LEARNING *SER* AND *ESTAR* IN A SPANISH SPEAKING COUNTRY: HOW CAN INSTRUCTION HELP?

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the development of grammatical accuracy in the study abroad context by analyzing the written output of 20 learners of Spanish as a second language in Costa Rica. Following Ryan & Lafford's (1992) initial research design, data were collected at three different time intervals, coding the total number of correct uses of two copula verbs, ser *and* estar, *as well as the total number of obligatory contexts targeted. In accordance with the mentioned investigation, location proved to be more prone to error than condition, although the progressive* estar *did not present any difficulty for the learners. A U-shape pattern of development was found where* estar *was overused after one month of study abroad, and nearly the end of the semester abroad, a trend not documented before. A close analysis of the lexical combination of adjectives or nouns and* estar *partially explains the results obtained, as well as the variety of Spanish the learners were exposed to.*

KEY WORDS: study abroad, stages of acquisition, *ser/estar*, grammatical accuracy, written tasks

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga el desarrollo de la corrección gramatical analizando el output *escrito de 20 aprendices de español como segunda lengua en Costa Rica. Siguiendo el diseño de investigación de Ryan & Lafford (1992), se recogieron datos en tres intervalos diferentes, codificando el número correcto de verbos copulativos usados,* ser *o* estar, *así como el número de contextos en los que se requería uno de los dos verbos. Al igual que en la investigación citada, la localización presentó más errores que la condición, aunque el uso de* estar *para el presente progresivo no presentó ninguna dificultad para los aprendices. Se encontró un patrón de desarrollo en forma de U, en el que* estar *se utilizó más de lo necesario tras un mes de estudio en el extranjero y hacia el final de la estancia, una tendencia que no había sido documentada antes. Un análisis minucioso de las combinaciones de adjetivos y sustantivos con* estar *explica en parte los resultados obtenidos, así como la variedad de español a la que los aprendices estuvieron expuestos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: estudio en el extranjero, estadios de adquisición, *ser/estar*, corrección gramatical, tareas escritas

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INTRODUCTION

Writing tasks and oral tasks

Writing is probably one of the most important linguistic activities a second language (L2) learner has to engage in for communicative and expressive purposes. Letters, postcards, e-mails, diaries, notes, stories, lists, reviews, reports and different types of essays are common products in everyday life whose writing requires not only mastering the L2, but also certain familiarity with the conventions of a given genre (*e.g.*, Hyland, 2003, 2007). In the academic contexts most of us work at, the preponderance of the written language is undeniable and large portions of the instruction time are devoted to the development of the writing skills. Usually, teachers do not approach writing in isolation, but they link it to the formal instructions of different linguistic features, such as a given vocabulary or a grammar topic. In the North American college tradition, the third year of study of a foreign language is usually devoted to the acquisition of the writing skills needed to successfully complete subsequent content courses, traditionally literature, history, and culture classes.

Despite the importance that college and university language programs assign to the development of the students written language, very little research in Second Language Acquisition makes use of written data (Harklau, 2002). The reason behind this asymmetry between the two modes is that oral data is usually considered a more reliable reflection of what the learner has truly acquired. In contrast with the oral mode, in the written mode learners have more time to ponder, to think, to apply grammar rules and to rewrite their sentences (Sanz, 1997; Montrul, Foote & Perpiñán, 2008). Thus, written data are usually considered a second-tier source of information about the internalized L2 system. Underneath this assumption lies Krashen's (1985) famous distinction between acquisition and learning. According to this distinction, if a grammar rule has been acquired, as opposed to merely learned, the learner should be able to use it without consciously thinking about it. Thus, researchers can access the acquired aspects of the L2 by eliciting oral samples. Since the oral language does not allow time for applying the learned rules, speaking is believed to represent the acquired language. In contrast, L2 learners' written output is usually more accurate than their oral output.

The distinction between learning and acquisition has been a controversial one since its incipience. As Gregg (1984) already noticed a number of years ago, it is a theory that cannot be empirically proved nor rejected. In other words, the distinction between acquisition and learning lacks falsifiability. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that oral output tends to be less accurate than written output. This does not mean that we should embrace Krashen's distinction since we can appeal to other explanations for this asymmetry related to the amount of processing time each mode provides. Sanz (1997) observed that the learners' production of object clitics was more accurate in the written mode than in the oral mode while completing three different tasks: a sentence completion, a structured interview task and a video narration. She concludes that "the oral mode makes more demands on production processes" (p. 53).

Similarly, in a recent study of the acquisition of Spanish gender agreement, Montrul, Foote and Perpiñán (2008) show that agreement accuracy rates were significantly higher when learners had to complete written tasks than when completing oral tasks. The types of tasks employed in this study were very different in nature than a communication task where the speaker has to express his/her own ideas, since the participants had to describe a series of pictures. This study, however, cautions us against assuming that oral and written data can provide similar types of information. They conclude that "we can interpret accuracy scores on the oral task as being more representative of fast, implicit, and automatically processed knowledge (typically acquired in early childhood), whereas accuracy scores of the written tasks could be taken to reflect ability with metalinguistic, explicit knowledge (typically acquired later)" (p. 541).

