proficiency groups, representing undergraduate third-semester courses (N = 26), fifth-semester courses (N = 35), third-year courses (N = 26), and fourth-year courses (N = 23) with a fifth group of NNSs studying Spanish at the graduate-level (N = 20). A group of NSs from a variety of dialectal backgrounds (N = 20) also participated in this study. NS and NNS participants completed three production tasks designed to elicit subjunctive and non-subjunctive verb forms: a monologic role-play task, a contextualized-clause-elicitation task, and a contextualized-verb-elicitation task. Cross-tabulations show a statistically significant increase in frequency of subjunctive forms as proficiency increases. Learners at the graduate level are not significantly different from NSs in their use of verbal mood forms. A multivariate regression analysis, often used in the field of sociolinguistics, reveals that as proficiency increases, the number of variables predicting mood use also increases, and that learners in the two most advanced proficiency groups, fourth-year undergraduates and NNS graduate students, respond to the same variables as NSs. These results show that L2 Spanish mood selection is first governed by semantic factors and eventually discourse-level factors as proficiency increases but do not necessarily indicate that these advanced proficiency groups perform exactly like NSs on the three tasks. Cross-tabulations of the statistically significant factors reveal that fourth-year learners do not perform in a native-like fashion as far as time reference (past, present, future) is concerned and that graduate-level participants' performance is not native-like in hypothetical contexts. The author indicates that, while discourse-level factors enter into the model at the same level, differences among proficiency groups reveal differences in developmental patterns. What this example study and others like it show is that without a multivariate analysis such as that used in sociolinguistic research, subtle differences between NSs and NNSs are not always obvious.

### **3. Native Speaker Variation and Verbal Aspect**

#### *3.1. The Present Perfect*

Like mood use, verbal aspect is another linguistic area susceptible to variation in both NS and NNS production. As mentioned earlier, many researchers (Copple, 2011; Holmes & Balukas, 2011; Howe, 2006, 2013; Schwenter, 1994; Schwenter & Torres Cacoulos, 2008) have discussed in depth a change in progress where the present perfect (PP) takes the place of the simple past in certain contexts that appears to be happening in Peninsular Spanish. Schwenter (1994) discusses an evolutionary trend in Romance languages first proposed by Harris (1982) and Fleischman (1983). This trend consists of four main stages: (1) PP for present states resulting from past actions, exemplified by Sicilian, (2) PP used for past actions that continue into the present, as seen in Portuguese, (3) PP used for past actions with current relevance, such as in Catalan, and the most advanced stage, (4) PP for all past situations, as we observe in French and Italian. Schwenter (1994) proposes that modern Mexican Spanish and modern Peninsular Spanish occupy two different places in this evolutionary trend. Mexican Spanish, being the more conservative of the two, is in stage 2, while Peninsular Spanish is in stage 3. In a more recent study, Holmes and Balukas (2011) argue that Peninsular Spanish may even be entering into stage 4 in some cases.

#### *3.2. Preterit and Imperfect*

The aforementioned researchers have done much in the way of describing PP and Pret variation in several NS varieties of Spanish. While it is open to debate whether Imp enters into NS variation in past-time narration, this form most certainly enters into the equation when one considers Type I variation in learner production. Terrell and Salgués de Cargill (1979) state that a speaker will use Imp to place emphasis on the course of an action or the fact that a state is durative while Whitley (2002)

postulates that general scholarly consensus holds that “with the imperfect, a narrator brings listeners or readers to some recalled point in the middle of an event or a series of events that, at the recalled point, was fairly open-ended and continuing” (117). Lunn (1985) introduces the notion of the aspectual lens, which explains verbal aspect as the cognitive ability of a speaker to either confer or withhold focus. Imp is used for the latter use while Pret is employed for the first. Studies such as those carried out by Schwenter (1994), Schwenter and Torres Cacoullós (2008), and Holmes and Balukas (2011) suggest that Peninsular speakers may use both Pret and PP when focusing attention on an action or state in the past.

To date, researchers have often simply assumed that Pret and Imp occupy two different spaces of past tense reference in Spanish and that their uses rarely, if ever, overlap. Even researchers such as Baker and Quesada (2011), who find what seems to be Pret/Imp variation in NS production, have left such variation unexplained. A notable exception to this generalization is Geeslin and Gudmestad (2010), who examine the impact of social variables on the production of past-time verb forms, finding that female NSs use Pret more often than their male counterparts, who tend to use more PP, while both gender groups use Imp at similar rates. It is important to note that this study only examines the impact of social variables and does not take into account linguistic variables. In general, empirical research has yet to show that Pret and Imp do not, in fact, overlap to some extent.

#### 4. Previous Studies in SLA of Aspect

Two main hypotheses have guided much of the previous research into L2 aspectual systems, the majority of which examine past-time contexts and focus on the acquisition of a Pret/Imp contrast. After working with the oral production of two children learning Spanish in an immersion setting, Andersen (1991) presents what many researchers call the Aspect Hypothesis: “In beginning stages of language acquisition, only **inherent aspectual** distinctions are encoded by verbal morphology, not tense or grammatical aspect” (307). Andersen (2002) describes the Aspect Hypothesis in depth. In this particular model, learners begin by associating Imp with states, such as “I had a book,” and Pret with punctual events, “I broke the vase” (Vendler [1967] refers to punctual events as *achievements*, and many subsequent studies in aspect acquisition use his terminology). As learners’ proficiencies improve, they begin to associate Imp with activities, “I played,” and Pret with telic events, “I taught addition to Paul” (Vendler [1967] uses the term *accomplishment*). By the final stage of acquisition, learners are able to use both verb forms in all contexts. Many subsequent studies have offered support for the Aspect Hypothesis to varying degrees using data from a variety of learners, learning contexts, learner proficiency levels, learner L1s, and learner L2s (see for example, Cadierno, 2000; Camps, 2005; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; Lopez-Ortega, 2000; Vranckx, 2004).

