

The Acquisition and Teaching of the Spanish Subjunctive

An Update on Current Findings

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Abstract: I provide an update on the state of the art of the research—the last one being Collentine (2003)—on the acquisition of the function of the subjunctive and mood selection, as well as the research’s implications for pedagogy. The article considers what we currently know about the role of universal grammar, psycholinguistic perspectives on the acquisition of the subjunctive—with special attention given to the second language context—as well as the impact of study abroad. I conclude with recommendations for curriculum and materials designers and directions for future research.

Keywords: foreign language instruction, second language acquisition, study abroad, subjunctive, universal grammar

Introduction

For learners of Spanish the acquisition of the subjunctive forms and their meaning continues to be one of the benchmarks of success. Even though the literature contains a good amount of research on the subjunctive in first (L1), second (L2), and foreign language (FL) contexts suggesting that it is acquired late, contemporary textbooks still give teachers and learners the impression that the subjunctive is so important to communicative goals that its study deserves large proportions of textbook pages and class time. Grammarians have suspected for a number of years that the subjunctive’s frequency in the input that learners might hear or read is relatively low (cf. Collentine 1995). Corpus tools can quickly provide a realistic estimate of the relative proportion of verb forms that learners will face that are in the subjunctive.

Figure 1 (page 40) presents an analysis of the frequency of 2,085,990 verb forms in the *Corpus del español*, a corpus of more than 21,000,000 words comprising native-speaker samples of both written and spoken Spanish from a variety of registers (Biber et al. 2006). The data suggest that, whether in oral or written language, the proportion of subjunctive forms native speakers produce is small compared to other paradigms/conjugations, such as the present indicative, imperfect, or preterit. This analysis shows that the subjunctive, whether in the present or the imperfect, comprises only about 7.2% of all verb forms. Of course, this perspective ignores the sociolinguistics of the subjunctive, which has a certain valuation among many Spanish speakers such that it serves as a marker of a variety of variables, such as level of education (Lynch 2000; Silva-Corvalán 1994).

In this article I provide an update on the state of the art of the research—the last one being Collentine (2003)—on the acquisition of the subjunctive paradigm and its meanings and the research’s implications for pedagogy. There has been much research conducted in the past six years on the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood selection. This aspect of Spanish grammar is not so much studied as of late for understanding the acquisition of the subjunctive for the subjunctive’s sake. Instead, it has become an important construct for studies attempting to understand more general L2 developmental issues, such as the role of universal grammar (UG) as well as input. I conclude with recommendations for curriculum and materials designers as well as for future investigations.

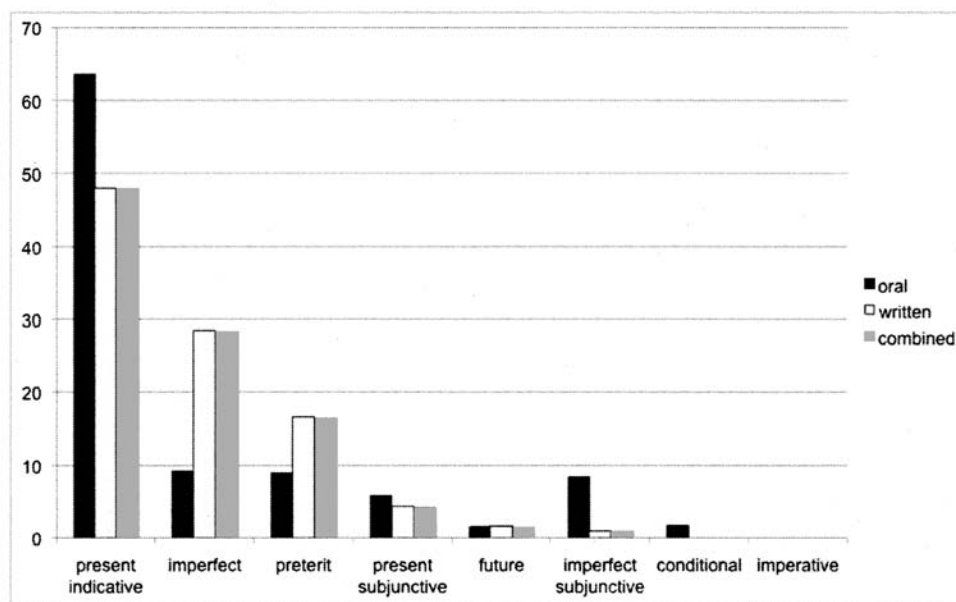


Figure 1. Frequency of Spanish verb forms in the Corpus del español by verb tense/mood and mode (see Biber et al. 2006).