In sum, despite their common use in the language classroom, written tasks have been hardly used in SLA research, and particularly in the study abroad context (DeKeyser, 2007: 211) because the information they provide regarding language development is believed to be filtered by the conscious application of grammar rules and in that sense, they do not accurately reflect the learner's interlanguage. Since the very nature of writing provides time to think and reconsider the outcome, researchers have often neglected this source of information on the basis of its indirectness. Nevertheless, if learners self-correct in writing, as they often do in the oral mode, the goal of making a particular grammar feature salient or to focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998) is met. Thus, whether learners use their acquired grammar rules or whether they rely on their learned grammar

rules, the result is that they are communicating not only successfully but also accurately. There is some evidence, however, that different contexts of language learning, such as the study abroad or the foreign language classroom, may have an impact on grammatical accuracy of learners' output. In the following section previous research on the emergence and development of linguistic features in the study abroad context is reviewed.

Grammatical accuracy development in the study abroad context

Very few studies have contrasted the development of any grammatical feature in the study abroad context with the development in the foreign language setting. One outstanding exception is Ryan & Lafford's (1992) study on the development of the *ser/estar* distinction. They found some differences with respect to the acquisition stages reported by VanPatten (1985) for students in the foreign language classroom. The stages of acquisition found by Van Patten (1985, 1987) were: 1. zero copula; 2. use of *ser*; 3. *estar* in progressive constructions; 4. *estar* for location and 5. *estar* for conditions. In the study abroad context, according to Ryan & Lafford, the uses of *estar* to express condition are acquired earlier than to those to express location, as opposed to the foreign language context. They also document an extended period where the zero copula is the preferred error to encode a condition or a state, such as *abierto/cerrado* 'open/close'. In addition, the percentage of accuracy of copula choice was higher in the study abroad context (83%) than in the foreign language classroom (70%).

It was also documented that, in the three times when the data were elicited, the copula *ser* was overused, that is, there were instances of *ser* where *estar* was required. Consequently, there were fewer instances of use of *estar* than required. They also observed an increase of the use of the two verbs from Time 1 to Time 2, but a decrease in the use of *ser* in Time 3. Still, at the end of the semester studying abroad, there were more uses of *ser* than required. Thus, the use of *estar* increased steadily, although in T3 it was still underutilized.

The question of the acquisition of grammatical features in the study abroad context remains a fruitful area of investigation. In a recent study, Collentine (2004) observed that the oral output of the study abroad students was less correct than the output of the foreign language learners. Nevertheless, Collentine also acknowledges that study abroad learners used more *estar* and therefore they were

more prone to error. In other words, since they used more *estar*, they also made more errors. Ryan and Lafford, however, found the opposite trend, namely, that study abroad students manipulated the two copulas more accurately than foreign language learners.

To summarize thus far, although there is some research on the development of grammatical accuracy in the study abroad setting, it is difficult to ascertain whether the input that surrounds the learners together with the need to communicate with native speakers of the target language contributes positively to the acquisition of certain grammatical features or not. It remains to be seen whether not only the classroom instruction but also the daily instances of interaction study abroad learners engage in influences the L2 development. In the case of the grammatical feature we are concerned with, the *ser* and *estar* copula choice, although the textbooks and the classroom instruction reflect the standard Spanish, the different varieties of Spanish exhibit some differences with respect to the copula choice, as we review in the next section.

Variation in the use of ser *and* estar *from the standard norm*

Spanish is obviously not a homogeneous language and many linguistic features exhibit great variation according to geography. One of the features that vary is the choice of the two copula verbs, *ser* and *estar*. Every variety of Spanish employs *estar* to evaluate or judge a thing, a person, or an event. Some examples of this function are provided in (1-3), which are common in all varieties of Spanish:[1]

1. *La casa está muy vieja*
   'The house is very old'
2. *María está realmente guapa*
   'Mary looks very pretty'
3. *El examen está muy difícil*
   'The exam is very hard'

However, this function of evaluation associated with *estar* is extended to a broader list of adjectives in some varieties of Spanish. In Morelia, México,

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[1] From here onwards, all the examples will keep students' exact wording and orthography.

Gutiérrez (1992) documented a linguistic change in place when speakers choose *estar* in a higher frequency than other varieties of Spanish in order to express their point of view in a description. Gutiérrez proposes that the use of *estar* helps the speaker to highlight the subjective tone of their description. In the same line of thought, Martínez (2005) further claimed that this innovative use of *estar* is not only a part of the Spanish variety of Morelia, but of what she calls Standard Mexican Spanish. Her Mexican informants, men and women with university degrees, accepted examples including adjectives such as *chiquito* 'small' and *bueno* 'good' as correct:

4. *Aunque la casa estaba chiquita la quisimos comprar*
   'Although the house was (*estar*) small we wanted to buy it'
5. *Yo ya quería llevar al niño a la escuela pero me dijeron que estaba muy chico de edad todavía*
   'I wanted to take the kid to the school but they told me that he was (*estar*) very small in age yet'
6. *A mí no me gustó mucho la película, yo digo que no está muy buena, pero claro, es cuestión de gustos*
   'I did not like the movie a lot, I say that it is (*estar*) not very good, but of course, it is a matter of taste'

