

Acquisition of Passives and Unaccusatives in an EFL Context: A Study of Elicited Production in Spanish-Speaking Students¹

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Introduction

As one of the aims of our research project was to investigate the acquisition of unaccusative verbs and passive constructions both in the mother tongue and in English as a Foreign Language, two experiments were designed to explore the written and oral production of these structures in university and primary school EFL learners². These structures were selected because they share one characteristic: the internal argument of the verbs, which has the semantic/thematic role of theme or patient, becomes the syntactic subject of the sentence. In English, the subject must always appear in pre-verbal positions, contrary to Spanish, where the subject can precede or follow the verb.

The predictions were that, unlike passives, the use of unaccusatives would pose no problem to either age group. Because in their mother tongue young children acquire unaccusative verbs very early on with no mistakes, we assumed that the same would apply to the acquisition of this type of verbs in English. In turn, as the Spanish periphrastic passive is acquired later, we predicted that a similar situation would hold in an EFL context. Independent evidence from the different courses we teach at university indicated that even at advanced stages in the acquisition of a foreign language, passives and unaccusatives are problematic.

This study sheds light on the difficulties learners encounter when producing these structures as well as the stages they go through in their acquisition.

Objectives

The overall aim of the research design was to determine EFL subjects' acquisition stage of passive constructions and unaccusative verbs³ in English through their performance in a) a sentence- transformation activity and translation exercise in the case of passives and b) a delayed imitation task.

1. Participants

1.1. University students

Thirty-three university teacher- and translator- trainees taking Syntax 1 (Second Year) participated in this research project after having successfully completed their first year

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² We would like to thank staff and 5th Form learners at the Escuela del Valle for their willingness to contribute to the research.

³ Unaccusative verbs denote non-agentive events, like *exist*, or a change of state, like *fall* and *bloom*. They take only one argument, the role of which is that of “theme” or “patient”. Like in passive constructions, this argument behaves as the syntactic subject of the sentence (although semantically it is not).

English Language subject. Subjects' ages ranged between 18 and 25 (mean age: 20; 4). This group completed the written elicited production task.

1.2. Primary school students

Twelve 5th graders at a bilingual primary school in General Roca, Río Negro, participated in both the written and the oral elicited production tasks. Subjects' mean age was 9; 7, ranging between 9 and 12. Learners in this context are exposed to English during three 50-minute periods five times a week, where the teaching/learning environment resembles an English-as-a-Second-Language setting. The school provides students with an English-all-around atmosphere, which ensures ample opportunities for learners to be exposed to the foreign language and use it naturally and purposefully. Thus, instances of structures, lexical bundles, discourse markers and organisers are part of the input they receive, which eventually leads to unconscious and implicit acquisition.

2. Data gathering procedures

The experimental design included a written and an oral task that complemented each other in the type of data gathered: while the written task (WT) provided researchers with information on learners' use of truncated and/or full passive constructions and unaccusative verbs in a controlled setting, the oral task (OT) showed more spontaneous language use, even when some prompts were given. The WT was administered during one period in the afternoon and the OT took place one week later on two different days due to the number of children interviewed.

2.1. The written elicited production task

The verbs selected for this task, which have been grouped below, were presented in two conditions each: a) plural subject + singular object (*The boy and the girl pushed Tom*) and b) singular subject + plural object (*The boy found Tom and his sister*). As can be noted, two of the verbs were irregular and the other two were regular.

Passive constructions		Unaccusative verbs		
follow	bite	arrive	appear	fall
find	push	leave	melt	float

Subjects in the cases of the verbs *follow* and *find* varied according to the feature [+/-human] (*The cat found the parrot and the bird*). Each of the unaccusative verbs was illustrated in a picture⁴. Participants were given a copy of the task which included 18 test items organised into three types of activities (see sample in Appendix A):

⁴ Illustrations for both the written and oral tasks were designed by Pablo Mirenda.

