

We test what we teach but do learners acquire what we test?

Barbara Hinger, Department of Romance Languages, University of Innsbruck, Austria
with the help of Carol Spöttl, Department of English Studies, University of Innsbruck

Research Background

- > State school systems usually test what is taught but little has been done to investigate whether learners acquire what they are taught and tested.
- > A classroom-based study was carried out in an Austrian secondary school over a period of four months. It covered 48 hours of instructional input in Spanish as a second foreign language and took place in the second half of grade 6, i.e. after one and a half year of Spanish or 170 hours of classroom instruction. By the end of the study learners had received 218 hours of instructional input.
- > Data was gathered in three areas; instructional input, test items in classroom exams and learner language development. The study focused on one single morphosyntactic feature, namely the Spanish Subjunctive, a stage 5 structure according to Pienemann's Processability Theory.

Research Questions

1. Is there evidence in the instructional input and in the classroom exams of the morphosyntactic structure under investigation?
2. If classroom exams reflect the instructional input, does the learner language reflect the acquisition of the research structure?

Methodology

The research is based on three sets of data:

> Instructional Input

The instructional input was analyzed on the basis of the lesson plans and categorized into morphosyntactic categories.

> Classroom exams

Pupils were tested twice in the study period. The classroom exams followed a traditional approach to classroom testing which was standard current practice in the area at that time. The first exam was administered after 18 hours of teaching, the second after 15 hours of teaching.

> Learner language development

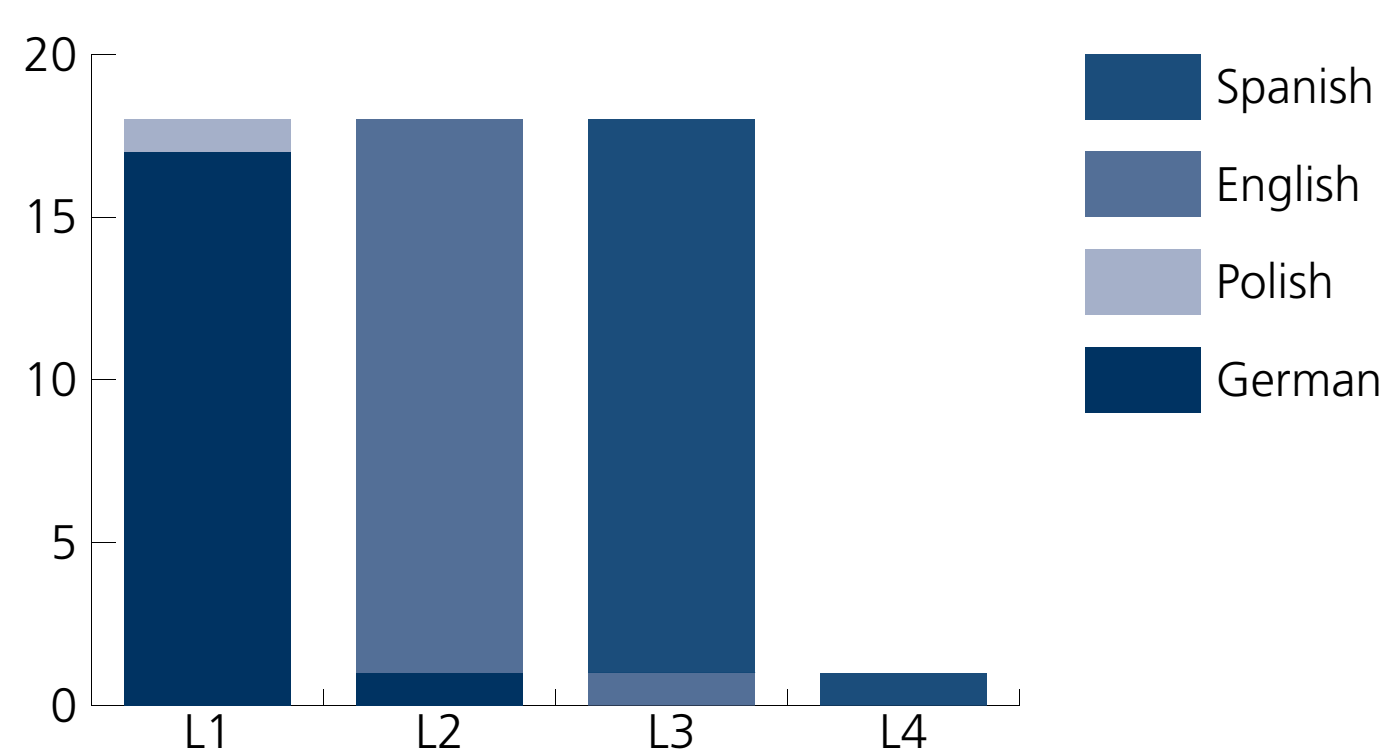
Spontaneous speech data was collected from each of the 18 participants at three points in the study; at the start, midway and at the end. To elicit learner language two research procedures were chosen;

- > a prompt card based dialogue between two participants
- > an interview format with the researcher

Each dialogue lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. All dialogues were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were checked twice with the help of a native speaker of Spanish to ensure that every comprehensible word had been transcribed. Permission to record and use the data gathered was obtained from all participants.

