

## Placeholders in the English Interlanguage of Bilingual (Basque/Spanish) Children

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In this article we provide an explanation for 2 syntactic phenomena whose systematic production has been observed in the English nonnative grammar of 3 different age groups of 58 bilingual (Basque/Spanish) children after 4 years of exposure to English in a formal setting:

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(a) insertion of *is* before a lexical verb and (b) insertion of a subject personal pronoun before a lexical verb. We argue that the presence of these phenomena could be explained assuming the transfer of a functional projection common to the participants' first languages and a gradual incorporation of the second language lexical items involved.

Although the age issue has been extensively dealt with in the literature on second language (L2) acquisition (e.g., Birdsong, 1999; Harley & Wang, 1997; Singleton, 1989, 1997, 2001; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995), age effects have only recently been considered in school contexts with practical purposes (Singleton, 1997, p. 48). Age effects on the rate of acquisition have been distinguished from age effects on ultimate attainment (in naturalistic contexts, where most of the age-related studies have been conducted, and on the basis of a significant body of research findings). The general claim was that older learners have a superior rate of acquisition (Asher & García, 1969; Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979, 1982; Oyama, 1976; Patkowski, 1980), specifically in regard to the acquisition of morphosyntactic aspects of the target language. Younger learners, on the other hand, have been reported to catch up and eventually outperform older learners (Krashen et al., 1979), thereby showing a higher level of ultimate attainment.

Research on the age issue has been scarce in institutional settings, where the amount and intensity of exposure to the target language, as well as the rate of acquisition, is much lower (Burstall, 1975; Cenoz, 2003; García Mayo, 2000, 2003; García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 1999). In the present article we analyze the morphosyntactic distribution of verb-subject sequences displayed in three different age groups (Group 1: 7–8 years, Group 2: 11–12 years, Group 3: 14–15 years) of bilingual (Basque/Spanish) children after 4 years of exposure to English in a formal setting. Our main goal is to provide an explanation for two syntactic phenomena whose systematic appearance has been observed in the English nonnative grammar of these children, namely, (a) insertion of *is* before lexical verbs (both transitive and intransitive), as in (1):

- (1) a. the kid *is* open the door  
 b. the boy *is* came  
 c. the little boy *is* want the frog  
 d. the boy and the reindeer *is* run  
 e. David and the dog *is* see two frog  
 f. the boy and the dog *is* sit down

and (b) insertion of a subject personal pronoun, mainly *he*, before a lexical verb (both transitive and intransitive). This pronoun doubles the determiner phrase (DP) subject that already appears overtly in the sentence, as illustrated in (2):

- (2) a. the wolf *he* opened the door  
 b. the father and the woman *they* love

We will refer to these two types of lexical items in these specific positions as *placeholders is* and *he*.<sup>1</sup> Previous research has identified their existence in other data sets (Eubank, 1993/1994; Fleta, 1999; Fuller & Gundel, 1987; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Lakshmanan, 1993/1994; Radford, 1988; Roeper, 1992). For instance, Radford (1988, p. 297) and Roeper (1992, p. 341) show examples of the use of *are* and *is* occupying a sentence-initial position (the position of the complementizer) in interrogative constructions that are not possible in adult English, as illustrated in (3) and (4).<sup>2</sup>

- (3) a. *is* I can do that?  
 b. *is* you should eat the apple?  
 c. *is* Ben did go? (Radford, 1988, p. 297)

- (4) a. *are* you help me?  
 b. *are* you want me? (Roeper, 1992, p. 341)

Radford considers that one possible interpretation of the data in (3) is that the child uses *is* as an invariable interrogative complementizer and thus has complementizers introducing main clauses. Roeper (1992) argues that the child has not identified the category complementizer phrase (CP); his or her grammar has functional heads, but without information about the specific language he or she is using, and that is the reason why the child attaches *is* or *are* in the case of English.

In the acquisition of English as an L2, some researchers assume that functional categories have been transferred from the first language (L1), but the specific instantiations of the adult language (abstractly or phonologically realized) are not produced. Therefore, *is/are* appears in the inflectional phrase in order to make up for the deficit (Eubank 1993/1994; Fleta, 1999; Ionin & Wexler, 2002; Lakshmanan 1993/1994).<sup>3</sup> Eubank (1993/1994) finds instances of nonnative uses of *is/are* in the English nonnative grammar of French speakers, Fleta (1999) and Lakshmanan (1993/1994) in the English nonnative grammar of Spanish speakers, Lee (2001) in the English nonnative grammars of Korean speakers, and Ionin and Wexler (2002) in the English nonnative grammars of Russian speakers. These examples are provided in (5):

- (5) a. my dog is not like the cage (Eubank, 1993/1994, p. 192)
- b. is went running (Fleta, 1999, p. 112)
- c. the girl is the cookie (Lakshmanan, 1993/1994, p. 61)
- d. is go (Lee, 2001, p. 609 )
- e. the lion is go down (Ionin & Wexler, 2002, p. 110)

Although these proposals differ in terms of the formalisms intended to account for the interlanguage structures, the various researchers explain *is* insertion as a filler for a functional category that has been projected.<sup>4</sup>

Placeholder *he* has also been found in English nonnative grammars, as shown in (6):

- (6) a. but the dog he can take the tea (Muñoz, 2001)
- b. the young boy he can get this fish (Fuller & Gundel, 1987, p. 10)