- 1) Transform 12 sentences in the active voice (describing an accompanying picture) into its passive counterpart starting each sentence with the given subject and using the appropriate form of the verb in brackets.
- 2) Answer the question “What’s going on?” to describe the situation in the adjoining picture making use of the unaccusative verb provided.
- 3) Write a possible L1 version for each of their answers (passives and unaccusatives) to ensure participants’ understanding of the situation and show their L1 knowledge of the structures.

The time allotted for the task was 50 minutes, with some learners handing in earlier.

2.3.2. The delayed imitation oral task

Participants listened to two sets of 5 and 6 situations respectively described by one researcher while looking at some pictures illustrating the actions⁵ (see Appendix B). After each stretch, learners retold the events when they were shown the corresponding picture. Before the test proper, participants were taught how the elicited imitation task worked with three additional verbs that were not unaccusative (*sleep, eat and kick*).

Learners were interviewed one at a time during approximately 10 minutes and their responses were recorded with an mp3. Even though the task is characterised as “imitation”, participants are actually producing spontaneous language prompted by the picture and the auditory stimuli given by the interviewer earlier. Because participants needed to have looked at one whole set of pictures and listened to the interviewer’s description before turning to their own production, the time elapsed between the stimulus and their response was long enough for them not to be able to “imitate” the stimulus unless equipped with the language to do so. Learners’ production was elicited through the question “What’s going on here/in this picture?” The verbs selected for this task were ***melt, fall, float, slip, arrive, appear, stand, fly, leave/ go home, break (2) and live*** (those in bold-face type were also used in the written task).

3. Results

3.1. The written elicited production task

Results of university participants’ performance in the tasks were almost error-free for both passives and unaccusatives. These students’ awareness of syntactic forms and constructions might account for these scores in such a controlled-production activity.

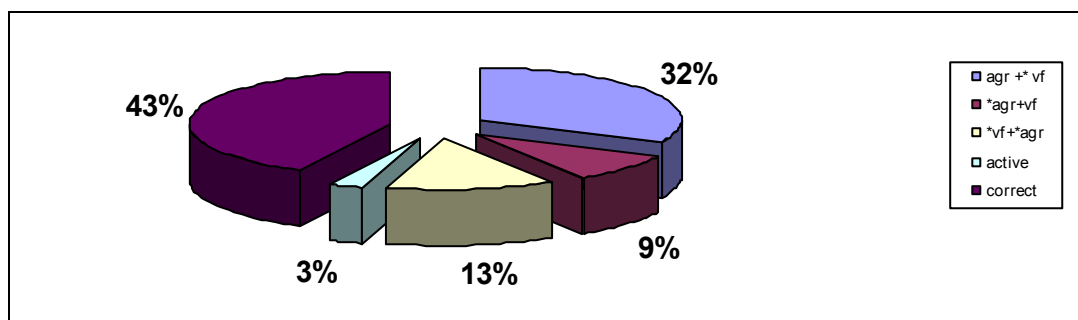
Children’s productions were far richer in terms of variety of answers and degree of knowledge of the structures, which is why the next sections will only be devoted to the analysis and discussion of these results.

On the whole, the answers in this task indicate that primary school participants know both structures, even though the passive voice had not been taught formally and explicitly at the time of the experiment. We will turn to a more detailed analysis of their production for each structure.

⁵ Illustrations were designed by Pablo Mirenda.

3.1.1. The use of the passive voice

141 sentences containing a passive construction were produced, out of which 42, 55% were correct. The remaining answers presented inaccuracies of various types (see Graph 1 below).



Graph 1: Distribution of responses for the passive construction

The mistakes in these sentences are grouped mainly around two categories: a) lack of agreement between subject and auxiliary verb and b) wrong choice of verb form for the main verb.

In all cases where there is lack of agreement (22%), a singular form of *be* follows a plural subject, as in (1).

(1)**Paul and his sister was found.*

The same type of error is also combined with the wrong verb form chosen for the main verb (*agr + *VF) as in (2).

