

A Look at Missing Objects in L2 Spanish

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1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), it has long been acknowledged that learner languages are structured systems that may be, at any given time, distinct from the learner's native language and the target language (Nemser, 1971; Selinker, 1972). Of particular interest, then, are interlanguage constructions that are not part of either the L1 or the L2. Such constructions highlight the creative nature of the acquisition process, raising questions about the potential limits of transfer and the kinds of hypotheses that guide second language learners.

The present paper examines one such construction—null direct objects—among L1 English speakers who are learning Spanish as a second language. The presence of null objects in the speech of this group of learners, as illustrated in (1), presents an intriguing problem because it cannot be explained by L1 transfer or by positive evidence from the L2 input.

- (1) *Pablo quita su abrigo y ... y Ø tira encima del sillón.*
'Pablo takes off her coat and... and throws Ø on top of the chair.'

If one of the goals of SLA research is to discover the systematic structural properties of learner language, then constructions such as (1) constitute an important source of data. Accordingly, the goal of the current study is to document the frequency and distribution of null objects in the oral production of L2 learners of different proficiency levels. The oral data are then examined in light of results from a grammaticality judgment task.

2. Null objects in Spanish

Standard Spanish is considered to be a non-null object language (Fujino & Sano, 2002), which means that objects with definite reference must be overtly realized, either lexically or with an object clitic. The relevant contrasts are illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. *Lavé los platos.*
'I washed the plates.'
b. *Los lavé.*
'I washed them.'
c. **Lavé.*
'I washed.'

However, generic referents that are non-specific permit the object slot to remain empty (Campos, 1986; Clements, 1994, 2006). Example (3) illustrates this phenomenon with a mass noun, but the same situation applies to bare plurals.

- (3) *¿Quieres jugo? No gracias, ya Ø tomé.*
'Do you want (some) juice? No thanks, I already drank (some).'

Clements (1994, 2006) proposed that null objects with non-specific referents are a manifestation of the partitive, for which other Romance languages have overt pronouns (*ne* in Italian, *en* in French). In this

sense, null objects in Spanish are constrained by the specificity feature; arguments that are non-referential and generic permit the use of zero, whereas specific referents must be overtly realized.

In addition to the partitive null object (Clements, 1994, 2006) described above, null objects with definite reference are common in contact varieties of Spanish (Suñer & Yépez, 1988; Sánchez, 1997; Schwenter, 2006; Choi, 2000). For example, Choi (2000) found very high rates of null objects among both monolingual Spanish and bilingual Guaraní/Spanish speakers in Paraguay. Similarly, Suñer and Yépez (1988) demonstrated that null objects in Quiteño Spanish occur approximately 62% of the time and are automatically interpreted as inanimate referents. Null objects in Peruvian Spanish seem to be less generalized among Spanish monolinguals, but their occurrence is prevalent in highland areas and among speakers who are more proficient in Quechua than Spanish (Lipski, 1994; Paredes, 1996; Klee, 1989). Schwenter (2006) reviews these findings from contact varieties and proposes a unified account of the discourse factors that promote null objects. Recently, Reig and Schwenter (2006) examined null direct objects with propositional antecedents (i.e. those typically encoded by the neuter pronoun *lo*) in monolingual varieties of Spanish, concluding that these are more frequent than previously assumed.

The problem, from an SLA perspective, is whether or not learners are exposed to input containing null objects. Although null objects with non-specific referents are permitted in all dialects, Bruhn de Garavito and Guijarro-Fuentes (2002) suggest that this construction is extremely rare in the input.¹ Furthermore, if we assume that classroom learners of Spanish have little, if any, exposure to contact varieties of Spanish, the input they hear is unlikely to contain many instances of null direct objects with definite reference.

3. Null objects in SLA

Several studies provide evidence of illicit object omissions among L2 learners.² Andersen (1983) documented null objects in the speech of Anthony, an adolescent boy acquiring Spanish in a naturalistic context. Anthony produced several sentences with missing objects, as illustrated in (4).

