Ser or not ser: That is the Question

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Some recent research in foreign-language education has suggested that many of the activities teachers traditionally engage in are either useless, or worse, counterproductive. From Krashen 1981 and 1982 and from sources cited therein one might easily conclude that foreign-language teachers should not teach anything. They should simply present the language naturally and comprehensibly. Then, given sufficient input under favorable affective conditions, each student’s natural language acquisition device is activated, and spontaneous, fluent, and accurate use of the target language results.

A close reading of the literature of “input hypotheses,” however, shows that they apply most strongly to immersion environments, not to the more circumscribed contact opportunities typical of most high school and college language programs. In the latter situations input, however comprehensible, does not attain sufficient density or critical mass to set off “the din in your head.” Instructors in classrooms must be more directive or “interventionist” than they would be in a natural acquisition environment. They must guide their students’ attention to the elements of the target language that make communication possible. Such guidance does not imply abandoning acquisition as a goal of instruction; it responds to pedagogical reality.

Even accepting that the standard classroom cannot provide a natural, acquisition-rich environment, we can ensure that instruction does not impede or render impossible acquisition-like progress. One way to do this is to recognize that a grammar is not a collection of forms and paradigms but a system for converting meaning into speech. When instructors focus on the communication of meaning as the goal of instruction, at worst they present their students with a natural motivation for learning the supporting forms. At best, they facilitate the entry of these meaningful forms into the posited language acquisition device.

Vocabulary is an area particularly amenable to this type of interventionist guidance. For while adult students may directly acquire concrete and unambiguous vocabulary through demonstration and exemplification, considerable lexical residue, which is more susceptible of direct instructional strategies, remains. In the balance of this article I will discuss first a general strategy for helping students learn and acquire vocabulary, and then, within this context, the specific vocabulary problem of ser versus estar in Spanish.

Beginning foreign-language students often have serious misconceptions about language, and in particular, about the role in language played by words. Students intuitively subscribe to what I have called elsewhere the “lexical analog hypothesis,” according to which the universal constant across languages is held to be the individual word. Students perceive the learning task as replacing one by one a string of native-language words with an analogous string of target-language words. This perception presents foreign-language teachers with a dilemma. We know that the lexical analog hypothesis is fundamentally and demonstrably false, but it is virtually impossible to provide beginning students with an alternative learning strategy. For if we remove English as their fundamental starting point— their stable communicative base—nothing remains with which to replace it. There seems to be no way to get beginning students to stop thinking in English and start thinking in the target language.

Yet we can show our students that incrementally they often use the target language directly. After only a short time in Spanish I, students understand and say things like Buenas tardes and Gracias without consciously processing them through two languages. In an interesting sense, they have acquired these parts of the language. If we analyze students’ early success with Estoy bien, gracias and Buenas tardes we see that it consists of an admittedly tiny set of expressions that are part of the total system of Spanish, but which students have assimilated into their nascent command of that system. This apparently trivial triumph illustrates the ultimate goal of foreign-language study: a spontaneous linking...
of meaning with form; i.e., communication without using the native language as either the initiator or the mediator of communication.

Strategically, our instructional task is to help our students forge just such a link. Tacitly, we must recognize the constraints that the lexical analog hypothesis imposes on our students’ ability to acquire the target language, and at the same time work to turn that hypothesis to mutual advantage. We must help our students recognize that words are not the starting point of communication. Rather, they are tokens for the actual message to be communicated or received: an informal greeting, an expression of gratitude, etc. The forms of language become acquirable only when the meanings they express are known.

Vocabulary learning is difficult only when the message it encodes is difficult to grasp. This is why ser and estar are so much more difficult to teach and learn than are other “problem pairs” such as preguntar/ pedir, salir/ dejar, or saber/conocer. Students readily see that the members of the latter pairs have different meanings. It is easy to show (and entirely harmonious with the lexical analog hypothesis) that some words which appear to be the same are obviously very different in meaning. Students then accept the need to “divide” them into their different meanings, and to assign to each meaning a distinct lexical item from Spanish. The affective support of the lexical analog hypothesis is not lost.