(2)**The parrot and the bird was find.*

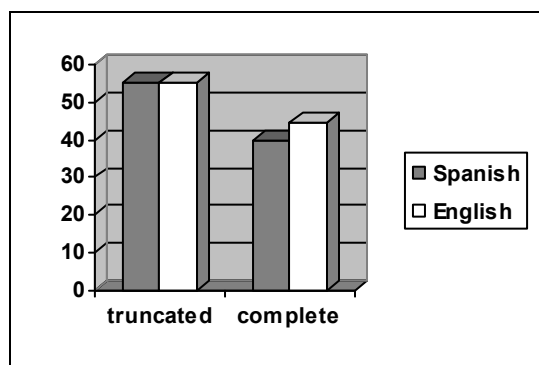
The results show a considerable degree of variability across participants, who, for the same regular and/or irregular verb, may choose different forms for different stimuli. Examples (1) and (2) were produced by the same subject across test items involving different situations. However, the Spanish version provided by the subjects supports the passive interpretation of these instances, independent of the choice for a correct or incorrect verb form.

While some learners appeared not to doubt as regards verb form, and systematically chose an incorrect one, others selected either one or the other alternatively. This variability might be directly related to the fact that in their interlanguages both forms (correct and incorrect) might coexist and compete, indicating the typically unstable nature of an IL grammar at this stage.

3.1.2. Full and truncated passives and the use of prepositions

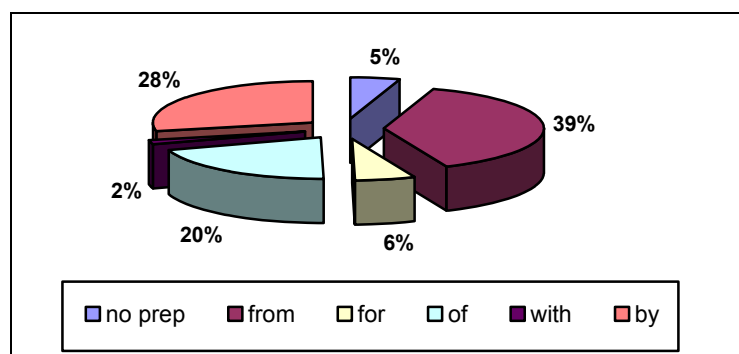
Percentages of full and truncated passives formed by the group of EFL children show, in Graph 2, that there is a higher proportion of truncated passives than of full constructions. It also becomes obvious that the structure participants chose for the English version is mirrored in the Spanish translation they have provided. This graph, however, does not portray the individual choices for each of the structures made by learners. Suffice it to say that, while some participants continued to choose the same

structure for every instance of use of the passive voice (be it truncated or complete), some others varied in their formation of passive constructions.



Graph 2. Complete and truncated passive sentences (target language and their translation into Spanish)

From those who attempted the complete form of the passive, very interesting facts can be observed as regards the use of prepositions, since 71% of these sentences contain wrong prepositions or no preposition at all to introduce the agent (see Graph 3).



Graph 3. Prepositions used to introduce the agent in complete passive constructions

The correct preposition *by* was selected to quite a similar degree as the preferred wrong preposition *from*, also capable of indicating SOURCE. The facts that, on the one hand, learners attempted to explicitly include all participants in the passive construction, and, on the other, they chose a preposition to introduce the agent of the action, indicate the students' implicit knowledge of the structure and their awareness of the syntactic representation, in absence of formal instruction. Other good signs are the accurate and consistent use of the correct preposition by a few participants as well as the recourse to a semantically similar, though incorrect, preposition to introduce the agent.

Some other participants vary in the prepositions they select and have also alternated between both truncated and full constructions. One participant in particular resorts to all possible forms (truncated, full with both *from* and *for*, full without a preposition and even active sentences). These alternative and incorrect structures are approximations to the correct versions in these young learners' implicit knowledge.

Another participant successfully produced all twelve instances of full passive sentences, using the right preposition to introduce the agent, which further evinces the

heterogeneous nature of the group in terms of their EFL proficiency and their different stages in the interlanguage development.

3.1.3. The use of unaccusative verbs

Against our predictions, participants in general used the six unaccusative verbs correctly in a rather low proportion (36.70%), although there is no single instance in the data of transitivity of the verb (attaching a direct object to it), or of VS word order, typical of and acceptable in their L1 (*Salió la luna*) but characteristically incorrect in English (**Appeared the moon*). Most of the inaccuracies encountered involve, once again, an auxiliary verb accompanied by either an incorrect form of the main verb as in (3), where a past form appears, or in (4), where the participant has resorted to an infinitive form.