Unlike the case of *is* insertion, *he* insertion is a possible (although not frequent) structure in adult native English in cases of topicalization (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Haegeman & Guéron, 1999; Radford, 1997). This would explain why the cases of *he* insertion illustrated in (6) have been treated previously as mere instances of topicalizations similar to those in adult native English. No special attention has been devoted to insertion of *he* in this specific position

in English nonnative grammars. However, we will show that the contexts in which *he* insertion appears in our database cannot be explained as instances of topicalization but rather as placeholders (elements that fill in a structural position with lexical material not present in the target language in that same position).<sup>5</sup>

This article is organized as follows: The next section provides an outline of the theoretical framework we will use to interpret the data, relevant morphosyntactic information about the L1s involved, and the hypotheses explored. We will then discuss the methodology, proceed with the analysis of the interlanguage of bilingual (Basque/Spanish) children, and suggest a possible interpretation adopting an approach based on the transfer of a functional category. Finally we discuss issues that our proposal raises with respect to the influence of age on language learning.

### Theoretical Framework

#### *Kato's Proposal*

We will adopt the proposal put forth by Kato (1999), who, following the tenets of the minimalist program (Chomsky, 1995), argued for a reanalysis of weak and strong pronouns. Kato's reanalysis provides an appropriate account of the categories and structures that learners have to deal with when confronted with L2 input that accounts for our data. Specifically, in the process of the acquisition of English by speakers of Spanish and/or Basque, we will pay special attention to the fact that (a) Spanish and Basque pronouns differ from English pronouns with respect to their syntactic value and (b) verbal inflection is a key element in both Spanish and Basque but is practically nonexistent in English.

Kato (1999) made an initial distinction between strong and weak pronouns. She assumed that the universal inventory of weak pronouns (Table 1) is made up of (a) free weak pronouns (as in English), (b) clitic pronouns (as in French), and (c) agreement pronominal affixes (as in Spanish and Basque). She proposed that languages canonically privilege only one type of weak form.<sup>6</sup>

Strong pronouns (Table 2), which are deictic in nature (unlike the referentially dependent weak pronouns or clitics), are assumed to exist in all languages. They can optionally double any weak form—weak pronouns, clitics, or agreement affixes—when they are [+pronominal].

Following this analysis, Spanish and Basque agreement morphemes are equivalent to English free weak pronouns, and the only difference between them is that free weak pronouns can appear independently, whereas agreement morphemes have to be adjoined to the verb. Consequently, the structural position proposed for each one is different. In Kato's analysis (1999, pp. 17ff), there is no agreement phrase (AGRP) projection,<sup>7</sup> but rather, Kato follows Speas's (1994, p. 193) claim that agreement morphemes in null-subject languages have content.<sup>8</sup> Like free weak pronouns and clitics, they will enter the numeration (the group of lexical items that makes up the sentence) as lexical items independent from verbs that will be inflected only for tense. Consequently, the

Table 1

*Weak pronouns*

Languages		Weak pronouns
English	Free	I, you, he, she, it, we, they
French	Clitic	Je, tu, il, elle, nous, vous, ils, elles
Spanish	Agreement morphemes	-o, -s, Ø, -mos, -is, -n
Basque	Agreement morphemes	-t, zu, -Ø, gu, zue, te

Table 2

*Strong pronouns*

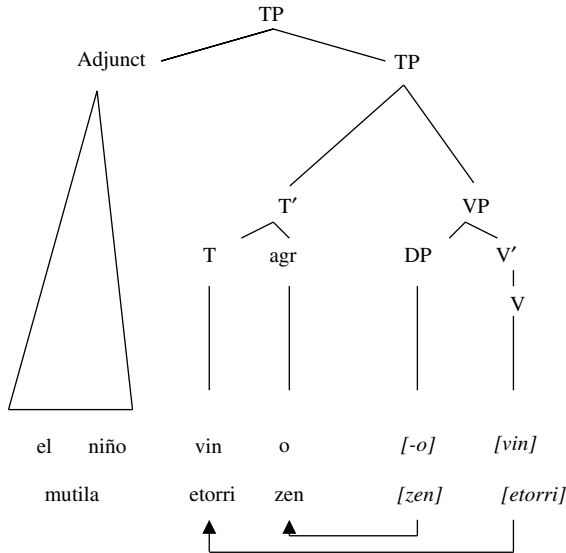
Languages	Strong pronouns	Default case
English	Me, you, him, her, it, us, them	Accusative
French	Moi, toi, lui, elle, nous, vous, eux, elles	Dative
Spanish	Yo, tú, él, nosotros, vosotros, ellos	Nominative
Basque	Ni(k), zu(k), hura, gu(k), zue(k), haiek, horiek	Nominative/ergative

representation for the sentences in (7) is the one given in (8) (TP = tense phrase; VP = verb phrase; DP = determiner phrase; agr = agreement; V = verb; T = tense).<sup>9</sup>

(7) a. Spanish: el niño vino  
 the boy come-3rd p. sing. past  
 the boy came

b. Basque: mutila etorri zen  
 boy-the come-3rd p. sing. past  
 the boy came

(8)

