

The Acquisition of the Verbs *Ser* and *Estar* in Undergraduate Students

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English has only one verb that means “to be,” but Spanish has two versions: *ser* and *estar*. *Ser* is used with much greater frequency, and it indicates stable traits and objective descriptions, such as where a person is from or his personality, while *estar* is used to indicate temporary conditions and subjective opinions. This grossly oversimplified description of the differences between *ser* and *estar* might lead one to believe that these verbs are relatively easy to acquire in people studying Spanish as a second language. Indeed, the use of these verbs is often covered in an introductory Spanish course. However, proficient use of these verbs requires more than an introductory textbook’s explanation. As teachers of Spanish are frustrated to discover, errors in the use of these verbs persist even in students at the advanced levels of Spanish who have recently focused on these two verbs.

One question should come to mind at this point: can the process of acquiring these two verbs be accelerated by changing standard pedagogical approaches, or is it simply a natural acquisition process that must run its course in its own time? This study does not explore whether or how an instructor’s teaching method can effect a more rapid acquisition of *ser* and *estar*. Rather, we examine the written use of these two verbs (and in particular, the accuracy of this use) in college students studying Spanish, the vast majority of whom are native speakers of English.

When a group of Spanish professors (Elizabeth A. Martínez-Gibson, Silvia Rodríguez and Joseph R. Weyers) conceived of a study to design a more effective teaching method for *ser* and *estar*, they realized

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that first they needed to assess the proficiency exhibited by students in the use of these verbs. To do this, they designed a 50-item objective test that forced students to choose between *ser* and *estar*, and a composition that was intended to compel students to use these two verbs.

The first part consists of two paragraphs in which students must select whether *ser* or *estar* is appropriate for a given phrase. Both *ser* and *estar* are in the correct tense and person to eliminate the possibility that trying to conjugate the verb might distract students. The first paragraph is a woman's description of her husband, while the second is a woman's letter about her trip to Spain. In content both are comparable to the type of material beginning and intermediate students are exposed to during class and in their reading: ordinary descriptions of people and places using everyday vocabulary.

The third part is a series of 10 statements in English. The participant is asked to select whether he would use *ser* or *estar* if he translated these statements into Spanish. Having this section in English provides a control for vocabulary. Otherwise, it is possible that a low scorer understood the concept but was distracted by having a poor understanding of the vocabulary. All of these statements are very straightforward except #29, "All of the sunflowers are so big this year!" While introductory level students are drilled to know that descriptions of size, color, etc. are always to use *ser*, the more advanced student might be tempted to use *estar*, since this is a more subjective description. (The sunflowers look big this year compared to the sunflowers of the previous years.)

In the fourth section are ten descriptions in Spanish of people followed by a description that "makes sense" given the first statement. For example, "*el profesor tiene unos veinticinco años*" (the professor is about 25 years old) is followed by "*Es joven*" (he is young). The statement that follows the first is given in two versions: one with *ser* and one with *estar*. This is designed to assess skill that may not be seen by simply filling in the blank with *ser* or *estar*.

Lastly, section five has students choose the correct adjective based on a description that contains the verb *ser* or *estar*. (The adjective is always the correct gender so as not to give away the correct answer.) For example, "*Pedro va a muchas fiestas y le gusta hablar con todo el mundo.*

Él es muy ____” (Pedro goes to many parties and likes to talk to everyone. He is very ____). The choices are “*hablador*” (talkative), “*borracho*” (drunk/drun kard), “*estudiante*” (student), and “*abogado*” (lawyer). The correct answer is “*hablador*,” because to say that Pedro is *borracho* with the verb *ser* means that he is a drunkard. With the verb *estar*, it means that he is drunk right now but is not necessarily a habitual drinker, which is the meaning learned at the introductory level and is probably the intended meaning. Pedro might be drunk at this party, but it has nothing to do with liking to talk to everyone, and neither does being a student or lawyer.

At first glance, this section might seem irrelevant, but it does assess some conceptual knowledge given that some choices would only be appropriate with the verb *ser*, while others would only be appropriate with *estar*. The other advantage to this part might be that students are not concentrating on whether to choose *ser* or *estar*, and therefore answering these questions correctly reflects a deeper understanding of these verbs. (Anyone can memorize a list of uses for each verb and correctly apply the list to a multiple-choice test.)

The last and perhaps most useful section is the composition. Students are asked to describe their dorm room or apartment and are given guiding questions like “Where is your room or apartment located?” that should elicit the use of *ser* and *estar*. Not only is it harder for students to get by with a shallow (memorized) understanding of these verbs, because they must produce these verbs themselves, but they are most likely concentrating on vocabulary, so the usage of these verbs is more “natural” in this section.