(3) *The peoples are arrived the house*

(4) *The pigs are float.*

These mistakes seem to respond to attempted progressive tenses in that both types include the auxiliary *be* and because in the Spanish versions they provided they used that verb tense. As with passives, another important source of inaccuracy lies in what Phillip calls “the anti-agreement effect” between subject and auxiliary verb or main verb. The data indicate a significant tendency towards the use of singular forms of auxiliary *be* and bare infinitive forms of main verbs, when compound verb tenses are attempted.

(5) *They leave of [sic] the house.*

(6) *The moon appear.*

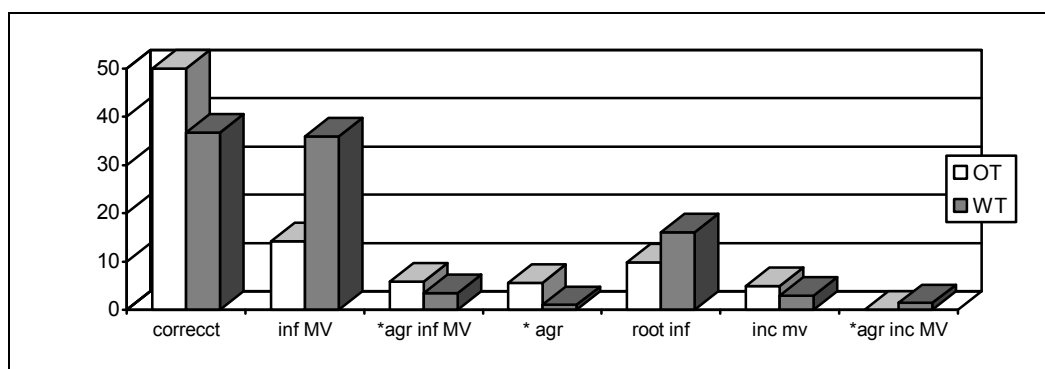
In fact, when participants did not use the progressive tense, they resorted to structures involving plural subjects like (5) to produce correct sentences. Three participants who used unaccusatives as in (5) also answered one or two questions as in (6). Thus, sentences like (5) might have been unintentionally made correct by inserting what White (2003) terms “a default form”, i.e. one that substitutes for others (p.196), which some of these learners use at this stage due to its similarity to the form in (6) and the root infinitive form. This default form appears to be their choice in sentences like (4) when unable to select the correct *-ing* participle to form a progressive tense or to indicate present simple form for the 3rd person singular as in (6).

Despite the errors encountered in the use of unaccusative verbs, these findings clearly reveal participants’ knowledge of this type of verbs, the retrieval problems they may be experiencing with verb forms as well as their strategies to tackle their production needs.

3.2. The oral task (children)

An experiment was carried out in order to get participants to produce these verbs in a less controlled situation. In the oral task (OT) participants in general successfully produced the expected verbs and when their memory or knowledge of the verb failed,

they resorted to other unaccusative verbs available in their lexicons. While some of the errors that appeared in the written task (WT) were also recorded in the oral data, this was the case to a much lesser degree, as shown in Graph 2.



Graph 4: Distribution of responses per task

The comparison reveals that at the oral task participants were, on the whole, more accurate in their production of unaccusative verbs. Instances of the infinitive form of the main verb, as in example (6), appear to have reduced by more than half, as has the use of root infinitives.

For both tasks the percentage of use of the progressive tense is similar (45,8 % in the oral task and 56% for the written), but the contrast lies in the distribution of answers in this tense across participants: in the oral task the eleven participants produced at least one correct instance of the present progressive tense (some learners providing 4, 5 and even 7), whereas in the written task only three used it accurately. Moreover, correct answers in the delayed imitation task were also expressed in a variety of other tenses used correctly: 30% are like those in (5), 7% are 3rd person singular simple present instances and the remaining 17% are instances of the simple past tense, which had not so far appeared.