Important Assumptions about the Subjunctive

Theoretical and typological treatments of the subjunctive have us consider two keys principles. First, mood and modality are distinct phenomena. Modality is any lexical or morphological expression of one's commitment to the truth-value of a statement. Adverbs such as *quizás* 'perhaps', verbs such as *insistir* 'insist', and adjectives such as *imposible* 'impossible' can all convey a certain degree of how much a speaker believes some concept like *Juan baila bien* 'Juan dances well' is or will be true, and so they express a modality. Mood, on the other hand, is an inflectional representation of modality. The indicative mood indicates a commitment to the truth-value of a statement, whereas the subjunctive indicates a lack of such commitment (Palmer 2001). Second, when we teach the subjunctive students learn that the Spanish speaker's task is one of mood selection. That is, for Spanish verbs, one must always select between one of two moods—namely the indicative or the subjunctive—for every verb, just as one must determine a verb's tense, person, or number. Indeed, Collentine et al. (2002) show that as learners become better at knowing where to use the subjunctive they show more signs of mood selection, since they show more instances of (erroneous) subjunctive use in main clauses. For the most part the indicative is the default mood of independent clauses, whereas one must be careful to select the correct mood in subordinate clauses. The subjunctive mood is frequently a redundant reflection of modality expressed elsewhere in a sentence, normally in the main clause of sentences containing a noun or adjectival clause or in the conjunction of sentences containing an adverbial clause.

(1) Mood and modality in a noun clause.

Deseo [modality] que me compres [subjunctive mood] algo. 'I want you to buy me something'.

(2) Mood and modality in an adjectival clause.

Busca a la chica [modality] que corre [indicative mood] rápido. ‘He’s looking for the girl that runs fast’.

(3) Mood and modality in an adverbial clause.

Me llaman antes de que [modality] lleguemos [subjunctive mood]. ‘They call me before we arrive’.

Mood selection is also dictated by pragmatics and discourse requirements. Haverkate (2002) notes that various speech acts are carried out with the subjunctive, such as directives and optatives. The indicative’s pragmatic function is often one of assertion and stating what is most relevant to a topic. Haverkate also asserts that, from a discourse perspective, the subjunctive mood has a low degree of “informational value,” which is consistent with the above observation that the subjunctive mood is often a redundant marker of modality. The subjunctive tends to connote defocalized information (i.e., background), whereas the indicative connotes focalized information (i.e., foreground), much like the preterit focuses on foreground events and the imperfect background events in narratives.

Based on the second language acquisition (SLA) research to date, there are some important assumptions to keep in mind about the acquisition of mood-selection abilities. The acquisition of mood-selection abilities entails knowing which mood is necessary in a given clause. Psycholinguistically, this involves recognizing which mood any verb is inflected for when processing input; it may also involve arriving at the correct conclusion about whether that inflection is accurate given instruction, convention, and the other linguistic factors described here above. Mood-selection abilities also require knowing and selecting the appropriate mood for any given verb that one produces in speech or in writing. The acquisition of the subjunctive is different from the acquisition of mood-selection abilities. This entails knowing general morphological rules for generating subjunctive inflections (and ramifications for stems) as well as which forms in a verb’s paradigm represent the modalities that the subjunctive reflects. The same modality association holds for the acquisition of the indicative, a topic that has not been studied in earnest in the L2 literature. In input, the research to date has shown that the subjunctive’s connotations have low communicative value (Farley 2004a; VanPatten 1997). Its modality is difficult to decipher in listening or reading activities. Also the mood of many verbs is not readily apparent to learners in these tasks, although so-called irregulars (*sepa* ‘should/may know’, *tenga* ‘should/may have’) may be particularly noticeable at early stages (Collentine 1997; Gudmestad 2006). From a production standpoint, the research indicates that for native-like mood selection (i.e., the production of a matrix then subordinate clause, and determining the mood of each clause), syntactic stage processing may be necessary (Collentine 1995; Isabelli and Nishida 2005). Learners need to be at a point in their development where they reliably produce subordinate clauses instead of depending on paratactic strategies or being heavily dependent on coordination for relating ideas such as cause-effect and stance. From a cognitive perspective this sort of processing requires one to process information across clauses (Johnston 1995).

