"Subject, Subject, Where Are You?" Unlearning L1 Null Subjects in L2 English: Is There a Way?

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Abstract

This paper presents an experiment targeting the null subject property of L1 Greek in the L2 acquisition of English. It will also discuss possible ways of teaching the overt subject property of English, focusing mainly on in-class Moodle grammar practice, thereby attempting to combine Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research findings and teaching practices. The experiment examines null and postverbal subject structures, as well as subject extraction structures. Data was obtained by means of a Grammaticality Judgment Task. Three groups of intermediate, advanced, and very advanced learners, as well as a control group of English natives were used. The results showed that, Greek learners even at advanced and very advanced levels exhibit performance which is clearly distinguishable from that of the native controls: they allow significantly more ungrammatical null and postverbal subjects, as well as subject extraction structures. On the background of this data which supports the claim that syntactic differences between L1 and L2 lead to persistent learnability problems in L2 acquisition and observing that the majority of the course books used with Greek learners do not address the issues raised by research findings like the present, we report on our attempts to address the overuse of ungrammatical null subjects in L2 English by integrating Moodle grammar on-site practice in a primary school classroom

1. Null Subjects in SLA

SLA research has shown that the domain of the subject poses problems for second language (L2) adult learners whose mother tongue (L1) differs syntactically from the target language in the area under question. Languages are divided into null subject languages (NSLs) and non-null subject languages (NNSLs). The first group comprises languages like Greek and Italian that allow for the subject (referential and expletive) to be null, to be placed in a postverbal position and to be extracted across an overt complementizer like "*that*". The second group consists of languages like English and German, where all the above structures are ungrammatical. SLA studies have provided data showing that speakers of a NSL learning a NNSL often transfer the null subject property of their L1 in their L2, with particular structures being more problematic than others [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

2. The experiment

The current experiment targets the null subject property of L1 Greek in the L2 acquisition of English, tests all the three related properties, namely null postverbal subjects, as well as subject extraction structures and, crucially, focuses on end-state L2 grammars. Data was obtained by means of a Grammaticality Judgment Task. Three groups of INT(ermediate) (*n=35*),ADV(anced) (*n=37*), and V(ery) A(dvanced) (*n=12*) learners, as well as a control group of native speakers (NS) (*n=25*) were asked to judge the (un)grammaticality of the test items in English. Accuracy of response was measured on a Likert-type scale from 1-5. The test comprised 186 test items and 150 distractor items and was administered offline. Half of the test items and of the distractor sentences were ungrammatical and the other half were grammatical. For the design of the ungrammatical items, the syntactic properties of Greek were used (see 2).

(2)   a   *Unfortunately, _ seems that the thief managed to get in.   (null expletive subject)*
           In my father's library there are lots of books
           _ Have been working in this bank for ten years.   (null referential subject)
           Anna takes a walk every afternoon before dinner.
      b   *Last night died the prime minister from a heart attack.   (postverbal subject)*
           Tomorrow morning father is returning from his trip.
      c   *Which athlete did you say that won the race   (subject extraction across that)*
           Which colour did you say is your favourite?

Tables 1 -3 present accuracy scores by item type. In each item type, the comparisons between the VA and NS group are presented separately, since the VA were not compared with the 25-member NS1 group, but with 12 randomly selected English natives comprising the NS2 group.

Table 1. Null and overt subject scores

Table 1a. INT - ADV- NS1

INT	ADV	NS1
*3.09	*3.93	*4.57
4.39	4.65	4.94

Table 1b. VA- NS2

VA	NS2	
*4.21	*4.65	
4.71	4.93	

Table 2. Preverbal and postverbal subject scores

Table 2a. INT - ADV- NS1

INT	ADV	NS1
*3.46	*4.37	*4.70
4.22	4.53	4.83

Table 2b. VA- NS2

VA	NS2	
*4.35	*4.70	
4.69	4.83	

Table 3. Subject extraction scores

Table 3a. INT - ADV- NS1

INT	ADV	NS1
*2.00	*2.66	*4.24
3.93	4.25	4.55

Table 3b. VA- NS2

VA	NS2	
*2.88	*4.24	
4.23	4.55	

Table 1: Although more proficient learners fare better than less proficient ones, crucially the ADV and VA group accepted significantly more null subject structures than the native controls (INT-ADV-NS1: *Group main effect* = $F_{2,376}$ = 143.29, *p* < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests ps* < 0.001. VA-NS2: *Group main effect*: $F_{1,280}$, = 30.40, *p* < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests*: *p* < 0.01). An analysis by subject Referentiality showed that null subject acceptability rate is significantly higher when the subject is expletive than when it is referential.

Table 2: Postverbal subject acceptability may decline at more advanced levels, however, it does not reach native speaker standards. ADV and VA learners accepted V(O)S(O) structures significantly more than native speakers (INT-ADV-NS1: VA-NS2*: Group main effect*: $F_{2,3071}$ = 363.4, *p* < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests* : *p*s < 0.001. VA-NS2: *Group main effect*: $F_{2,3071}$ = 271.5, *p* < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests*, *p* < 0.001). Additionally, learners observing the no-verb-initial constraint of English declarative sentences, accepted more postverbal subjects in structures where an adverbial or a prepositional phrase was preposed (see 2b).