Ser and estar, however, are crucially different in that a) no convenient lexical paraphrase exists to show that they differ in meaning, and b) in important situations—although by no means always—they share apparently identical constructions. In their classic contrastive analysis of the structures in English and Spanish, Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin place the ser and estar problem at the very top of their “hierarchy of difficulty” (and implicitly subscribe to the lexical analog hypothesis) claiming that ser and estar have no direct (lexical) analog in English while requiring a (lexical) choice in Spanish, and that furthermore, they show no functional or semantic correspondence across the two languages. Franco and Steinmetz also argue that nothing in English prepares students for the ser/estar choice in Spanish, stating that English is one of the languages that requires the insertion of a copula in the surface structure when the underlying predicate is an adjective.

This perception of English with respect to ser and estar is crucially false. It is virtually identical to that which is shared by our students and which is at the root of the difficulty they experience. At first they feel frustrated by what appears to be the arbitrary distribution of ser and estar over a range of expression that the lexical analog hypothesis has conditioned them to believe should be covered by a single word, “just the way it is in English.” Then they become successively discouraged by trying to “learn the unlearnable.” Frustration becomes hostility, and their “affective filter” raises. What students need is an a priori justification for these two lexical items that is credible, that appears to harmonize with their preconceptions, and that encourages them to tackle the still considerable learning chore.

The Stockwell et al model suggests two possible ways to accomplish this. One would be to discover direct lexical analogs for ser and estar in English. The English lexicon, however, renders this solution impossible. The second solution lies in discovering a functional or semantic correspondence across the two languages, the effect of which would reduce the difficulty level of ser and estar to that of the other pairs mentioned above. If we can convince students that the difference in form in Spanish, i.e. ser/estar, is motivated by a difference in meaning—a situation completely consonant with their own preconceptions—the battle will be at least fairly joined, if not won outright.

The goal is to lower students’ psychological resistance to ser versus estar not so much by demonstrating their semantic differences (which are admirably accounted for in the pedagogical and theoretical literature), but by showing that English is sensitive to many of these same differences in interesting and recognizable ways. Based on several years of success in my own teaching and in my work with graduate teaching assistants, I recommend sharing with Spanish students the following discussion of the relationship between meaning and conceptual structure in their native language. The discussion aims in general to defeat the lexical analog hypothesis, and in particular to make possible a meaningful consideration of ser and estar.

One way to show whether or not two putatively identical sentence types really are the same in both structure and meaning is to see
if they answer the same kind of question:
1. The rabbi talked about ten minutes.
2. The rabbi talked about ten tribes.
3. My brother only drinks Scotch with water.
4. My brother only drinks Scotch with friends.

It is trivially simple to show that sentences 1 and 2, or 3 and 4 differ in both meaning and in structure. Sentence 1, for example, answers the question “How long did the rabbi talk?” while 2 answers “What did the rabbi talk about?” Similarly, sentences 3 and 4 answer, respectively, a “how” and a “with whom” type of question. These examples of “construalional homonymy” show that sentences which seem identical may proceed from different conceptual structures.

Another way to show same/different relationships is to see if the transformational potential of a pair of sentences is the same. Consider the famous pair:
5. John is easy to please.
6. John is eager to please.

While 5 can easily be transformed into 7, 6 cannot be transformed into 8:
7. It’s easy to please John.

We conclude that despite their superficial similarities, 5 and 6 proceed from different structures and reflect different meaning relationships."

A third and related way to compare structural identity involves conjoining shared constituents with “and” and reducing the redundant remainder. We can combine 9 and 10 because syntactically and semantically “John” and “Mary” are identical:
10. Mary drinks lemonade.
11. John and Mary drink lemonade.

However, sentences that proceed from distinct underlying structures cannot so easily be conjoined in a reduced form by using “and.”

Note how strange it sounds to say,
12. “My brother only drinks Scotch with water and friends.