Research Findings on Subjunctive Acquisition Pre-Collentine (2003) Review

In this section I briefly outline the major findings on the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities up to my 2003 summary (Collentine 2003). And, as will be seen in the next section, although many of the same themes are being discussed currently, a number of new perspectives have added to our understanding. Collentine (2003) emphasizes that the research to date implied that there were both internal and external factors that influenced the

acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities in L1, L2, and FL contexts. Internal factors relate to storage and cognitive processing of linguistic phenomena. External factors are the influences of sociolinguistic variables and instructional practices.

Internally, knowledge of the subjunctive and mood selection are poorly developed even after numerous formal opportunities to practice with it (Stokes and Krashen 1990; Terrell, Baycroft, and Perrone 1987). In psycholinguistic terms, mood selection and the production of the subjunctive seem to resist automatization. Collentine (1995) surmises that another internal factor is that, since the subjunctive is largely limited to subordinate (i.e., dependent) clauses, learners may not begin to develop knowledge of the subjunctive's meaning or mood-selection abilities until they have reached the syntactic stage of processing (cf. Swain 1985).

The research implied that the acquisition of the subjunctive in all contexts is influenced by both internal, psycholinguistic and external, sociolinguistic factors. Lee and Rodríguez (1997) as well as Leow (1993) argue that learners do not readily notice the subjunctive when they are faced with it in comprehensible input, which is consistent with VanPatten's contention that learners tend not to attend to formal properties of language when they are focusing on processing meaning, especially when the structure in question has low communicative value (VanPatten 1997). Additionally, Blake (1985) notes that even in L1 contexts the subjunctive's function does not fully match the majority of prescriptive tenets until one becomes an adolescent, when social pressures to conform to (socio)linguistic norms are strongest.

Recent Findings on Subjunctive Acquisition

The recent research on the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities has been approached from three main perspectives. Many of the recent investigations have approached the issue of their late or incomplete acquisition (and even attrition) from a UG perspective. Others have taken a psycholinguistic perspective. Three of note have examined the effects of context of learning, specifically, study abroad contexts. I examine them separately in the following.

UG Perspectives

Recently researchers have focused on the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities to better understand how different modules/systems (i.e., relatively distinct linguistic domains such as phonology, syntax, and discourse-pragmatic domains) communicate between each other when the learner has some sort of linguistic deficit. Access to UG is not guaranteed as one ages, and there is substantial debate as to whether after puberty one has even partial access to UG when it comes to learning an L2. The most widely accepted perspective stipulates that some systems do not communicate well if one loses full access to UG, which leads to persistent grammatical errors (Montrul 2000, 2008; Sorace 2000). The subjunctive is of interest to this line of research because using it like a native speaker requires that the "interface" between the syntactic and discourse-pragmatic module be intact. The learning problem is that the UG mechanisms responsible for intermodule communication in the L2 do not operate in the same way that they do when one learns his/her L1. Montrul (2008) contends that there are certain modules that are most vulnerable to transfer and to incomplete acquisition of the syntactic and discourse-pragmatic features of the subjunctive. Sorace (2000) has argued that unreliable communication between interfaces is a particular vulnerability for adults. Montrul (2008) claims that the syntax and discourse-pragmatic interfaces are the most "vulnerable" in L2 acquisition, which might explain why the subjunctive is so difficult to acquire. Montrul (2008) shows that heritage speakers of Spanish who incompletely acquired the language are much more vulnerable to attrition in subjunctive use than, say, preterit/imperfect usage. If the subjunctive's place in one's linguistic competence is vulnerable even for heritage native speakers, one should not be

surprised that it is especially difficult for the subjunctive to gain a foothold in the L2.