A study that finds only partial support for the Aspect Hypothesis is Salaberry (2002). In his analysis of a fill-in-the-blank task completed by college-level classroom learners in both third and sixth semesters of study, Salaberry finds that lexical aspect is a significant predictor of aspectual choice only for the more advanced learners. Intermediate learners, that is, those in the third semester of study, seem to choose Pret as a default past tense marker, regardless of lexical aspect.

Bardovi-Harlig (1994) presents a second hypothesis that has been the driving force behind much research in SLA aspectual distinction. The Discourse Hypothesis states that “learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives” (43). Bardovi-Harlig (1998) finds evidence that supports the Discourse Hypothesis in spoken and written narrations of adult learners of L2 English. The Discourse Hypothesis, when applied to Spanish, associates Imp with background information and Pret with foreground information. Again, many researchers have found supporting evidence for the Discourse Hypothesis using data from a variety of learners, learning settings, and languages, including Spanish (see for example Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; López-Ortega, 2000). More recently, Salaberry (2011) has found that discourse grounding is what most clearly distinguishes NNSs from NSs, although inherent aspect also plays a role. While NSs are able to manipulate verbal morphology to accommodate discourse, learners are less able to do so, especially when a verb’s inherent aspect is in conflict with its discourse role. In Salaberry’s study, which examines selection of Pret or Imp in a written forced-choice task performed

by learners from five proficiency groups, the effect of lexical aspect and discourse grounding increases as learners' proficiency increases.

In addition to these two main hypotheses, the role of adverbs in learner past tense expression is an area that has been researched previously. Lubbers Quesada (2006) examines the development of past tense expression in the oral narratives of three groups of learners with special attention placed on the role of adverbs. She finds that, contrary to her initial hypothesis, based on Bardovi-Harlig (2000), as learners' proficiency increases, they use more adverbials to modify, embellish, and express more complicated temporal relationships in their past tense narrations. Baker and Quesada (2011) confirm that the presence of adverbials in cloze activities enables both learners and NSs to produce the verbal morphology, Pret or Imp, expected by the researchers, and Lee (1999) finds that students consistently refer to any available adverbials in order to assign meaning to past tense verb forms.

To my knowledge, only one study, Geeslin, García-Amaya, Hasler-Barker, Henriksen, and Killam (2012), examines students' acquisition of Pret and PP, the two perfective forms experiencing change in progress outlined above, in a specifically Peninsular context. This particular study examines these two verb forms in the interlanguage of 33 high school students before, during, and after their participation in an intensive immersion program in León, Spain. Using a written contextualized task, they find that learners consistently restructure their interlanguage systems to be more like that of the NSs in their surroundings. In this case, students begin to refer to time of action, the only predictor of NS Pret and PP use, in order to make morphological choices as opposed to predictors such as telicity or discourse grounding, which were used by students before and during their time abroad.

To date, Geeslin and Gudmestad (2010), referenced earlier regarding NS variation, is the only study that includes Imp in a sociolinguistic analysis of the acquisition of past-time expression in Spanish. This study examines advanced learner and NS production of past-time verb forms in sociolinguistic interviews, finding that NNS production is influenced by the extralinguistic variables of gender, time abroad, and years of study. As far as gender is concerned, Geeslin and Gudmestad find that male NNSs produce more PP forms than female NNSs, while female NNSs produce more Pret forms, both groups producing Imp at similar rates. Learners who have spent more than a year abroad produce more PP and Pret forms than those who have less abroad experience. These learners with less abroad experience, on the other hand, produce Imp forms more often than their peers with more experience abroad. The same result is found concerning years of study. Learners with less than nine years of study produce more Imp forms than those with greater than nine years of study, while this group of learners tends to employ Pret and PP forms more often.

Howard (2004) offers a variationist analysis of the acquisition of a perfective/imperfective contrast in French, and takes into account linguistic rather than extralinguistic variables. French has an aspectual system similar, but arguably not identical, to that of Spanish in that the *passé composé* roughly corresponds to Pret while the *imparfait* corresponds in most situations to Imp. The author points out that the Aspect Hypothesis and the Discourse Hypothesis have been called upon in many cases to explain the same data (see Liskin-Gasparro, 2000 and López-Ortega, 2000 for examples). In data from sociolinguistic interviews of 17 advanced Irish learners of French, Howard finds that these two factors, inherent lexical aspect and discourse grounding can "interact" and create variation in learners' interlanguage. Howard (2004) does not include an analysis of NS variation as a baseline for comparison with learners' production. This analysis of Type II variation, as described above, is essential to the analysis of Type I, learner, variation.

