

**Spanish Second Language Acquisition across the Globe:  
What Future Research on Non-English Speaking Learners Will Tell Us**

**Avizia Yim Long**  
*Texas Tech University*

**Kimberly Geeslin**  
*Indiana University*

**RESPONSE**

**On Universal Trends in Spanish as a Second Language**

**Bill VanPatten**  
*Michigan State University*

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# Spanish Second Language Acquisition across the Globe: What Future Research on Non-English Speaking Learners Will Tell Us



**Avizia Yim Long**  
*Texas Tech University*

**Kimberly Geeslin**  
*Indiana University*

**Abstract:** Research on second language Spanish encompasses a sophisticated and broad-reaching body of work. Nevertheless, there is a bias in this literature toward English-speaking learners. The implication of this bias is that our search for universal trends of acquisition is undermined by an inability to distinguish between challenges that are specific to English-speaking learners and those that apply across learner populations. The goal of this essay is to demonstrate the value of extending the scope of second language Spanish research to include diverse first language populations and to illustrate new insights that might be gleaned through a presentation of recent research on Korean-speaking learners.

**Keywords:** copula/cópula, individual factors/factores individuales, Korean learners/estudiantes de coreano, second language acquisition/adquisición de segunda lengua, subject expression/expresión de sujeto

## Introduction

Spanish is a global language, with over 400 million speakers worldwide (Mar-Molinero 2004). The significance of the Spanish language is also reflected in its growing importance and study as a foreign language (Ammon 2010). It has been estimated that there are approximately 14 million nonnative learners of Spanish worldwide (Instituto Cervantes 2006), and Ammon (2010) ranks it as the fifth most studied foreign language in the world. In US instructed learning settings, Spanish is the most studied foreign language (Instituto Cervantes 2006), and in several non-US instructed learning settings, Spanish is the most studied foreign language after English (e.g., Brazil, Europe; see Mar-Molinero 2004).

Despite the global reach of Spanish in foreign language learning and education research, we know surprisingly little about the acquisition of Spanish as a second language (L2) by learners whose first language (L1) is not English. In fact, many of the assumptions we hold about the acquisition of Spanish are based nearly exclusively on empirical studies of English-speaking learners. For example, our understanding of the First Noun Principle (VanPatten 2004) is based primarily on studies where English is the L1 or the target (e.g., VanPatten and Cadierno 1993), making it difficult to determine whether the tendency to interpret the first noun in an utterance as the verbal subject is universal or simply an effect of the influence of English language strict word order (Lee 2003). Within the past 100 years, we have seen a well-developed and increasingly complex body of work focusing on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) of Spanish. However, as we recognize the importance of Spanish as a global language, it is essential to expand the scope of research to include non-English-speaking learners. Only through this extension can we begin to assess whether the assumptions we make about learning—and the corresponding

pedagogical materials based on them—are generalizable to diverse learning contexts and learners. To this end, we offer a concise, critical review of two basic assumptions currently held in the extant literature on Spanish L2 learning. Using these assumptions as a foundation, we will demonstrate how recent empirical research on native Korean-speaking learners serves to provide essential information regarding the degree to which these assumptions might generalize beyond the population of English-speaking learners of Spanish.

### **SLA Research: Goals and Assumptions**

Although the field of SLA enjoys a wealth of theoretical approaches to the study of L2 learning, there are several general goals that apply across these differing views. For example, most approaches to SLA seek to understand the nature of developing learner grammars, including the commonalities across learners in these developing systems. Likewise, we seek to understand the degree to which such cognitive processes are influenced by factors related to the learner (e.g., age) or to the learning context (e.g., nature of the input). With some exceptions, theories tend to assume that learners build and store information about the language they are learning, that the nature of human cognition dictates that some of these acquisitional processes will be similar from one learner to another, and that individual differences may also contribute to differing outcomes in SLA (e.g., VanPatten and Williams 2015). In the discussion that follows, we identify two of these common assumptions and, through a comparison to recent findings on Korean-speaking learners of Spanish, we explore the degree to which our current understanding of the nature of this phenomenon is based primarily on English-speaking learners of Spanish.

#### **Assumption One: A Common Path of Development**

Most cognitive approaches assert that learners pass through common stages of development. These may be seen to reflect an innate learning mechanism (e.g., White 1989), general problem solving skills (e.g., Ullman 2005), and/or the nature of identifying salient or frequent items in the input (e.g., Ellis 2006). Regardless of the cause of these stages, a shared goal across approaches is to identify the path through which learners pass en route to the acquisition of a particular structure in Spanish (for exception see Tarone and Liu 1995). In both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs, we describe knowledge at various points along this trajectory and how this knowledge changes over time. One robust example of this approach to the SLA of Spanish can be seen in the study of the copula contrast.