In sheer contrast, Martínez's informants from other Spanish-speaking countries, such as Spain, Colombia and Argentina, considered the examples above as erroneous. Although we do not have a complete description of the copula choices in all different varieties of Spanish, it is clear that Costa Rican Spanish also exhibits this subjective use of *estar*, which does not occur in Peninsular Spanish, for example. Instead of the typical textbook sentence to illustrate the use of the imperfect, reproduced in (7a), in Costa Rica it is common to hear (7b), which includes the verb *estar*:

7. a. *Cuando era pequeña, jugaba en el parque*
      'When I was (*ser*) little, I played in the park'
   b. *Cuando estaba chiquita, jugaba en el parque*
      'When I was (*estar*) little, I played in the park'

A book by a Costa Rican writer, *Pantalones cortos* by Lara Ríos, which reflects the speech of a little boy in the form of a diary, provides a clear use of *estar* + noun *amigo*, emphasizing the temporality of the friendships at that age:

8. *Estoy muy amigo de Toni, Alberto y Marcos, que son muy buena gente.*
   'I am (*estar*) very friend of Toni, Alberto y Marcos, which are really good people'
   (p. 30)

It is not the purpose of this section to provide a complete description of the use of *ser* and *estar* in the different varieties of Spanish but to distinguish the Costa Rican variety from the standard one. It is also true that textbooks students work with usually follow the standard variety and tend to ignore variations of this type, in an attempt to provide easy-to follow rules that account for thorny issue of the copula choice.

THE STUDY

In a rather exploratory manner, we investigated the changes in the participants' written use of *ser* and *estar* during one semester of intensive language study in Costa Rica. Although no comparison with a control group was performed, we were able to assess the overall effect of their learning experiences. In this study we address the following questions:

Q1: What is the use of *ser* and *estar* during a study abroad experience in the written mode? Is this pattern of development similar to the one found in Ryan & Lafford (1992) for oral language?
Q2: What are the accuracy rates in the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* at the end of a semester in the study abroad context?

The participants

The 20 students that participated in this study had English as their L1 and were enrolled in the beginning course, a 14-credit intensive one-semester Spanish course in Costa Rica. They were in different sections in two different sites: Heredia and Puntarenas but the classes shared the same design, methodology

and syllabus. Students met for three hours from Monday to Friday for fifteen weeks and received formal instruction using U.S. printed material. They had to complete daily homework and their grade was based on a midterm, a final, participation and homework. The book learners followed in their classes was Salaberry, Barrette, Elliot and Fernández-García (2004), *Impresiones*. In addition to daily instruction, they all lived with a local family and most of them had regular meetings with Costa Rican students of their age in order to practice Spanish.

The instrument: The task and task-essentialness

We decided that the task had to resemble a real life task, but we also followed Loschky and Bley-Vroman's (1993) insight that a given grammar point, such as the copula choice, had to arise naturally in the task design. We decided that a letter format where students described a new friend to their parents in the US would be appropriate. We anticipated that the description of a person would in principle trigger a considerable amount of the two Spanish copulas *ser* and *estar*. It was deemed essential or at least "natural" to use these two verbs for a description of a friend. Again, the possibility of completing the task without using a single instance of the two copula verbs was not ruled out.

Procedures

Following Ryan and Lafford (1992), we conducted three observations at three different time intervals during the semester abroad. We decided not to conduct a pre-program observation because study abroad participants were truly beginners which had not studied Spanish at college before this course. It is true that some participants might have had some high school Spanish but not enough to count it as first year Spanish. Thus, unlike Ryan and Lafford (1992) our first time of elicitation (Time 1) was after one month of study of the language in the immersion setting, our second time interval (Time 2) was the second month of their stay and finally, our third time coincides with their Time 3, that is, towards the end of the semester abroad or three months later.

We collected 60 compositions in two different sites in Costa Rica. The prompt was written in English, so as to prevent any words or phrases from being

copied from the instructions into the compositions.[2] Moreover, since they were beginning students, we wanted to make sure that the prompt was correctly understood. Students hand-wrote their compositions during class time. They were given 30 minutes to complete the writing on each occasion. Language professors were instructed not to help the students and not to let them use dictionaries or other reference material. The students' compositions were typed keeping their original form as much as possible and hesitations and mistakes were preserved.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

For explanatory purposes we provide the results obtained in the three times of observation, since there were clear and remarkable differences from one month to the next. We report the actual uses of each copula as well as their obligatory occasions of copula use. Following Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993: 210), "an obligatory occasion consists of an occasion when a learner creates a context that requires the use of a specific linguistic feature –irrespective of whether the feature is or is not actually used".

Results at Time 1

At Time 1 there were 112 uses of copulas, but contrary to our expectations, and unlike Ryan and Lafford's study, in these compositions, *estar* is used in more occasions than required. Learners, nevertheless, used *estar* in all the obligatory occasions, which were 25.

TABLE 1. Copula use in Time 1

OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF SER	CORRECT USES/TOTAL USES OF SER	OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF ESTAR	CORRECT USES/TOTAL USES OF ESTAR	TOTAL USE OF COPULAS
88	83/83	25	25/29	112

[2] The instructions given for the composition were the following:

Nombre: _____ Curso: _____

Fecha: _____

WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR PARENTS DESCRIBING YOUR ROOMMATE OR A NEW FRIEND IN THE UNIVERSITY: TELL WHAT THE PERSON IS LIKE AND EXPLAIN WHAT ACTIVITIES HE/SHE ENGAGES IN, WHAT ACTIVITIES YOU DO TOGETHER.

