Mood and Aspect in Spanish L2 and L3: Positive Transfer and Intercomprehension in British Education

El modo y el aspecto en el español L2 y L3: transferencia positiva y intercomprensión en la educación británica

Lourdes Barquín Sanmartín
University of Reading (UK)

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Abstract

This article presents a transdisciplinary doctoral study at the intersection of second and third language acquisition and foreign language pedagogy in British Higher Education. It investigates the common language sequence among British students: English (L1), French (L2), and Spanish (L3). The study offers a quantitative, yet descriptive comparison of native English speakers enrolled in Hispanic Studies at the University of Edinburgh, distinguishing between students of Spanish only (Spanish L2 group) and of both French and Spanish (Spanish L3 group). Findings reveal that the L3 group demonstrates higher proficiency across A2, B1, and B1+ levels. This advantage is linked to positive transfer from French to Spanish—two typologically related Romance languages. The analysis focuses on mood selection (*indicativo/subjuntivo*) and aspectual contrast (*imperfecto/indefinido*), both absent in English. Pedagogically, the study advocates for fostering Intercomprehension competence in the classroom to enhance interlinguistic awareness and strategic use of positive transfer in language learning.

Keywords: Spanish as a Foreign Language; Third Language Acquisition; Intercomprehension; Positive Transfer; Pluralistic Approaches

Resumen

Este estudio examina la adquisición del modo y el aspecto en aprendientes de español L2 y L3 en universidades británicas. Compara a estudiantes británicos cuya L2 es el francés y el español como L3, con aquellos que solo estudian español como L2. Los resultados muestran que el conocimiento previo de francés facilita el aprendizaje del español, especialmente en el uso del subjuntivo y del imperfecto. Este beneficio se vincula a la transferencia positiva entre lenguas tipológicamente cercanas. El estudio propone integrar la intercomprensión en la enseñanza para mejorar la conciencia metalingüística y el uso estratégico de la transferencia. Se aboga por enfoques pluralistas en la educación lingüística del Reino Unido para aprovechar los conocimientos previos de los estudiantes y optimizar el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: Español como Lengua Extranjera; Adquisición de la Tercera Lengua; Intercomprensión; Transferencia Positiva; Enfoques Pluralistas

INTRODUCTION

Foreign Languages in British Primary, Secondary and Higher Education

Despite a sustained decline in modern foreign language (FL) enrolments across all educational levels in the United Kingdom —initially driven by the Labour government's 2004 decision to remove the compulsory status of FLs beyond age 14[1], which led to a sharp drop in GCSE[2] uptake and a subsequent domino effect in Higher Education, and later exacerbated by the repercussions of Brexit—Spanish, French, and German have remained the most widely studied languages (Collen, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Collen & Duff, 2024; Tinsley, 2019; Tinsley & Board, 2013). The continued institutional presence of these "big three" underscores their enduring significance within the UK's linguistic landscape.

At the primary education level, French has traditionally been the predominant FL offered—a trend rooted in France's historical prominence as a European power from the late seventeenth century and its subsequent status as a lingua franca. In recent years, however, Spanish has experienced steady and significant growth. Notably, in 2024, Spanish was the highest-ranking FL at A level for the fifth consecutive year (Collen & Duff, 2024). This trend is mirrored in Higher Education, where French and Spanish remain the only languages offered almost universally across universities delivering degree programmes or Institution-Wide Language Programmes ('Languages for All') (Critchley et al., 2021, 2022; Chaurin & Sadoux, 2024).

Data from the British Council's *Language Trends* reports over the past five years reveal a typical sequence in language learning: French is most often introduced at the primary level, thus assuming the role of L2, while Spanish is typically added in later educational stages, functioning as an L3. This pattern is particularly salient in Scotland's 1+2 Approach (Scottish Government, 2016, 2020), which reflects plurilingual objectives set by the Council of Europe (2021) and UNESCO (2003). In light of ongoing challenges in the sector, this article argues that this language sequence offers an underutilised pedagogical advantage, warranting more explicit integration into foreign language teaching practices.

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[1] Although foreign languages remain compulsory throughout Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14), in 2004 they ceased to be mandatory at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), and thus were no longer required for GCSE examinations, at the end of Year 11.

[2] GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is an academic qualification in a specific subject taken by students in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, typically at age 16.

Grounded in the transdisciplinary nature of this doctoral research, the study proposes a pedagogy informed by empirical findings rather than limited to theoretical constructs. For native English speakers, the integration of French and Spanish in classroom practice—through reflections, metalinguistic comparisons, and targeted activities—can foster interlinguistic awareness. As typologically related Romance languages, French and Spanish share grammatical features that are either absent or differently expressed in English, such as verb morphology, grammatical gender, and, most relevant to this study, the grammatical marking of aspect and mood. Leveraging these similarities enables educators to promote positive transfer from French to Spanish, while also reducing interference from the learners' L1.

Findings from third language acquisition research support this approach. Learners of an L3 Romance language with prior exposure to another Romance language often show enhanced progression in areas such as morphology and syntax (Diaubalick et al., 2020; Eibensteiner, 2019; Leung, 2005, 2006; Rothman, 2011, 2015, 2013; Salaberry, 2005, 2020; Sánchez & Bardel, 2017; Westergaard et al., 2017). Within this framework, the present study examines the acquisition of Spanish aspect and mood (*indicativo/subjuntivo*; *imperfecto/indefinido*) across CEFR levels A2, B1, and B1+ among native English-speaking undergraduates at the University of Edinburgh. By systematically comparing learners with and without prior French instruction, the study offers pedagogical insights into how multilingual repertoires can be strategically mobilised to enhance Spanish acquisition.