> Participants

18 Austrian secondary school pupils aged 16 taking Spanish as their second foreign language.



Theoretical framework for learner language development

Pienemann's Processability Theory (1998) was chosen both as a theoretical framework and an instrument of analysis. The basic assumption of Processability Theory asserts that predictable and ordered stages of learner language development depend on learners' psycholinguistic processing abilities. Bresnan's lexical-functional grammar (1982) serves as a linguistic basis for formal description of the developmental stages. The psychological basis of PT builds on Levelt's 1989 Speech Production Model. The point of contact between Levelt and lexical-function grammar is to assume that language production is a lexical driven process.

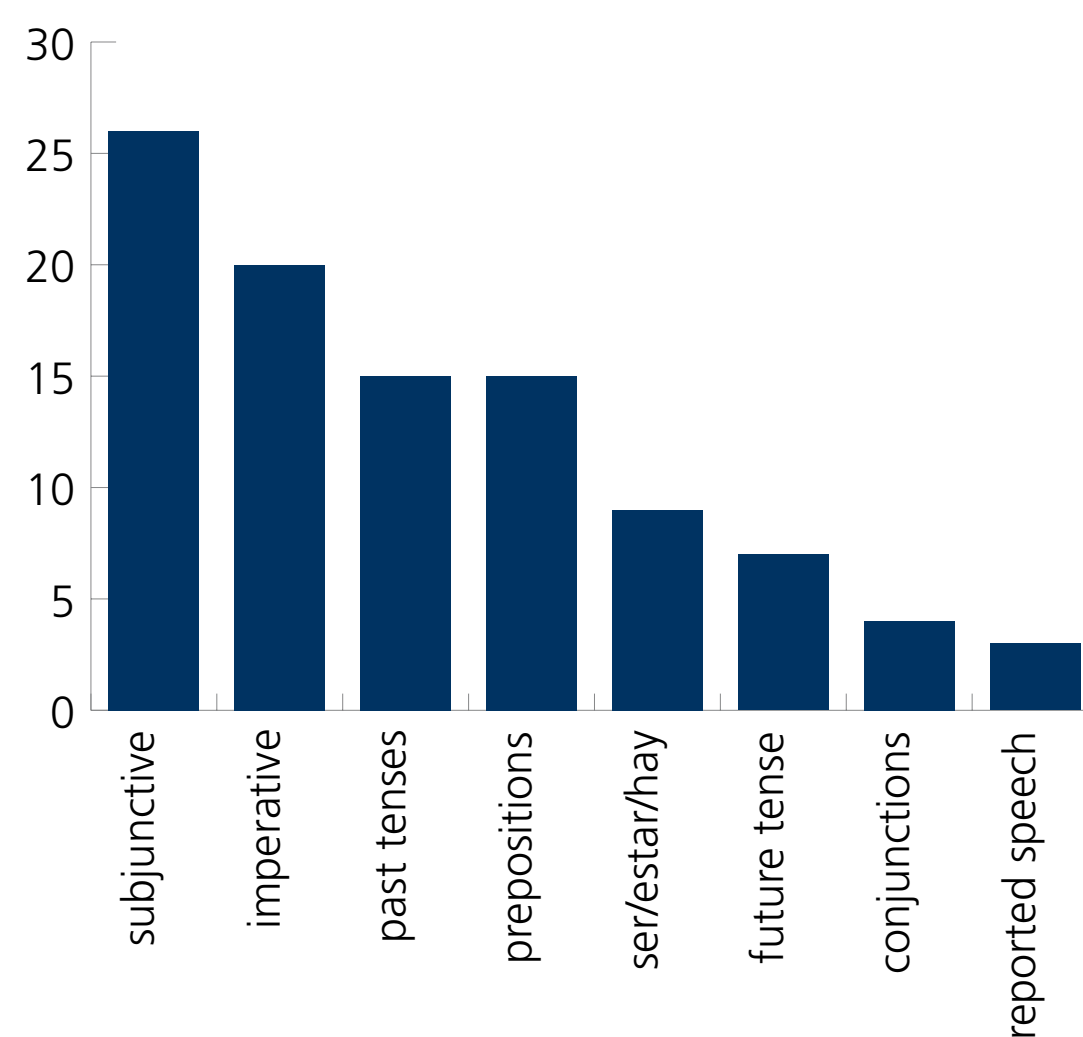
Processability Theory is restricted to the domain of processability of morphological and syntactical structures. It describes the interlanguage development and acquisition of these domains as a hierarchical process in which each lower level is a prerequisite for the higher one, thus establishing an implicational hierarchy. Pienemann postulates five acquisitional stages. These have been widely tested in different languages and thus claim a typological validity. For Spanish, the structures for these stages are as follows.