Method

A Windows machine (Dell Dimension 2400 series) ran SPSS version 12.0 to perform bivariate correlations.

Although other data were collected, this study examines only the scores on the 50-item objective test and the frequency of correct and incorrect uses of *ser* and *estar* in short essays about participants’ living spaces by both current level of Spanish and the number of semesters of Spanish students reported having completed at the time of test-taking. This analysis is broken into two components. In the first analysis course levels were not combined, even where some groups

were much smaller than other groups. For the second analysis it was deemed necessary to combine certain groups to compensate for unequal group sizes. Specifically, the 202 and 250 levels were combined to form the 200 level, the 313 and 314 levels were combined to form the 300-1 level, the 361 and 371 levels were combined to form the 300-2 level, the 344 and 381 levels were combined to form the 300-3 level, and the 446 and 458 levels were combined to form the 400 level.

Results

Scores on the Objective Test (Analysis 1)

Students at the different course levels appeared to differ in scores on the 50-item objective test. The 371 level (n=4) had the highest mean at 47.75, while the 202 level (n=160) had the lowest mean at 38.28.

Correct Uses of Ser (Analysis 1)

Groups also appear to differ in the mean number of times each group correctly uses the verb *ser*. The 344 level (n=15) had the highest mean at 3.87 correct uses, while the 202 level (n=160) had the lowest mean at 2.36 correct uses. The 250 level (n=6) scored similarly to the 202 level with a mean of 2.33 correct uses, while the 314 level (n=22) scored similarly to the 344 level with a mean of 3.55.

Correct Uses of Estar (Analysis 1)

The groups do not appear to differ with respect to the number of correct uses of *estar*.

Incorrect Uses of Ser (Analysis 1)

Groups do not appear to differ in the number of incorrect uses of *ser*.

Incorrect Uses of Estar (Analysis 1)

Groups do not appear to differ with respect to the mean number of incorrect uses of *estar*.

Summary of Analysis 1

Although the unevenness of the group sizes is problematic for reasons discussed further in the Discussion section, groups seem to differ by level in their scores on the objective test and in the number of times that they use *ser* correctly. However, no significant differences are apparent between levels in correct uses of *estar*, incorrect uses of *ser*, and incorrect uses of *estar*.

Scores on the Objective Test (Analysis 2)

There appears to be a difference between levels in scores on the 50-item objective test. The 200 appears to be significantly different from all other levels. The combined 313 and 314 levels seem to differ significantly from the other two groups of 300-level students but not from the 400-level. However, no correlation was found between level and score.

Correct Uses of Ser (Analysis 2)

The students in the various levels of Spanish do appear to differ in the total number of correct uses of *estar*. Specifically, a significant difference is expected between the 200-level and the 400-level and between the 200-level and the group consisting of 361 and 371. However, no correlation was found between level and correct uses of *ser*.

**Correct Uses of Ser by Level
(95% Confidence Interval for Mean)**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
No Data	47	2.70	1.284	.187	2.33	3.08	1	6
200	164	2.36	1.365	.107	2.15	2.57	0	8
300-1	70	3.16	1.337	.160	2.84	3.48	1	6
300-2	5	3.40	1.817	.812	1.14	5.66	1	6
300-3	31	3.55	1.362	.245	3.05	4.05	1	6
400	11	3.09	.701	.211	2.62	3.56	2	4
Total	328	2.73	1.395	.077	2.58	2.88	0	8

Correct Uses of Estar (Analysis 2)

The students in the various levels of Spanish do appear to differ in the total number of correct uses of *estar*. Specifically, a significant difference is expected between the 200-level and the 400-level and between the 200-level and the group consisting of 361 and 371. However, no correlation was found between level and correct uses of *estar*.

**Correct Uses of *Estar* by Level
(95% Confidence Interval for Mean)**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
No Data	47	2.32	1.163	.170	1.98	2.66	0	6
200	164	1.96	1.396	.109	1.75	2.18	0	8
300-1	70	2.46	1.003	.120	2.22	2.70	0	5
300-2	5	3.20	1.304	.583	1.58	4.82	2	5
300-3	31	2.71	1.488	.267	2.16	3.26	0	7
400	11	3.18	1.471	.444	2.19	4.17	2	7
Total	328	2.25	1.334	.074	2.11	2.39	0	8

**Incorrect Uses of *Ser* by Level
(95% Confidence Interval for Mean)**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
No Data	47	.17	.433	.063	.04	.30	0	2
200	164	.15	.393	.031	.09	.21	0	2
300-1	70	.10	.347	.041	.02	.18	0	2
300-2	5	.20	.447	.200	-.36	.76	0	1
300-3	31	.06	.250	.045	-.03	.16	0	1
400	11	.00	.000	.000	.00	.00	0	0
Total	328	.13	.372	.021	.09	.17	0	2

Incorrect Uses of Ser (Analysis 2)

The students in the various levels of Spanish do not appear to differ in the total number of incorrect uses of *ser*. No correlation was found between level and incorrect uses of *ser*.