4. Discussion

The mistakes observed in the two structures and across tasks are clustered around the forms chosen for the auxiliary verb and for the main verb. In the former, learners mostly tend to use the singular form with a plural subject, mainly in the simple past tense (*was*) for the written task, and in the present for the oral task (*is*). As regards the main verb, participants show a marked preference for the bare infinitive form, instead of the past participle, in passive sentences, and instead of the -ing form, in unaccusative progressive constructions. The fact that participants were able to accurately use the correct form at least once indicates that some morphological aspects are present in their IL grammars. Thus, the reason why the correct forms do not occur consistently might be difficulty of retrieval. In fact, Philips (1995, in White 2003) claims that

In sentence production the advantage of spelling out inflectional features... must be weighed against the cost involved in accessing the morphological spell-out of the inflectional features. For adults [i.e. *native speakers* LW], accessing inflectional paradigms is a heavily overlearned process, and hence bears minimal or zero cost... For young children, on the other hand, accessing morphological form is presumably not an

automatic process to begin with, and as a result the cost of accessing a given form may outweigh the cost of failing to realize it... The transition to adult-like performance can thus be seen as a transition from controlled to automatic processing of the task of accessing morphological knowledge. (p. 360)

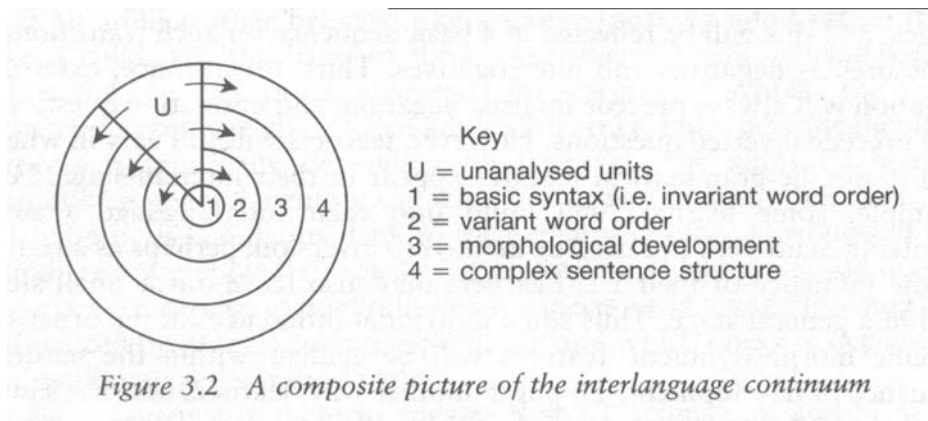
The regularity and systematicity with which some of these errors occur, the directionality in terms of preference for a particular incorrect form (White, 2003) and the concurrent variability do not reflect these learners' competence but rather provide a glimpse of their performance and output under real-time constraints.

According to Bialystok (1982) variability in learners' performance (erratic behaviour between correct and incorrect forms) is not only due to difficulties in accessing or retrieving the correct form, but also on the way in which a certain form has been learned. Bialystok claims that language use depends on two intersecting continua: automaticity and analysis. On the one hand, access to a certain form may be more or less automatic, as Phillips suggests. On the other hand, the mental representation of that grammatical form may be more or less analysed according to whether it has been learned as an unanalysed whole or whether the learner has been able to infer its underlying rule. Ellis (1997) recasts these ideas in terms of the dichotomy implicit/explicit knowledge.

In Ellis's account, the amount of planning before production determines recourse to one or other of the types of knowledge. In unplanned discourse, which the author considers primary because it is produced in spontaneous conversation, speakers draw on unanalysed and automatic knowledge. Conversely, planned discourse allows the use of more analysed and less automatic knowledge.