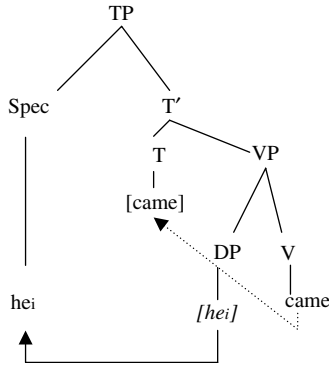


In (8), TP does not need to project a specifier position because the agreement morphemes are attracted to T and are adjoined to it. T has its case and other phi-features (person, number, and gender features) eliminated after checking. However, the phi-features of the agreement morphemes are retained. The agreement chain is interpreted at logical form (LF) as the subject of the clause. Agr can thus be reconstructed at LF as the head of the external argument of the verb.<sup>10</sup>

In English, however, the structure for (9) is provided in (10) (Spec = specifier):

(9) English: he came

(10)



Movement of the lexical verb to T is delayed (as indicated by the dotted lines) until LF because the verb does not have strong features. The weak pronoun raises to the specifier position of TP to check its strong nominal features and its own features (nominative case and phi-features). [Spec, TP] is projected to house the pronoun.<sup>11</sup>

### *Some Relevant Morphosyntactic Facts in Spanish and Basque*

Although Spanish and Basque are languages with very different origins (Ortiz de Urbina, 1989), the former a Latin-based language, and the latter a language with non-Indo-European roots, both languages share the following characteristics:

1. They belong to the group of null-subject languages (Chomsky, 1981; Jaeggli, 1982; Rizzi, 1982). Spanish and Basque, unlike English, allow missing subjects, free subject-verb inversion, and apparent violations of the so-called *that*-trace filter, as illustrated in the following (AUX = auxiliary; LOC = locative; GEN = genitive; ABS = absolutive; PP = past participle; PF = perfect; P = person; PL = plural; SING = singular):



## Missing subjects

Spanish: Llegaron a las seis  
 arrive–3rd P PL PAST at the six  
 ‘They arrived at six’

Basque: Seietan iritsi ziren  
 six–LOC arrive–3rd P PL PAST  
 ‘They arrived at six’

English: \*Arrived at six  
 vs.  
 They arrived at six

Spanish: Llovió mucho ayer  
 rain–3rd P SING PAST a lot yesterday  
 ‘It rained a lot yesterday’

Basque: Atzo euri asko egin zuen  
 yesterday rain a lot make AUX 3rd P SING  
 ‘It rained a lot yesterday’

English: \*Rained a lot yesterday  
 vs.  
 It rained a lot yesterday

## Subject-verb inversion

Spanish: Han venido mis amigos  
 have–3rd P PL come–PP my friends  
 ‘My friends have come’

Basque: Etorri dira nire lagunak  
 come AUX 3rd P PL I–GEN friend–ABS PL  
 ‘My friends have come’

English: \*Have come my friends  
 vs.  
 My friends have come

Apparent violations of the *that*-trace filter

Spanish: ¿Quién<sub>i</sub> dijiste que *t<sub>i</sub>* llegó tarde?  
 who say-2nd P SING that arrive-3rd P SING late  
 'Who did you say arrived late?'

Basque: Nor<sub>i</sub> esan zenuen *t<sub>i</sub>* berandu iritsi  
 Who say-PF AUX 2nd P SING late arrive-PF  
 AUX-3rd P SING PAST  
 zela?  
 that  
 'Who did you say arrived late?'

English: \*Who<sub>i</sub> did you say that *t<sub>i</sub>* arrived late?  
 vs.  
 Who did you say arrived late?

2. Spanish and Basque have a rich morphological paradigm with temporal and person morphemes present in both languages.

It should be pointed out, however, that Basque is an ergative language: Subjects of intransitive verbs and objects of transitive verbs bear absolutive case, whereas subjects of transitive verbs bear ergative case, as shown in (11) and (12):<sup>12</sup>

(11) Intransitive verb  
 Ana etorri da  
 Ana-ABS come have-3rd sing.  
 Ana has come

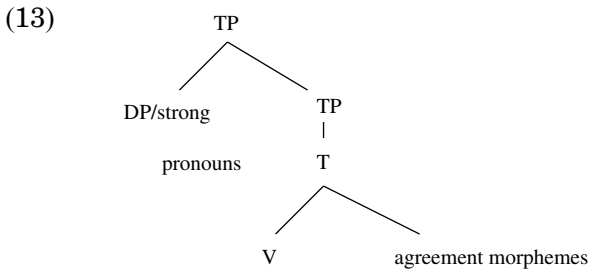
(12) Transitive verb  
 Anak etxea egin du  
 Ana-ERG house-ABS the done have-3rd sing.  
 Ana has built a house

In this article we are going to analyze the nonnative English of bilingual (Basque/Spanish) participants.

The Nonnative English of Basque/Spanish Bilinguals:  
An Experimental Study

The data we have analyzed come from the spontaneous oral production of three groups of bilingual (Basque/Spanish) children who have been exposed to a foreign language (English) for about 396 hr during 4 school years. Therefore, any claim that we make about the state of their interlanguage grammar has to do with what that grammar looks like during the course of the participants' acquisition of the foreign language. Although in L2 acquisition research there has been an increasing interest in the issue of how much grammatical information initial-state grammars may contain (cf. Vainikka & Young-Scholten's [1994, 1996a, 1996b] minimal trees hypothesis, Eubank's [1993/1994, 1996] weak parametric transfer/valueless features hypothesis, and Schwartz & Sprouse's [1996] full transfer/full access model), there is no room for such hypotheses here because our spontaneous data do not cover the children's initial contact with the language.