Notice also that sentences which are alike in meaning but which differ in form are not easily combined and reduced with “and.” Either 13 or 14 feels much better than 15:
13. I like to speak in public and (to) receive the plaudits of the crowd.
14. I like speaking in public and receiving the plaudits of the crowd.
15. I like speaking in public and to receive the plaudits of the crowd.

These examples lead to an interesting generalization about English: Sentences cannot conveniently be combined and reduced with “and” unless both their grammatical and conceptual structures show a high degree of parallelism and compatibility. An important corollary to this generalization is that sentences that answer different questions proceed from different meanings and/or structures."

Now for examples that directly motivate the existence of ser and estar. Our students need to see that distinct words for English be are needed in Spanish because distinct meanings are involved. The best way to do this is where both ser and estar are followed by adjectives, and thus seem to compete for the same syntactic space:
16. John is intelligent.
17. John is handsome.
18. John is tired.
19. John is fed up.
20. John is intelligent and handsome.
21. John is tired and fed up.

In terms of their surface structures, 16 through 19 can be represented as “John + BE + Adjective.” One might hypothesize that all four share the same relevant linguistic structures. Indeed, we can combine and reduce 16 and 17 to form 20, and 18 and 19 to form 21. But if we combine and reduce sentences across rather than within groups, both 22 and 23 are unacceptable.
22. *John is tired and intelligent.
23. *John is fed up and handsome.

Not surprisingly, we find that both 16 and 17, as compared with 18 and 19, answer different questions—a second check on identity of form and meaning. Sentences 16 or 17 answer questions such as “What is John like?” or “What kind of a person is John?” Sentences 18 and 19 answer, “How is John?” or “How does John feel?”

At last the groundwork is laid for motivating ser and estar, and the logic is irresistible: In order to be combined and reduced with “and,” sentences must have parallel form and meaning. Sentences 16 and 18, or 17 and 19 have parallel form, but cannot be combined and reduced with “and.” Therefore, they must differ in meaning. This conclusion is supported by the fact that these sentence pairs answer different questions. Since the propositions “John is tired” and “John is intelligent” express different types of meaning it is only reasonable that different words are needed to express them in Spanish: “be” → ser/estar
just as “know” \(\rightarrow\) saber/conocer, “leave” \(\rightarrow\) dejar/salir, etc. Thus, 24-29:

25. Juan es gaupo.
26. Juan es inteligente y gaupo.
27. Juan está cansado.
28. Juan está hastiado.
29. Juan está cansado y hastiado.

Quod erat demonstrandum.

The goal of including our students in the discussions outlined above is to demythologize ser and estar and to establish a more positive affective climate. Thus, the first step in presenting ser and estar even in an interventionist pedagogy, is not to present a list of “rules,” for this exacerbates the students’ negative perception of arbitrariness. The point is simply that students have greater success with challenging but comprehensible learning problems than with arbitrary lists to be memorized. However, while the process thus far has established and motivated the learning problem, it has not resolved it. Students still need to acquire ser and estar. They do not need “rules” but meanings, so that when they hear and read these verbs the input is largely comprehensible.

The basic communicative functions of ser include identifying (Ese hombre es mi profesor), defining (La antropología es el estudio científico del hombre), and classifying (Juan es rico). The first two functions, which unlike estar take either nounal or sentential complements, typically offer little difficulty. It is in the third area, classifying, that students have the most trouble, for here ser and estar are both syntactically possible.

Fortunately, certain attributes or characteristics are used by both Spanish and English speakers to classify people and things, so cultural interference is minimized. To say that Juan es rico is to say, “I am classifying John as a member of the set of people tacitly and culturally understood as being wealthy.” Thus, asking “What is John like?” or “What type of person is John?” is a way of asking, “Which different sets representing different types of people is John a member of?” Let’s say he is classed as being slender, wealthy, Catholic, and liberal. All of these adjectives would thus take ser in Spanish. If later on John gains and retains a lot of weight, goes broke, converts to Mormonism and espouses conservative causes, he is now a member of a different constellation of sets, and ser is still used. Hence the notion of “permanence” is not salient in a discussion of the functions of ser.