In general, literature on the SLA of verbal aspect highlights the importance of a verb's inherent lexical aspect, its role in discourse, and the presence of adverbs in the development of L2 aspectual systems. Two studies, Geeslin and Gudmestad (2010) in Spanish and Howard (2004) in French, indicate that these L2 aspectual systems are subject to variation predicted by both linguistic and extralinguistic variables, and Geeslin et. al. (2012) highlight the importance of including PP forms, and the factors influencing its selection, when examining data from learners exposed to Peninsular varieties of Spanish. The current study seeks to build on previous research on the SLA of past-time expression by a) including factors that have been found to influence NNS acquisition of Pret vs. Imp, b) including factors known to influence the selection of Pret vs. PP forms, and c) using a task that allows participants to choose among Pret, Imp, and PP forms.

## 5. The Current Study

In light of previous literature on both NS variation and accounts of variation in SLA, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What constraints govern the selection of past tense morphology in the aspectual systems of learners of Spanish abroad?
- (2) What constraints govern the selection of past tense morphology in the aspectual systems of the native Spanish speakers who represent part of the input to which these learners are exposed?
- (3) Do the learners' constraints change over the course of a study abroad program? If so, do they approach the NSs' constraints that govern past tense morphology selection?

### 5.1. *Participants and Tasks*

In order to answer the research questions outlined above, learners participating in an intensive 7-week long summer study abroad program in Valencia, Spain designed for high school honor students, as well as members of their host families, completed two tasks: a background questionnaire (this background questionnaire was provided in Spanish to the NSs and in English to the NNSs) and a 24-item cloze paragraph typical of an introductory student text in which participants chose preterit, imperfect, or present perfect verb forms (Appendix A). The use of a selection task enables the researcher to observe how students choose verbal aspect in situations that they would not typically produce themselves as well as provides comparable linguistic contexts for all participants. In addition to the two tasks outlined above, learners also completed a placement test administered by their study abroad program both at the beginning and at the end of the summer which grouped them into three proficiency levels: high (N = 9), mid (N = 12), and low (N = 9). Learners remained in the same proficiency groups over the course of the summer. NSs were not required to complete this task. Students in the high-proficiency group scored an average of 734 on the placement test at the beginning of the summer and 757 at the end of the summer. The mid-proficiency group scored an average of 646 at the beginning and 714 at the end, and the low-proficiency groups scored an average of 573 and 637, respectively. The maximum on this particular test was 850 and the minimum was 0. It is interesting to note that students in the high-proficiency group only increased their average score by 23 points over the course of the summer while the mid- and low-proficiency groups improved 68 and 64 points, respectively. I will return to this point briefly in the conclusion of this paper. Students completed the background questionnaire in English before departure from the United States and completed both the cloze paragraph and the placement test upon arrival in Spain (Time 1). The cloze paragraph task and the placement test were repeated the week before they returned to the United States in order to measure any change in these students' interlanguage (Time 2).

While abroad, learners were required by their study abroad program to attend four classes between four and five days a week (literature, grammar, culture, and communication) and also signed a contract stating that they would speak only Spanish for the duration of the 7-week-long program. All students lived with host families in Valencia, Spain. A total of 30 learners, 12 males and 18 females, all between the ages of 16 and 18, participated in the study. NS participants were recruited from the families hosting the students during their stay in Spain. A total of 5 host mothers with an average age of 55.4 years, the youngest being 35 years old and the oldest 65, volunteered to participate. The incorporation of data from the students' host families is important within this particular learning context as these families are a partial representation of the input received by students during their time abroad.

### 5.2. *Coding*

All verbs in the past tense selected by both the learners and the NSs were coded according to inherent lexical aspect and discourse grounding, keeping in line with the Aspect and Discourse Hypotheses. Inherent lexical aspect was divided into three groups, telic, activity, and state, as

described by Andersen (1991). In order to code verbs correctly, each verb was extracted from its context, along with any objects, and placed into the infinitive form so that verbal morphology did not influence how verbs were coded. Verbs were also coded as providers of either background or foreground information, following Bardovi-Harlig (1994). The presence or absence of lexical aspectual indicators (LAI), such as temporal adverbs, was also noted, as previous studies (Baker & Quesada, 2011; Lubbers Quesada, 2006) have found that the presence of certain adverbs can have an impact on learners' selection of past tense verb forms. The term lexical aspectual indicator is used here in order to include expressions such as *el año pasado* 'last year' in the analysis, even though these expressions are not technically adverbs.

In addition to coding for inherent lexical aspect, discourse grounding, and presence or absence of LAIs, time of action (a year ago or yesterday) was also coded in order to account for a constraint that has been found to be important in selection between Pret and PP in Peninsular Spanish (Geeslin et al., 2012; Holmes & Balukas, 2011; Schwenter, 1994).

The cloze paragraph activity (Appendix A) provided comparable contexts for all participants, and was therefore coded identically for everyone. All possible combinations of the previously outlined factors are represented. In addition to recording lexical aspect, discourse function, presence or absence of LAIs, and time of action, the verb form selected by each participant, Pret, Imp, or PP, was also noted. All independent variables mentioned here and their categories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent variables and their categories

Variable	Categories
Inherent lexical aspect	state, activity, telic event
Discourse grounding	background, foreground
Lexical aspectual indicator	presence, absence
Time of action	a year ago, yesterday

These factors, along with verb form selection as the dependent variable, were submitted to a regression analysis using SPSS. This particular analysis was chosen because it enables us to see which of the factors described above influence aspectual choice among these learners and NSs without taking for granted that one verb form is "correct" while the others are "incorrect." Cross-tabulations of significant factors reveal the direction of these effects.