If we assume Kato's proposal and the role that both Universal Grammar (UG) principles and the learners' L1s play in shaping new input data, we predict that our learners will transfer the characteristics of the agreement morphemes of their L1s and the fact that the agreement morphemes are adjacent to the verb. Although projecting a specifier for tense is a UG option, our participants' interlanguage will not project a specifier. There would be no need for a specifier position, since tense does not have a strong determiner [D] feature (in their L1s and, therefore, in their interlanguage), and we will optionally find strong pronouns or DPs as subjects in an adjunct TP position, as illustrated in (13):<sup>13</sup>



Assuming that our participants will use the TP structure of their L1s and assuming Kato's proposal, we expect:

1. English weak pronouns working as agreement morphemes and realizing agreement overtly. This will be expected if the participants establish a parallelism between Spanish and Basque agreement morphemes and English weak pronouns.<sup>14</sup>
2. English free weak pronouns co-occurring with a DP subject, as in participants' L1s, where DP subjects co-occur with agreement morphemes.

## Method

### *Participants*

As indicated above, our data come from the spontaneous oral production of 58 bilingual (Basque/Spanish) students who had been exposed to the same amount of formal instruction at the time of data collection: approximately 396 hr during 4 school years. These students are what is usually termed "balanced bilinguals," in the sense that they possess age-appropriate competence in their L1s. All of them belonged to the same school, an *ikastola* (Basque school) in Guipúzcoa, Spain, and their knowledge of English came exclusively from classroom exposure.<sup>15</sup> The context in which they are immersed has been defined as additive trilingualism (Cenoz & Valencia, 1994): Basque, the language of

instruction, is the minority language, which is nowadays used increasingly and valued in the community. Spanish is the majority language, and English is taught as a foreign language.

As Table 3 shows, the participants were divided into three groups that differed in the age of first exposure to English:<sup>16</sup> thus, in Group 1, the early childhood contact group, students were first exposed to English between the ages of 4 and 5; in Group 2, the late childhood contact group, students' exposure began between the ages of 8 and 9; and in Group 3, the early adolescence contact group, students' exposure began between the ages of 11 and 12.

Participants in the three groups received 3 hr of weekly English instruction. The early childhood contact group followed a communicative approach (Nunan, 1989) based on oral activities from home-produced materials specifically designed for this age range (4- to 5-year-olds). The late childhood and early adolescence contact groups followed a communicative approach and used standard textbooks for their age range. Teachers in the early adolescence contact group combined practice in the use of the language with some attention to its formal aspects. The overall production of the three groups would be classified as low proficiency based not only on standard tests but also on the

Table 3

*Participants in the study*

	Age at first exposure	Age at testing
Group 1 ( <i>n</i> = 20)	4–5	7–8 ( <i>M</i> = 7.3)
Group 2 ( <i>n</i> = 20)	8–9	12–13 ( <i>M</i> = 11.3)
Group 3 ( <i>n</i> = 18)	11–12	14–15 ( <i>M</i> = 14.2)

*Note.* For all participants in this study, length of exposure was 4 years (approximately 396 hr), native language was Basque/Spanish, and the learning context was institutional.

teachers' reports on their students' performance (see Perales Haya, 2004, for a study on the participants' acquisition of sentential negation).

### *Procedure*

Each participant narrated two stories: The first, the well-known "Frog, Where Are You?" (Berman & Slobin, 1994), was common to the three groups; the second story varied depending on the age group. Specifically, Group 1 narrated the story "Teddy Bear," Group 2 the story "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids," and Group 3 a story based on the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*. The researcher in charge asked each learner to describe to her what he or she could see in the story the vignettes depicted. The participants narrated both the common story and the second stories individually. Their production was audiotaped and later transcribed and codified in Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES; MacWhinney, 1991) format.<sup>17</sup>

Two speech samples were collected from each child, and several decisions had to be made when coding the transcribed data:

1. When the distribution of sentences with copular *be* and auxiliary *be* was established, all those whose status was not clear in the transcription were excluded. The cases of placeholder *is* were categorized separately.
2. When inflection in lexical verbs was analyzed, (a) verbs with invariable forms in the past (*put, cut, ...*) and (b) imperatives (*look, listen, help*) were excluded.
3. Also excluded were formulaic sequences such as *there was, there is, that's all*, and *once upon a time there was a teddy bear* and repetitions by the child of what the researcher was saying, as in (14) (pound symbols indicate pauses):

- (14) Child:           the dog and the boy  
 Researcher: no? go on to the next bit then  
 Child:            the boy is ### is ###

Researcher: the boy is putting on his clothes

Child: the boy is putting on his clothes

The uses of *is* that we have identified in the students' narratives were as follows (relevant information in italics; the examples represent extracts from the participants' stories):

(15) Auxiliary *is*

Group 1, Child 9

Child: the teddy mummy *is looking* the teddy bear  
the teddy bear *is in* the bed  
the doctor *is pushing* one injection

Group 2, child 11

Child: and the boy *is up* in a tree  
here the owl *is coming, is going* to the boy

(16) Placeholder *is*

this is a reindeer

the boy *is on* the reindeer

the boy and the reindeer *is run*.

the boy *is very dirty* (Group 1, Child 8)

in the rock *is a* reindeer

and the boy in the reindeer *is go* on the river (Group 2, Child 15)

(17) Copula *is*

the boy *is on* the rock and the frog *is behind* the trunk  
(Group 2, Child 4)

one day the man and wife and the boy mother died

and the man and boy *were* very sad

and two months later the boy he see the photos of her  
mother (Group 3, Child 6)