- (4) *Cuando nueva cosa entraban, pue Ø ponemos en cajas o algo así pa' vender cosas...*
 'When new thing arrived, well we put Ø in boxes or something like that in order to sell things.'

Andersen (1983) suggests that omission of the object is just one of the strategies used by Anthony to compensate for his difficulties with the clitic pronoun system. VanPatten (1987) examined Andersen's (1983) data and compared it to the performance of a classroom learner studying Spanish. In contrast to the naturalistic learner studied by Andersen, the classroom learner studied by VanPatten never omitted object pronouns. Given this difference, VanPatten (1987: 254) hypothesized that classroom learners may be more aware of the importance of complete sentences: "instruction impacts upon omission. Classroom learners tend not to omit surface realizations of verbal arguments."

Sánchez and Al-Kasey (1999) report on the acquisition of direct object clitics among first- and second-year university-level learners of Spanish. In their data the occurrence of null objects was minimal during oral production, thus tentatively confirming VanPatten's (1987) hypothesis that classroom learners rarely omit arguments. However, Sánchez and Al-Kasey also found that L2 learners (as well as native speakers from Perú) accepted null direct objects in a sentence-picture matching task. The authors speculate that this may be the result of interpreting the null direct object as generic.

¹ It is unclear if Bruhn de Garavito and Guijarro-Fuentes (2002) are referring to classroom input or input in general.

² For reasons of space, I discuss only studies pertaining to L2 Spanish. However, there is considerable evidence that the null object phenomenon is not limited to a particular L1/L2 combination. For example, studies of L2 French by Adiv (1984), Gundel, Stenson, and Tarone (1984), and White (1996) have shown that L1 English speakers omit objects. In the ESL context, Gundel and Tarone (1992) document the use of null objects by native Spanish speakers. Zobl (1994) and Yuan (1997) report that Chinese learners of English accept null objects at relatively high rates in written tasks of acceptability.

Bruhn de Garavito and Guijarro-Fuentes (2002), working within a UG perspective, conducted a study to determine if L2 learners would be able to recognize the appropriate contexts for object drop in Spanish. Two L1 groups (English and Portuguese speakers) evaluated grammatical and ungrammatical sentences on a scale of from 1 (totally ungrammatical) to 5 (totally grammatical). Two sets of target sentences tested learners' knowledge of the relationship between clitic pronouns and their antecedents, as well as indefinite object drop (grammatical) and definite object drop (ungrammatical). The remaining sets of sentences targeted subadjacency and other types of constraints that I do not discuss here. Bruhn de Garavito and Guijarro-Fuentes found a high rate of acceptance for indefinite object drop, suggesting that learners know it is a syntactic option in the target language. However, acceptance of definite object drop was higher than expected, especially for the group of native English speakers (mean acceptance rate above 3). These findings suggest that learners at the intermediate level have indeterminate judgments regarding object drop, although there is some indication that they may treat definite and indefinite referents differently.

Previous research, utilizing a variety of data elicitation methods, has documented both production and acceptance of null objects among L2 learners of Spanish. However, little data is available from learners of advanced proficiency. Furthermore, a key question that remains to be answered is whether null objects in learner language occur primarily in certain discourse contexts, as has been shown for contact varieties of Spanish.

4. The present study

4.1 Participants

The participants were 50 L2 learners of Spanish who were enrolled in various Spanish language courses at a large public university. These 50 learners were divided into four proficiency groups based on their institutional status and prior exposure to Spanish: beginner, intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced. Each group has 12 participants, with the exception of the advanced group (n=14). All participants were native English speakers and all reported English as the only language spoken in their household.

Since the division of proficiency groups is based on participants' prior exposure to Spanish, it is important to provide details regarding the profile of these learners. Those in the beginner group were finishing their third quarter of language study. They were not 'true beginners' but had completed the first two quarters of Spanish at the same university. The intermediate students were finishing their second year of Spanish language instruction, but had not studied abroad. The high intermediate learners, all in their third year of language study, had been on short-term study abroad programs (2-3 months). The advanced group consisted of fourth-year students (Spanish majors) who had spent a minimum of one academic year in a Spanish-speaking country.