## 6. Results

In this section, I first present the distribution of past tense verb forms as selected by all three proficiency groups and the NS group. I then explore the results of the previously mentioned regression analysis for each proficiency group followed by descriptive cross-tabulations for significant factors.

### 6.1. Distribution

Table 2 shows the general distribution of past tense verb forms for each learner proficiency group at both Time 1 and Time 2, as well as for NSs. Time 1 refers to the task completed at the beginning of the learners' 7-week-long study abroad experience and Time 2 refers to the task completed at the end. Total numbers are different in some instances between the two tasks completed by the students because sometimes students failed to choose a verb form. The reader will note that the percentage of the data for which participants chose PP forms is very small in most groups, including the NS group. This distribution in the NS dataset is rather surprising, given that previous research, as outlined above, finds that PP use is on the rise in Peninsular Spanish. I will return to this point in the discussion section of this paper.

In Table 2, we see that the distribution of past tense forms appears to approach NS distribution in all cases for the mid-proficiency group and in most cases for the high-proficiency group. While students in the mid-proficiency level group improve in all verb forms vis à vis NS performance over the course of study abroad, the high-proficiency group of students chooses Imp (53.1% at Time 2

Table 2. Distribution of verb form selection (percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding)

Proficiency Group	Time 1			Time 2			Native Speakers		
	Pret	Imp	PP	Pret	Imp	PP	Pret	Imp	PP
High	45.1% (97)	49.3% (106)	5.6% (12)	45.3% (87)	53.1% (102)	1.6% (3)	47.5% (57)	50% (60)	2.5% (3)
Mid	51.2% (146)	43.2% (123)	5.6% (16)	49.4% (129)	46.4% (121)	4.2% (11)	47.5% (57)	50% (60)	2.5% (3)
Low	46.7% (100)	43.9% (94)	9.3% (20)	43.5% (93)	45.8% (98)	10.7% (23)	47.5% (57)	50% (60)	2.5% (3)

vs. 49.3% at Time 1) more often than NSs (50%) by the end of the study abroad program. The low-proficiency group does not seem to fare as well, moving away from the NS group in both Pret (moving from 46.7% to 43.5% vs. 47.5% for NSs) and PP (moving from 9.3% to 10.7% vs. 2.5% for NSs) forms, only approaching NS norms for Imp (moving from 43.9% to 45.8% vs. 50% for NSs).

While these rates of selection show a general shift over the course of the summer in the interlanguage of these students, they do not demonstrate which linguistic and discourse factors students and NSs may be using when selecting verb forms. A regression analysis will show which of the factors described above significantly influence participant verb form choice. The reader is reminded that these factors are inherent aspect, discourse grounding, time of action, and presence/absence of LAI. For this particular analysis, Pret and PP were combined into one single perfective verb form group due to the extremely low instances of PP selection, giving us a binomial dependent variable, perfective/imperfective.

## 6.2. Regression Analysis Results

Table 3 shows the results of a regression analysis for the three learner groups as well as NSs. Independent variables appear across the top while participant groups appear in the left-most column. P-values and Wald values are shown when a variable is found to be statistically significant, the Wald value shows the strength of effect of that variable. A higher number in the Wald column indicates that the variable has a stronger effect. Boxes in grey indicate non-significant variables. Variables are arranged in order of strength of effect for NSs from left to right, strongest to weakest.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis for all groups (boxes in grey were not significant)

Proficiency group		Time of action		Inherent aspect		Discourse grounding		Presence/absence of LAI	
		p value	Wald	p value	Wald	p value	Wald	p value	Wald
High	Time 1	.010	6.617	.001	14.618				
Mid		.010	18.873	.001	14.618				
Low		.000	19.275	.000	28.894				
High	Time 2			.000	38.245				
Mid		.000	15.905	.000	29.191	.024	5.079		
Low		.000	15.187	.000	29.453				
NSs		.000	16.032	.002	12.023	.002	9.240		

Table 3 shows that for NS participants, time of action, inherent aspect, and discourse grounding were all statistically significant in this order of strength. These results for NSs serve as a baseline for comparing results for the three student proficiency groups. As far as the high-proficiency group is concerned, we see that at Time 1, these learners used both inherent aspect and time of action, in this order of strength, to choose verb form in past time narration. This order is the opposite of that found for NSs. Surprisingly, by Time 2, we see that instead of adding discourse grounding as a significant variable and rearranging the strength of effect of these variables, this learner group appears to abandon time of action as a significant variable and trends away from NS norms.

