Subject expression in Spanish has been widely studied in variationist research and we know that while the frequencies of use of overt and null subject forms vary between dialects, the same independent factors tend to influence use across varieties (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996; Cameron 1995; Cameron & Flores-Ferrán 2004; Erker 2005; Flores-Ferrán, 2005; Otheguy et al. 2007; Shin 2006; Silva-Corvalán 1994; Travis 2007; Travis & Torres-Cacoullos 2010). Among the linguistic factors previously identified are grammatical person, the tense, mood and aspect (TMA) of the verb form, whether the TMA is continuous, and co-reference with the preceding verb. Variationist studies of subject expression have addressed issues that include the influence of English on Spanish in contexts of language contact, dialect leveling between varieties of Spanish (Otheguy & Zentella 2012) and the first language acquisition of subject expression (Shin & Cairns 2009). The current study adds to these works by examining how second language (L2) learners of Spanish come to acquire subject expression in Spanish. This research provides additional information about the nature of variable structures in contexts of language contact and bilingualism.

Just as for native speakers (NSs), learner language is conditioned by linguistic and extra-linguistic factors and can also be studied using a variationist approach (Labov 1972). Thus, recent research on L2 acquisition of subject expression has analyzed the frequency of use of subject forms and the factors that influence such use. These studies have shown that both NSs and highly advanced learners demonstrate similar effects for the variables discourse cohesiveness and perseveration but have significantly different frequencies of use of null subject forms (Geeslin & Gudmestad 2011). Despite these gains in research on L2 subject expression in Spanish, however, only one developmental study has been conducted which focused exclusively on discourse-level constraints (Geeslin & Linford 2012). Therefore, the current study was designed to examine the development of subject expression in terms of the syntactic and discourse-level constraints known to be essential for constraining native use.

Our participants were 20 NSs and 120 learners of Spanish who completed a background questionnaire, a proficiency test, and a written contextualized elicitation task where the features of the context were highly-controlled in order to isolate the effects of the variables under examination. In the current study, the TMA of the verbs, the grammatical person and the continuity of the referent were manipulated while other variables known to contribute to subject expression were controlled. The L2 participants came from 6 different levels of enrollment, ranging from first year to graduate-level study, and the NS participants came from the same speech community. All data were analyzed in terms of frequency of selection of each subject form and the degree to which the independent linguistic variables examined were shown to influence that selection. Preliminary results show that L2 learners gradually allow more null forms into their developing grammars, over time can become sensitive to the same factors that predict NS subject form selection and that these factors are not acquired simultaneously.