4.2 Methodology

In order to investigate the null object phenomenon in L2 Spanish, I examined oral production data alongside learners' grammaticality judgments of written sentences with null objects. The multiple-task design was chosen in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of L2 knowledge and use.³ Four tasks were used to elicit the oral data: a storybook narration, a structured interview, and two video narration tasks. A popular children's picture book (dePaola's *Pancakes for Breakfast* (1978)) was chosen for the storybook narration task because the plot involves many inanimate objects, thus providing natural contexts for the expression of direct objects (both lexical and pronominal). The second oral task was a structured interview designed to elicit the use of (pronominal) direct objects. The two remaining oral tasks involved the narration of two silent video clips in real-time (i.e., a simultaneous video narration task). Each video clip provided the participants with many opportunities

³ Many researchers have advocated for the use of multiple assessment tasks in SLA research (cf. Leow, 1996; Chaudron, 2003). Nevertheless, these two tasks place different cognitive demands on the learner (Robinson, 2001; Doughty & Long, 2000) and thus, may not be directly comparable. See the discussion for further commentary on this issue.

to encode direct objects. Participants were given a list of vocabulary items to facilitate performance on the storybook and video narration tasks, and were allotted up to five minutes of planning time for each task.

The grammaticality judgment (GJ) task was administered after the four oral tasks had been completed. It can be described as a standard grammaticality judgment task (cf. Davies & Kaplan, 1998) because participants were given as much time as needed to complete it. The task consisted of 24 target sentences and 24 fillers. Both groups of sentences—target and fillers—were balanced for grammaticality. The task was designed partially on an instrument developed by Hedgcock (1991) to measure knowledge of key grammatical structures in Spanish. Participants evaluated the sentences on a three-point scale (correct, incorrect, or “not sure”). While such a scale does not allow for a separate analysis of judgment accuracy and judgment confidence (Sorace, 1996), it does give the learner the option of not rendering an either-or judgment.⁴ As part of the GJ task, participants were instructed to correct the perceived errors in sentences that they judged to be incorrect. The grammatical sentences all contained correct use of third-person direct object clitics in anaphoric contexts. Half of the grammatical sentences were coordinated structures and other half consisted of short question-answer dialogues. The ungrammatical sentences were divided among three types: null objects with specific referents, wrong verb-clitic word order, and lack of clitic doubling with strong pronouns. There were four items for each structure. Examples of the experimental sentences are given below in Table 1.

Sentence type	Example
Coordinated structures ($k=6$)	<i>Compré el libro pero luego lo vendí.</i> 'I bought the book but later sold it.'
Question-answer dialogues ($k=6$)	<i>¿Qué hiciste con el pastel?</i> <i>Lo puse en el refrigerador.</i> 'What did you do with the cake?' I put it in the fridge.'
*Null objects ($k=4$)	<i>Ellos compraron la cerveza y pusieron en el refrigerador.</i> 'They bought the beer and put in the fridge.'
*Wrong verb-clitic order ($k=4$)	<i>Pilar termina la tarea y pone la en su mochila.</i> 'Pilar finishes her homework and puts it in her backpack.'
*Strong pronouns w/o clitic double ($k=4$)	<i>La profesora ayuda a él con la tarea.</i> 'The professor helps him with the homework.'

Table 1. GJ task target structures

4.3 Data analysis

The oral data were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed for the occurrence of null objects. Each non-partitive context involving an obligatorily transitive verb in which there was no object present was classified as a null object. All of the examples presented from the corpus of L2 oral production and are marked for participant number (P1-P50), level (B=beginner, I=intermediate, HI=high intermediate, A=advanced), and elicitation task (ST=storybook, SI=structured interview, V1 and V2=video tasks).