VanPatten (1985, 1987) pioneered early work on the stages of acquisition of the copula contrast. His analyses of English-speaking learners' spontaneous oral production, performance on a grammaticality judgment test, and language use in the classroom led him to propose the following five stages of copula development:

- 1) omission
- 2) overuse of *ser* to fulfill copula functions
- 3) use of *estar* in progressive contexts
- 4) use of *estar* in locative contexts
- 5) use of *estar* before adjectives

The generalizability of these stages has been demonstrated across learning contexts and with different learner populations (e.g., Guntermann 1992; Ryan and Lafford 1992). In addition to corroborating overall trends in the path of development, those subsequent studies revealed differences in the order of contexts in which *estar* emerged (accurately) in learner production, particularly as it related to the use of *estar* in pre-adjectival contexts.

Geeslin (2000, 2003) further explored these [copula + adjective] contexts, hypothesizing that error-based analyses could not properly account for the development of the copulas in pre-adjectival contexts because such contexts were simultaneously influenced by a wide range of linguistic factors, such as adjective class (e.g., age, size, physical appearance, mental state, etc.), frame of reference (i.e., whether or not a comparison of the referent [to itself] is implied), the susceptibility of the referent to change, and the speaker's experience with the referent (e.g., immediate or ongoing). Additionally, an evaluation of accuracy failed to capture the potential for more than one form to be acceptable, even though one might be more probable. Starting with the work of Geeslin (2000), variationist studies on the acquisition of copula choice in pre-adjectival contexts have confirmed that, as proficiency increases, *estar* is gradually extended to new contexts of use and used with greater frequency. They also showed that learners do acquire the appropriate linguistic factors constraining copula choice over time but sometimes with subtle differences in their relative importance, even at high proficiency levels (e.g., Geeslin 2003), where pragmatic constraints sometimes override semantic ones in learner use. Thus, in general, research on the SLA of the Spanish copula contrast has arrived at an understanding of how the distribution of copulas changes during the process of acquisition (i.e., rates of *estar* increase to native-like levels) and of the linguistic factors that condition those patterns of use. Nevertheless, these generalities were based entirely on English-speaking learners of Spanish.

Studies of copula choice by non-English speaking learners remain relatively scarce. Geeslin and Guijarro-Fuentes (2005) showed that rates of selection of *estar* did not differ for French-, German-, or English-speaking learners on a written contextualized task. In contrast, Geeslin and Guijarro-Fuentes (2006) found that very advanced Portuguese-speaking learners' selection rates differed from those found for native Spanish speakers, although their use was predicted by similar factors to those of the English-speaking learners, and they, too, showed a tendency to overgeneralize pragmatic constraints at the expense of semantic ones. There is only one study to date (Cheng et al. 2008) that examines learners from a typologically distinct L1 background. Cheng et al. (2008) examined Chinese-speaking learners' use of *ser* and *estar* in free-writing compositions. In addition to the increasing use of *estar* as proficiency increased, they found that linguistic factors constraining *estar* production—specifically, the speaker's experience with the referent and the referent's susceptibility to change—were also integrated into learners' grammars as proficiency increased. In sum, their results showed Chinese-speaking learners to be more like English-speaking learners than Portuguese-speaking ones, in that acquisition can be described as the gradual integration of *estar* into the developing grammar. Taken together, these studies suggest that it is generally true that learners must adjust rates of *estar* as development takes place, but the path of changing that rate may be linked to the typological characteristics of the L1, even though other characteristics, such as the predictors of those patterns, may be shared across languages.

Recent research on Korean-speaking learners of Spanish has furthered our understanding of these contrasts between studies. Geeslin and Long (2015) examined the range and distribution of copula forms produced by 23 university-level Korean-speaking learners (residing and studying in the Republic of Korea) in a sociolinguistic interview. Geeslin and Long (2015) identified the following copular verbs in the Korean learners' production: *ser*, *estar*, and *parecer*. Their analysis showed notable rates of omission and also that non-native-like omission persisted even in the speech of higher proficiency learners (11.6% at Level 3). Nevertheless, rates of omission decreased and rates of *estar* increased as proficiency increased, corroborating previous research with English-speaking learners. However, *estar* use did not exceed 10% at any level of proficiency, and rates of *ser* use remained relatively high, particularly at level 3. This recent study appears to solidify the assumption that, at least for languages that do not have a two-copula system, the general path of acquisition can be described as the gradual integration of *estar* over time. However, it is also clear that the rate of use of *estar* cannot solely be attributed to proficiency level, even where other types of formal grammatical knowledge appear to be equivalent.