## Results

In order to analyze the morphosyntactic development of the interlanguage of these participants, we observed the distribution

of placeholders *is* and *he*. Table 4 features the distribution of placeholder *is* in comparison with the contexts in which auxiliary *is*, copular *is*, and lexical verbs were used by the participants. Table 5 features the distribution of placeholder *he* considered in relation to the total number of subject pronouns used by the participants (individual counts of the different uses of *is* and *he* for the three groups are given in the Appendix).<sup>18</sup>

As can be seen from Table 4, the use of placeholder *is* decreases from Group 1 (9.02%) to Group 2 (4.81%) and Group 3 (0.96%). A similar pattern is seen in Table 5, where we also see a decrease in the use of placeholder *he* for Groups 2 and 3. This

Table 4

*Distribution of placeholder is*

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Placeholder <i>is</i>	22/244 = 9.02% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	22/457 = 4.81% <i>SD</i> = 0.01	5/521 = 0.96% <i>SD</i> = 0.004
Auxiliary <i>is</i>	82/244 = 33.61% <i>SD</i> = 0.03	65/457 = 14.22% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	63/521 = 12.09% <i>SD</i> = 0.01
Copular <i>is</i>	83/244 = 34.02% <i>SD</i> = 0.03	103/457 = 22.54% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	77/521 = 14.78% <i>SD</i> = 0.02
Lexical verbs	44/244 = 18.03% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	267/457 = 58.42% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	376/521 = 72.17% <i>SD</i> = 0.02

Table 5

*Distribution of placeholder he*

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
_____	22/53 = 41.51%	14/193 = 7.25%
_____	<i>SD</i> = 0.07	<i>SD</i> = 0.02

*Note.* The blanks in the column for Group 1 indicate that no instances of placeholder *he* were found.



decrease is significant both from a quantitative (placeholder *is*: test statistic = 2.19 from Group 1 to Group 2,  $p = 0.0142621$ ; test statistic 3.67 from Group 2 to Group 3,  $p = 0.000121295$ ; placeholder *he*: test statistic = 6.25,  $p < .001$ )<sup>19</sup> and a qualitative point of view.<sup>20</sup> We interpret this as evidence that the participants use placeholders to make up for the lack of inflection.<sup>21</sup>

Although the differences between Group 1 and Group 2 are statistically significant, it should be noted that if one looks at the number of participants who produce placeholder *is*, it is nearly the same for both groups: 12/20 for Group 1 and 10/20 for Group 2. There is yet another potential outlier problem with Group 2 and placeholder *he*: 9/22 instances (40.91% of the total production of this placeholder in Group 2) come from a single participant (number 4), and these 9 instances represent at least three times as many as those produced by any other child in that group. Finally, only 8/20 (40.00%) of the children in Group 2 produce any placeholder *he* occurrences, compared with a very similar proportion, 7/18 (38.89%), of those in Group 3.

In order to provide a more comprehensive account of these results we have also analyzed the distribution of independent lexical verbs (not accompanied by *is*) as well as that of all subject pronouns (including placeholder *he*).<sup>22</sup> Additionally, we took into consideration all instances of *is* used in plural contexts as a default form, as in (18), and the instances in which *he* was used as a default pronoun, as in (19):<sup>23</sup>

(18) the frog and the boy *is* going

(19) the mother *he* is on the tree

Table 6 shows these results.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of Group 1, the high percentage of *is* default (86.49%) and the low percentage of independent lexical verbs (27.33%) shows the prominent role of *is*. This contrasts with what happens in Groups 2 and 3, where no default uses occur and the number of independent lexical verbs is higher (Group 1 vs. Group 2: test statistic =  $-10.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Group 1 vs. Group 3: test statistic =  $-10.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Figure 1 displays the groups' morphosyntactic development more clearly.

Table 6

*Morphosyntactic development*

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Independent lexical verbs	44/161 = 27.33% <i>SD</i> = 0.04	267/354 = 75.42% <i>SD</i> = 0.02	376/444 = 84.68% <i>SD</i> = 0.02
Subject pronouns	0 N/A	53/457 = 11.60% <i>SD</i> = 0.01	193/521 = 37.04% <i>SD</i> = 0.02
<i>Is</i> default	32/37 = 86.49% <i>SD</i> = 0.06	0 N/A	0 N/A
<i>He</i> default	0 N/A	11/17 = 64.71% <i>SD</i> = 0.12	1/100 = 1.00% <i>SD</i> = 0.01

Note. N/A = not applicable.

In the case of Group 2, the relevance of placeholder *he* is highlighted by the limited number of subject pronouns (11.60% vs. 37.04% in Group 3), whose production is significantly different statistically from its production in Group 3 (test statistic = 9.15,  $p < 0.0001$ ) (see individual counts for subject pronouns in Groups 2 and 3 in Table A.5). It also has a parallel in the production of default uses, in contrast with what happens in the case of Group 3, as Figure 2 clearly shows.

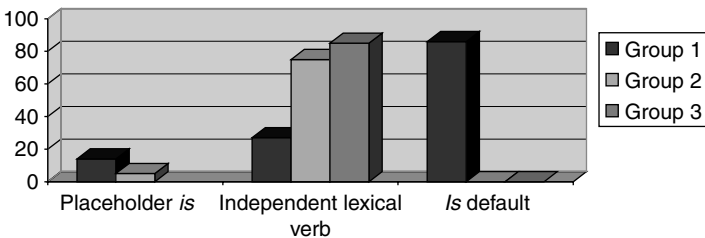


Figure 1. Percentage use of placeholder *is*, independent lexical verbs, and *is* default.

