

Comprehension of Spanish passive clauses by heritage speakers and second language learners of Spanish

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Heritage speakers (HS) of Spanish have shown better command with early-acquired aspects of grammar than second language (L2) learners, mainly in oral tasks (Montrul, 2016; Montrul, de la Fuente, Davidson, & Foote, 2013). This study investigates whether this advantage persists with structures of later language development (i.e. structures acquired early but mastered at a later age), namely, passive clauses.

Passive clauses have been the focus of many first language (L1) acquisition studies because they involve a reordering of the thematic roles into a non-canonical word order: the first noun phrase is not the agent but the theme, and the agent is downgraded, even omitted if possible (Ud Deen, 2011). But reordering of thematic roles in passive clauses is not the main problem for HS and L2 learners of intermediate to advanced proficiency in Spanish as they are familiar with the verbal passive clause with the copula *ser* in the preterit tense, *fue*, (1). Their greatest difficulty is knowing the functions of the copulas *ser* and *estar*. In adjectival passive clauses, (2), a description of a state or a final result follows the copula *estaba*. In verbal passive clauses, (3), an ongoing or habitual action in the past follows the copula *era*. Previous studies have shown that although HS and L2 learners find adjectival passive clauses with *estar* in the imperfect tense (i.e. *estaba*) acceptable, they reject verbal passive clauses with *ser* in non-canonical tenses, such as the imperfect tense *era* (Bruhn de Garavito & Valenzuela, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2015). This study posits that this rejection of verbal passive clauses in the imperfect tense is because HS and L2 learners do not comprehend them. They are not aware of *copula* functions in these clauses.

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|---|----------------------------|
| (1) La comida fue servida.
Dinner WAS.PRETERIT served.
'Dinner was served.' | Verbal/Eventive Passive |
| (2) La comida estaba servida.
Dinner WAS (estar.IMPERFECT) served.
'Dinner was served.' | Adjectival/Stative Passive |
| (3) La comida era servida.
Dinner WAS (ser.IMPERFECT) served.
'Dinner was being served.' | Verbal/Eventive Passive |

Because L2 learners tend to perform better in tasks that target metalinguistic knowledge and HS in aural tasks that tap on implicit knowledge, or on intuitive information (Bowles, 2011; Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008; Montrul & Perpiñán, 2011) this study was administered in written and auditory modalities. 33 HS, 32 L2 learners of Spanish (L1 English) and 30 Spanish native speakers, as a control group, completed a grammaticality judgment task (GJT) testing knowledge of the copulas in different simple sentences, and an off-line picture-matching task (PMT) testing comprehension of the two passive clauses.

PMT results showed that HS and L2 learners comprehended adjectival passive clauses, (2), better than verbal passive clauses, (3). HS were significantly more accurate than L2 learners in the comprehension of both passive clauses (Figures 1 and 2). L2 learners were not familiar with the function of *era* in verbal passive clauses. And, while HS performed significantly better in the aural modality, L2 learners' performance was not affected by modality. These results are

explained in terms of age effects, language experience, speakers' proficiency, and frequency of the structures.

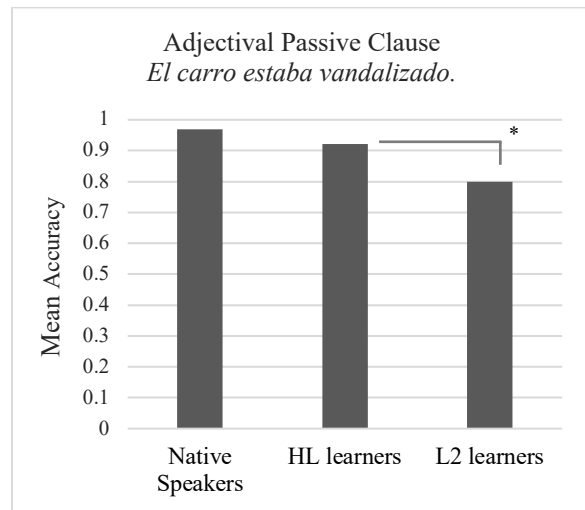


Figure 1

Mean accuracy scores for Adjectival Passives

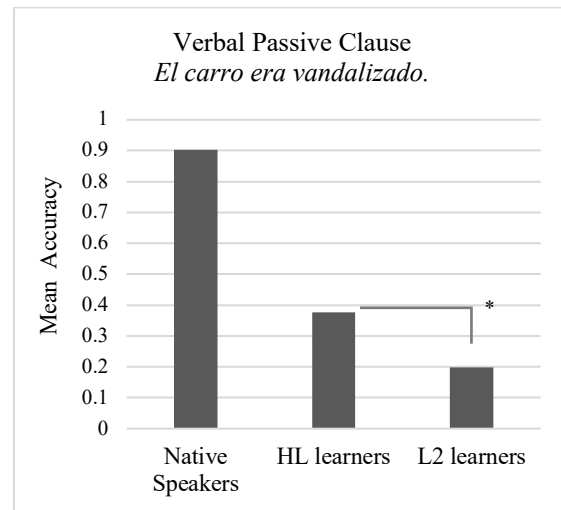


Figure 2

Mean accuracy scores for Verbal Passives

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