### Assumption Two: Individual Characteristics Influence Outcome

A second assumption that is prevalent across theories in SLA literature is that the characteristics of individual learners do, in fact, play a role in the ultimate attainment of a L2 (e.g., VanPatten and Williams 2015). This assumption can take a variety of forms, from being viewed as factors that have an indirect effect on acquisition because they are related to the nature of the input to which a learner has access, to playing a direct role in the process of acquiring language itself. This variability is not simply a question of differing theories but also a matter of the general agreement that not all individual characteristics are equally important. For example, one's social status may in fact be related to the degree to which one has access to certain types of input (e.g., academic content, study abroad in a target setting, genuine communicative situations, etc.), but it is unlikely that a contemporary approach to SLA would posit that social class has a direct effect on one's ability to acquire a language. In contrast, it is more widely accepted that a factor such as age of learning, or even a cognitive factor such as working memory capacity, might directly influence the process of acquiring a language. In the case of all of the factors mentioned thus far (i.e., social class, age, and working memory), we have little reason to believe that research findings should differ from one group of learners to another simply because of the L1 background of those learners. Nevertheless, there are several approaches to SLA that allow a role for the degree of typological difference between languages, and the roles of L2s as compared to third, fourth, and fifth additional languages (Rothman 2011). Additionally, we may find that certain cultural contextual characteristics of the "typical" setting for SLA differ to the extent that important contrasts surface between new findings from learners outside the English-speaking learning context, and our current understanding of the role of individual differences. In this portion of the paper, we explore the role of individual learner characteristics in the acquisition of variable subject form expression in L2 Spanish.

In Spanish, the grammatical subject of a finite verb may be expressed overtly (e.g., *yo hablo, él habla*), or it may be omitted (e.g., *Ø hablo, Ø habla*). As is the case with other variable structures, a range of linguistic factors are known to constrain subject expression in Spanish, including person and/or number of the verb, tense, mood, and aspect of the verb, and switch reference (i.e., the referent of the preceding verb is different from the current verb). Research on the SLA of Spanish subject expression, again focusing on English-speaking learners, has demonstrated that, as learners gain proficiency in the Spanish language, they come to use null subjects with similar frequency to native speakers and that the constraints on subject form selection and/or use reflect native-like patterns (e.g., Geeslin et al. 2015). Some interesting differences with native speakers have also emerged. For instance, the frequency of null subject pronouns tends to be higher for highly advanced non-native speakers than for native speakers on free production tasks (Geeslin and Gudmestad 2008, 2011), but demonstrates a u-shaped pattern of development across proficiency levels on controlled selection tasks (Geeslin et al. 2015). Thus, L2 learners demonstrate a similar range and distribution of subject forms attested for native speakers, but are sensitive to the elicitation task.

Within the L2 Spanish subject expression literature, two important individual factors that are examined closely include learners' proficiency in Spanish and time spent abroad. These factors are often interrelated, such that those learners who report more time abroad similarly demonstrate greater proficiency in the L2 and vice versa. Proficiency is measured independently, most often by means of a grammar-based reading task (e.g., Geeslin 2008). Studies on L2 Spanish subject expression conducted on English-speaking learners have shown that greater proficiency and more time spent abroad is related to greater rates of null subject pronoun use in sociolinguistic interview tasks (Linford 2009; Linford and Shin 2013). This rate of use increases linearly as proficiency and study abroad experience increases. For selection tasks, on the other hand, rates of null subject pronoun use are characterized by a u-shaped curve in which rates are high for lower level learners, drop for intermediate level learners then increase again for advanced

learners and overshoot native speaker rates for highly advanced learners (Geeslin et al. 2015). Regardless of the task type, rates of null subject pronoun use are greater than rates of overt subject pronouns. Further, null subject rates are both lower and more native-like with increased proficiency and with additional time abroad, although learners with the most experience abroad overshoot native speaker rates.

In a recent study conducted by Long and Geeslin (2015), the first to our knowledge to explore this structure with learners whose L1 is typologically distant, similar findings for Korean-speaking learners were reported. On a sociolinguistic interview task, Long and Geeslin found the tendency for rates of null subject pronoun use to increase as proficiency level and experience in a Spanish-speaking country abroad increased. However, rates of null subject pronoun use were much lower than those reported for English-speaking learners: Whereas rates of null subjects ranged from 72% to 87% in Linford and Shin (2013), rates in Long and Geeslin ranged between 49% and 57% for the Korean-speaking learners. As is the case for the Spanish copula, the study by Long and Geeslin further substantiates the assumption that findings for English-speaking learners regarding the general path of acquisition of rates of null subject pronoun use in Spanish can be extended to Korean-speaking learners. However, the comparatively lower rates of null subject pronouns observed for Korean-speaking learners similarly cannot be linked to proficiency level and time spent abroad alone. Thus, while individual factors may be equally important across learners, the direction and magnitude of their influence may differ for distinct L1 populations. Consequently, adding new learner populations does not derail our existing work, but rather, allows an additional level of detail that was not previously available.