(4) *Quiero que te vayas*. 'I want you to leave'.

(5) *Es imposible que sepan*. 'It's impossible for them to know'.

Learners may well know that the pragmatics of (4) and (5) imply, respectively, a directive and a lack of assertion, and they may also know that the mood of each subordinate clause is the subjunctive. What learners may lack in their own production or interpretation of sentences are the processes that license the influence of main clause modality over subordinate clause mood selection, which a strong syntactic to discourse-pragmatic module interface would take care of. What is extremely interesting about this line of research is that it has challenged investigators and pedagogues to consider the role of L1 transfer. It seems that where interfaces are vulnerable like the syntactic to discourse-pragmatic one discussed here, L1 transfer is very likely to occur.

(6) **Quiero para él salir*. 'I want him to leave'.

Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect that, whereas L1 transfer may not account well for errors in marking, say, person and number in the L2, the weak/vulnerable interface hypothesis explains why sentences such as (6) are common in learner production.

It should be noted that, although Montrul's perspective is compelling in the sense that it explains much of what teachers observe (i.e., the subjunctive is very hard to learn and often never achieved) and it explains why L1 transfer is so prevalent when instruction deals with the subjunctive, other researchers contend that the picture is more complex. Whong-Barr (2006) adds that it is difficult to argue that certain modules are more or less vulnerable to transfer because the development of different modules occurs at differing rates. It is difficult to argue that intermodule communication is weak/vulnerable if one does not know whether the modules in question are on a different development schedule. Borgonovo, Bruhn de Garavito, and Prévost (2008) present evidence suggesting that when the L1 and L2 are grammatically congruent (e.g., French L1 learners of Spanish as a L2), the interface vulnerability can be overcome with time so as to lead to native-like performance. Additionally, it is well known that most FL curricula do not integrate the teaching of pragmatics as systematically as grammar. Pearson (2006) conjectures that the apparent interface vulnerability may be ameliorated with explicit instruction about the pragmatics of the subjunctive (i.e., rather than simply prompting learners to make lexical or pattern-based associations with it, e.g., *querer que*, indefinite article + noun + *que* + subjunctive).

Psycholinguistic Perspectives

In one way or another recent psycholinguistic research into the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities has examined development either within the context of instructional interventions or in terms of the path that learners take toward mature subjunctive knowledge and mood-selection abilities. The psycholinguistic research on instruction has focused on the effects of strategies for elevating the subjunctive's noticeability and communicative value mostly in input. The remaining research attempts to elucidate the linguistic processes that influence what learners process and produce.

Regarding the effects of subjunctive instruction, Fernández (2008) as well as Farley (2004a) present research indicating that processing instruction is better than structured input alone at fostering the subjunctive knowledge and mood-selection abilities. Processing instruction and structured input are similar in that they both are input oriented and they both focus learners on making meaning connections with a targeted linguistic structure. They are different in that pro-

cessing instruction foreshadows these meaningful activities with an explanation of how learners are likely to process the target structure erroneously in listening or reading tasks. Fernández (2008) argues that it is particularly important to provide learners with hints about how to process the subjunctive (i.e., the input-oriented activities should be preceded with explicit information about the processing involved). Finally, Fernández (2008) presents additional evidence that the Spanish subjunctive is not particularly salient to learners, which may explain why coupling meaningful input practice with processing strategies (i.e., about the fact that learners tend to pay attention only to the lexical content of verb forms, rather than the grammatical content found in Spanish's suffixes) affects more subjunctive intake. Farley (2004a) presents similar results, showing that mood selection is improved substantially when structured input is coupled with strategies for processing the subjunctive forms. Information such as doubt is less apparent than it is in modality clues such as *es posible* 'it is possible'. In other words, the low communicative value of the subjunctive mood benefits much from instructional strategies showing how that mood conveys certain modalities.

