THE TEACHING OF "SER/ESTAR" BY A COGNITIVE AUDIOLINGUAL APPROACH

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One of the tenets of early audiolingualism as shown in the textbooks that were produced around 1960 was that grammatical structures should be learned inductively, with grammatical explanations either not given or relegated to the status of "summaries of behavior" at the end of the lesson, that is, presumably when the grammatical point had already been learned. This was probably the result of the influence of the direct method, with its dual emphasis on monolingualism and induction in second language teaching.

The grammar-translation method, on the other hand, has always placed a considerable emphasis on the learning of rules and their deductive application.

Is the choice we face as language teachers between total induction and total deduction? Or is there a middle ground? Elsewhere the author has discussed the deduction/induction controversy and proposed the following solution: teach inductively those structures that can be learned with relative ease by that approach and deductively those for which the conscious awareness of a rule helps linguistic performance.

Experience with Spanish and French over the years has shown me that about 80 percent of the structures of those two languages can be learned inductively. On the other hand, the remaining 20 percent of structures seldom comes under the control of the learner without the learning of rules.

The latter type of structure is characterized by the fact that it is based on a concept lacking in the native language of the learner and by the fact that the choices presented by the structure cannot be demonstrated through a short set of examples and practiced in relatively simple exercises. The distinctions in usage between ser and estar constitute a good example of this type of structure. Attempts to teach the differences in usage between ser and estar by means of mechanical exercises usually meet with failure or take a very long time to succeed, because the choice between these two verbs is not automatically conditioned by the environment but depends on concepts of "being" different from those in English.

It follows that the ser/estar dichotomy lends itself very well to the type of teaching in which the point of departure is a concept or set of concepts which are then applied deductively to the production of sentences. The approach can remain audiolingual in that emphasis on the spoken language is retained and in that intensive oral exercises follow the presentation of the concepts.

If what precedes is true, that is, if it is true that a deductive approach benefits students in the case of structures like the ser/estar dichotomy, then it should follow that those students that after some time can best verbalize the rules governing this grammatical point should also be best in the correct use of ser or estar in sentences. That is, if despite the equalizing factor of intensive practice, the students who can verbalize the rules retain superiority in performance, then conscious rule knowledge is demonstrated to be valuable for the type of structure under consideration, and the claim of those who say that a second language is to be learned the way a child learns his own language (i.e., without analysis) is demonstrated to be invalid. The rest of this article reports on an experiment designed to test this hypothesis.

* Articles for this section may be sent to Prof. Yolanda R. Solé, Dept. of Spanish and Portuguese, Univ. of Texas, Austin, TX 78712. Please send a typed original and copy for each paper submitted. Maximum length is 20 double-spaced pages.
Subjects
The subjects were 50 English-speaking students of first-semester Spanish who completed the course. There were 15 males and 35 females. The mean age of the group was 19.5 years (expressed decimal-
ly).

Method
Instruction was carried out by native speakers of Spanish in small groups of about 10 students each. The groups met for five hours a day for intensive oral work in Spanish; in addition, most students spent several hours a week studying with tapes. The textbook used was Bolinger et al.'s Modern Spanish.2

The ser/estar dichotomy, which appears at the end of the third unit in the text-
book, was taught at the beginning of the third week of the course. However, it was not presented as it appears in the textbook but rather according to a deductive cogni-
tive approach. The first step was the presen-
tation and distribution of a chart with the rules governing the choice between ser and estar. This was followed by a brief discus-
sion of the rules and examples on the chart. Finally, oral exercises on the choice between ser and estar were done, with the chart referred to only in cases of error.

The students came across instances of ser or estar many times during the nine following weeks. At the beginning of the twelfth week the ser/estar dichotomy was formally reviewed, with reference made to the rules, as part of a two-week general review before the final exam.

The measurement of performance for ser/estar took place as part of the final exam for the course at the end of the thir-
teenth week of classes. It consisted of an entire oral series of short sentences given in English, the Spanish equivalents of which the students were expected to record on tapes as their answers. There were ten sentences in the series, each followed by a ten-second pause to think of the oral translation and a ten-second pause to record it. The series of sentences was preceded by the twice-re-
peated instruction: "You will now hear a series of simple sentences in English; re-
cord their Spanish equivalents, being care-
ful in your choice of ser and estar." The English sentences follow:
1. John is very intelligent.
2. We are tired.
3. The students are tall.
4. Mary is from Cuba.
5. Waiter, the soup is cold!
6. They are busy.
7. Are you a Canadian?
8. I am at the university.
9. The party is in Paul's home.
10. Ice cream is cold.

The expected responses (with ser and estar underlined) were:
1. Juan es muy inteligente.
2. Estamos cansados.
3. Los estudiantes son altos.
5. ¿Hizo, la sopa está fría!
7. ¿Eres (tú) / Es (usted) canadiense?
8. Estoy en la universidad.
9. La fiesta es en la casa de Pablo.