Mood and Aspect in Spanish: Linguistic and Crosslinguistic Considerations

In exploring L2 and L3 learning of Spanish, many studies focus on areas where the language differs most sharply from English. In Spanish, mood (*modo*) and aspect (*aspecto*) are essential grammatical categories that structure meaning, yet both pose particular cognitive challenges for English-speaking learners due to their distinct or limited markedness in English. Since these features are central to this study, below we outline the crosslinguistic differences and expected acquisition difficulties.

The Subjunctive Mood in Spanish, French and English

Spanish exhibits a rich and highly developed subjunctive system (*subjuntivo*), whose use goes well beyond expressing counterfactuals or issuing commands. The subjunctive mood typically occurs in embedded clauses and is associated with meanings related to doubt, negation, uncertainty, volition, and lack of assertion. In contrast, the indicative (*indicativo*) is the default mood for asserting factual

information and events perceived as certain or real. This distinction is both semantic and pragmatic in nature.

From a semantic perspective, the subjunctive is commonly associated with non-assertion, meaning that the speaker does not commit to the truth of the embedded proposition. The indicative, on the other hand, expresses assertion—a commitment to the truth value of what is being said (Stalnaker 1978). This explains why the indicative is used to report beliefs or facts, while the subjunctive appears in contexts where truth is suspended or irrelevant.

From a discourse-pragmatic angle, recent studies (e.g. Haverkate, 2002; VanPatten, 1997) suggest that the subjunctive signals backgrounded or defocalised information—content that is not central to the speaker's communicative intention—while the indicative highlights foregrounded information, considered relevant or new in the conversation. Consider the following contrast:

- Indicative (assertion, foregrounded information):

    o *Creo que ella viene mañana.* → The speaker asserts the embedded proposition as likely or real.

    o I think she is coming tomorrow.

- Subjunctive (non-assertion, backgrounded information):

    o *No creo que ella venga mañana.* → The embedded proposition is not asserted as true; the speaker distances themselves from it.

    o I don't think she is coming tomorrow.

While French and Spanish both maintain a morphologically distinct subjunctive, they differ in their scope and obligatory contexts. For example, Spanish requires the subjunctive after *después de que* ("after that"), whereas French allows the indicative (*après que* + *indicatif*). This distinction suggests that learners with L2 French may experience positive transfer in *some* subjunctive contexts but interference in others, depending on structural alignment.

In contrast, English lacks a fully inflected subjunctive system, relying instead on modal verbs and periphrastic constructions (*e.g.,* "*I suggest [that] he go*") to convey similar meanings. This fundamental structural difference means that L1 English learners must acquire both the form and functional scope of the Spanish subjunctive from scratch, making mood selection one of the most persistent challenges in their Spanish acquisition.

Perfective vs. Imperfective Aspect in Spanish, French and English

Spanish marks aspectual contrasts in past tenses using the preterite (*pretérito indefinido*) and imperfect (*pretérito imperfecto*), which distinguish between completed and ongoing actions. This contrast can be analysed through the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (Andersen, 1991; Vendler, 1967) and the Discourse Hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, 2000), considering both semantics and pragmatics/discourse. Thus, the preterite is perfective, signalling completed, bounded events, or foreground events (telic actions), while the imperfect is imperfective, indicating ongoing, habitual, or background actions (atelic actions). For example:

- Preterite (perfective):

    o *Ayer comí pizza.* → Completed event.

    o Yesterday I ate pizza.

- Imperfect (imperfective):

    o *Cuando era niño, comía pizza cada sábado* → Habitual or background action.

    o When I was a child, I used to eat pizza every Saturday.

French exhibits a similar perfective-imperfective distinction (*passé composé vs. imparfait*), though key differences exist. The *passé simple*, which historically mirrored the *pretérito indefinido*, is now rarely used in spoken French, while the *pretérito indefinido* remains frequent in Spanish. Additionally, *passé composé* partially overlaps with both the Spanish *pretérito indefinido* and *pretérito perfecto*, potentially creating mismatches for learners transferring from French to Spanish.

English, in contrast, lacks a dedicated imperfective past tense and instead conveys aspect through periphrastic or lexical means:

- *I was reading* (progressive form for ongoing past actions)

- *I used to read* (habitual past action)

Research shows that L1 English learners of Spanish often default to the *preterite* in contexts requiring the imperfect, suggesting difficulty in recognising aspectual contrasts (Andersen, 1991). However, L3 acquisition research also shows that learners of a Romance language (e.g. Spanish) with prior exposure to another Romance language (e.g. French) tend to show greater accuracy in imperfect selection, likely due to their familiarity with the *passé composé-imparfait* distinction, which

parallels the Spanish contrast (Diaubalick et al., 2020; Eibensteiner, 2019; Salaberry, 2005, 2020; Sánchez & Bardel, 2017; Vallerossa et al., 2021).

GOALS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Building on the introduction above, this study aims to assess the influence of prior experience with French on Spanish acquisition, identify the primary source of transfer —whether English (L1) or French (L2)— and examine whether the acquisition order of aspect and mood in L3 Spanish follows typical L2 learning patterns. Findings from this study suggest that learners with prior knowledge of French outperform their peers in the accurate selection of aspect (preterite vs. imperfect) and mood (indicative vs. subjunctive). This advantage becomes more pronounced from the B1+ level onwards, indicating that transfer effects from L2 French become increasingly beneficial as learners' level improves in Spanish.

To this end, the study also proposes pedagogical strategies that transform positive transfer into a deliberate learning mechanism. Central to this is the concept of Intercomprehension (Candelier et al., 2010; Doyé, 2005), understood both as a teaching approach and a learner competence. By encouraging students to compare structurally related languages, intercomprehension fosters metalinguistic awareness and strategic cross-linguistic transfer. Given that nearly 90% of L3 Spanish learners in this study (n=69) had prior formal instruction in French, developing intercomprehension could serve as an effective bridge between the two Romance languages—enhancing positive transfer while helping to mitigate potential interference from English.