The grammaticality judgment task was scored on a 2 point scale: participants received 2 points for correctly accepting a grammatical sentence, 0 points for rejecting a grammatical sentence, and 1 point for indicating they weren't sure. The same scoring scale applies to the ungrammatical items. In addition, learners' responses were further examined for the corrections made to the perceived errors.

⁴ Sorace (1996) discusses the disadvantages of eliciting absolute judgments from L2 learners, favoring instead alternative techniques such as ranking scales and magnitude estimation. While the three-point scale has obvious weaknesses, scales including more than three points (i.e., 1 to 5) present the additional complication of how to interpret intermediate scores.

At times, the corrections made by the learners were irrelevant to the target structure. For example, item 36 on the GJ task (below) was rejected by some of the participants because they believed a determiner was missing in front of *casa* ‘home’.

- (5) *¿Tienes mi libro de química? Sí, lo tengo en casa.*
 ‘Do you have my chemistry book? Yes, I have it at home.’

Since the interest here was to assess whether or not learners associate the clitic *lo* with its antecedent *mi libro de química*, such a response was coded as ‘acceptance’ of the grammatical sentence.

5. Results

5.1 Oral production data

The descriptive statistics for the null objects in the oral production tasks are shown in Table 2.

Group	Tokens	Mean	SD
Beginners	31	2.58	2.67
Intermediate	42	3.5	2.71
High intermediate	29	2.41	3.60
Advanced	16	1.14	1.70

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: oral data

Although the advanced group produced fewer null objects than the three remaining groups, a one-way analysis of variance reveals that the differences between groups are not significant ($F(3,46)=1.665$, $p=.188$). Further examination of the data suggests that null objects occur more commonly in particular discourse contexts. The distribution of null objects is summarized in Table 3.

Discourse context	Beginner	Intermediate	High Intermediate	Advanced	Tokens
conjoined	27	27	17	7	78
topic established by interlocutor	3	6	6	2	17
after preposition <i>para</i>	0	3	2	4	9
inter-sentential	1	3	2	2	8
double object	0	2	1	1	4
left-dislocated NP	0	1	1	0	2

Table 3: Discourse contexts in which null objects appear

Table 3 clearly indicates that null objects are most prevalent in conjoined structures, constituting two-thirds of the total number of tokens. An example is given below in (6).

- (6) *Y después ella quita Tico de la bañera y Ø seca más.* (P26-HI) (V2)
 ‘And then she takes Tico out of the tub and dries Ø more.’

Null objects were also frequently found in the transcripts of the structured interview, in which the researcher establishes the discourse topic in the question. Example (7) illustrates how the learner responds by providing the verb and a locative PP complement, but omits the NP antecedent.

- (7) *Y aquí ¿qué hace la mujer con el libro?*
Ø Saca de la estante. (P18-I) (SI)
 ‘And here what does the woman do with the book?’
 ‘She takes Ø off the shelf.’

Together, conjoined clauses and questions that established a discourse topic account for over 80% of all the occurrences of null objects. Inter-sentential null objects, as in example (8), were rare:

- (8) *También limpia sus ojos. Tico está muy tranquilo con eso. Después Ø saca de la bañera y Carmen seca Tico un tiempo más.* (P28-HI) (V2)
 ‘She also cleans his eyes. Tico is very calm with this. Afterwards, she takes Ø out of the tub and Carmen dries Tico one more time.’

In addition to the role of discourse context discussed above, object omissions occurred frequently with particular lexical items. This data reveal that the verb *poner* ‘put’ (43 tokens) often appeared with missing objects. The verb *echar* ‘pour’, whose argument structure is identical to *poner*, also seems to promote the use of null objects (11 tokens). *Tirar* ‘throw’, which takes an optional locative complement, occurred 12 times with a missing object. Since these three verbs account for more than fifty percent of the total tokens of null objects, it is possible that their common argument structure promotes object drop in learner language (see the discussion for further commentary on this issue). The remaining tokens of null objects occurred with a wide variety of verbs such as *secar* ‘dry’, *comprar* ‘buy’, *enjuagar* ‘rinse’, and *tapar* ‘cover.’