The responses were graded solely on the basis of ser and estar, that is, mistakes else-
where in the sentence were disregarded. Each correct response was awarded half a point, for a possible total of five points.

The measurement of conscious knowl-
edge of the rules was done by grading inde-
pendently a short essay that each stu-
dent wrote about ser/estar, in English, as part of the same final exam. The follow-
ing instructions appeared at the top of the last page of the test papers: "Section III [of the written part of the exam]: Write in English on the differences in usage be-
tween ser and estar. Give examples. Use the reverse side of this page if you need more space." The students had about ten minutes to do this. The essays on ser/estar were graded by the author without knowl-
edge of the subjects' scores in the oral perfor-
ance test, which were on separate sheets of paper (that is, on answer keys not given to the students). The essays were graded on a half-point scale of zero to five, depending on the accuracy and completeness of the essay.

The following is an essay given a grade of 4.5:
Ser
A. Used with inherent qualities:
Soy inteligente.
La casa es bonita.
B. Used with origin and nationality:
Soy de México.
El es español.
C. Used with occupation and religion:
Juan es abogado.
María es católica.
C. Used with time and dates:
Son las tres.
Hoy es viernes.
Es el 15 de abril.
Sometimes, one can use both ser and estar in the same constructions, but this will alter the meaning. For example, Ella está enferma means she is sick right now (but may get well), while Ella es enferma means that this is one of her permanent qualities—she is always sick.

Estar
A. Used with locations:
Estoy en la escuela.
B. Used with temporary conditions:
Estoy enfermo.
C. Used to ask for a state of being:
¿Cómo está usted?
which means "How are you (now)?"
(The condition could change)

The following is an essay given a grade 0.5:

Estar is used to describe the location or position of an object or person; for example, El libro está en la cocina. It is also used to describe an ordinary state. If Paul is always studying, one would say, Pablo está estudiando. However, if Paul never studies and you wish to say that he is studying, you say, Pablo es estudiando. You can also use ser to emphasize something; for example, La casa es muy grande.

Results
Once both the test and the essays had been graded, the scores were paired for each subject and they were analyzed statistically in order to determine their correlation if any. The mean test score was 3.71 out of a possible 5.0, with test scores ranging from 2.0 to 5.0. The mean essay score was 2.90, with a range from zero to 4.5.

The plotting of the scores produced the scatter plot shown below:
The correlation coefficient \( r \) was .4031, a moderately strong correlation significant at the .01 level of confidence. The regression line permitting the prediction of a test score (given an essay score) had a slope of .3067; the line is shown in the scatter plot above.

**Discussion**

The results indicate that the greater the ability to state the rules governing the usage of *ser/estar* the better the performance in a situation in which one or the other of these verbs must be used. However, there are sufficient high performance, low rule-knowledge scores (note, for example, test 3.5-essay 0 and test 4.5-essay 1.0) to justify the assumption that through much practice fairly good performance may exist with poor conscious knowledge of rules. (It may be that in such cases the rules have become, through the practice, subconscious habitual behavior.)

Nevertheless, the fact that in spite of all the equalizing practice the students who had the best conscious grasp of the rules did best in the test would seem to indicate the advisability of using a deductive, cognitive approach in teaching grammatical structures of the type of the *ser/estar* dichotomy. The hypothesis stated early in this article seems therefore to be confirmed by the results of this experiment.\(^3\)

**NOTES**


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**A NOTE ON THE SPANISH ARTICLE WITH TITLES**

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Among the many problems which English-speaking students encounter in using the Spanish articles, one is particularly troublesome: the use of the article with personal titles (*señor, señorita, señora, doctor, profesor*, and so on). The statement typically found in standard texts distinguishes between two contexts of utterance, namely "person spoken to" (no definite article), and "person spoken of" (definite article).\(^1\) While this statement is accurate, it is helpful to seek the cause of student interference, and to attempt a presentation which will take advantage of the parallelism these constructions share with other Spanish structures.

When titles such as *profesor* are used as common nouns, both Spanish and English require the article:

(1) El profesor ha llegado.

(2) The professor has arrived.

If the person named is unknown or previously unidentified by context, the indefinite article is used in both languages:

(3) Un profesor ha llegado.

(4) A (one) professor has arrived.

When the proper name is added to sentences like (3) and (4), the indefinite article is retained:

(5) Un profesor Gómez ha llegado.

(6) A (one) Professor Gómez has arrived.

Meanwhile, in direct address, neither language employs the article:

(7) Buenos días, profesor (Gómez).

(8) Good morning, Professor (Gómez).

The only point of conflict, then, occurs when the proper name is added to sentences like (1) and (2):

(9) El profesor Gómez ha llegado.