Incorrect Uses of Estar (Analysis 2)

Groups do not appear to differ in the total number of incorrect uses of *estar*. No correlation was found between level and incorrect uses of *estar*.

**Incorrect Uses of *Estar* by Level
(95% Confidence Interval for Mean)**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
No Data	47	.49	.748	.109	.27	.71	0	2
200	164	.57	.859	.067	.43	.70	0	4
300-1	70	.29	.515	.062	.16	.41	0	2
300-2	5	.00	.000	.000	.00	.00	0	0
300-3	31	.35	.608	.109	.13	.58	0	2
400	11	.27	.647	.195	-.16	.71	0	2
Total	328	.46	.753	.042	.38	.54	0	4

Discussion

In both analyses, students in various current levels differed in their scores on the objective test. However, scores were not correlated with current level. This could be a reflection of the fact that the 400 level group scored lower than all levels except 200 and 313-314.

As one might expect, there does appear to be a relationship between the current course level and scores on the objective test: the higher the level, the higher one is likely to score. Similarly, there seems to exist a relationship between course level and correct uses of *ser* and *estar*: the higher one's course level, the more frequently he is likely to use *ser* correctly. Presumably, students in the higher levels of Spanish

have been exposed to more Spanish than students in the lower levels, and the normal acquisition process is taking place.

Curiously, this does not appear to be the case with the incorrect uses of *ser* and *estar*. One might reasonably assume that as students progress in their Spanish studies, they would make fewer errors. However, this study did not show in either analysis any significant difference between groups in terms of how often they used *ser* and *estar* incorrectly. While this seems counter-intuitive, there might be a logical explanation.

One possibility is that students in the lower levels of Spanish tend not to use the unfamiliar verbs, which causes them to have few incorrect uses (as well as few correct uses). Meanwhile, more advanced students use these verbs more often than less proficient students, but they tend to use them correctly. This causes them also to have more correct uses but equally few errors, which conceals the difference between lower-level students and high-level students. This also explains how lower- and upper-level students can simultaneously differ in their correct uses of these verbs but not in their incorrect uses of these verbs.

Also worthy of notice is the fact that the graph of the mean incorrect uses of *ser* does not resemble the graph of mean incorrect uses of *estar*. This seems to suggest that the processes of acquiring these two verbs are not the same.

At the lower levels, students seem about equally likely to use *ser* and *estar* incorrectly. In response, two possible components might be suggested. First, beginning students tend to overuse *estar* because many of the first phrases they learn use the verb *estar* (e.g., “*Como estás* or *how are you*). However, the verb *ser*, and in particular its third-person singular (present indicative) form *es* closely resembles the English word “is” in both appearance and use. Thus, these students have not developed intuition about which verb is appropriate in a given situation.

However, at the higher levels (not including 361-371 due to its having only 5 students), *ser* is less likely to be used incorrectly, while *estar* is almost as likely to be used incorrectly as in the lower levels. That is, the upper-level students are overusing *estar*. Taking a closer look, they are the grammar-related classes (344 and 381) that tend to be making this mistake. Since this topic was most likely covered in

344 prior to the time of test-taking, it is possible that these students have suddenly been made aware of the fact that *estar* is not as rare as they might have thought and are now overusing the verb as a result, which leads to both more correct uses of *estar* and more incorrect uses of *estar*.

Limitations

Unfortunately, the sizes of groups consisting of the different course levels are too uneven for legitimate comparison, even when appropriate groups are combined. Specifically, the 200-level group (n=164) is more than twice as large as the second largest group, 313-314 (n=70). This group is more than twice as large as the third largest group, 344-381 (n=31), which is more than twice as large as the 400-level group (n=11), which is more than twice as large as 361-371 (n=6).

When students answered the question as to how many semesters of Spanish they had taken at the College of Charleston, it is apparent that some answered in the number of hours, while others answered in the number of semester or the number of classes. For example, some students claimed to have had 12 “semesters” of Spanish even though they were only at the 200-level, which represents at most (assuming no repeats) three completed semesters of Spanish. One student even wrote “hours” next to her response on her questionnaire. Because we know that some students were responding with the number of hours they had taken, it is unclear for most of the other students whether they meant semesters or hours. Therefore, no meaningful comparisons between groups can be drawn with regard to the number of semesters of Spanish taken.

Because of uneven group sizes and other statistical assumptions, statements made about differences and correlations are merely conjectures — one would need to run appropriate nonparametric statistical tests to draw any conclusions.