5.2 Grammaticality judgment data

The mean scores for the grammatical and ungrammatical sentences were tabulated out of a maximum of 24 (recall that participants received 2 points for acceptance of an item). Thus, means approximating 24 indicate acceptance while means approximating 0 indicate rejection. The descriptive statistics for all four groups of learners on the experimental sentences are presented in Table 4.

	Ungrammatical items ($k=12$)		Grammatical items ($k=12$)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Beginner	19.25	4.13	20.08	3.02
Intermediate	8.83	3.40	23.08	1.08
High Intermediate	9.08	5.17	23.33	1.23
Advanced	3.43	2.62	23.71	.611

Table 4. Summary table of mean scores on GJ task

A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether learners treated the two types of experimental sentences differently. The within-subjects factor was sentence type (grammatical vs. ungrammatical) and the between-subjects factor was group (beginner, intermediate, high-intermediate, advanced). Results of the analysis indicate a significant main effect for sentence type $F(1,46)=367.4$, $p<.001$, with grammatical items ($M=22.55$) being accepted more than ungrammatical ones ($M=10.14$), a significant main effect for group $F(3, 46)=20.8$, $p<.001$, and a significant type by group interaction $F(3,46)=40.819$, $p<.001$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that within the ungrammatical condition, there were significant differences between the beginners and the other three groups ($p<.001$) as well as between the advanced learners and the other groups ($p<.005$). In the grammatical condition, however, only the beginners were significantly different from the other three groups ($p<.005$).

The high mean scores from all groups on the grammatical sentences suggest that the majority of L2 learners in this study recognized the anaphoric relationship between a clitic pronoun and its antecedent. In contrast, the responses on the ungrammatical items point to a clearer differentiation between groups. These were further analyzed according to construction type in order to determine which kinds of sentences were being rejected or accepted by the learners. The distribution of acceptance on the ungrammatical items is presented graphically in Figure 1.

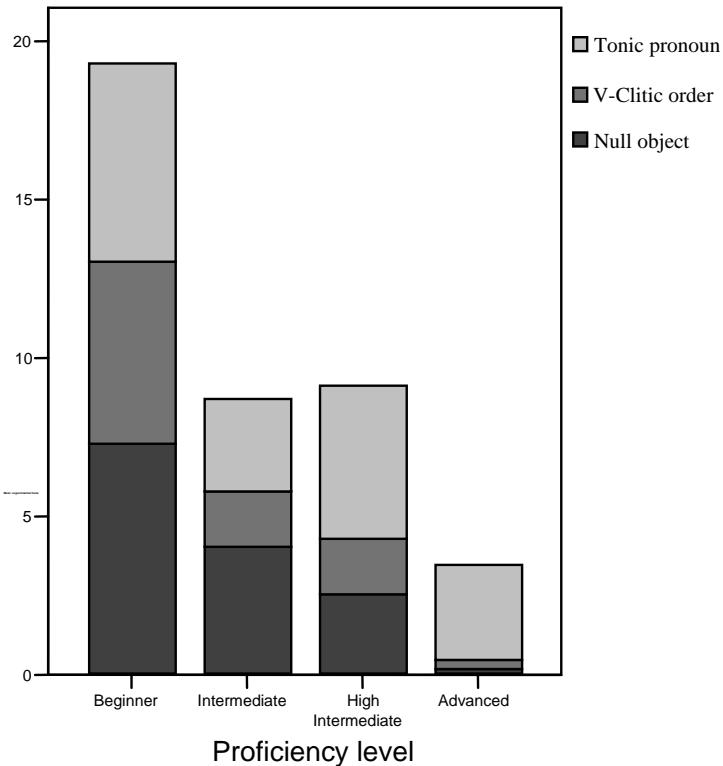


Figure 1. Distribution of acceptance on ungrammatical items

As shown in Figure 1, the advanced learners' mean acceptance rate of 3.43 is attributed primarily to one kind of ungrammatical construction: sentences with tonic pronouns and no clitic double. A 3 X 4 repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to see whether the differences between types of ungrammatical sentences (null, V-clitic order, and tonic pronoun without doubling) were significant. The analysis reveals a main effect for sentence type $F(2,92)=11.64$, $p<.001$, a main effect for group $F(3,46)=37.28$, $p<.001$, and a type by group interaction $F(6,92)=3.92$, $p<.005$. The mean acceptance scores on the ungrammatical sentences containing null objects ($k=4$) are presented in Table 5.