Developmental stage	Processing Procedures	L2 Process	Spanish Morphosyntax
Stage 5	Subordinate clause procedure	Inter-clausal information	Mood unification in main and subordinate clause (Subjunctive)
Stage 4	S-procedure	Inter-phrasal information	Object marking ("a", clitics) Feature unification NP-VP
Stage 3	Phrasal procedure	Phrasal information	Feature unification in NP Verb marking
Stage 2	Category procedure	Lexical morphemes	Noun: plural marking Restricted verb marking
Stage 1	Word/lemma access	Words'	Invariant forms: single constituents, chunks

Results

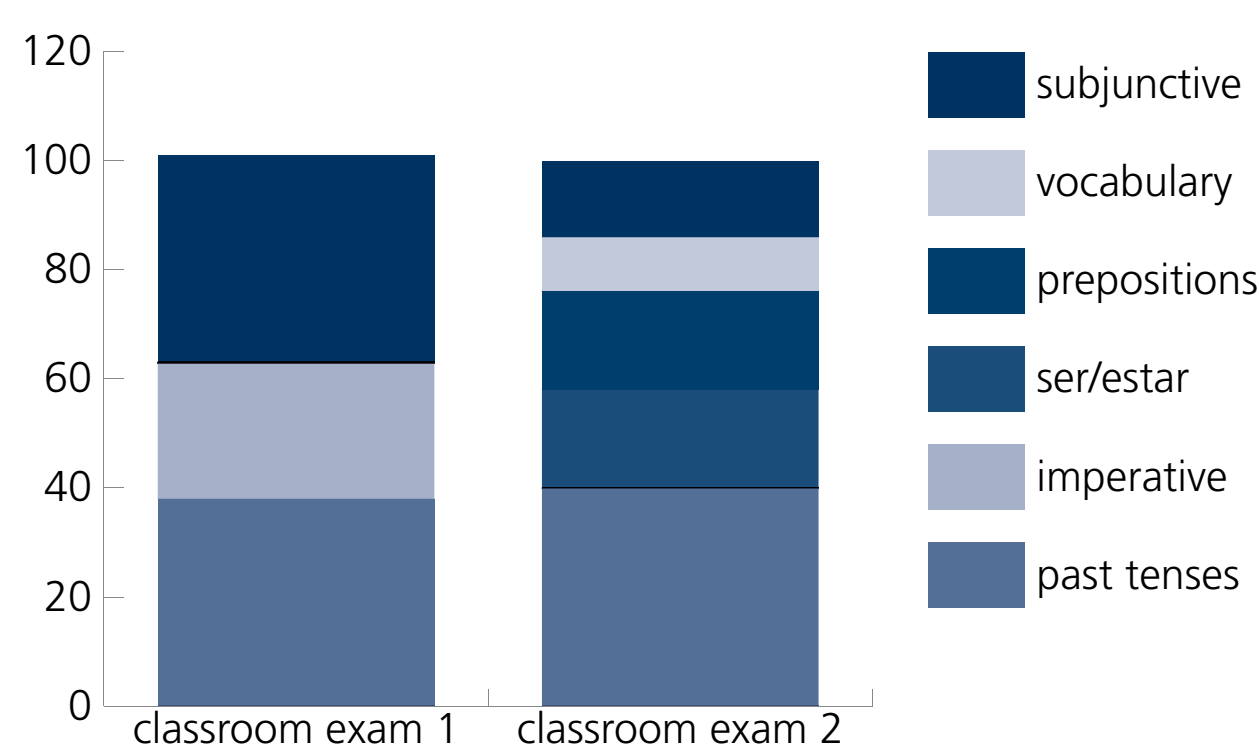
> Instructional input

The percentage distribution of the morphosyntactic structures in the instructional input is presented below.