Ellis's claim would appear to run counter to the fact that our young learners did better in the oral task, which involved more unplanned discourse. In our opinion, our subjects' improved performance may have been due to a combination of factors. Firstly, children rely on the oral skills more naturally than on the written skills. Besides, writing makes many demands on young learners, not only from a cognitive point of view but also, and more importantly for our purposes, from a linguistic point of view. Writing involves more analysis of the form of the language, and such an analysis may be lacking or may be incomplete in these students' IL. Secondly, the particular context in which these learners are acquiring the FL is crucial, for they are encouraged to make use of the linguistic resources they have, no matter the mistakes they may make. Although they receive formal instruction, the linguistically rich environment favours more "holistic" or unanalysed learning, which might reflect the way in which they have learnt the structures in question. Besides, the interview situation prompted a more spontaneous response on the part of subjects.

Why then if learners are explicitly taught the correct forms of verbs and tenses do they make so many mistakes? Ellis (1984:63) identifies four broad stages of development in terms of EFL learners' output:



The first stage is characterised by a **standard word order**, irrespective of their L1. Learners first operate with rules that lead to external negation and non-inverted interrogatives. Utterances are **propositionally reduced** in that sentence constituents are omitted.

In **the second stage** the learner expands his propositions to include all or most of the constituents required, and also begins to vary the word order of utterances in accordance with the word order patterns of the target language.

During these two stages some grammatical morphemes appear, however erratically, in the learner's utterances and will not be used to perform the same functions as in native speaker speech.

Grammatical morphemes begin to be used systematically and meaningfully in **the third stage**, while in the **fourth stage**, complex sentence structures appear.

Ellis observes that right from the beginning and throughout the four stages the learner also acquires and uses unanalysed units such as "I don't know". He may slowly analyse these and so release the grammar elements for use in creative speech.

Ellis's description of the sequence of development seems to be true of our learners' IL grammar, in which no word order errors were found, but where mistakes were of a morphological nature.

The hypotheses we set to investigate had predicted the early acquisition of unaccusatives and a delayed appearance of the passive construction. Both predictions were advanced considering our and other researchers' findings in L1 acquisition. The results show that our L2 learners do not rely on transfer from the mother tongue as the main learning strategy: on no occasion did they produce a postverbal subject with an unaccusative verb. At the same time, we may claim that frequency in the input does not seem to be a crucial factor either: unaccusatives, though not presented formally, have a higher frequency of use than passives. Yet, they posed a similar degree of difficulty to our child learners.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the data obtained, different subsystems of learners' IL grammar seem to interact until each structure is fully acquired. This strengthens the theory that language acquisition is not a linear process, and that changes in one part of the

grammatical system (for example, gaining knowledge of the passive voice) will necessarily modify the rest and result in more variation in performance manifested in the similarity of the errors found in both constructions.

These mistakes are evidence of typical steps in L2 acquisition. The output of most young children in our study falls within Ellis's second and third stages in that the variability found across tasks for one same participant indicates that learners are aware of the need for a certain inflected form of the verb, which on occasions they cannot retrieve. However, use of the correct finite form not only lends support to the claim that these learners are stepping on the threshold of the third stage but also points to the availability of the forms in their interlanguage grammars, which may or may not be accessed successfully at different times (Ellis, 1997: 67; Phillips, 1995).

Our findings may have implications for foreign language learning and teaching in our context. If we consider that these students are immersed in an input-rich environment which allows a communicative use of the language and gives rise to implicit learning (especially in the case where the passive has not been formally taught yet), their performance is above the expected level of acquisition. If under these quasi-optimum conditions, the rate of correctness does not reach 40% in either structure, in other EFL scenarios which are not as favourable for learning, the percentage will definitely be lower, and it will take learners much longer to reach an equivalent developmental stage.

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Appendix A: The Written Elicitation Task

2



The boy and the girl pushed Tom. (push – pushed – pushed)

Tom

.....

Versión en castellano

.....

3



The boy found Tom and his sister (find – found – found)

Tom and his sister

.....

Versión en castellano

.....

Appendix B: The Oral Elicited Imitation Task

1. Oh look! The ice-cream is melting.
2. How nice! The eggs are breaking
Three chicks are born.
3. Oh, no! The yellow pig is slipping and it's falling into the water.
4. The other pigs are jumping into the water too.
And look! The pigs are floating, they are not sinking.
5. The tree has got so many apples that ... look! One branch is breaking.