There were five fewer uses of *ser* than required and these were: 1) omission of copula in one case and 2) four cases of use of *estar* when the correct copula should have been *ser*. These four cases were all uses of *ser* + descriptive adjective by four different learners:

9. *Jorge no gusta fútbol porque Jorge no está bueno*
   'Jorge does not like soccer because Jorge is (*estar*) not good'
10. *Mi compañero de cuarto está muy simpatico e inteligente*
    'My housemate is *(estar)* very nice and intelligent'
11. *Nosotros no estudiamos mucho porque nosotros estamos muy inteligente*
    'We do not study much because we are (*estar*) very intelligent'
12. *Mi nueva amiga Anie esta simpatica*
    'My new friend Anie is (*estar*) nice'

Consequently, there were four more uses of *estar* than required. Thus, during the first month of acquisition, the tendency is to overuse *estar* for occasions where *ser* should have been used. We did not find the cases of overuse of *ser*, as predicted by the stages described by Ryan and Lafford. In terms of percentages of accuracy, *estar* is 100% since all the targeted contexts were correctly supplied, but *ser* was accurately used 94% of the times it was targeted. In four occasions the learners did not use *ser*, using *estar* instead.

Results at Time 2

During the second month of the study abroad, namely Time 2, however, we find the opposite trend. In the written output, we found that there were more uses of *ser* than required and, consequently, *estar* should have been used more often. Specifically, there should have been nine more uses of *estar*, which were encoded with the verb *ser*. Nevertheless, there is an incorrect use of *estar*, the one illustrated in (15) that should have been some other verb, such as *usar*, for instance. Thus, if this is an incorrect use of *estar*, there are not nine, but ten occasions where *estar* should have been used, and that are missing in these compositions. The nine instances are reproduced in examples (13)-(21), where the verb *ser* is used instead.

TABLE 2: Copula use in Time 2

OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF SER	CORRECT/TOTAL USES OF SER	OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF ESTAR	CORRECT/TOTAL USES OF ESTAR	TOTAL USE OF COPULAS
101	101/111	38	27/28	139

These nine incorrect uses of *ser* can be classified in three groups according to their semantics: 1. location, 2. condition and 3. progressive. There is also an expression of height that should not be encoded with *ser* but with a specific verb, *medir*. In addition, there are five cases of *ser* to express the location of a person, three of condition and one progressive obligatory occasion of the use of *estar*:

Location:

13. *ella *es en track 2*
     'She is (*ser) in track 2'
14. *conocé J. el premiro semana *fui aquí*
     'I met J. the first day I was (*ser*) here'
15. *entonces yo *era a la casa para estudio*
     'then I was (*ser) at home to study'
16. *Mi amiga Gloria *es en un clase differente de mi*
     'My friend Gloria is (*ser*) in a different class than me'
17. *Cuando no viajamos y *somos en Puntarenas, solemos ir a lugares juntos*
     'When we do not travel and we are (*ser) at Puntarenas, we usually go to places together'

Condition:

18. *Nosotros *somos muy contentas en nos cuarto*
     'We are (*ser) very happy in our room'
19. *Yo *era muy contenta*
     'I was (*ser) very happy'
20. *En Costa Rica, R. *es un poco triste porque ella tiene un novio en Nevada*
     'In Costa Rica, R. is (*ser) a little sad because she has a boyfriend in Nevada'

Progressive:

21. *En otro lado, mi amigo J. de los estados unidos *es visitando ahora*
     'On the other hand, my friend J. from the united states is (*ser) visiting now'

There is also one single attempt to express height, which does not require any of the two copulas in Spanish, but the use of a different verb, namely *medir*.

22. *Tiene cabello rubio y ojos obscuros, y *es más o menos dos metros*
    'He has blond hair and dark eyes and is (*ser) more or less two meters'

We see that the tendency is the opposite than the one in Time 1. The number of copulas increases but there are fewer uses of *estar* than required. Students used 27 times the copula *estar* correctly, but there were other locative and conditional uses that should have been encoded with this verb. In addition, there is one anomalous use of *estar* that we could not classify:

23. *estoy muy feliz porque nosotras *estan lo ~~miso~~ mismo libros*
    'I am very happy because we are (*estar) the same books'

It may be the case that the learner forgot to write the main verb, *usando* 'using'. Summarizing, at Time 2 there were more uses of *ser* than required, which reminds us of stage 2 in VanPatten (1987) where *ser* is the default option and location and condition are expressed with this copula. With respect to percentages of accuracy, every time there was an obligatory occasion to use *ser*, it was actually used, thus achieving a 100% of accuracy. *Estar*, however, was not used as often as needed, yielding to a 78% of accuracy.

Results at Time 3

Finally, right before the end of the semester, the students wrote the same descriptive composition. At Time 3 the amount of copula use in general lowered, but the actual uses and the obligatory occasions matched better. Nevertheless, the raw numbers shown in Table 3 are misleading since there are some uses of *estar* that should have been *ser* and vice versa. At Time 3 the pattern of error is more complicated than the two previous intervals of elicitation.