Farley (2004b) shows that processing instruction can nullify syntactic deficiencies that learners might have so that they can interpret and produce the structure with a high degree of accuracy with sustained results. Recall that Collentine (1995) posited that English L1 learners must be at the syntactic stage of development before they can select mood like native speakers (i.e., they cannot select mood in subordinate clauses until they can reliably produce subordinate clauses), which I term the syntactic deficiency hypothesis. However, presenting subjunctive forms to learners in meaningful and syntactically strategic ways such as breaking down a task into two components—namely one that involves processing the main clause and another where learners focus on the subordinate clause and presumably its mood, Farley (2004b)—shows that processing instruction can lead to sustained gains in mood-selection accuracy.

Farley and McCollam (2004) as well as McCollam-Weibe (2004) study subjunctive development within a processability framework and its application to the acquisition of Spanish (Johnston 1995; Pienemann 1998), which makes predictions about learners' readiness to acquire phenomena, such as the ability to make mood selection across clausal boundaries. Their research shows that processing instruction can achieve results that are beyond their predicted readiness. This work along with Farley (2004b) argues that Collentine's syntactic deficiency hypothesis can be made irrelevant as instructional techniques lessen the burden of simultaneous process either in input or output syntax and mood.

Gudmestad (2008) as well as Geeslin and Gudmestad (2008) provide evidence that, in production tasks, learners' mood-selection behaviors depend on the nature of the task that they are engaged in. Gudmestad (2008) shows that subjunctive error rates increase as learners have to produce more parts of any sentence involving mood selection, which provides partial support for the syntactic deficiency hypothesis. When learners speak freely in monologues, they use significantly less subjunctive than if they must only produce a sentence's subordinate clause verb. Geeslin and Gudmestad (2008) compare learners' mood-selection behaviors in an interview and in written contextualized tasks, where language use is contextualized, and learners indicate a preference for either the indicative or the subjunctive. Their analysis shows that learners consider a wider array of factors in the written contextualized task than in the interview. In the written task the linguistic features of semantic category of a main clause and futurity most predicted subjunctive use, whereas in the interview semantic category was the only linguistic predictor.

Gudmestad goes beyond focusing on the effects of task type on mood selection to understand learners' linguistic associations with the subjunctive. Gudmestad (2006) examines the lexical and grammatical factors that predict subjunctive use, providing us with insights into how the subjunctive is integrated into the interlanguage system. She found that for intermediate-level learners only irregular forms predicted subjunctive use, whereas for advanced-level learners irregular forms + verbs of volition (e.g., *querer* 'to want', *desear* 'to wish', *pedir* 'to request')

predicted subjunctive use. This may imply that as learners progress they initially incorporate the subjunctive only into the verbal system (i.e., it is largely seen as another “conjugation,” without any particular communicative value). As they develop, the subjunctive accumulates lexical (or perhaps semantic) features. Another interpretation of these data is that the syntactic-pragmatic interface can be breached over time.

Gudmestad (2008) uses elicitation tasks to study the pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, and lexical variables that predict mood selection at different levels of Spanish proficiency. She attempts to provide an understanding of the linguistic variables that most influence when learners will produce the subjunctive. Her research shows that as learners progress in their development, the verb forms they generate in the subjunctive expand and vary. Yet, not all verbs are equally associated with the subjunctive at early stages. There are certain lexical categories that are associated from the beginning, such as volition, but the range of categories expands as learners progress and they include comments and uncertainty. Interestingly, although irregular forms may be particularly salient to learners in input, Gudmestad (2008) found that this factor predicts much less where the subjunctive will appear than semantic category. It is also noteworthy that time reference (e.g., futurity) and hypotheticality were poor predictors of subjunctive use among learners at all levels, suggesting that lexical classes guide learners in mood selection for quite some time.

One seemingly insignificant finding in the recent subjunctive-related L2 research deserves note here. Upon close inspection of her dataset of Spanish L2 dyadic speech, Buckwalter (2001) conjectures that the incorrect use of the subjunctive may be more an issue of reduced vowel formation than incorrect mood selection. Given this finding, given that irregular subjunctive forms may be particularly salient to learners (Collentine 1997), and given that the field of SLA does not to date fully consider the role of phonological development during the acquisition of an L2, it seems that we have much to learn about the effects of Spanish phonological development on learners’ processing of mood in input and in output.