Table 1. Research questions and hypotheses. Source: Own elaboration

Research Questions (RQ)	Hypotheses (H)
RQ1: Does the presence of an L2 (French) facilitate the learning of Spanish, leading to better performance in grammatical tasks related to mood and aspect?	H1: Learners with an L2 in French (Spanish L3) will outperform those who have not studied another Romance language (Spanish L2) in tasks requiring subjunctive and/or imperfect usage.
RQ2: Do L3 learners access both English and French as sources of transfer in Spanish acquisition? Does English consistently result in negative transfer, and French in positive transfer?	H2: The L3 group will show more positive transfer from French than from English, though English may occasionally interfere, particularly in early stages or with lexical aspect.
RQ3: Is aspect acquired before mood in both L2 and L3 groups, or does prior knowledge of another Romance language alter that order?	H3: Aspect will be acquired before mood in both L2 and L3 learners, reflecting the curriculum sequence and the relative complexity of subjunctive.
RQ4[3]: Which didactic approach—based on intercomprehension—can help L3 learners capitalise on their French knowledge to improve Spanish acquisition?	H4: An intercomprehension-based approach, emphasising the structural similarities between French and Spanish, will allow learners to foster a more reflective and strategic use of positive transfer.

METHODOLOGY

Context and participants

This study was conducted at a British university during the second semester of the 2021/22 academic year, focusing on undergraduates enrolled in Spanish degree modules across three CEFR proficiency levels—A2, B1, and B1+. The total participant pool consisted of 335 students, the majority of whom were English-speaking learners of Spanish.

Participants were divided into two groups based on their academic enrolment and linguistic background. Students studying both French and Spanish as part of their degree were classified as the Spanish L3 group (n=69). Notably, nearly 90% of this group had prior formal instruction in French before learning Spanish (Figure 1), confirming the sequential order of French as L2 and Spanish as L3.

Students enrolled only in Spanish as part of their degree were assigned to the Spanish L2 group (n=266), which served as the control group. However, it is important to acknowledge that a small subset of the Spanish L2 group had prior exposure to other foreign languages—such as Mandarin, Slavic languages, Italian, or Portuguese—or came from diverse international backgrounds. Due to their low representation in the dataset, these students were not analyzed separately. Instead,

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[3] This RQ does not present results per se, so it will not be covered in the 'Results' section. Rather, we will cover it in the 'Discussion and Proposals' section later on in this article.

linguistic pairings such as Spanish-Italian, Spanish-Portuguese, Spanish-Mandarin, and Spanish-Slavic were incorporated into the Spanish L2 control group, recognising this as a methodological limitation.

Figure 1. Students with French first and with Spanish first (n=69)

■ Francés   ■ Español
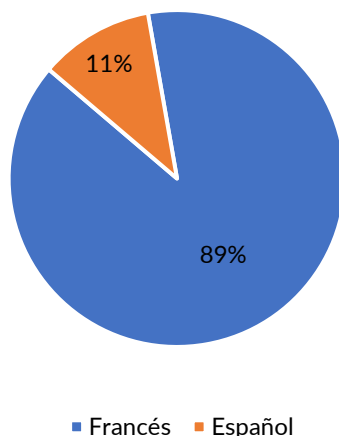
Despite this limitation, these participants were included in the L2 group because the study aligns with the principles of applied linguistics, which seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical insights and practical teaching by integrating empirical research into real classroom settings. A key premise of the study is that university language classrooms in the UK are inherently sociolinguistically diverse, comprising students from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, rather than homogeneous learner profiles. This diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for research, requiring methodological approaches that account for such variation while still generating insights applicable to real-world teaching contexts.

An example of a challenge is that Italian and Portuguese are typologically close to Spanish, and their presence in the L2 group may have influenced accuracy rates. However, rather than viewing this as a constraint, we argue that it provides a valuable reflection of real-world classroom settings. In contemporary European societies, particularly in multilingual and migratory contexts such as the UK, university language learners bring a wide array of linguistic repertoires into their studies (INEE, 2023; Instituto Cervantes, n-d).

This diversity is not only visible in language degree programmes, but also in Institution-Wide Language Programmes, which cater to non-specialist students from diverse academic disciplines across the university and linguistic backgrounds. Traditional studies that assume an 'ideal' language-learning sample may fail to capture these realities, leading to findings that do not fully reflect the complex and

plurilingual nature of language acquisition in Europe and, in our case, in British universities. By acknowledging this variation, even if it is not explored in full depth, this study provides a more realistic and nuanced perspective on second and third language acquisition.

All participants voluntarily took part in the study under informed consent, in compliance with ethical guidelines for low-risk educational research. Data collection was carried out via an online platform, integrated into students' regular formative assessments, ensuring high participation rates while minimising disruption to their coursework. This digital approach facilitated both wide accessibility and efficient data analysis during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Task design and materials

We used an online questionnaire, distributed via the University of Edinburgh's Blackboard platform, as the primary data collection tool. Presented as a grammar review exercise, it offered five bonus points for early completion to encourage participation among first- and second-year undergraduates (aged 17–19). To further boost engagement, we explained the research aims and designed the task to mirror the online quizzes students regularly complete for formative assessment. This familiar format allowed them to focus on content rather than instructions or structure.

Our questionnaire comprises a total of 39 grammatical items[4], which include multiple-choice (example 1), and A/B selection (example 2), matching (example 3), and fill-in-the-blank exercises (example 3). We sorted the class lists of the three Spanish modules involved in the study and divided students into two groups according to their language proficiency: those enrolled in the joint major in French and Spanish (referred to as the "Spanish L3 group[5]") and those solely studying Spanish (referred to as the "Spanish L2 group").

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[4] The questionnaire was identical for both groups, featuring the same tasks presented in the same order. However, the L3 group responded to two additional personal questions concerning the sequence of language acquisition and their proficiency levels in their two FLs. The total score for the questionnaire is out of 100 points.

