THE TEACHING OF SER AND ESTAR

“I don’t believe my students will ever learn Spanish,” one teacher was recently heard lamenting to another. “Why, they can’t even understand when they should use ser and estar!”

It sounds like a simple thing, but in reality the uses of ser and estar present one of the most delicate and difficult points of all Spanish grammar. Even the teacher may not be too sure of the correct verb on occasion, as S. G. Morley points out in his study, “Modern Uses of Ser and Estar.” “No one underlying principle,” says Mr. Morley, “suffices to explain all the uses of ser and estar. . . . Some examples are quite idiomatic and without rational explanation. . . . Only the closest study and wide reading can allow a foreigner to approach a native in ability to catch the shades in meaning.”

At the same time that the teacher of Spanish realizes the difficulties of ser and estar, however, he must also recognize their importance. They are the two most commonly used verbs in the Spanish language. That point was clearly proven in a recent study made by Hills and Anderson on the frequency of verbs and tenses in forty-three contemporary Spanish plays. In the course of their investigation, the authors found that ser and estar were among the twenty-three irregular verbs used more often than all the regular ones combined. Indeed, forms of ser make up approximately one-fourth of all these irregular verbs, while estar accounts for over 6 per cent of the total. Combining these percentages, we find the two together forming almost one-third of all the irregular verbs in use!

Another important feature of these verbs is also deserving of mention. It is precisely such fine delineations in meaning as those existing between ser and estar which lend to the Spanish language its superior accuracy of expression—a fact which endows this difficult point with a dignity which mere quibbling over grammatical rules could never bestow. An explanation of this fact, given by the teacher and supported by definite illustrations, will inspire in the student more respect for the language in general and for these two much-maligned verbs in particular. It will also provide an answer to the question we have all heard, “Why in the world do they have two verbs that mean the same thing, anyway?”

The teacher beginning the presentation of ser and estar is faced with the problem of giving this material the attention which its importance claims for it and at the same time choosing carefully the
chief uses of each verb, since he cannot hope to introduce the idiomatic and irrational uses mentioned by Mr. Morley in the above quotation. The problem of *ser* and *estar*, then, resolves itself into three phases: a selection of the most important usages, a decision as to the time for presenting these usages, and the old question of presenting the material in an interesting and graphic way.

Most teachers and textbook makers are in substantial agreement about the most important uses of these two verbs. The following are those which are most generally accepted:

**Uses of *ser***:
1. With predicate nouns.
2. To express inherent qualities.
3. To express origin, ownership, material.

**Uses of *estar***:
1. For location.
2. To express non-inherent qualities.
3. For the formation of progressive tenses.

To these should be added the uses of these verbs with past participles, but this phase of their use should be presented late in the course and introduced carefully with sentences illustrative of their meaning.

Until lately, these two verbs were presented simultaneously in order to allow the student to contrast their usages. Unquestionably, the psychological principle of association by contrast functions here, but its value is apt to be overbalanced by the confusion created in the minds of the students. More sensible is the plan, favored by most modern teachers, of presenting these verbs separately, concentrating on only one or two uses for each one at its introduction. Owing to the fact that *ser* will be encountered by the student four times as often as *estar*, the logical order seems to be to present *ser* first, merely explaining for the time that all other uses of the verb "to be" are expressed with *estar*.

The first step in presentation should be a recognition of the verb from the reading which the class is doing. In the course of a reading lesson, the teacher may ask the students to pick out sentences containing forms of the verb *ser*. From these sentences, he should select several examples to be written on the board. This list should contain only sentences illustrating one point, the use of *ser* with predicate nouns, for example. It is essential for the understanding of
the pupils that no exceptions be considered at the outset. Examples of sentences that may be used are:

El hombre es sereno.
Mi padre es médico.
Los niños son alumnos.

When several sentences have been written on the board, the students may be called upon to underline the verbs. After this, they should be led, by inductive methods, to realize that in each sentence the verb serves as a link connecting two nouns referring to the same person. When the analysis of the sentence has been completed, the teacher may summarize the process by the statement that the verb ser is always used in Spanish when this situation exists. The rule covering this use of the verb should then be stated in its final form by the student.