	Mean	Std. dev.
Beginner	7.25	1.055
Intermediate	4.00	2.49
High Intermediate	2.50	1.93
Advanced	.14	.53

Table 5. Mean scores on ungrammatical items containing null objects

A post hoc Tukey test on the null object sentences reveals significant differences between the beginners and the other three groups ($p<.001$) as well as between the advanced learners and other groups ($p<.005$). The difference between the intermediate and high-intermediate learners was not significant ($p=.126$).

5.3 Correlation between intuitional and production data

By using a multiple-task design, it is possible to investigate whether there is a relationship between learners' performance on the written GJ task and their oral production with respect to null objects. In other words, if learners accept null objects on a test of grammatical intuitions, do they also

produce them? If learners produce null objects, do they necessarily accept them? A correlation between these two variables—total score on items with null objects in the GJ task and total production of null objects in the oral tasks—yielded a statistically significant positive correlation, $r(49) = .38$, $p < .01$. However, the individual response patterns suggest that another variable may be influencing this correlation. There were 17 learners who did not produce any null objects throughout the oral tasks. However, 9 of these learners accepted null objects on the GJ task. In fact, three of these participants, (all from the beginner group) accepted null objects consistently on all target items. Likewise, there were 17 learners who never accepted null objects on the GJ task. Of these learners, 9 produced at least one token of object drop in the oral tasks. For example, P46 categorically rejected null objects on the GJ task, but produced 6 tokens in the oral tasks. Further research is necessary to determine if these learners are simply outliers (and thus weaken the strength of the correlation), or if there are other factors influencing the production and/or acceptance of null objects.

6. Discussion

Null objects were not entirely absent from the oral corpus as VanPatten (1987) had predicted for classroom learners. Nevertheless, the relative frequency of this type of argument omission is not high. Since the four oral tasks yielded a total of 118 tokens among 50 learners, we can infer that object omissions are relatively rare events.⁵ The intermediate group produced the most null objects ($k=42$), but that only amounts to a mean of 3.5 per individual, or less than 1 per oral task. The distribution of these tokens, however, is not random. The large majority of null objects occurred in coordinated structures and in response to questions that established a discourse topic. This finding suggests that null objects in second language speech are restricted to pragmatically appropriate contexts, that is, when their referents are highly accessible and indicate topic continuity (Ariel, 1990; Givón, 1984).

In addition to the discourse distribution of null objects, the data indicate that null objects frequently occur with three-argument verbs like *poner* 'put' and *echar* 'pour.' This suggests that the lexical semantics of the verb also plays a role in promoting object drop. Three-argument verbs like *poner* actually transmit four pieces of information: the agent, the action, the object, and the location. Given that connected discourse consists of both new and presupposed information, an utterance containing the verb *poner* will generally exclude certain participants from the scope of assertion (cf. Givón, 1984). In response to a question like "What does she do with the eggs?" (included in the structured interview task), there are two pieces of information that must be included in the scope of new information in order to transmit a comprehensible message: the action and the locative complement. Thus, when an L2 learner uses *poner* with an NP antecedent that is highly accessible, it is logical that the object often gets dropped in favor of more essential information: the locative complement.

