Exploring null and postverbal subjects in L2 English beyond the initial state: an investigation on the written production of unaccusatives and passives in Italian learners

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Theoretical background. This work wants to contribute to a well-known research strand in generative studies on L2 English (White 1985, Phinney 1987, Judy 2011, Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2010, Orfitelli & Grüter 2013 a.o.): the acquisition of some aspects of the syntax of subjects that crucially diverge in the learners' L1, in this case Italian. The main focus is on the mastering of two syntactic phenomena: the compulsoriness of subjects and the lack of free inversion structures (Verb-Subject order) in English, as traditionally described for the Null Subject Parameter by Rizzi (1982). With respect to previous studies, the peculiarity of the present research is twofold: firstly, it looks at null and postverbal subjects through unaccusative and passive constructions; secondly, it provides L2 data from a translation task, that proves to be a powerful tool to let intermediate and advanced L2 learners' sensitivity to subtle syntactic differences come to light.

The study. The data analysed (267 sentences) are part of a written translation task administered to n. 89 University students (n. 20 Towards C1, n. 48 Towards B2, n.21 Towards B1; mean age 20,12). The short text analysed for this research contains one unaccusative context with a postverbal subject (Unacc_VS), one short passive with a postverbal subject (Shortpass_VS) and one long passive with a null referential subject (Longpass_NS). Sentences (1) – (3) exemplify the relevant contexts:

(1) È appena accaduto qualcosa di spiacevole nel nostro ufficio: [...].   (Unacc_VS)
     "Something unpleasant has just happened in our office."

(2) [...] è stato danneggiato il computer del capo.   (Shortpass_VS)
      "The chief's computer has been damaged."

(3) Domani verrà riparato da un nostro esperto di fiducia.   (Longpass_NS)
   "Tomorrow it will be repaired by one of our reliable experts."

These sentences express two peculiar syntactic phenomena traditionally related to the null-subject nature of Italian: the postverbal position of a subject (examples 1-2) and the omission of a (referential) subject (example 3), namely, when it is a topic (old information). Both facts (postverbal and null subjects) are not allowed in the same contexts in standard English, which is a non-null subject language. In terms of L2 acquisition, the three sentences pose then a challenge to an Italian learner: standard English is a [- null subject] language, where properties related to the positive setting of the parameter (null and postverbal subjects) are not available, contrary to his mother tongue. In light of these facts, three main research questions (RQ henceforth) guide this investigation: RQ1: Are postverbal and null subject contexts equally problematic for L2 learners when translating from Italian into English? RQ2: Are there any differences between unaccusative constructions and passives in terms of mastering the target word order SV? RQ3: Can developmental patterns in the three different contexts be identified across proficiency levels?

The data. Overall, the main findings indicate that null subject contexts (Graph 3) are less problematic than postverbal subject contexts (Graph 1 and 2 – RQ1) and that mastering is sensitive to proficiency levels (RQ3; see table n.1 for statistical analyses). Moreover, an interesting asymmetry between unaccusatives and passives in terms of subject placement emerges (Graph 1 vs. 2; RQ2).