### The Future of Spanish SLA Research

In this essay, we illustrated the importance of extending the scope of Spanish SLA research to include diverse L1 learner populations by means of a concise, critical overview of empirical findings on acquisition of the copula contrast and subject expression, as well as recent findings reported for Korean-speaking learners. Future research on diverse learner populations will not only offer empirical findings to test the generalizability of patterns of development already attested for English-speaking learners, but also facilitate our evaluation of commonly held assumptions for L2 learning across multiple approaches to SLA. Given the status of Spanish in the world and the prominence of Spanish foreign language learning, it is essential that we systematically investigate Spanish SLA within and across the diverse learning contexts in which it occurs.

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Response to “Spanish Second Language Acquisition across the Globe: What Future Research on Non-English Speaking Learners Will Tell Us”



## On Universal Trends in Spanish as a Second Language

**Bill VanPatten**

*Michigan State University*

**Keywords:** first language transfer/tranferencia de primera lengua, second language acquisition/adquisición de segunda lengua, teacher education/formación docente, universals of acquisition/universales de adquisición

In this important and provocative essay, Avizia Yim Long and Kimberly Geeslin suggest that we cannot accept the findings of research on Spanish as an L2 until we have evidence from learners of typologically diverse L1s. That is, “the search for universal trends of acquisition is undermined by an inability to distinguish between challenges that are specific to English-speaking learners and those that apply across learner populations” (205). Long and Geeslin’s data from Korean L1 learners of Spanish L2 (in addition to some data from Chinese and Portuguese L1 learners) is a point of departure.

Long and Geeslin’s position is well taken. Research is always welcome that attempts to verify extant findings. However, several caveats are in order. The first concerns the research on English as L2. The extensive body of literature on English as L2 is informed by research using learners from a variety of typologically different L1s. And yet, while some L1 influences are noted, the universality of various aspects of acquisition is well known. This universality includes such things as developmental sequences, morpheme orders, processing heuristics and constraints (from UG and other sources), among others. What this literature suggests is that powerful underlying forces are at work in acquisition independent of any L1 influence. So, the first question for the present essay is this: why would Spanish L2 be any different? Is there something about Spanish that makes it “special” compared to English such that the L1 should exert an influence against the universals? To be sure, my claim is not that there is no L1 influence in acquisition. Some of the findings reported by Long and Geeslin on Spanish L2 are to be expected and have been shown in the acquisition of English as L2, for example.

Assuming that comparing research studies poses no problem where designs are different, data collection is different, and procedures may be different, if we look closely at the research presented by Long and Geeslin, we do not really find any actual dispute regarding the extant research findings on the acquisition of Spanish as L2. As one instance, Long and Geeslin note that the sequence established back in the 1980s for the acquisition of copular verbs (*ser/estar*) basically holds regardless of the L1; that is, L1 influence does not appear to affect the sequence but rather the rates of use of certain kinds of adjectives. The same is true for the research on null and explicit subjects. Long and Geeslin report, not on the universal aspects of the acquisition of subject pronouns (e.g., operation of the OPC, how *pro* operates in the grammar, referentiality) that should hold regardless of L1, but, instead, on rates of pronoun suppliance. Again, we would

expect such differences for a variety of reasons. To be sure, Long and Geeslin clearly state that such research “does not derail our existing work, but rather, allows an additional level of detail” (209). I agree and although such detail is interesting and of merit, I return to my original point: what are we trying to find out in L2 acquisition that we don’t already know from research on English and other languages, including Spanish?

For me, then, taking a visionary perspective on the future of Spanish L2, I would suggest the following questions:

- How can the acquisition of Spanish as L2, if at all, be used to inform theories of second language acquisition or test particular hypotheses derived from those theories? And why would we want to do this?
- To what extent can the research on Spanish L2 be used in education to inform teachers about the nature of language acquisition?

After thirty-plus years in the profession, I find the second question particularly important for the future of Spanish. In my experience, knowledge about both language and language acquisition is woefully underrepresented in teacher preparation and in continuing teacher education. Because of this underrepresentation, we have failed to create true and lasting changes in language teaching. Sitting back and looking at the future of Spanish L2, then, I see a major role for the research on Spanish L2 to become a significant part of teacher education. And the effects of this knowledge on teachers need to be researched. Along with testing particular L2 theories and hypotheses, I see the impact of Spanish L2 research on shaping teachers’ knowledge as a major future contribution.

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