With respect to the results of the GJ task, the data indicate that beginning-level learners readily accepted sentences with null objects whereas advanced learners almost categorically rejected them. A plausible interpretation is that null objects are particularly difficult to detect during sentence comprehension, especially when the antecedent is found in the preceding clause, as in the target sentences for the present study. It has been suggested by Swain (1985, 1995) that comprehension (unlike production) is a semantically driven process. Similarly, VanPatten (1996) has claimed that learners process sentences for meaning before they attend to form. Davies and Kaplan (1998), in an examination of strategy use during grammaticality judgment tasks, showed that intermediate learners frequently relied on meaning to judge sentences in their L2. Specifically, Davies and Kaplan (1998: 195) cite an example of learners rejecting a grammatical sentence because they could not fully interpret the reference of a pronominal form. If beginning-level learners rely primarily on semantic information to comprehend (and evaluate) the sentences they are presented with, it is possible that their parser 'fills in' the missing object because it is easily recoverable from the preceding clause. In other words, these learners simply may not notice the missing object, and judge the sentence as 'correct'

⁵ The data discussed in this paper form part of a larger study on the acquisition of clitic pronouns. Here I focus exclusively on the use of null objects, but it is important to consider the problem within a larger context. Specifically, the use of null objects was significantly less frequent than that of other anaphoric devices (e.g., NP repetition and clitic pronouns). See (Zylik, 2004) for further discussion.

because they understand it. More proficient learners, by definition, have a greater command of the L2 syntax. When parsing a sentence with a null object, they are more likely to notice the missing argument despite the fact that it is pragmatically recoverable. In this way, the results of the GJ task could be due to differential strategy use: lower proficiency learners rely primarily on meaning (leading them to accept sentences with null objects) whereas more proficient learners are more in tune to syntactic violations, which explains their rejection of such sentences.

Previous studies on null objects have focused exclusively on one data source—either oral production or acceptability judgments. By looking at production and metalinguistic data in conjunction, we are able to examine the phenomenon from two different perspectives. The data presented here suggest that there is some relationship between learners' judgments and their oral production. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to determine why some learners' judgments do not coincide with their oral production (and vice-versa). One possibility is that the type of GJ task utilized was not sensitive enough to learners' knowledge of the target structure, given the pervasiveness of indeterminacy in L2 grammars. It is feasible that a different type of acceptability judgment (e.g., a ranking task) would have yielded different results. Another possibility is that object drop in oral production is the result of processing difficulty experienced by learners during cognitively demanding tasks, such as the ones used in the present study. Although learners were allotted planning time and were asked to describe events in a shared context (+here and now), the tasks did involve a component of prior knowledge (i.e., vocabulary) that made them more complex (see Robinson, 2001 for a thorough discussion of task complexity).

7. Conclusions

This study has presented data from oral production tasks and a metalinguistic judgment task pertaining to null objects in L2 Spanish. The results reveal that L2 learners occasionally drop definite direct objects during oral production, but only when no pragmatic infelicity results from such omission. The results from the written GJ task indicate that lower proficiency learners readily accept null objects, while more proficient learners almost categorically reject such argument omissions. It was further suggested that lower proficiency learners may rely primarily on semantic strategies to evaluate sentences in the target language, whereas more proficient learners are more sensitive to syntactic properties, and thus, to illicit null arguments.

Although Spanish is classified typologically as a [-null object] language, native speaker usage patterns show that this is not categorically the case. As described at the beginning of this paper, object position in Spanish often remains empty in partitive contexts (Clements, 1994, 2006) and with propositional antecedents (Reig and Schwenter, 2006). It is unclear to what extent this affects the learners' developing grammar. In other words, future studies of null objects in L2 Spanish must confront the fact that the input (i.e., primary linguistic data) is not consistent and that learners may be influenced by constructions with null objects, even if these are not as frequent as lexical NPs or pronominal objects.

Future studies on null objects in the L2 setting should also attempt to make connections with the findings from first language acquisition, where argument omission has been extensively investigated. It is well known, for example, that L1 Spanish-speaking children omit objects during the early years of language development (cf. Fujino and Sano, 2002). If the two phenomena are related in terms of their distribution, it could be argued that null objects are part of developmental stage that operates in both L1 and L2 acquisition. Additional cross-linguistic data from learners of various second languages (especially [-] null object languages) would be very useful in pursuing such a hypothesis.

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