Context of Learning

Even when learners are exposed to the subjunctive in authentic, immersed contexts, the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities is rarely guaranteed. What is interesting is that two of the recent study abroad studies report that syntactic abilities improve and that improvement in mood selection is apparent though not robust. Isabelli and Nishida (2005) compared learners’ mood-selection abilities in study abroad and at home (domestic, classroom) groups. After four months, the study abroad group produced more subordination and made more accurate mood selection (between 40% and 50% accuracy). Isabelli and Nishida (2005) also claim that study abroad learners can be moved beyond the presyntactic stage (see Collentine 1995). Velasco-Zárate (2006) examined long-immersed L2 speakers of Spanish whose L1 was either English or Japanese. In both cases, where the L1 lacked a given Spanish property, the participants made several misinterpretations of Spanish sentences. Velasco-Zárate (2006) conjectures that since the English speakers do not have comparable subjunctive features in their L1, they were inaccurate in interpreting it in relative clauses (e.g., *Juan busca un perro que sea fiel* ‘Juan is looking for a dog that will be loyal’). Cheng and Mojica-Díaz (2006) found that formal instruction in study abroad environments had almost no effect on learners’ use of the subjunctive, although it did affect learners’ abilities to generate more tightly constructed argumentation. Nonetheless, over time the learners’ abilities did improve, especially in terms of their abilities to produce tightly structured argumentation (an issue largely of complex syntax), and only one advanced learner eventually could use the subjunctive reliably in hypothetical discourse. Finally, Isabelli (2007) showed that, for learners with study abroad experience, explicit subjunctive instruction is quite beneficial, conjecturing that the time abroad assists these learners in producing complex syntax.

What We Know about Effective Subjunctive Pedagogy (and What We Need to Know)

Based on the preceding review, it is not unreasonable to connect our current knowledge of subjunctive and mood-selection acquisition to today's core principles of L2 instruction. In the following, I describe how instruction might be most effective from three perspectives: input-oriented approaches to instruction, output/interactionist approaches, and task-based approaches. I also provide guidance about what we need to understand better.

In general, the research to date continues to hint that the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities is a complex and timely process. Most Spanish educators will attest that even students with lots of experience abroad and with a certain, unquantifiable language aptitude may never "master" mood selection, however that lay term is defined or conceived. One question, thus, that will continue to be a concern is whether we can reasonably expect appreciable gains from subjunctive and mood-selection instruction. It is too early to assert that instruction does not make a difference, especially given that we see from the above research that task type is extremely important and that there is much potential in certain approaches, especially those that are input oriented.

Input-Oriented Instruction

There is a good deal of research that has shown that subjunctive forms are not well or accurately noticed (cf. Buckwalter 2001; Fernández 2008; Lee and Rodríguez 1997; Leow 1993). The key challenge is to get learners to notice the subjunctive in oral or written input. When subjunctive forms are irregular with respect to their infinitival form (e.g., *ser* > *sea*, *saber* > *sepa*, *tener* > *tenga*), they may well be quite noticeable whether learners are focusing on meaning or not. However, the majority of subjunctive forms only differ from their indicative counterparts by virtue of the so-called thematic vowel between the stem and any other person/number inflection (e.g., *trabaj*—{*a,e*—*mos*). Processing instruction (e.g., Lee and VanPatten 2003; VanPatten 2004; Wong 2004) appears to be a highly productive methodology with which to foster learner's (re)awareness of the existence of the subjunctive in input, their understanding of its meaning, and its syntactic distribution. Indeed, this approach, which goes out of its way to point out to students that they tend to overlook phenomena such as verbal mood and that the subjunctive conveys important pragmatic information, seems to be the only defensible input-oriented approach for targeting the subjunctive in a given class. To the extent that the subjunctive has very low overall communicative value (i.e., its information is frequently encoded redundantly in other words in the input), attempts to implicitly expose learners to this structure seem not to hold much promise.