[5] We acknowledge limitations within the L3 group, as not all participants may be enrolled in identical modules or proficiency levels for both French and Spanish. Furthermore, participants might possess proficiency in languages beyond those formally studied at the university, a constraint also recognised within the L2 group.

Example 1. Multiple-choice item from questionnaire

Selecciona el tiempo verbal correcto.

Yesterday I did my homework in less than ten minutes.

A. Ayer HE HECHO los deberes en menos de diez minutos.

B. Ayer HICE los deberes en menos de diez minutos.

C. Ayer HACÍA los deberes en menos de diez minuto

Example 2. A/B selection item from questionnaire

Lee el contexto y elige la opción correcta.

You are hosting a get-together at home with your old classmates from school. Unfortunately, your best friend has to leave now because they have to get a flight early the next morning. You feel sorry to see your best friend leave so soon.

A. Siento que te vayas tan pronto.

B. Siento que te vas muy pronto.

Example 3. Matching-up item from questionnaire

Necesito que SEPAS la verdad.   A. Subjuntivo

                                                       B. Indicativo

Me parece que María COGE el tren al aeropuerto.   A. Subjuntivo

                                                       B. Indicativo

Si FUERA millonario, viajaría por todo el mundo.   A. Subjuntivo

                                                       B. Indicativo

Example 4. Fill-in-the-gap item from questionnaire

Cuando *fui/iba* al colegio, me *gustó/gustaba* cantar, actuar y pintar. Al principio *quise/quería* estudiar medicina o ingeniería, pero finalmente *decidí/decidía* estudiar teatro. Cuando cumplí/cumplía 18 años, me *mudé/mudaba* a Madrid y allí *empecé/empezaba* a trabajar como actor. Un día, cuando *tuve/tenía* 19 años, el famoso director Pablo Almodóvar *estuvo/estaba* en el público y me *ofreció/ofrecía* actuar en su nueva película.

Limitations regarding the L2 Spanish group

This study acknowledges limitations in the composition of the L2 Spanish group, which included students pursuing joint majors at the University of Edinburgh (e.g., Spanish-Italian, Spanish-Slavic, Spanish-Mandarin, and Spanish-Portuguese).

While exposure to other Romance languages may have facilitated transfer in some L2 learners, the sample size was too small for separate statistical analysis. Consequently, no specific percentage is provided, as isolating this subgroup would not yield meaningful conclusions.

Some participants may have been heritage speakers, whose language proficiency differs from native speakers. Heritage speakers acquire the language at home but may lack full proficiency or literacy if educated in another language, whereas native speakers use the language consistently across domains (Valdés, 2001). Due to these complexities, heritage speakers were not analysed as a separate subgroup, and the study focused on overall group dynamics.

The questionnaire assessed two grammatical phenomena: aspectual contrast (perfective/imperfective) and mood selection (indicative/subjunctive). Responses were categorised in Excel, enabling separate analysis of aspect and mood acquisition in the L2 and L3 groups.

The same questionnaire was used for both groups, with two additional questions for the L3 group on the order of acquisition of Spanish and French and self-perceived proficiency. Item analysis via Blackboard provided insights into L2 and L3 performance, including average scores, completion rates, and question difficulty, aiding the comparison of group outcomes.

RESULTS

This section addresses Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, while Research Question 4, which pertains to pedagogical approaches, will be discussed in the 'Discussion and Proposals' section.

Figure 2. Superiority L3 group over L2 group in all three levels
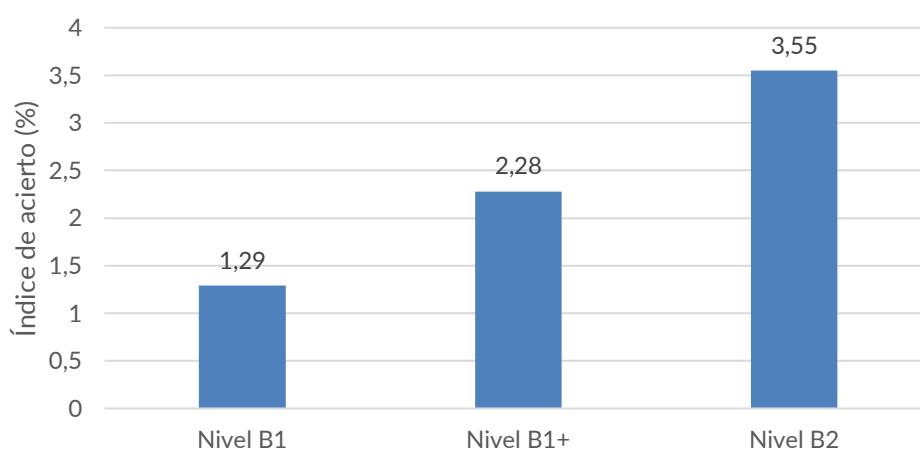
Regarding RQ1 — whether learning in the L3 group is more efficient than in the L2 group — the findings in Figure 2 demonstrate that Spanish L3 learners outperform their L2 counterparts across all tested proficiency levels (B1, B1+, B2). The consistent advantage of the L3 group suggests that prior experience with the subjunctive mood and imperfect tense in French provides a distinct benefit for L3 learners. Since both groups followed the same curriculum and had equivalent exposure to Spanish, the superior performance of the L3 group can be attributed primarily to positive transfer from French, rather than differences in individual language aptitude. These results indicate that knowledge of a structurally similar L2 (French) significantly enhances Spanish accuracy, particularly in areas where English lacks morphological equivalents.