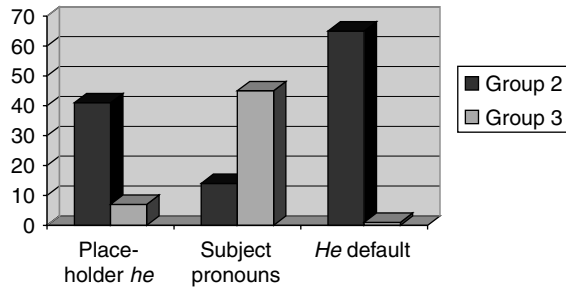
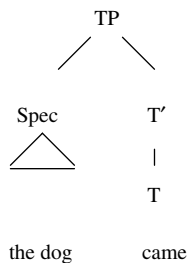


Figure 2. Percentage use of placeholder *he*, subject pronouns, and *he default*.

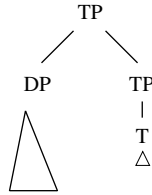
Based on the above data, we argue that the lexical items *is* and *he* in the syntactic positions in (1) and (2) provide evidence that our participants did not project the specifier position of TP [Spec, TP]; rather, they use placeholders *is* and *he* as agreement morphemes (Kato, 1999). An alternative approach would be to claim that placeholder *is* occupies the [Spec, TP] position, but that proposal would lead to the analysis of DP + subject pronoun structures as topicalized or left-dislocated, as in adult L1 English, which is not the case in our database, where they are not emphasized and are not followed by a pause.

We illustrate our proposal of placeholders *is* and *he* as agreement morphemes with the structures corresponding to an English sentence (cf. (20)), the equivalent sentences in Spanish and Basque (cf. (21)), and what we propose as the equivalent structure in the English interlanguage of Spanish/Basque speakers (cf.(22)):

(20) English

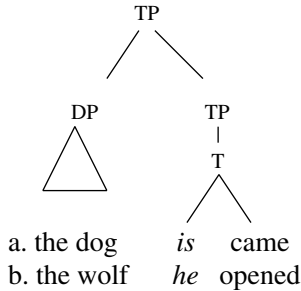


## (21) Spanish/Basque



- a. el perro      vin-    o  
 b. txakurra    etorri   da

## (22) English interlanguage of Spanish/Basque speakers



That is, we propose that our participants transfer the characteristics of the agreement morphemes of their L1s and their position linked to the verb. They adjoin lexical pieces from the L2 input, and these adjoined elements function as the English substitutes for the agreement morphological markers of Basque and Spanish and are assigned the corresponding values. English weak pronouns always appear preceding the corresponding verb: Because the learners are not blind to the L2 input they are exposed to, they incorporate the English lexical pieces into the Basque/Spanish structure of their interlanguage precisely in preverbal position.

Our proposal that the characteristics of the agreement morphemes from participants' L1s are transferred is supported because (a) no lexical material is ever inserted between

placeholders *is* and *he* and the verb: The placeholder and the verb never appear separated, whereas one can find examples of DP subjects separated from the verb by pauses (e.g., the boy and the dog ### is in the water); and (b) the participants' L1s, Basque and Spanish, both have agreement morphemes and a similar TP structure. However, in light of the development of the tense-aspect system in the children's interlanguage (see note 25), we must acknowledge that this evidence is suggestive, but not conclusive.

We should also mention that, in order to account for the occurrences of placeholder *is*, we also considered the possibility (cf. Lakshmanan, 1993/1994) that, in some cases, we might be dealing with sentences in the present continuous: That is, participants would use auxiliary *is* and omit the *-ing* suffix. However, this explanation could not account for all cases since, as Zobl and Licerás (1994) point out, the suffix *-ing* is acquired early, concurrently with auxiliary *be*, which selects it. This seems to be the case for the participants in this study, as can be seen in Table 4. Moreover, as shown in Table 7, a detailed analysis of these *is* forms shows that the majority are not intended as progressives but are used with a generic/habitual meaning. Some examples are given in (23):

- (23) Progressive meaning  
 the dog is jump and dancing (Group 1, Child 8)  
 The dog is jumping and dancing

Table 7

*Breakdown of is + lexical verb utterances by intended meaning*

	Progressive	Generic	Stative	Past	Future	Ambiguous	Total
Number of utterances	9	45	2	1	_____	5	62
Percentage of total	15	73	3	2	_____	8	100

*Note.* The blanks in the column for Future indicate that no instances of *is* + lexical verb with an intended meaning of "future" were found.