Output/Interactionist Strategies

With the exception of Farley (2004a), most of the output-oriented subjunctive research was conducted before 2003. Since that time there has been no published research specifically investigating ways to enhance subjunctive acquisition in output-oriented approaches. The research by Farley (2000, 2004a) suggests that meaning-oriented output instruction—which attempts to parallel processing instruction's tenets except that learners "produce" the targeted structure—is effective at fostering short- and longer-term gains in mood-selection abilities. Collentine (1998) also provides evidence that both input and output activities raising the communicative value of the subjunctive can have a significant impact. And, Woodson (1997) presents evidence that output-oriented tasks that involve problem solving with a partner promote the subjunctive knowledge and mood-selection abilities. All told, effective instruction entails production that forces learners to contemplate the communicative value of the subjunctive. The relative paucity of output stud-

ies is surprising. Output-oriented research in general (e.g., interactionist research, sociocultural research, task-based research) has probably received more journal space in the past five years than input-oriented research. The challenge to Spanish pedagogues is to design activities that will promote (1) the use of the subjunctive in naturalistic sorts of interactions (e.g., real-world, functional activities); and (2) language-related episodes, such as when subjunctive forms lead to breakdowns in communication, clarification requests, or linguistic incidents that increase the likelihood that noticing the subjunctive's formal and semantic properties will occur.

Task-Based Approaches

Task-based language teaching has received a good deal of attention in the past five years, growing out of psycholinguistic research and general constructionist theories of learning (Ellis 2003; Robinson 2001; Skehan 1996). Given its current popularity, it seems reasonable to consider the extent to which task-based strategies can foster subjunctive use and acquisition. Task-based language teaching principles involve the following: "meaning is primary; there is a relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome" (Skehan 1996). Essentially, learners must solve a problem collaboratively while using the L2. What is interesting regarding the subjunctive and the issue of complex syntax is that much task-based research has attempted to identify the conditions where linguistic complexity will occur (Robinson 2001). It appears that, during the early stages of L2 development, learners will not be able to focus on the subjunctive's communicative value within a task because they will not have enough processing resources to attend to the subjunctive's formal properties (Foster and Skehan 1999). At later stages of development, however, the research suggests that learners will use the (structurally and semantically complex) subjunctive when they are forced to produce coherent messages, such as when they are to report on or provide some hypothesis about some situation/event, or when they have time to plan what it is they will have to communicate in a task (Robinson 2001).

Clearly, we know nothing about task-based language teaching's potential for fostering subjunctive abilities, for there has not been to date any relevant studies published. The closest to meet the task-based design criteria is Woodson (1997), who employs jigsaw activities and the like, finding a beneficial effect for this sort of output-oriented approach. Much needs to be studied. Interestingly, much task-based research tries to understand where linguistic complexity will occur based on the nature of the task and the learner's level of development. Thus, the Spanish subjunctive is a prime candidate as a target for understanding task-based instruction's potential and efficacy.

Current Research Challenges for Understanding the Acquisition of the Subjunctive

There are various areas of research that deserve attention in the future. Investigators have adequate reason to examine the following areas as regards subjunctive development and the acquisition of complex syntax: the role of the L1/transfer, discourse-pragmatics of the subjunctive, phonology, the lexical and grammatical features predictive of subjunctive use, and the effects/role of study abroad.

When the field of L2 acquisition began to mature in the early 1980s (e.g., the use of error analysis, the study of learners' internal syllabi), the role of L1 transfer in L2 acquisition and L2 use was relegated to a trivial role, largely because Skinnerian behaviorist perspectives do not explain language acquisition processes well. However, modern UG perspectives on language development explain in arguably intuitive ways where and when L1 transfer effects will be seen in learner production and other behaviors (e.g., interpreting utterances). The research reviewed here suggests that we need to better understand why the interface between discourse-pragmatic knowledge and syntactic knowledge is so weak as to make L1 transfer especially likely when

English L1 learners must deal with mood in Spanish (Montrul 2008). Additionally, there is very little information available about ways to remedy this vulnerability, even though much of FL instruction is aimed at providing strategies for overcoming innate language learning deficiencies beyond the “critical period.” Even if the interface vulnerability hypothesis explains why so few adult learners of Spanish acquire the subjunctive, it still behooves us to seek partial remedies for this innate psycholinguistic shortcoming.