To explore this further, we quantified the accuracy differences between the L2 and L3 groups to measure the positive transfer from French and track its evolution across proficiency levels. The "coefficient of determination" (R^2) was employed to assess the correlation between French transfer and L3 proficiency. The R^2 value of 0.99 indicates a strong correlation, underscoring the substantial role of French transfer in L3 performance. Given the sociolinguistic diversity within the L2 group — including a minority of learners with varied linguistic backgrounds — inferential statistics were not conducted. This decision stems from the challenge of isolating specific language influences in a statistically meaningful way, due to the limited representation of these learners in the dataset. Instead, descriptive statistics were used, which reflect general trends and align with the study's goal of replicating real-world classroom contexts, where learners often come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The R^2 value further illustrates the strength of the relationship between French transfer and L3 accuracy. A high R^2 (close to 1) signifies that French knowledge plays a key role in improving L3 learners' performance. Additionally, the evolution of R^2 across proficiency levels highlights how transfer mechanisms develop as learners advance, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of linguistic transfer in multilingual acquisition.

In terms of aspect and mood in the L3 groups, the data show the influence of both French and English. While English tends to induce negative transfer, French generally facilitates acquisition. The language of transfer is not fixed, but fluctuates based on interlinguistic factors such as typological proximity, structural equivalence, and learners' proficiency level. Early exposure to specific grammatical structures in the classroom also shapes transfer direction. Negative transfer from L1 is

particularly noticeable at the B1 level, where predicates requiring the subjunctive or imperfect are most affected. However, as learners progress to B1+, the influence of English diminishes, and French increasingly facilitates positive transfer. This transition aligns with the L2 Status Model (Bardel & Falk, 2007; Falk & Bardel, 2011), which posits that the L2, as a later acquired language, remains more cognitively accessible than the L1 during subsequent language learning.

Additionally, English's influence on the acquisition of the imperfective aspect — particularly the overgeneralisation of the perfective form — supports the Default Past Hypothesis (Salaberry, 1999, 2005). In contrast, Romance languages explicitly distinguish perfective and imperfective aspects, aiding learners in making clear [+perfective] and [-perfective] associations (Montrul & Slabakova, 2002, 2003). This complexity suggests that the acquisition of aspect is reliant on a modular learning mechanism, which may explain the persistent challenges learners face in mastering this distinction.

Regarding RQ2 —which examines whether the L3 group experiences transfer from both L1 and L2, and specifically whether transfers from English are negative while those from French are facilitative— the findings indicate that L3 learners draw on both languages, though their influence varies depending on grammatical domain and proficiency level. Notably, transfers from L2 French are predominantly positive, even when structural asymmetries exist between French and Spanish. This highlights the advantageous role of French due to several factors: its status as a FL, its typological proximity to Spanish, and its structural similarities (Westergaard et al., 2017).

Figure 3. Structurally Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Predicates in French-Spanish from the Aspectual Selection Task with Ungrammatical Options
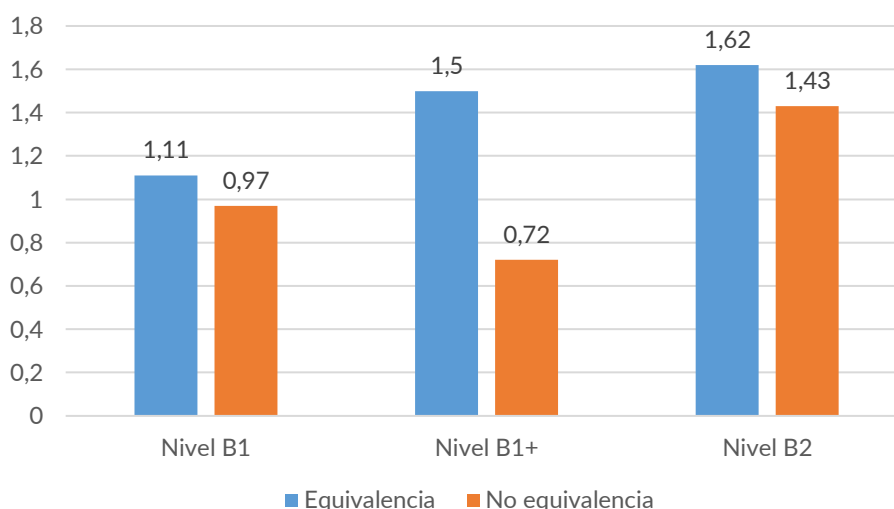
Figure 3 illustrates a clear relationship between interlinguistic structural symmetry and positive transfer in L3 Spanish acquisition. Learners achieved higher accuracy with structurally symmetrical predicates—where French and Spanish share equivalent morphosyntactic patterns—across all levels, particularly at B1+ and B2. This supports the view that structural alignment across related languages facilitates the acquisition of complex grammatical features, such as mood and aspect (Rothman, 2010, 2011, 2013; Rothman & Halloran, 2013).

While French-to-Spanish transfer generally proved beneficial, Figure 3 also reveals instances of negative transfer in asymmetrical contexts. A salient case is the verb construction esperar que, where interference from French led to errors. In Spanish, esperar que typically requires the subjunctive (e.g., María espera que no llueva), whereas in French, espérer que governs the future indicative (e.g., Marie espère qu'il ne pleuvra pas), creating a mismatch at both syntactic and semantic levels. This underscores that typological proximity alone does not guarantee facilitative transfer, and that fine-grained structural alignment is key (Westergaard et al., 2017).

These results lend strong support to the Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al., 2017), which highlights individual structural properties as crucial predictors of transfer outcomes. At the same time, the occasional non-facilitative effects observed are consistent with the Full Transfer Hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996), which recognises that L2 transfer can produce both positive and negative influences. Overall, Figure 3 reinforces the need for pedagogical approaches that help learners navigate both similarities and subtle mismatches across their linguistic repertoires.