Graph (1): VS Unaccusative context
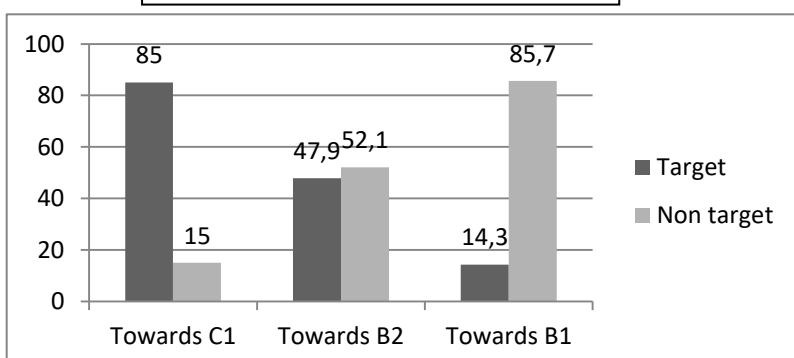
Graph (2): VS Short passive context
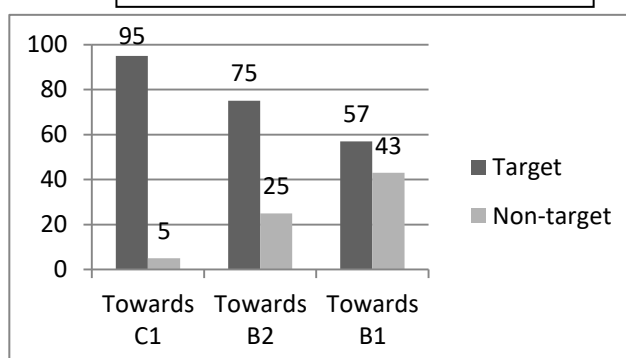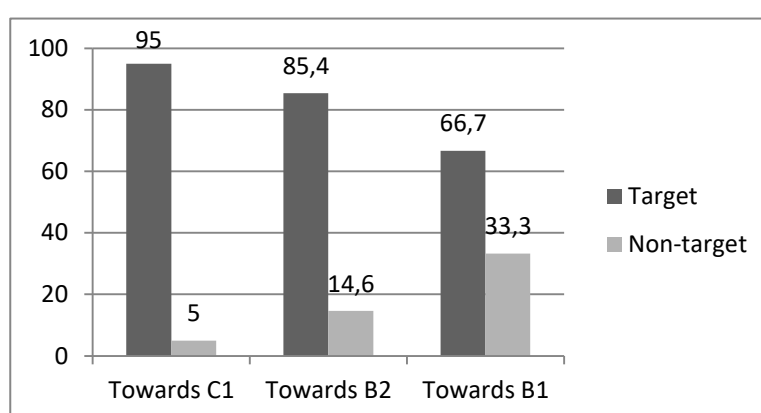

Graph (3): NS Long passive context

Table (1): Statistics for the three contexts analysed				
Contexts	Test	Variable List	Grouping Variable	Results
VS Unaccusative context	Kruskal-Wallis	Target SV order	Proficiency Levels (3 groups)	$X^2 = 20{,}289$, df = 2, $p = .000$
VS Short passive context	Kruskal-Wallis	Target SV order	Proficiency Levels (3 groups)	$X^2 = 7{,}805$ df = 2, $p = .020$
NS Long passive context	Kruskal-Wallis	Target Subject insertion	Proficiency Levels (3 groups)	$X^2 = 6{,}181$, df = 2, $p = .045$

The finding that (referential) null subjects are less problematic has been largely documented in previous studies on the acquisition of the Null Subject Parameter in L2 English (White 1985, Phinney 1987, Judy 2011 a.o.), conversely the new interesting result is the contrast between passives and unaccusatives: even the VS short passive context (Graph 2) is less challenging than the VS unaccusative one (Graph 1), especially for intermediate L2 learners (Towards B2 and B1). In the discussion of the data, I will propose that a possible reason for this asymmetry lies in the nature of the verb (unaccusative vs. passive) as well as in the (in)definiteness of the subject and its related position in the clause. Supporting evidence for this claim will be provided and comes from the translation of another VS unaccusative sentence provided in the same translation task where, crucially, the subject is definite (*Sono appena entrate le due nuove impiegate* – The two new employees have just come). Interestingly, the tendency emerged in this case confirms that L2 learners strongly prefer the SV order across proficiency levels. The sharp contrast in terms of pre- and postverbal subjects when the subject is [+/- definite] seems then to suggest that L2 learners are

sensitive to the Definiteness Effect with unaccusatives and that this sensitivity follows a developmental path. A more fine-grained research that includes different verb types as well as definite/indefinite postverbal subjects is clearly desirable in order to support such proposal.

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