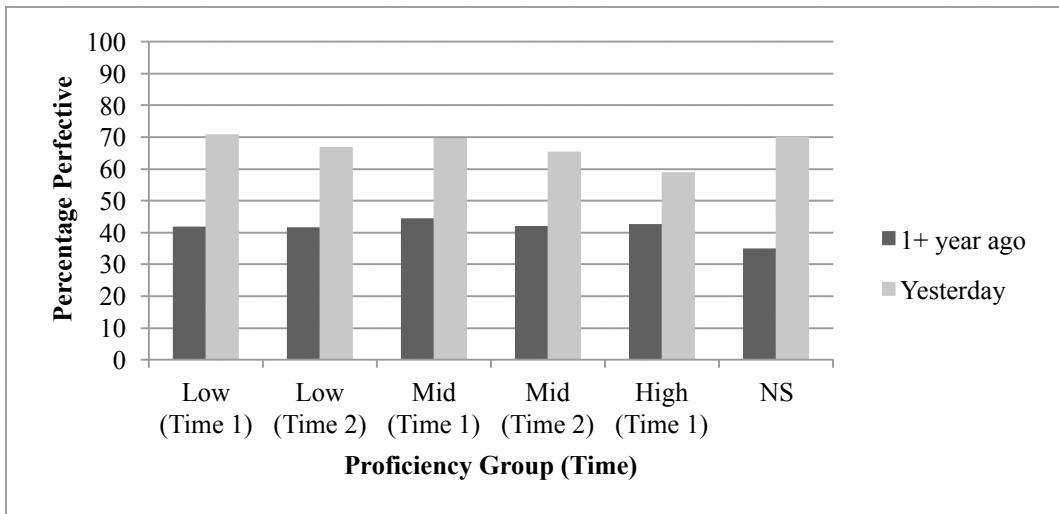
At Time 1, learners in the mid-proficiency group employ time of action and inherent aspect for past time verb form selection, in this order of predictor variable strength. This order is comparable to that of NSs, but is missing a significant factor. By the end of the program, this learner group has added the missing significant variable, discourse grounding, but rearranges the strength of the variables, making inherent aspect the strongest, followed by time of action and then discourse grounding. This change trends both closer to NS norms in that discourse grounding has been added as a significant factor and further away from them, as inherent aspect becomes increasingly stronger for this learner group than it is for NSs.

Finally, significant factors for the low-proficiency learner group, in order of strength, are inherent aspect followed by time of action. This order remains the same over the course of the study abroad program. At Time 1, this particular learner group made use of both inherent aspect and time of action for past tense verb form selection, but in the opposite order of strength from that of NSs. At Time 2, factors appear to have shifted very little both in statistical significance and in order of importance.

### 6.3. Cross-tabulations of Significant Factors

While the results of a regression analysis show the variables that are significant for the selection of past-time verb form for each participant group, they do not show the direction of the effect for each variable. The descriptive cross-tabulations presented below show how variables influenced participants' selection of past-time verb form. Each figure shows the percentage of perfective verb form use (Pret and PP combined) for each category of an independent variable. If the variable was not significant in the regression analysis presented above, it is not included in the figure. Tables that correspond to each figure can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 1. Percentage of Perfective forms according to Time of Action

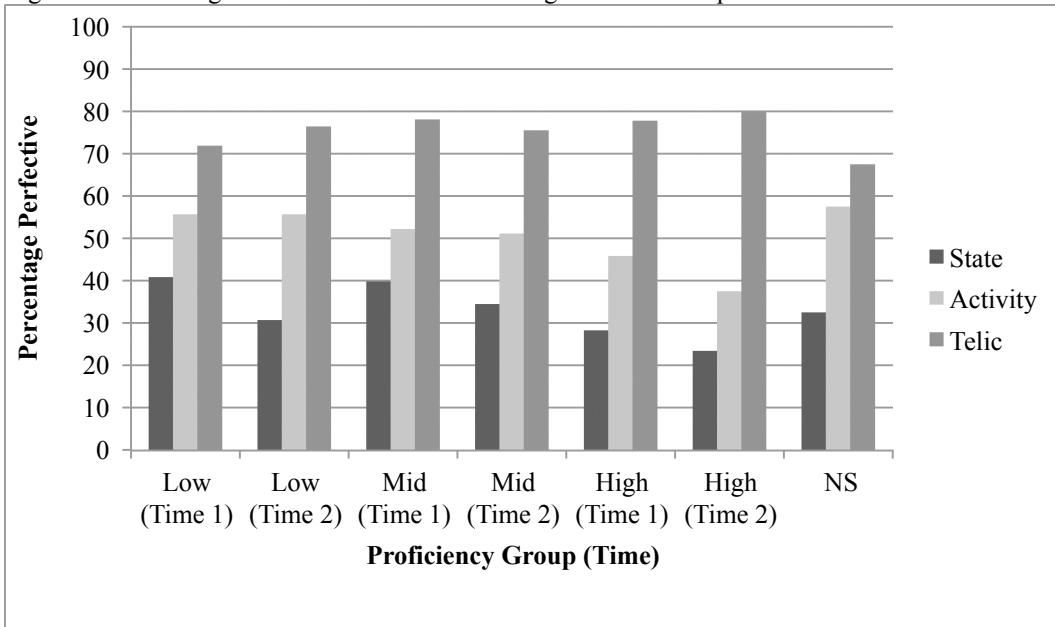


The most significant factor for NSs, time of action, is shown in Figure 1. This factor was a predictor variable for all groups at both data collection times except for the high-proficiency group at Time 2. All proficiency groups at all times behave similar to each other and to NSs in that perfective forms are found most often in contexts of actions that happened yesterday rather than those that happened a year or more ago. While the direction of the effect of time of action is the same for all groups, all learner groups appear to use perfective forms slightly more often in contexts of 1+ year ago than NSs, and both the mid proficiency group at Time 2 and the high proficiency group at Time 1 use perfective forms less often than NSs in yesterday contexts.