While ser + Adjective entails a commitment to a classification, estar + Adjective limits one to an observation and report. If we say Esta argolla está pesada, we are not classifying it as a member of the set of objects that are heavy. We are reporting an observation or a reaction to having just hefted it. The ring may in fact weigh only an ounce or two. If we say La ventana es transparente, we are noting one aspect of “windowness” (it’s not of the translucent type). La ventana está rota, on the other hand tells us something based on an observation of the window, but nothing about windowiness. Notice that the window just reported on is permanently broken, but we don’t classify types of windows as “broken” as distinct from “intact.” Hence, “temporary condition” is as inappropriate a descriptor for estar + Adjective as “permanent state” is for ser + Adjective.

As students master the cognitive distinction between classifying an object versus reporting an observation valid for a specific event, they can often check their understanding by returning to the “and” test of structural equivalence. Suppose they wish to say “Mexican food is spicy” and must decide between Es picante and Está picante, both of which are grammatically well formed, but only one of which is contextually appropriate. Suppose further that their impression is that they are classifying and not reporting a particular example of Mexican food they have just tasted. Now they seek reassurance. They can take a bull’s-eye expression that uses ser, coordinate that with “spicy,” and evaluate the acceptability of the result. They might try “Mexican food is nutritious and spicy.” Since this is felicitous, they are encouraged to say La comida mexicana es (nutritiva y) picante. In the same way, if they want to say “John is furious” and are vacillating between ser and estar they might try combining “furious” with a bull’s-eye expression using estar: “John is furious and fed up.” Since this result is much more felicitous than, say “*John is furious and intelligent,” they reject ser in favor of estar.

By thinking along these lines and applying their insights accordingly, students can assimilate the classifying/observing distinction in a surprisingly short time. The fundamental question with ser versus estar + Adjective,
by far the most challenging aspect of the ser/estar problem, is “Am I classifying a person or object by type?” If the answer is “Yes,” ser is used; if not, estar.

In summary, the teaching/learning process as presented argues that adult students approach Spanish expecting to find a one-to-one relationship between English words and Spanish words. They will extend this expectation to allow for an analogous relationship between expressions, e.g., Buenas tardes for “Hello” or, conversely, Gracias for “Thank you.” Classic “problem pairs” are accommodated by identifying, e.g., English “leave” ≠ “leave” or “ask” ≠ “ask” as homonyms and providing a Spanish lexical item for each distinct sense, thereby sustaining the students’ expectations. Ser versus estar, however, appears as an anomaly, in that no homonymous “be” ≠ “be” seems to exist. But by constructional rather than lexical homonymy, I have shown that while there is no direct lexical analog in English for ser or estar, certain other meaning-based criteria reveal discernible meaning differences between apparently identical “be” sentences in English. These differences fortuitously overlap with certain—but by no means all—differences between Spanish ser and estar, but in particular their use with a following adjective. These constructions are well suited for contrasting the meanings of ser and estar in ways that students can now see, through their reflection in English structure. I have suggested that prior to approaching ser and estar directly, time and effort be devoted to legitimizing their very existence by demonstrating the different senses of “be.” Of course, these perceptions must be considerably refined, and other functions of ser and estar must still be acquired. But with the legitimacy of the two verbs accounted for in terms that students understand and indeed demand, and a major distinction between them under at least partial cognitive control, the positive affective climate thus established encourages students to turn more willingly to the task.

**NOTES**


7Bear in mind that the discussion that follows must neither overwhelm nor intimidate our students. It is sufficient that they understand that apparently identical structures are often quite different. Once they sense that one cannot say “She made up her mind and then her face,” or “The queen is cruel and constipated,” no further linguistic sophistication is required. The present discussion is sufficiently accurate for this purpose. A complete and rigorous linguistic account of these phenomena is far beyond the scope and intent of this paper.