Related to this is the observation that the subjunctive’s communicative value is probably so low because it plays a largely pragmatic role in the language, where language is used to affect actions, to talk about their effects, or to hypothesize. Pragmatic interpretations of input or using the subjunctive for native-like pragmatic purposes are complex for learners for two reasons. First, the ability to properly interpret pragmatic intent or encode utterances with pragmatic appropriateness requires that learners understand both the locutive (i.e., $\pm$ irrealis) semantics of the subjunctive and its varied illocutive meanings (e.g., coercion, lack of presupposition). Second, managing a structure’s pragmatic interpretations also implies that learners can manage meaning across phrasal and clausal boundaries (Geeslin 2003). A final consideration for future investigations brings us back to transfer. Kasper (2001) notes that learners rely on either universal or L1 pragmatic strategies in the L2, and the adoption of native-like L2 strategies eludes learners at all levels of proficiency. If appropriate subjunctive usage entails pragmatic L2 abilities, a better understanding of its relationship to L2 pragmatic development seems overdue.

A large amount of the L2 research on the present subjunctive has hinted in one way or another that the phonological properties of this verbal inflection (and its similarities with the present indicative) either confound learners or make the form unnoticeable in input. Arteaga, Herschensohn, and Gess (2003) demonstrate how form-focused instruction coupled with instruction heightening learners’ sensitivity to the phonology of French gender agreement can be highly effective at fostering the learning of this construct. To the extent that the subjunctive’s phonological features are often as subtle as the use or deletion of a consonant (as is often also the case with adjectival agreement in French), investigating the utility of a phonological design feature might well prove beneficial to learners. It would also be fruitful to conduct research that employs moving-window, eye-tracking, and event-related potential techniques to tell us about how or whether beginning learners notice the subjunctive in written input.

Gudmestad (2006) provides us with a glimpse of the extent to which the subjunctive is integrated into the interlanguage as a whole and how that integration changes over time. Collentine and Asención-Delaney (in press) show how a robust corpus-based analysis of learners’ use of copula + adjective can describe this construct’s change over time in terms of the lexical and grammatical features associations. Since copula + adjective usage in learners is more a function of pragmatic factors than it is for native speakers (Geeslin 2003), a large-scale corpus-based study on the predictors of subjunctive use among learners at different levels may well be quite revealing.

Collentine (2003), following on the research of Blake (1985), posits that social (cultural acceptance) and institutional (e.g., educational, mass media) pressures cause adolescent native speakers of Spanish to conform to normative uses of the subjunctive. Sociocultural research (e.g., Lantolf 2000) and its methodological tools have provided interesting case studies on the effects of cultural pressures to conform to linguistic norms as well as the reason that learners reject such norms, such as wanting to identify or not with the target culture (Kinger 2002). No research to date has examined the institutional pressures within a domestic, at home context or a study abroad context that impede or lead to successful subjunctive acquisition.

Finally, we know that study abroad and (domestic) at home learning contexts have differential effects on the acquisition of the subjunctive and mood-selection abilities. Interestingly, this line of research has connected subjunctive development to broader syntactic gains than subjunctive research in formal classroom contexts (Isabelli and Nishida 2005). This may well be due to the particular research questions asked, or it may be due to the fact that the fluency

gains that characterize study abroad learners (and so the ability to produce more words per turn) enhance the syntactic development of the learner more so than the classroom alone (O'Brien et al. 2006). If so, the relationship between syntactic and subjunctive abilities may become a more obvious connection in study abroad contexts. The effects (beneficial or otherwise) of immersed environments on mood-selection abilities deserve further investigation.

Conclusions

In spite of its low communicative value and its relatively infrequent occurrence in native-speaker production, the subjunctive continues to be the focus of formal instruction and it is given ample attention in the L2 research. In this article I have attempted to provide an update of what we know about the construct in terms of how, when, and whether it is acquired by learners of Spanish. Because of its complex syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic associations, the subjunctive will no doubt continue to have a central role in Spanish L2 research, whatever the importance it is given in our instructional materials.

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