Figure 2, below, shows cross-tabulations for the second most significant factor for NSs, inherent aspect. This factor was significant for all learner groups at all times. As for time of action, all three proficiency groups behave similarly to NSs and to each other as far as the direction of effect of this

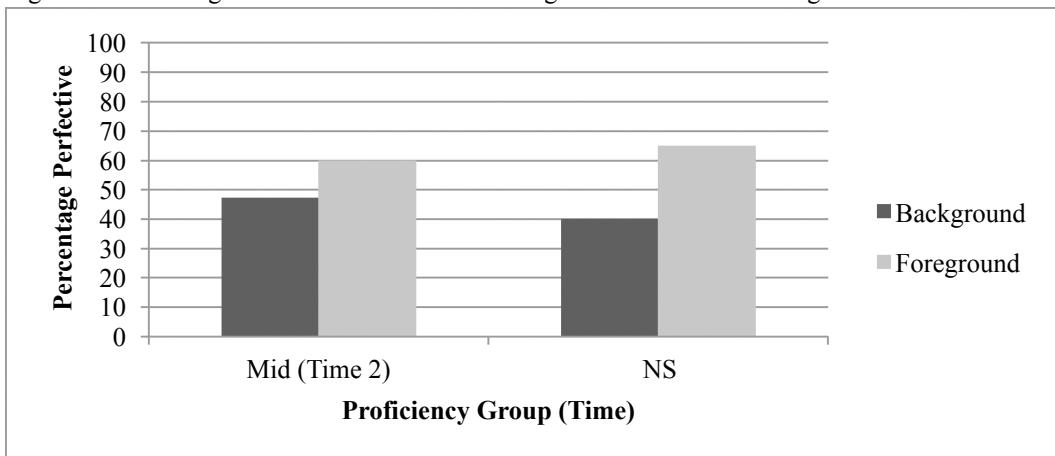
factor is concerned. Perfective forms are found most often with telic verbs, followed by activity verbs and finally state verbs. With the exception of the low-proficiency group at Time 2, learner groups appear to select verbs more categorically as far as inherent aspect is concerned as proficiency increases. Telic verbs are found more often in perfective forms as proficiency increases and state and activity verbs are less often in perfective forms as proficiency increases. As far as telic verbs are concerned, all three proficiency groups at all times select more forms in the perfective than do NSs, and the high proficiency group at both Time 1 and Time 2 select fewer perfective forms for state verbs than do NS, meaning that they select imperfective instead. Learners also show a steady decline in the rate of activity verbs in perfective forms, a trend that is the opposite of what is found for NSs.

Figure 2: Percentage of Perfective forms according to Inherent Aspect



Finally, Figure 3 shows the third most influential factor for NSs, discourse grounding. This factor was only significant for the mid-proficiency learner group at Time 2. This learner group trends in the same direction as NSs as far as the selection of perfective forms for background and foreground information are concerned, but they select perfective forms slightly less often in the foreground and more often in the background than the NS group.

Figure 3: Percentage of Perfective forms according to Discourse Grounding



## 7. Discussion

The research questions guiding the current study asked which constraints govern the selection of past tense morphology in the aspectual systems of both learners and NSs alike, as well as if learners' constraints changed to approach those of NSs over the course of a study abroad program. The following discussion section answers each of these questions individually, discusses these results in light of previous literature, and lastly outlines several implications for study abroad.

The first research question inquires about the constraints governing the selection of past tense morphology in the aspectual systems of learners of Spanish abroad. The results presented above show that the constraints governing past tense selection vary among the three proficiency groups. The mid-proficiency group is the only group that adds a predictor variable from Time 1 to Time 2, discourse grounding, to those to those selected as significant at the beginning of the summer, lexical aspect and time of action. The high-proficiency group, on the other hand, appears to lose a statistically significant variable, time of action, over the course of the study abroad program, thus ending with only lexical aspect as a predictor. The low-proficiency group shows very little change over the course of the study abroad program, both beginning and ending with time of action and lexical aspect as predictor variables. These results are particularly interesting, as time of action, intended initially to be a variable that predicts selection of Pret or PP, continues to be important for two of the three proficiency groups even after the two verb forms are combined into one perfective category. This variable as a predictor of perfective or imperfective morphology has not been explored previously. The descriptive cross-tabulations presented above show that variables generally have the same effect for NNSs and NSs, that is, all groups use more perfective forms in yesterday time of action contexts, with telic verbs, and in the foreground of narrations. Learners appear to overgeneralize the effect of lexical aspect, however, using more perfective forms with telic verbs than do NSs, the opposite being true for stative verbs.

The second research question asked which constraints govern the selection of past tense morphology in the aspectual systems of the native Spanish speakers who represent a part of the input for these same learners. We see in Table 3 above that these factors are time of action, inherent aspect, and discourse grounding, in this particular order of strength. It is interesting to note that for NSs, in line with the learner groups, time of action, a factor initially included to distinguish PP from Pret remains statistically significant even when PP and Pret are combined to form one single perfective verb category.

Finally, the third research question asked if learners' constraints change over time and if so, whether or not they approach NSs' constraints governing past tense morphology selection. Rather surprisingly, the high-proficiency group trends away from NS norms. This particular proficiency group appears to rely solely on inherent aspect to select past tense verb forms by the end of the study abroad program, thus losing a statistically significant factor, time of action, instead of gaining one, discourse grounding. The mid-proficiency group fares slightly better, adding a missing variable selected by the NS group, discourse grounding, but arranging the order of factor strength in a way that trends away from NS norms. The low-proficiency group does not appear to approach nor move away from NS constraint rankings, thus appearing to end the study abroad program with the same predictor variables as when they began it.