TABLE 3: Copula use at Time 3

OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF SER	CORRECT/TOTAL USES OF SER	OBLIGATORY OCCASIONS OF ESTAR	CORRECT/TOTAL USES OF ESTAR	TOTAL USE OF COPULAS
74	66/73	48	41/48	121

There were seven cases of *ser* that should have been *estar* or just omitted, which were classified as three conditions, three locatives and one that responded to a literal translation from the learner's l1 but did not correspond to any use of *estar*:

24. *Mamá,*
    *¿Cómo esta? *Soy muy bien aquí en Puntarenas.*
    'Mum,
    How are you? I am (*ser*) very well here in Puntarenas'

25. **Soy emocionada a regreso para visitar otra ves*
    'I am (*ser*) excited to come back to visit again'

26. *Todo *es bien*
    'Everything is (*ser*) all right'

27. **Es en el gimnasio*
    'He is (*ser*) at the gym'

28. *R. *es en mi clase*
    'R. is (*ser*) in my class'

29. *Ella *es en un programa differente*
    'She is (*ser*) in a different program'

30. *Se llama *es M.*
    'She is called is (*ser*) M.'

One learner used two zero copulas in her composition at Time 3, which should have been *ser*:

31. *Ella de Alaska y estudia a la Universidad (…) Eso muy triste.*
    'She Ø from Alaska and studies at the University. (...)That Ø very sad'

Similarly, there were seven uses of *estar* for descriptions that, according to the standard use of Spanish, should have been *ser*:

32. **Estará muy dificíl decer "Adíos"*
    'It will be (*estar*) very difficult to say 'Goodbye'

33. *Espero que nosotros ***estámos*** amigas por mucho tiempo. S. tiene un novio. El es un bueno gente tambien y cuando ellos estan juntos, les *estan muy lindos.*

> *Hoy despues clase, S. y yo iremos a una fiesta con nuestros amigos de XXX. Creo que la **estará** un buen tiempo.*
> 'I hope that we will be (*estar) friends for a long time. S. has a boyfriend. He is (*ser*) good people and when they are together, they are (*estar) very cute. Today after class, S. and I will go to a party with our friends from XXX. I think it will be (*estar) a good time'

34. *El es un muy bueno estudiante de inglés, y piense que *estoy una muy buena estudiante de español. No estoy de acuerdo, pero él es demasiado simpático.*
    'He is a very good student of English and thinks that I am (*estar) a very good student of Spanish. I do not agree, but he is (*ser*) too nice'

35. *J. y yo *hamos **estado** amigos por 6 años. Cuando J. *fui en colegio, el *estuvo muy tímido.*
    'J. and I have been (*estar) friends for six years. When J. was (*ser) at school, he was (*estar) very shy'

In sum, we observed that there were 74 obligatory occasions where *ser* should have been used, but this copula was only used 65 times. The remaining nine times either *estar* was used (seven times) or a zero copula (two times by the same learner).

With respect to the use of *estar*, there were 48 instances of total use, but only 41 of those were correct. Since there were six other uses of *ser* that should have been *estar* plus one instance of zero copula (28), the number of obligatory occasions adds up to 48 instances, giving the false impression of perfect command of copula choice.

36. *Ahora nosotros Ø escuchando musica en nuestro cuarto*
    'Now we Ø listening music in our room'

In terms of percentages of accurate use, *ser* was used 89% of the occasions it was targeted and *estar* 84% of the times. Thus, at Time 3 there is a confusion between the two copulas, but the accuracy percentages are still a little higher than the ones reported by Ryan & Lafford for the Spanish copulas combined (Time 1=82%; Time 2=85% and Time 3= 83%).

General quantitative results

Summarizing, we can say that at Time 1 there are more uses of *estar* than needed resulting in an overuse of this copula. At Time 2 the trend is reversed and *ser* is used in occasions where *estar* should have been used. In the third and last month of stay, Time 3, learners have as many errors in one direction as in the other. In other words, unlike the previous two times, at the end of the semester, there is no clear error pattern. Nevertheless, there is less use of the verb *ser* than in the two previous times and more use of the verb *estar*. The following figures report the mean average use of each copula at the three times of observation:

TABLE 4. Mean average and standard deviation (SD) of the use of *ser* at the three times

USES OF SER	USES OF SER	USES OF SER
Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
4.15 (1.98)	5.55 (2.87)	3.6 (3.05)

TABLE 5: Mean average and standard deviation (SD) of the use of *estar* at the three times

USES OF ESTAR	USES OF ESTAR	USES OF ESTAR
Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
1.46 (0.99)	1.5 (1.14)	2.3 (1.62)

By looking at Tables 4 and 5, we can see that there is a clear contrast in the two copula use: *ser* declines its use in Time 3 while *estar* increases its presence in the compositions. Paired t-tests report that the difference of *estar* between Time 2 and Time 3 is significant (p-value=0.035). Nevertheless, the use of *estar* in Time 1 and Time 2 remains practically the same according to the paired samples t-tests (p=0.866). This means that towards the end of the semester, at the end of the third month of stay, learners start using the verb *estar* in creative, although not always correct ways.