Figure 4. Contrast by grammatical phenomenon and proficiency
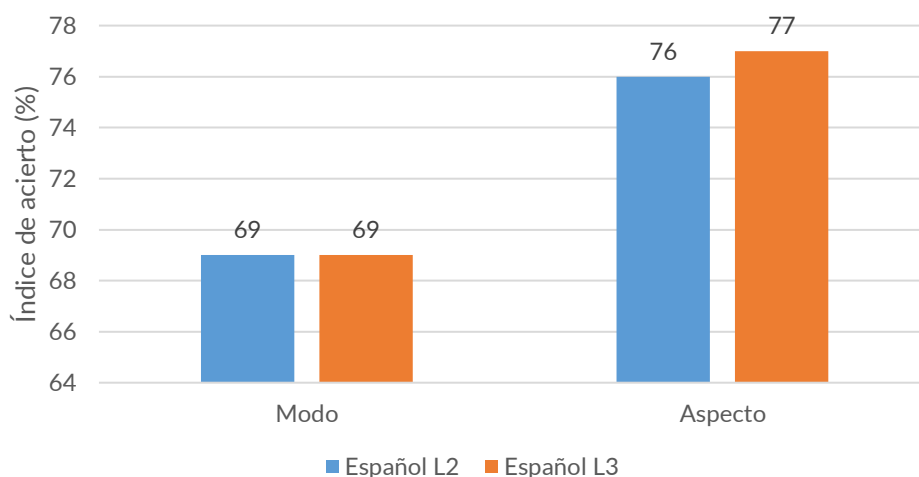
Regarding RQ3—whether mood or aspect is acquired first and whether L2 and L3 Spanish learners follow the same order—Figure 4 shows that aspect is acquired before mood in both L2 and L3 Spanish learners, with aspect accuracy 7.5% higher. This reflects the Spanish as a Foreign Language or *Español como Lengua Extranjera* (ELE) curriculum sequence: aspect (e.g. *pretérito imperfecto*) is introduced at A2, while the subjunctive appears later at B1 and in more limited contexts. The subjunctive's semantic and morphosyntactic complexity (Sorace, 2000, 2004), along with its lower frequency in native input (Collentine, 2010), further delays its acquisition.

Both L2 and L3 learners show similar developmental orders, suggesting that curriculum and input shape acquisition more than language background. However, L3 learners perform slightly better overall, likely due to greater metalinguistic awareness and the strategic use of cross-linguistic transfer.

These findings support the Typological Primacy Model (Rothman, 2010, 2011, 2013) and the Linguistic Proximity Model (Westergaard et al., 2017), showing that perceived structural similarity aids learning. While the order of acquisition remains consistent, L3 learners tend to reach higher accuracy more quickly, highlighting the benefits of multilingualism in instructed settings.

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS

Theoretical Implications

This study offers insights into third language (L3) acquisition by examining the role of transfer from both English (L1) and French (L2) in the acquisition of Spanish. The results support an integrated view of transfer, combining three complementary models: the Typological Primacy Model (TPM), the L2 Status Model (L2SM), and the Linguistic Proximity Model (LPM).

The predominance of French as a transfer source reflects the influence of typological proximity (TPM), as learners benefit from structural similarities between French and Spanish—particularly in morphosyntax and lexicon. The timing of this transfer also varies: early stages show broader, whole-language transfer from French, while later stages favour selective, property-by-property transfer, as outlined by the LPM. For instance, learners at B1 and especially at B1+ levels showed higher accuracy with structurally symmetrical predicates and encountered difficulties with asymmetrical ones such as *esperar que* vs. *espérer que*, indicating that fine-grained structural alignment is key (Figure 3).

The data also reveal the impact of L2 status (L2SM): despite occasional overlap between English and Spanish, learners more consistently transferred from French, suggesting that the cognitive accessibility of the L2—as a later-acquired, declarative system—makes it more readily activated than the L1. This pattern aligns with the Cumulative Input Threshold Hypothesis, since most L3 learners had received formal instruction in French before Spanish, allowing French to cross the input threshold and dominate transfer.

Finally, the evolving nature of transfer across proficiency levels—from initial reliance on English to later, more strategic use of French—supports a dynamic, multidimensional view. No single model fully explains the complexity of L3 development; rather, it is the interaction of typology, acquisition order, and structural similarity that shapes transfer patterns and learning outcomes.

Optimising L3 Spanish learning through Intercomprehension

A strong foundation in one's native language is essential for foreign language acquisition, equipping learners with the analytical skills necessary for making conscious crosslinguistic comparisons. These comparisons enable learners to identify similarities and differences across languages, facilitating the acquisition of new linguistic structures. While learners naturally compare grammatical structures when exposed to a new language, these comparisons are often unconscious (Ringbom, 2007). The brain instinctively seeks patterns, applying familiar rules to new linguistic contexts as a cognitive economy strategy (Odlin, 1989). However, without explicit guidance from instructors, students may remain unaware of these comparisons and their potential benefits. Targeted instruction—such as contrastive analysis, guided reflection, and metalinguistic discussions—can help raise learners' awareness, improving their ability to transfer knowledge and thus enhancing language acquisition (Jessner, 2006; Ellis, 2005).

In the UK's secondary education system, the 'English Language and Literature' curriculum focuses primarily on literature, reading comprehension, textual analysis, and creative writing, often at the expense of explicit grammar instruction (Department for Education, 2014; Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2014). While these skills are important, they leave students with limited exposure to metalinguistic reflection, which is critical for mastering foreign languages with complex features such as aspect and mood. A deeper understanding of linguistic form and function is essential for overcoming these challenges.

Although many UK students studying Spanish have prior knowledge of French, they rarely draw explicit connections between the two languages. Languages are traditionally taught in isolation, with minimal reference to students' prior linguistic knowledge. This monolingual approach overlooks opportunities to leverage linguistic similarities, especially between Romance languages. By neglecting to strategically use L1 and prior languages, teachers miss chances to accelerate language acquisition through crosslinguistic comparisons.