Previous studies in the acquisition of the Pret/Imp contrast have found support for the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen, 1991; Cadierno, 2000; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; Lopez-Ortega, 2000; Vranckx, 2004; Camps, 2005) as well as the Discourse Hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; López-Ortega, 2000). The current study overwhelmingly finds evidence in support of the Aspect Hypothesis, as all learners appear to rely on inherent aspect more than any other variable, especially at Time 2, but does not fully support the Discourse Hypothesis. Reliance on discourse grounding only increases in strength for the mid-proficiency group while it completely disappears as statistically significant for the high-proficiency group. Another contrast with previous literature seen here is that Salaberry (2011) finds that the effect of these two factors increases as learners' proficiency increases. The results of the current study partially contradict these results, as reliance on inherent aspect does increase, but reliance on discourse grounding disappears for the high-proficiency group and remains the same for the low-proficiency group.

Interestingly, of the three proficiency groups discussed above, the high-proficiency group deviates the most from the norms of the NS participants over the course of this particular study abroad program. Many ways of explaining why this particular learner group seems to deviate from rather than approach the norms present in their input are possible. One such explanation is that these students are more heavily influenced by the language classes that they took prior to studying abroad when compared to students in the other two proficiency groups. In the background questionnaire, students in the high-proficiency group self-reported an average of 8.4 years of Spanish study while the mid- and low-proficiency groups self-reported an average of 4.6 and 4.8 respectively. Given that cloze activities are fairly common in the L2 classroom in the United States, these more advanced learners have possibly been exposed to more activities of this nature than those at lower proficiency levels. While the effect of a cloze-type activity has yet to be explored in the SLA of past-time expression, Geeslin and Gudmestad (2008) compare results for written contextualized questionnaire tasks, a task-type similar to a cloze task in that learners must choose among multiple options within a context, with oral interview data and find task variation in learner copula and mood selections. Additionally, researchers have found task effects for learner past-time production data when comparing two types of oral data (Liskin-Gasparro, 2000) and written in oral production data (Cadierno, 2000). A future study should examine the effect of a cloze-type task on the results of studies of L2 past-time expression.

Another possible explanation for this difference between the high-proficiency group and the other two proficiency groups may also have to do with previous experience in Spanish-speaking countries. While the nine students in the high proficiency group reported an average of almost a year (355.6 days) of previous experience in a variety of Spanish-speaking countries, including Nicaragua, Mexico, Puerto Rico, as well as Spain, the mid- and low-proficiency groups only reported an average of 11.8 and 4.2 days abroad, respectively, with many students in these groups having never traveled to a Spanish-speaking country before. This previous exposure to other dialects of Spanish, whether via other study abroad experiences or general travel, may also account for why students in the high-proficiency group were not as open to adjusting their interlanguage while abroad as the other two proficiency groups. This particular explanation, however, would assume that aspectual distinction is not uniform across all Spanish dialects, an area of investigation that is only recently being explored in the field of sociolinguistics (Delgado-Díaz, submitted).

The current study also raises questions about the type of linguistic impact a particular study abroad program can have when a student's proficiency level in the target language is already very high. Results suggest that students with more years of language learning experience and/or more experience abroad do not trend towards native-speaker norms as much as those with lower proficiency levels. We saw that not only did the high-proficiency group in the current study move away, in general, from NS constraints, but they also show the smallest point increase on the placement test administered by the study abroad program (23 points as opposed to 68 and 64). It may be that these students' proficiency is too high for formal grammatical competence to increase much over such a short amount of time abroad (7 weeks), but that they improve in other areas of language competence, such as pragmatic competence or fluency. Davidson (2010) notes that most previous literature on study abroad deals with learners at lower proficiency levels, and that these results may not be applicable to learners at a more advanced proficiency level. In fact, he finds that the advanced proficiency learners participating in his study have about an equal chance of remaining at the same level of speaking ability after a year of study abroad as they do advancing a speaking proficiency level. Future studies on learners abroad should take proficiency level into consideration when interpreting their results.

Another interesting result of this particular study, while not directly related to the three research questions explored here, is that NSs did not select PP as often as previous literature (Copples, 2011; Holmes & Balukas, 2011; Howe, 2006, 2013; Schwenter, 1994; Schwenter & Torres Cacoullas, 2008) leads one to expect. It may be that a task influence similar to the one mentioned above to explain learner results is at work in NS verb form selections as well. Interestingly, NSs showed considerable variation in their selection of past tense verb forms, displaying uniformity for only 14 of 24 task items. This variation, which has yet to be explored in sociolinguistic research, may very well explain at least partially why learners appear to vary their past tense verb form choices, at times drastically, between Pret and Imp.

## 8. Conclusions and Future Directions

The current study adds to knowledge about the acquisition of past-time expression in that it takes into account linguistic variables that had previously been unexamined in variationist SLA work. It also attempted to account for an ongoing change in progress in Peninsular dialects of Spanish with the inclusion of the PP, although NSs do not behave as previous research suggests they would on the task employed here.