Generic meaning<sup>25</sup>

the reindeer is go to the forest (Group 2, Child 12)

The reindeer goes to the forest

## Stative meaning

the little boy is want the frog (Group 1, Child 13)

The little boy wants the frog

## Past-tense meaning

the frog went out of the bottle and is escape from the house (Group 1, Child 18)

The frog went out of the bottle and escaped from the house

In a study examining spontaneous oral production data from 20 L1 Russian children acquiring English, Ionin and Wexler (2002) examined the issue of finiteness in child L2 grammar. Although the participants in their study were very different from the ones in ours with respect to the children's overall English proficiency,<sup>26</sup> the authors also observed that some of the L2 learners used *is* in utterances that contained an uninflected thematic verb in place of a progressive participle, as in the examples in (24):

(24) a. the lion is go down

b. and then the police is come there (Ionin & Wexler, 2002, examples (4a) and (4b), p. 110)

In Ionin and Wexler's data, 30% of the *is* + lexical verb utterances are used to mark progressive aspect. Ionin and Wexler also find that when *be* is used, there is seldom affixal inflection on the verb: There were only six instances of an irregular past-tense form along with a *be* form (*in one episode he is said to Bart, I kill you*) and two with affixal inflection (*he is goes to elementary school*). In our data the children use only four instances of *be* and either an irregular form of the verb (cf. (25a), used twice) or a regular form (cf. (25b) and (25c)), a total of 6% (4/62):

(25) a. the boy is came (Group 2, Child 18)

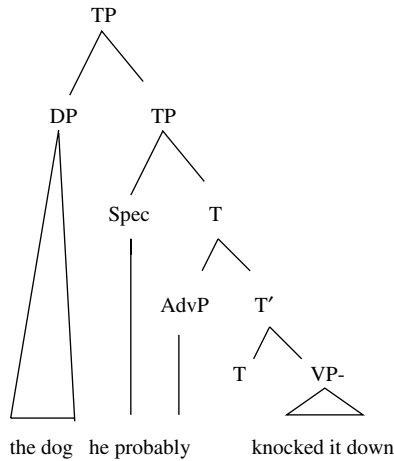
The boy came

- b. they are wanted (Group 3, Child 7)  
 They wanted
- c. the bees are escaped (Group 3, Child 16)  
 The bees escaped

Ionin and Wexler (2002, p. 112) argued that it is possible that *be* is being used by the L2 learners to mark tense and/or agreement on the verb.

As for our analysis of placeholder *he*, although the DP subject is topicalized, it is not the same type of topicalization one finds in adult L1 English. In the case of adult L1 English, we assume the structure in (26) (from Berman & Slobin, 1994, p. 173) (AdvP = adverbial phrase):

(26)



In the structure with placeholder *he*, which we consider a syntactic structure of nonnative English, *he* is adjoined to the verb and the DP appears in an adjunct position, as we showed in (22).

## Discussion

What we would like to emphasize about placeholders *is* and *he* is that the participants in our three different age groups look

for “fillers” that function as the agreement morphemes of their native languages. The younger children (Group 1), who have a very restricted lexical repertoire and do not seem to have internalized the English pronominal system (no subject pronouns are used at this stage), find in placeholder *is* an element that allows them to “fill in” the position of the agreement morphemes. This observation has also been made in other studies with children whose L1 was Spanish and who were learning English as an L2 both naturalistically (Lakshmanan, 1993/1994) and in immersion settings (Fleta, 1999). The results also coincide with those obtained by other researchers, who point out that the acquisition of *be* takes place in the early stages and that *is* is the more frequently used form (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Haznedar, 1997, 2001; Zobl & Licerias, 1994). In fact, the presence of placeholder *is* in the interlanguage of these participants is overwhelming: The mere use of *is* with any of the values seen in Table 4 (namely, auxiliary, copular, or placeholder) is in significant contrast to the use of lexical verbs (77% use of *is* vs. 18% use of lexical verbs). The form *is* is never omitted or contracted. In addition, Group 1 differs from Groups 2 and 3 in that students in this group did not produce any instances of subject pronouns or inflected forms. The lack of inflection provides strong evidence in favor of *is* as the form that functions as a placeholder for the agreement morphemes in our participants’ L1 structures at this point. This agreement morpheme is adjoined to the verb as shown in (22).

As we have shown, participants in Group 2 resort to placeholder *he*. In this group, subject pronouns display the following characteristics not present in Group 3:

- *he* is nearly the only pronoun used ( $48/52 = 92.31\%$ )
- *he* is used as a default pronoun ( $11/17 = 64.71\%$ ), as illustrated in (19)
- *he* appears in placeholder constructions ( $22/53 = 41.50\%$ ), as illustrated in Table 5

Group 2 initially transfers the characteristics of the agreement morphemes from the L1s, and *he* functions as one such



morpheme which they adjoin to the verb. Lardiere and Schwartz (1997, pp. 346–347) provide similar evidence of what they consider “wrong’ affixation encoding precisely the right agreement feature-marking in L1 acquisition as well.” Specifically, they report data from Clahsen (1990/1991, p. 377, (12)) and Clahsen and Penke (1992, p. 188, (4)) in which children learning German as their L1 make the following error:

- (27) a. fels noch nich is-er putt  
           rock yet not is–he broke  
           The rock is not yet broken  
       b. das is-er fest  
           that is–he fixed  
           This is fixed

In (27), an apparent third-person singular “pronominal copy” *er* (he) affixed to the verb occurs, instead of the third-person singular target form *ist* (is).

The data for participants in Group 3 do not feature the characteristics of Groups 1 and 2: We find the entire pronominal system (although sometimes with agreement problems) and instances of self-correction, as shown in (28):

- (28) *he ... she ... he* went out

The characteristics found in Group 3 indicate that students in this group seem to be on their way to restructuring their interlanguage pronominal system: Pronouns are no longer analyzed as adjoined to the verb but rather as free elements, although they might still constitute the morphological realization of agreement features. At this point we can only mention that there is a change in process, that agreement morphemes *–s* and *–ed* are now present, and that there are optional strong pronouns. A follow-up study of these students would be necessary to determine the direction the change may take, something that is beyond the scope of this article.