Moreover, traditional language instruction often prioritises rote memorisation and repetitive grammar drills, focusing on mechanical accuracy over meaningful engagement with the language (Tinsley, 2019). Without explicit guidance in recognising linguistic parallels, students may struggle to apply their existing language skills effectively. Adopting a more integrative approach that encourages crosslinguistic comparisons can enhance comprehension, foster metalinguistic awareness, and make language learning more efficient and engaging.

Intercomprehension-inspired tasks can address these gaps by promoting crosslinguistic reflection and enhancing metalinguistic skills. By explicitly drawing parallels between English (L1), French (L2), and Spanish (L3), intercomprehension fosters a more reflective and structured approach to language learning. This reduces cognitive overload and enables learners to make use of positive transfer, facilitating access to new linguistic structures. Furthermore, intercomprehension is curriculum-friendly, easily integrated into existing French and Spanish programmes, and aligned with broader multilingual educational goals.

Figure 5. *Euromania* Textbook

Source: Escudé, 2009, p. 6.

'Intercomprehension', rooted in the concept of 'comprehension', is generally implemented in classrooms through receptive tasks, although it can be made compatible with production tasks too, for example, through mediation activities (see Figures 10-13). These tasks align well with contrastive analysis activities, which highlight specific linguistic features across languages, including lexicon, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. Instructional materials such as *Euro-Mania* (Figure 5), *ESORom* (Figure 6), and *INTERLAT* (Figure 6) have been designed to facilitate intercomprehension among Romance languages, reinforcing the effectiveness of this approach.

Figure 6. *ESORom* (Capdevila and Mir, 2009) and *INTERLAT* (Tassara and Moreno, 2007)

In this article, we regard 'intercomprehension' not just as a teaching approach needing curriculum adjustments or new textbooks, but as a distinct skill, comparable to speaking and writing. It serves as a tool for tackling pan-Romance morphosyntactic features like aspect or mood in class.

Figure 7. Screenshot of *thefablecottage.com*

Figure 8. Screenshot of *worldstories.org.uk*

Teachers can use recommended websites like *thefablecottage.com* (Figure 7) and *worldstories.org.uk* (Figure 8) for classic stories in multiple languages with native speaker audio support.

Integrating parallel translations in English, French, and Spanish into the classroom—particularly when introducing new grammatical features—enables learners to compare linguistic systems and identify cross-linguistic similarities and differences.

For example, in the perfective/imperfective aspectual contrast, students can analyse foreground and background patterns in past narratives, recognising the parallels between French and Spanish while noting the asymmetry in English.

Figure 9. PowerPoint of parallel contrastive analysis of the English, French, and Spanish translations of the Hansel and Gretel tale from *thefablecottage.com*

This contrastive approach helps learners reflect on how English compensates for its lack of morphological marking in this aspect through morphosyntactic and lexical strategies (Figure 9). This perspective aligns with Bardovi-Harlig's (1998, 2000) Discourse Hypothesis, which highlights the role of foreground and background structures in aspect selection.

Additionally, the pluralistic approach of intercomprehension is closely linked to mediation skills (CEFR – Council of Europe, 2021), as both rely on key processes such as inference and linguistic and cultural transfer. Figures 10–13 present authentic materials that can serve as valuable resources for speaking activities, offering opportunities to go beyond purely receptive skills and apply intercomprehension strategies in speaking production tasks. While intercomprehension focuses on decoding text, mediation involves conveying its meaning into another language —whether the learner's native or target language. Together, these processes enhance language learning by promoting social interaction, collaborative meaning-making, and the development of translation skills (Bovill, 2019, 2020).

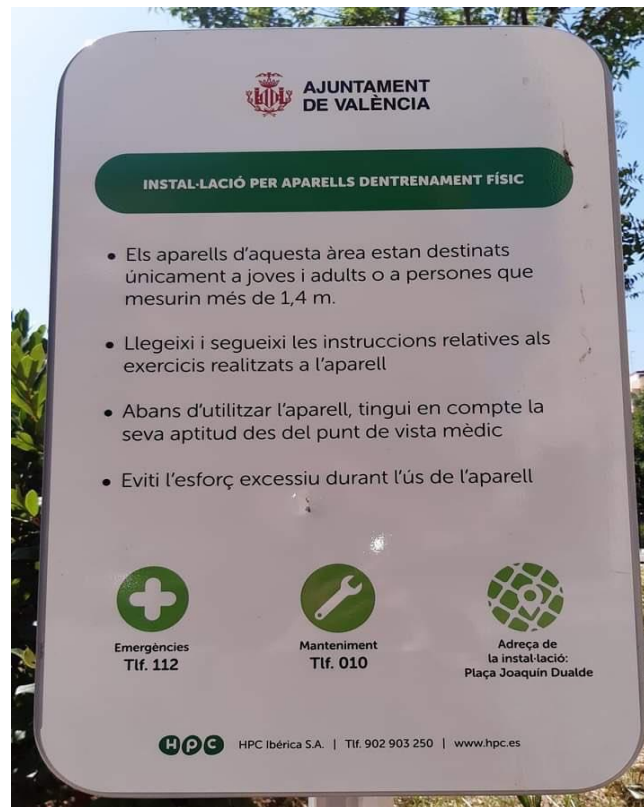Figure 10. Town hall sign written in Valencian (E. M., 2020)