The current study raises some interesting issues for future analyses of the acquisition of past-time aspectual systems. Findings suggest that a predictor variable previously unstudied in research of Pret/Imp acquisition, time of action, may come into play for both learners and NSs alike. This variable has previously been shown to be a distinguishing factor in NS selection of PP and Pret. Future studies should further explore the impact of this factor when looking at how learners choose past-time morphology. Secondly, while the results outlined above seem to show support for the Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen, 1991), support for the Discourse Hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994) is minimal at best. This result is in direct contrast with the results of many studies into the acquisition of past-time expression which show that discourse grounding is highly significant (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; López-Ortega, 2000; Salaberry, 2011). These differences among studies may be the result of a task effect, an area that needs future exploration. Oral interview data from learners over the course of a study abroad experience would be particularly interesting to examine, as this type of task may involve less language monitoring than written tasks. The practical application of the current study to study abroad experience in general is also important. The results presented above call into question the types of linguistic benefits more advanced learners can expect from study abroad. Future studies should examine further what these learners actually gain from an experience abroad.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Cloze Paragraph*

Choose the correct form of the verb in parenthesis.

Hace mucho tiempo, cuando (1. fui, era, he sido) niña, durante las vacaciones de invierno (2. fui, iba, he ido) a la casa de mis abuelos. (3. comimos, comíamos, hemos comido) comida muy rica que mi abuela (4. cocinó, cocinaba, ha cocinado) ese día. Antes de irnos, siempre le (5. hicimos, hacíamos, hemos hecho) muchas preguntas sobre la comida a mi mamá. En la casa de mis abuelos, (6. jugamos, jugábamos, hemos jugado) en el jardín. Antes de vender la casa, mi abuela (7. trabajó, trabajaba, ha trabajado) mucho allí. No me acuerdo cuando (8. supimos, sabíamos, hemos sabido) que mis abuelos (9. quisieron, querían, han querido) vender la casa grande, pero mis abuelos se (10. mudaron, mudaban, han mudado) pronto y (11. estuvieron, estaban, han estado) muy contentos en su casa más pequeña. ¡Pienso que mi abuela (12. estuvo, estaba, ha estado) cansada de limpiar tanto después de tantos años!

Ahora que mis abuelos ya no tienen una casa grande, vamos a la casa de mis tíos para ver a mi familia, por ejemplo, ayer. Mi prima de 16 años (13. trajo, traía, ha traído) a su novio, Pablo, con ella. Pablo (14. fue, era, ha sido) un poco extraño. El caso de Pablo (15. fue, iba, ha ido) a ser muy interesante al final. Todos (16. comieron, comían, han comido) la comida rica que mi tía y mi abuela (17. prepararon, preparaban, han preparado) por la mañana cuando de repente nos (18. dimos, dábamos, hemos dado) cuenta que Pablo no (19. estuvo, estaba, ha estado) en la mesa. Después de unos minutos, mi tío lo (20. buscó, buscaba, ha buscado) y nosotros (21. charlamos, charlábamos, hemos charlado). ¿Dónde estaría? Todos (22. dijeron, decían, han dicho) sus ideas de las actividades secretas de Pablo.

Mi madre: “(23. jugó, jugaba, ha jugado) al baloncesto hace una hora.”

Mi padre: “Pero (24. estuvo, estaba, ha estado) en el garaje antes de la cena.”

¿Y Pablo? En la piscina. Claro.

## Appendix B: Cross-tabulation Tables

Time of action:

Group	1+ year ago		Yesterday	
	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective
NSs	35.0% (21)	65.0% (39)	70.0% (42)	30.0% (18)
High (Time 1)	42.6% (46)	57.4% (62)	58.9% (63)	41.1% (44)
Mid (Time 1)	44.4% (64)	55.6% (80)	69.5% (98)	30.5% (43)
Mid (Time 2)	42.0% (55)	58.0% (76)	65.4% (85)	34.6% (45)
Low (Time 1)	41.7% (45)	58.3% (63)	70.8% (75)	29.5% (31)
Low (Time 2)	41.5% (44)	58.5% (62)	66.7% (72)	33.3% (36)

Inherent Aspect:

Group	Telic		Activity		State	
	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective
NSs	67.5% (27)	32.5% (13)	57.5% (23)	42.4% (17)	32.5% (13)	67.5% (27)
High (Time 1)	77.8% (56)	22.2% (16)	45.8% (33)	52.4% (39)	28.2% (20)	71.5% (51)
High (Time 2)	79.7% (51)	20.3% (13)	37.5% (24)	62.5% (40)	23.4% (15)	76.6% (49)
Mid (Time 1)	78.1% (75)	21.9% (21)	52.1% (50)	47.5% (46)	39.8% (37)	60.2% (56)
Mid (Time 2)	75.5% (65)	24.4% (21)	51.1% (45)	48.9% (43)	34.5% (30)	65.5% (57)
Low (Time 1)	71.8% (51)	28.2% (20)	55.6% (40)	44.4% (32)	40.8% (29)	59.2% (42)
Low (Time 2)	76.4% (55)	23.6% (17)	55.7% (39)	44.3% (31)	30.6% (22)	69.4% (50)

Discourse Grounding:

Group	Background		Foreground	
	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective
NSs	40.0% (24)	60.0% (36)	65.0% (39)	35.0% (29)
Mid (Time 2)	47.3% (62)	52.7% (69)	60.0% (78)	40.0% (52)

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