To this may be added a useful device suggested by Dr. F. M. Kercheville of the University of New Mexico in his book, Living Spanish. “I am going to show you,” the teacher says, “a simple way to remember this. You all know that 2 + 2 equals 4. That is just another way of saying that two 2's and 4 are the same thing. In our sentences, we have said that the two nouns are the same. Therefore, in practically every case in which the equation sign could be substituted for the verb, some form of ser is correct in Spanish.”

He then demonstrates the truth of the statement by erasing the verb and using instead the sign of the equation. A good drill in the forms of the verb may then be given by allowing the students to turn the equations back into sentences by the use of the correct form of the verb.

Once having established this principle, the next step should be to present, by the same process of inductive reasoning, predicate adjectives of inherent quality. At the close of the presentation, the pupils should be requested to make sentences of their own, since the learning process is never complete without an application of the thing learned. The other uses of ser—origin, ownership, and material—are introduced as they appear in the text. With this basic understanding the student should be able to grasp them very quickly.

If the pupils are wide awake in their reading, they will probably bring up the question of the use of estar. When the point arises, it should be dealt with by the same method suggested above. Undoubtedly, the first use of estar should be that of location. After the pupils have discovered that estar is used to tell where a thing is, a brief
explanation of the Latin origin of the word and its connection with our own verb "to stand" will be of value to the student. As a mechanical device to establish this use, the teacher may represent it on the blackboard as a point showing location, as a map is marked with a dot to show where a city is.

The use of *estar* with non-inherent qualities should also be developed inductively. In this connection, the use of *ser*, already established, may be used in effective contrast. This contrast may be obtained by using the same sentence, whose meaning will vary according to whether the verb used is *ser* or *estar*. For instance, one may use such sentences as these:

La niña es pálida.
La niña está pálida.
El soldado es borracho.
El soldado está borracho.

Various tests may be used to check the student's mastery of the subject. I have already mentioned the fact that he should make sentences of his own using these verbs. A completion test leaving a blank for the correct form of the verb is useful. As a measuring device for his own success as well as that of the pupil, the teacher should make use of the objective tests put out by such organizations as the Columbia Research Bureau and the Cooperative Testing Bureau.

In connection with the presentation of the material outlined above, I have suggested a few devices. The resourceful teacher will have many ideas of his own, but the following suggestions may be helpful:

Another mathematical device may be used in addition to the use of the equation to fix the meaning of *ser*. This is the triangle, a symbol familiar to all, which can be used very effectively to summarize the uses of *estar*. The upright line represents location. The base, action going from one point to another, represents the use with progressive tenses, while the derivative use with non-inherent qualities is represented by the hypotenuse.

Charts for the uses of these verbs may be made after the students have worked out the rules and may be kept in their notebooks for reference and review.

Games and contests are useful for fixing the usages of the verbs as well as providing pleasant diversion for the students. A simple contest consists of dividing the class into two groups to see which can make the better score in filling in blanks requiring *ser* and *estar*. 
A game of baseball provides fast and interesting drill. The class is divided into two teams. The teacher is the umpire to decide on the correctness of the answers. The pitcher reads a simple sentence from a prepared list, pausing where the form of the verb *ser* or *estar* is to be used. If the player on the other side (the batter) replies with the correct form as well as the correct verb, he has a hit which counts as one score for his side. If the verb is correct but the form is not, the ball is a foul. If he misses entirely, the count is an out for his side. The scores are counted as in baseball.

One warning to the teacher should be included in every discussion of the subject of *ser* and *estar*. Never should the students be allowed to feel that these verbs are of unusual difficulty. Fear of the subject will only prove a handicap to its mastery. And it will not be any more confusing than any other topic in grammar if the teacher himself is well prepared, if the lessons are carefully planned and varied, and if the point is given repeated drill throughout the year. Under such conditions, those two *fieras*, *ser* and *estar*, lose their ferocity and take their places quite amiably in the kingdom of the language.

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