Perhaps the most surprising finding is that, unlike what VanPatten (1987) documented for the foreign language context and Ryan and Lafford (1992) did for the study abroad, we found an initial stage where *estar* was overused. A month after studying abroad learners used more *estar* than required. Two months later, at Time 2, the same learners targeted more conditions and locations, that is they

created more obligatory occasions to use *estar*, but this time, they incorrectly encoded them with *ser*. Finally, at Time 3, towards the end of the semester abroad, the pattern is less clear but we still find more uses of *estar* than required. Thus, and unlike Ryan and Lafford, both at Time 1 and Time 3 we found some extra uses of *estar* for occasions where *ser* was expected. This pattern of development can be better described as a U-shape (Marcovitch & Lewkowicz, 2004) than as an ascending line, since the learners exhibit a regression to the overuse of *ser* at Time 2. To better understand the development of the interlanguage of these 20 learners over time, we will take a closer look at their actual production.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Once we have summarized the amount of use, we look at the types of combinations our learners provided. First, it is interesting to note that evaluative adjectives, such as *simpático* 'nice', *inteligente* 'intelligent' and *bueno* 'good', prompted some learners to use *estar*, as early as their first month abroad. Some learners evaluated the person they decided to describe by saying that they are intelligent, good (soccer player) and nice. The rest of the adjectives that express physical descriptions were always combined with *ser*: *alta* 'tall', *bonita* 'pretty', *moreno* 'dark', *tímido* 'shy', *rubio* 'blond', *cómica* 'amusing', *divertida* 'funny', etcetera, following the target norm.

At Time 1 learners only targeted uses of *estar* to express location four times and these were correctly encoded: *estar en clase* 'be in class', *estar en Belize* 'be in Belize', *estar en Guatemala* 'be in Guatemala', *no está aquí en la ciudad* 'S/he is not here in the city'. There is only one instance of use of progressive tense: *En Costa Rica hace sol y algunas días está lloviendo* 'In Costa Rica it is sunny and some days it is raining'.

The task prompted many instances of *estar* for condition, since according to the genre, the beginning of a letter starts with a salutation and a question about the addressee's wellbeing: after that, learners talked about how they felt in general. One may argue that this part should have factored out, since it could have been learned as a chunk and this not reflect the learner's internal system that triggers use of the copula. Nevertheless, if the task is a real communication task learners had to think to whom they were addressing the letter and act accordingly. Depending on the addressee of the letter, the verb form had to be singular or plural.

The difficulty to decide whether a segment is a memorized chunk or an on-line creation can be illustrated by the following excerpt, where the learner communicates with his/her parents and tells them about her being so-so:

37. *¿cómo están? Yo estoy regular porque ahora estoy enferma pero por otra parte estoy bien.*
    'How are you? I am so so because I am sick but other than that, I am fine'

It comes as no surprise that we found a great degree of variability. This variability can be seen in the use of both copulas in combination with the same adjective, *contenta* 'happy', within one single composition at Time 2:

38. *Yo *era muy contenta (…) En otro lado mi amigo J. de los estados unidos *es visitando ahora. (…) Yo estoy contenta a visitar con él*
    'I was (*ser) very happy (…) On the other hand my friend J. from the united states is (*ser) visiting now (…) I am (*estar*) happy to visit with him'

    (Student C, Time 2)

Even though *contento/a* 'happy' is a high frequency adjective both in the input and in the output of the students, the fact that it appears with *estar* does not guarantee that the learner will not employ *ser* to express condition in subsequent utterances. The following excerpt from T3 illustrates how, at the end of the semester abroad, the learner correctly uses *estar* to combine it with *contenta* but resorts back to *ser* when conveying her excitement:

39. *¡yo estoy contenta por todos los amigos yo conocí en Costa Rica! A mí me encanta Costa Rica y *soy emocionada a regreso para visitar otra ves.*
    'I am (*estar*) happy for all the friends I have met in Costa Rica! I love Costa Rica and I am (*ser) excited to return to visit again'

    (Student D, Time 3)

The adjective *feliz* 'happy' is semantically related to *contento/a*, also of high frequency in our data, which nevertheless we accepted either with *ser* or with *estar*. Although it is our intuition that *estar feliz* is less frequent in the input than *ser feliz*, we believe that the former is also part of the standard Spanish. Thus,

either combination was coded as correct. Both at Time 2 and at Time 3, we find this adjective combined with *estar*.

40. *Estoy feliz ella es mi amiga*
    'I am (*estar*) happy she is my friend'

    (Student I, Time 2)

41. *Estoy feliz porque tengo amiga nueva*
    'I am (*estar*) happy because I have a new friend'

    (Student D, Time 2)

42. *Estoy muy feliz hoy porque tengo una compañera nueva quien es una buena gente*
    'I am (*estar*) very happy today because I have a new mate who is a good people'

    (Student C, Time 3)

43. *¡Estoy muy feliz porque yo tengo una amiga nueva!!*
    'I am (*estar*) very happy because I have a new friend!!'

    (Student D, Time 3)

It is interesting to note that although *feliz* can be combined with either copula, *contento* cannot and must be used with *estar*. In principle there is no semantic difference between the two adjectives that the teacher can appeal to, but the learner has to become aware that the adjective *contento* cannot be combined with *ser*. Only explicit instruction can shed light on this combinatorial gap, so that the learner notices this peculiar collocation of the target language.