Table 3: learners are more inaccurate in subject extraction structures than in null /postverbal subject structures. Across all levels of proficiency, learners accept significantly more ungrammatical subject extraction structures than the native controls (INT-ADV-NS1: VA-NS2*: Group main effect*: $F_{1,752}$ = 395.51, p < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests* : ps < 0.001. VA-NS2: *Group main effect*: $F_{1,280}$ = 71,517, *p* < 0.001, *Tukey HSD tests*, *p* < 0.001).

Thus, it was shown that Greek learners even at very proficient levels transfer the syntactic properties of L1 in the L2 grammar. This data supports the Formal Features Deficit accounts to SLA (see [3], [8]) which associate adult L2 learner inconsistent linguistic behavior with syntactic differences in between L1 and L2.

3. Unlearning Null Subjects

Findings like the above are reinforced by in-class student oral and written production as regards the subject property. In our case, the 6th grade (i.e. 12-year old) students of the Ioannina Primary School

of Intercultural Education falling between the A2 and B1 levels of proficiency have repeatedly produced in guided, semi-guided or free oral and written production null subjects, especially expletive ones, as well as postverbal subjects structures, more often of the no-verb-initial type. With respect to subject extraction structures (not often encountered in oral and written production) our student failed to detect the ungrammaticality of these permutations in relevant in-class small scale diagnostic tests.

Despite these observations, the majority of the course books used with Greek learners does not address the issues raised by findings and problems like the above. Irrespective of the methodological orientation that each book adopts, the issue of the obligatoriness of overt subjects in English is exhausted in the obligatoriness of expletive subjects, while the preverbal position of subjects or the constraints on their movement are not discussed.

3.1 Teaching Practices
3.1.1 More traditional ones

To address the overuse of null and postverbal subjects in the L2 grammar of our students, despite the questioning of the efficiency of active grammar teaching, we initially adopted a more traditional teaching approach. Attempting to cope not only with the absence of relevant teaching material in our course books, but also with the complexity of the phenomenon and the frequency of the relevant errors in student production, conscious attention was brought to the syntax of the subject by detailed explanation of the English properties with the help of authentic material followed by grammar exercises like translation, gap-filing and guided writing, correction and re-writing of relevant texts. However, despite this 3-month, 1 and a 1/2-hour per week grammar remedial intervention, our students continued to produce null and postverbal subjects especially in free production at almost the same rate.

3.1.2 Moodle Grammar Practice

To address this issue, we decided to integrate on-site Moodle grammar practice. This decision is related to the need to make grammar teaching more attractive for students, and, thereby, hopefully, more effective. None of our students has used the Moodle or any other platform for foreign language learning before, thus an introduction to the rationale and practicalities of Moodle was necessary. This lack of experience also required that Moodle use will be restricted in class and always with the presence of the teacher who would guide and help students. For 10 weeks our students spent 1 hour per week in the computer lab working with an online course which consisted of exercises targeting the problematic subject related structures. The exercises were organized and presented by the level of their difficulty, from simpler exercises targeting only one aspect of the phenomenon to more complex ones targeting all three aspects. Students could practise the use of English subjects though a variety of activities choosing the level/type of exercise they felt more comfortable with. There were multiple choice questions, embedded (gap filling) questions and assignments in the form of more or less guided essay writing.

Upon the completion of the intervention with Moodle grammar practice, an offline test was administered to students aiming to examine the effect of the course on use of English subjects. The scores showed that most students were 10% more accurate than in matching tests prior to the Moodle course. Specifically, students produced more overt and preverbal subject structures across a variety of tasks, while they were equally (un)successful in detecting errors in subject extraction structures. However, students continued to produce ungrammatical null expletive and postverbal subjects, especially in semi-guided or free-production tasks, in complex sentences and in no-verb-initial English structures, like many other speakers of null subject languages were reported to do at their level of proficiency.

Although the abovementioned improvement may not denote a systematic change in the use and production of the subject phenomenon, it nevertheless signals a direction worth investigating. As in other reported Moodle grammar remedial courses (see [9]) the versatility of the exercises, the degree of student involvement and the immediate feedback students receive could be factors that contributed to the improvement of our students' performance.

On the other hand, the short period of the implementation of the Moodle course, the fact that this was the first time that a platform was used for the teaching of curriculum subjects in our school, the lack of regular IT staff on-site to support the procedure, as well as the fact that since our school is an intercultural one not all our students share the same mother tongues (although in most of the cases their L1s are NSLs) could explain the fact that the improvement attested was not higher.

4. Conclusion

What can a foreign language teacher do when s/he is confronted with the task of teaching his/her students how to *un*learn the syntactic properties of their L1s in L2 acquisition? Is there a way to do so? Is there a methodology that could help teachers in this daunting task? While SLA research has provided considerable data on the inaccessibility of L2 syntactic features which are absent in L1, many studies have also shown that learners do notice the L2 input and try to accommodate their performance, albeit arguably only superficially, to approximate the native norm ([5], [6]). On the background of these assumptions, a methodological approach which is based on student motivation and engagement, versatility and variety of tasks, ample and differentiated oral and written input, as well as immediate feedback may help for teachers and learners bringing them closer to the desired learning outcome.

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