Figure 11. Infographics in Catalan (Gencat, 2018) and Galician (Son de noso, 2016)
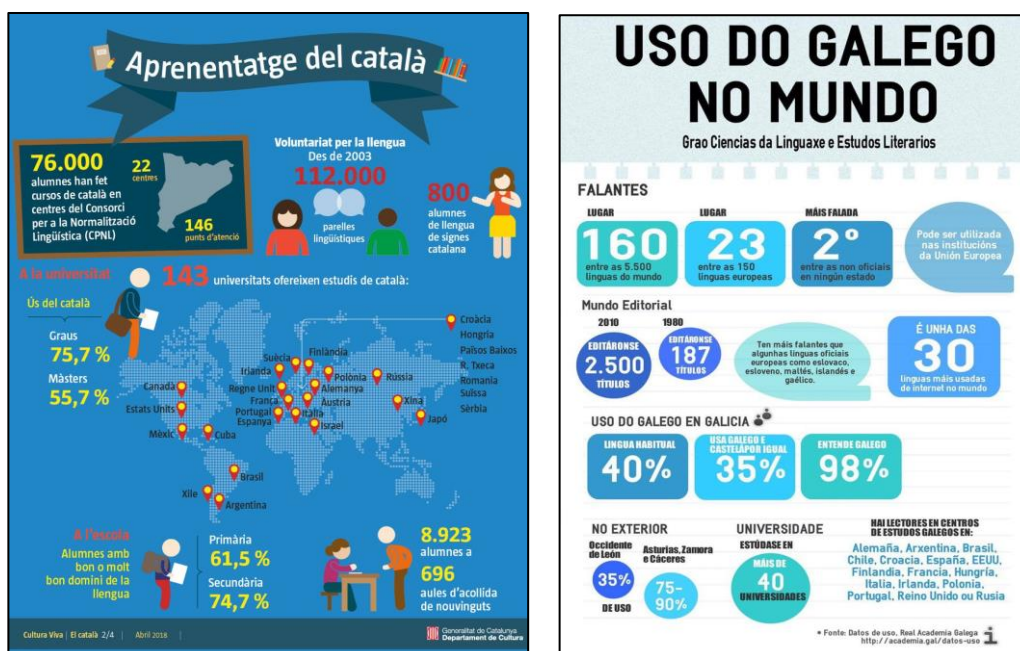
Figure 12. French ID (*République française*, 2023)

Figure 13. Traffic sign in Portuguese ("La OEI fomentará…", 2018)

Intercomprehensive tasks expose learners to linguistic samples from other Peninsular Romance languages found in public spaces, such as informational signs, infographics, official documents, and traffic signs. These materials play a crucial role in exploring the "linguistic landscape" (Fuertes Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Landry & Bourhis, 1997), promoting linguistic awareness, and challenging stereotypes about Spain's linguistic diversity. By incorporating authentic input similar to immersion, this approach fosters both incidental and explicit learning, enabling learners to connect new and prior knowledge while reducing cognitive load. Furthermore, these resources encourage collaborative meaning-making and social interaction, ensuring authentic engagement and minimizing the risk of AI-generated plagiarism.

The pedagogical value of intercomprehension extends beyond the UK, with its principles being equally relevant in multilingual contexts such as the US, Canada, Switzerland, and Latin America, where Romance languages are taught either sequentially or simultaneously (Lusin et al., 2023). While this study focuses on French-Spanish transfer within the British education system, its applicability to other settings underscores its broader significance.

In conclusion, integrating intercomprehension into foreign language curricula enhances linguistic proficiency while supporting broader plurilingual goals (Candelier et al., 2010). By leveraging prior knowledge—especially the French-Spanish connection—it promotes crosslinguistic awareness, reduces learning barriers, and fosters multilingual flexibility. Moreover, this approach holds significant potential to boost student engagement, which is particularly crucial in light of the challenges faced by UK universities, including declining enrolment in language degrees and shifting academic priorities. Intercomprehension offers a more intuitive, cognitively efficient pathway to L3 acquisition, which can motivate students and sustain their interest in language learning. By positioning French as a bridge to Spanish, this approach provides a practical and scalable solution to strengthen foreign language education in the UK.

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that British learners who possess French as an L2 achieve notably higher proficiency in Spanish (L3) than peers lacking a Romance-language background. The advantage is most evident in the acquisition of aspect (preterite vs. imperfect) and mood (indicative vs. subjunctive), domains in which English (L1) differs substantially from Spanish. Although English can exert a certain level of negative transfer—particularly at earlier stages—French largely facilitates the learning process, reinforcing morphology and syntax in ways that accelerate Spanish development.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings reinforce the importance of intercomprehension: explicitly drawing on learners' French as they acquire Spanish fosters a more systematic and strategic use of prior language knowledge. While the sequence of acquiring aspect before mood remains consistent for L2 and L3 learners, those with a French L2 progress more quickly and achieve higher accuracy overall. In this sense, a plurilingual mindset—one that values and sustains French L2 before Spanish L3—continues to prove beneficial in the British educational landscape.

By exploring Spanish as an L3 in British contexts, this work highlights how L3 acquisition diverges from the more commonly studied L2 route and advocates more broadly for pluralistic approaches. Such methods are increasingly relevant given the United Kingdom's evolving linguistic milieu, shaped by sociopolitical factors like Brexit, digital connectivity, migration, and greater academic mobility.

Pluralistic frameworks recognise and capitalise on learners' multilingual backgrounds, promoting lifelong, learner-driven language growth.

Specifically, intercomprehension between related languages emerges as a practical and impactful strategy for British students who typically learn French first, then Spanish. The typological commonalities and structural parallels of these two Romance languages strengthen learners' interlanguage and cultivate higher proficiency levels. Crucially, this refutes the notion that referencing other languages impedes L3 acquisition: rather, it enhances it, as shown by the superior outcomes among native English speakers studying Spanish as an L3.

In short, this research underscores the effectiveness of an intercomprehension-based pedagogy in advancing Spanish L3 acquisition, while also affirming the need for transdisciplinary research that integrates language education, applied linguistics, and policy-making. By adopting a pluralistic, long-term outlook, educators enable students to build on existing linguistic knowledge and remain poised to tackle further language learning experiences throughout their lives.

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LOURDES BARQUÍN SANMARTÍN

Lourdes is a Lecturer in Spanish at the University of Reading and holds a PhD in Language Acquisition and Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh. Her research centers on positive grammatical transfers between proximal languages in native English speakers.

l.barquinsanmartin@reading.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7892-2177

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