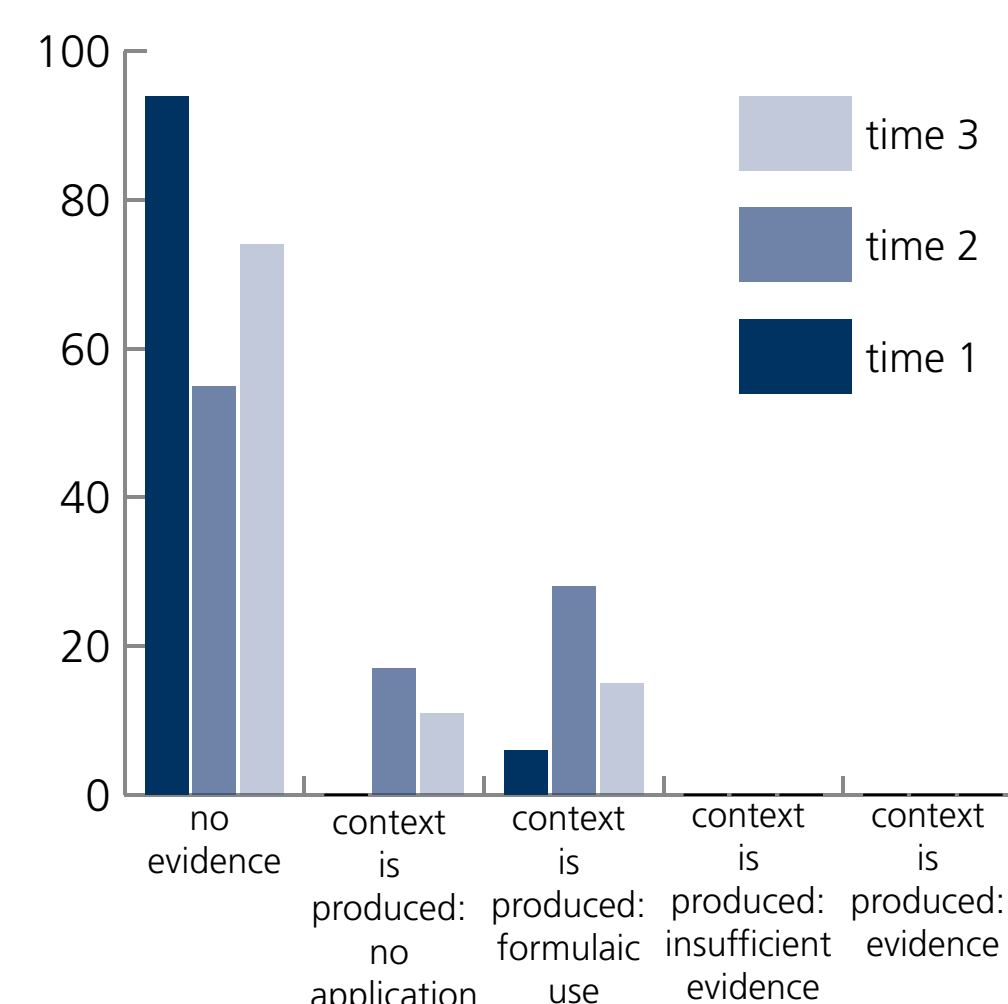
> Classroom exams

The distribution of the morphosyntactic structures in the classroom exams were as follows.



> Learner language development

- Time 1:** At the beginning of the study, i.e. after 170 hours of instructional input, the structure in question was only evidenced by 6 % of the population, and that in formulaic use.
- Time 2:** At the second data gathering stage 55 % still failed to produce this structure. 17 % produced a potential context for Subjunctive but did not produce the form. 28 % produced both context and structure but again in a formulaic use.
- Time 3:** The final data gathered showed 74 % of the participants producing no evidence of either context or form of the structure. 11 % produced a context but no form and 15 % evidenced a formulaic use.



Examples of spontaneous language production of the structure under investigation:

- Time 2**
- (1) learner 3: no creo que es falso / learner 7: es es es
learner 3: que sea falso
 - (2) learner 8: ¿crees? / yo no creo que el futuro s / ah yo no creo que el futuro no se / sea negro
- Time 3**
- (3) learner 15: sí / me alegre que sea muy importante que se ayuden la gente

Conclusions

- > No evidence was found for the acquisition of the morphosyntactic structure under investigation, though taught and tested.
- > The result is a plea for more joint classroom-based research between the areas of second language acquisition and language testing.
- > Learner language corpora need to be consulted in both teaching input and test item design.