Another particularly enlightening example is the combination of *estar* + *amigo*. Usually, the problem of choice of copula is restricted to their combination with adjectives, since with nouns the verb that always appears is *ser*. Nevertheless, it is our experience that this kind of explanation does not produce better output since it is hard for our learners to distinguish between nouns and adjectives. In addition, according to our learners' and some teachers' general belief, *estar* combines with temporary properties while *ser* with permanent ones. If we apply this generalization, since the concept of friendship is viewed as a temporary condition, particularly for students who have to move back to their country after the experience, the lexical item *amigo* should be combined with *estar*, something we find both at Time 2 and Time 3. Notice that in the three examples in our data

there is also some time expression that underscores the temporal—sometimes ephemeral—nature of the friendship:

44. *J. y yo hamos estado amigos por 6 años.*
    'J. and I have been (*estar*) friends for 6 years'

    (Student I, Time 3)

45. *Espero que nosotros estámos amigas por mucho tiempo*
    'I hope we are (*estar*) friends for a long time'

    (Student C, Time 3)

46. *Estamos muy buenos amigos y cuando salgo, vamos a estar amigos en nuestros diferentes estados*
    'We are (*estar*) very good friends and when I leave, we are going to be (*estar*) friends in our different states'

    (Student A, Time 2)

Finally, beside this choice of *estar* plus the noun *amigo*, there is also a couple of examples that are worth commenting. One is the combination of *estar* + the adjective *difícil* 'hard', repeated in (47) and the other is *estar* + *buen estudiante* 'good student'. Both examples were written at Time 3 by two different learners. The first example appears in the conclusion of her letter when the learner describes saying goodbye as a very hard thing to do:

47. *Estará muy difícil decer "Adíos"*
    'It will be (*estar*) very difficult to say "Goodbye"'

We reviewed in the *Quatitative results of the study* section that the evaluative value of *estar* is part of standard Spanish, but with some adjectives or even nouns, it is a distinctive feature of some varieties of Spanish, such as Mexican or Costa Rican varieties. This is one of those extensions, since a teacher native of Peninsular Spanish would mark it as erroneous. Another clear example of this evaluative or subjective flavor that *estar* adds to the sentence, is the one in (48), where the learner decides to describe her conversation partner. She correctly uses *ser* to describe that her partner is a very good student of English, but when talking about her own abilities in Spanish, she decides to switch to *estar*:

48. *El es un muy bueno estudiante de ingles y piense que estoy una muy buena estudiante de español. No estoy de acuerdo, pero él es demasiado simpático.*
    'He is (*ser*) a very good student of English and thinks I am (*estar*) a very good student of Spanish. I do not agree, but he is (*ser*) too nice'

(Student A, Time 3)

If *ser* is used to encode inherent properties of a person, as any first year textbook would dictate, this verb cannot be the correct choice for encoding a description of herself as a good student of Spanish. By mapping *estar* with the notion of the subjectivity of the description, as in Mexican and Costa Rican varieties of Spanish, *estar* is a more appropriate copula, since being a good student is not perceived as an inherent feature of herself, but as an opinion or impression.

DISCUSSION

The accurate choice of the copula by L2 learners is a long and complicated process that, as many other grammatical features, does not proceed in a linear order and requires a great amount of restructuring. Through the analysis of the written output of a group of elementary students, it was observed that the number of obligatory occasions or targets of *estar* significantly increases from Time 2 to Time 3, that is, from the second to the third month of their study abroad. Not only the targeted occasions increase but the actual uses of *estar* as well, while the use of *ser* decreases from Time 2 to Time 3. As in Ryan & Lafford (1992), and unlike previous descriptions of development in foreign language contexts, in our study condition seems to be acquired earlier while the expression of location usually is encoded with *ser*. At Time 3, although there are still errors, the majority of the expressions of condition (28 targets and only two uses of *ser* for this function) are encoded with *estar*. There were much fewer occasions where the expression of location was needed, namely eight cases, and five of those were expressed with *estar*. Thus, the rate of accuracy was higher for condition (90%) than for location (62.5%). According to VanPatten (1985) and others 90% of accuracy is the threshold indicator of acquisition. In that case, we can conclude that the use of *estar* to express location has not yet been acquired by our learners. In addition, it is worth noting that the progressive use of *estar* appears in our data several times and with the exception of one student that uses a zero copula one time, this function of

estar does not entail much difficulty for our learners, which at Time 3 are capable of combining the progressive use with the present perfect tense:

49. *Hemos estado viajando a muchos lugares*
   'We have been (*estar*) traveling to many places'

(Student D, Time 3)

In sum, there are similarities and differences with respect to the original research design by Ryan and Lafford. Regarding the three main uses of *estar*, we have documented a similar pattern than the one in found in Ryan and Lafford. Thus, the progressive and the condition uses are acquired relatively early, while the location seems to be pending for future instruction. The fact that we did not find an initial stage of a zero copula may be explained by the written nature of the task, as opposed to the oral interview in the original research. Once again, if there is more time to reflect and think about the output as previous research suggest (Sanz, 1997), learners will fill up those gaps and produce complete and more accurate Spanish sentences.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the written task proposed in this study has proved to be a useful but not intrusive tool to elicit relevant amounts of targets and uses of the two copulas. All the learners had to resort at least to the verb *ser* to complete the task, although most compositions included instances of both *ser* and *estar*. In this sense, the use of the copulas was not only natural but also necessary (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993) to successfully complete the task. The data gathered with this written task was a reliable reflection of the development of the linguistic system that the learners were experiencing during their semester abroad.

Finally, a new trend was also observed: at Time 1 and at Time 3 there were more uses of *estar* than needed according to standard language norms. This was not reported in Ryan and Lafford. Two possible explanations have been hinted at so far. One is the written nature of the task, which allows for more thinking time and potentially to apply the rules seen in class or extracted by the learner. The other conflating explanation may be that the variety the learners in this study were exposed to was Costa Rican Spanish, which shares with Mexican Spanish the evaluative use of the verb *estar*, as was described in the *Quatitative results of the study* section. If this is a feature of the input the learners are surrounded by, it may

eventually permeate in their interlanguage. These two are mere speculations to explain the unexpected and not previously documented data obtained in this study.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It was surprising to see that in Time 1 and in Time 3 there were more uses of *estar* than needed, in what can be described a U-shape development. We did not find the expected initial stage where *ser* was used at the expense of *estar*. We found this stage in the middle of our observation time, at Time 2. That is why decided to characterize this process as a U-shape development, following other scientific areas, such as Child Development. In this field, Markowitch and Lewkowicz (2004: 113) define U-shapes as regressions and claim that "regressions in the developmental trajectory of particular behavioral traits are, if anything, the quintessential hallmark of the *developmental process* rather than mere artifacts of development."

As teachers of Spanish as a second language, we know that, in many cases, the choice between *ser* and *estar* depends on the speaker's point of view and that, for students' puzzlement, both copulas can be used. The following excerpt from one of the letters of the students in Time 3 exemplifies these two possibilities and when facing this type of output, we the researchers, debated whether to code it as a correct use of *estar* or not. In her letter, the learner is telling her parents about a person from Nicaragua that she meets everyday in Heredia (Costa Rica) in her way to school. The student does not know this person's name but the fact that he greets her every day makes her happy:

50. *No sé su nombre, Pero, él es de Nicaragua. Yo veí él cada día cuando yo camino a la universidad y cuando yo regreso en la tarde. Siempre él está muy feliz y amable. Cada día espero a ver él, porque me siento mejor después viendo el.*
   'I don't know his name. But he is from Nicaragua. I saw him everyday when I walk to school and when I come back in the afternoon. Always he is (*estar*) very happy and nice. Every day I hope to see him because I feel better after seeing him'

We decided to accept this use of *estar* and classify it as condition, despite the fact that the combination *estar+amable* refers more to how this person acts than to a description of the condition. Nevertheless, this interpretation can match

the learner's expressive needs. Had the student wrote *siempre él es muy feliz y amable* ['he is (*ser*) always very happy and nice'], we would have classified it as a correct use of descriptive *ser*. Thus, both choices would have made sense in the whole description that learner is composing.

As the short excerpt above illustrates, the correct choice between *ser* and *estar* is not an easy one and native speakers from different geographical origins may not agree on the choice. At the beginning of the article we explained that different varieties of Spanish employ these verbs differently and it was hinted that Costa Rican Spanish made a more extensive use of *estar* than other varieties of Spanish. It may be posited that the constant presence of the verb *estar* in the input learners are exposed to, may explain why as early as their first month learners overuse this verb, contrary to what was documented in previous studies, where *ser* usually takes the space of *estar* and not vice versa. The tension between the norm—usually reflected in the textbook—and other varieties does not disappear as the learners' proficiency increases. In a paper of a fourth-year student we can see the expected hesitation between the two copulas:

51. *El libro está muy bueno*
    'The book is (first *estar*, then *ser*) very good'

In fact, as teachers, we should be able to explain that both choices are correct: one would be the evaluative function that sociolinguists have documented in American varieties of Spanish and the other, the choice the learner in example 51 ends up with, is probably the most standard one. The challenge is to offer choices in a clear way, without inducing confusion, and to show that those options will always depend on our communicative needs.

To summarize, two main pedagogical implications derive from this study. One is that, from the structures analyzed in our data, particularly at the end of the semester, *estar* + location has been the hardest construction to acquire. Second and third year courses, therefore, should emphasize and reinforce this use, since it remains opaque, even after approaching its formal instruction. It has proven to be an area of Spanish resistant to change and modification.

The second pedagogical implication is that there are many uses of *estar* that are not in our Spanish textbooks, but that speakers resort to, as some sociolinguists (Gutiérrez, 1992; Martínez, 2005) have correctly pointed out. Thus, if we en-

counter examples like the ones in (32-35) in our students' written output, we should think twice and contemplate the possibility that they may be common sentences in the variety of Spanish the learner has been in contact with. Instead of sanctioning this type of construction, we should take the opportunity to remind our students (and ourselves) that languages offer a great deal of variation and that part of becoming a competent speaker is to make the right choice for the appropriate communicative purpose.

Finally, it must be emphasized that this is just a descriptive study and that the explanations we provided for the observed patterns are, therefore, speculative. Further investigations with larger number of participants which could compare two groups studying Spanish in the study abroad but exposed to different varieties of Spanish could shed some light on the actual impact of the surrounding input on their interim grammars.

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