A more complete picture of the results of inflection in Groups 2 and 3 is depicted in Table 8, which shows the number and

Table 8

*Inflected forms*

Group 2	31/205 = 15.12% <i>SD</i> = 0.03
Group 3	126/292 = 43.15% <i>SD</i> = 0.03

distribution of inflected forms in Groups 2 and 3. The results shown in the table parallel the ones found for subject pronouns in these two groups (see Table 6): Children in Group 2 produced a significantly lower percentage of inflectional forms (test statistic =  $-6.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, many of the inflectional endings in Group 2 correspond to irregular forms ( $14/31 = 45.16\%$ ) and not to productive affixes ( $-s$ ,  $-ed$ ), which means that these forms could have been acquired as lexical pieces (Zobl, 1998).<sup>27</sup> This parallelism seems to indicate that there is a relationship (at least a temporal one) between the acquisition of subject pronouns and inflectional forms (there is a significant [test statistic =  $22.3439$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ] strong positive linear relationship [Pearson's correlation coefficient =  $0.999$ ] between the production of subject pronouns and inflected forms in Groups 2 and 3). Table 9 features the data with inflected forms and subject pronouns for Groups 2 and 3.

Within the syntactic framework adopted, children in Groups 1 and 2 do not seem to be sensitive to English inflection as long as they have *is* and *he* as placeholders. Consequently, only when they have reanalyzed the English pronouns as free elements will a new element ( $-s$ ,  $-ed$ ) appear adjoined to the verb. In other words, the misanalysis of English pronouns

Table 9

*Subject pronouns and inflected forms*

	Inflected forms	Subject pronouns
Group 2	31/205 = 15.12%	53/457 = 11.60%
Group 3	126/292 = 43.15%	193/521 = 37.04%

resulting from the transfer of the features of the agreement morphemes from their L1s delays the acquisition of English inflectional forms, which are not necessary while the pronouns occupy their structural position.

Therefore, the pattern of morphosyntactic development described seems to point to the idea that the same (native) syntactic structure is retained in all cases and the choice of one element or another (*is, he, she, they*) to adjoin to the lexical verb depends on the items available in the participants' English vocabulary: *is* would realize T features, whereas *he* would realize D features. We should add at this point that instances of null subjects in the positions in which the children's L1s allow them are not found in their nonnative grammar. This is explained by the proposal put forth here: Agreement morphemes are the subjects in the participants' L1s, and what they transfer, then, is the agreement features and the structural position (linked to the verb) of those morphemes. The learners look for substitutes in their English lexicon (*is, he*), and the result is the placeholder constructions we have analyzed.<sup>28</sup>

### *Implications and Further Inquiry*

In this study we have analyzed the oral production of 58 bilingual (Basque/Spanish) learners of English as a foreign language divided into three groups on the basis of their first exposure to English. They have had, however, the same number of hours of classroom exposure, and they have all been classified as low-proficiency learners in terms of their oral output. It should be borne in mind, however, that the way input is presented in formal learning settings varies according to the age range of the learners (more metalinguistically oriented instruction as they grow older). Besides, the cognitive development of the learners is a factor that cannot be disregarded when the way they approach new input is considered. This is what we would like to argue accounts for the three different ways in which the learners structure their intake. In other words, what we have shown is that Kato's (1999) typology of weak pronouns

provides a valid framework for analyzing the different ways in which our learners approach input data in a foreign language. Thus, in what seems to be an age factor effect, not in terms of overall proficiency but in terms of structuring the input, the youngest learners use placeholder *is* coexisting with a total lack of personal subject pronouns, an overwhelming use of instances of default *is*, and a very low occurrence of independent lexical verbs. The second group of learners uses placeholder *he*, and their interlanguage features a modest occurrence of *he* default and other subject pronouns, as well as a dramatic increase in the use of independent lexical verbs. Finally, the older learners show a significant decrease in the use of placeholder *he*, the use of other personal pronouns as placeholders, the practically null occurrence of placeholder *is*, and a significant increase both in the use of subject pronouns and in the use of independent lexical verbs.

The fact that there is never any lexical material between placeholders *is* and *he* and the verbs provides strong evidence that these learners are using these lexical items as the agreement morphemes that carry the f-features in Basque and Spanish. We have also shown that these instances of *is* plus a bare stem cannot be interpreted as sentences in the present continuous form that are lacking the *-ing* morpheme. This evidence, we believe, clearly supports our claim that two processes explain our data: transfer of lexical structure and restructuring by incorporating English lexical items. Furthermore, we would like to argue that UG guides our learners in their search for identifying the system of weak pronouns that characterizes the target language. However, parameter resetting on the basis of access to English features does not seem to have taken place at the point in time when the learners' interlanguage was analyzed (Liceras, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2003; Tsimpli & Roussou, 1991).

We must acknowledge, however, that the actual number of learners who make use of placeholders *is* and *he* is low. This may be for several reasons:

1. As mentioned above, ours are production data. We have no way of knowing whether the participants that have not used placeholders *is* and *he* in the oral narration of the stories might have used them at some other point in their oral production.
2. By the same token, the participants who do not use those placeholders in production data may use this strategy for comprehension. Experimental procedures intended to test this aspect could shed light on how learners process sentences with and without placeholders.
3. Not all children proceed through the same stages when learning their L1 or their L2. When referring specifically to placeholders, not all children produce them in the acquisition of English as an L1, so we would not expect L2 learners to produce them across the board.<sup>29</sup>

We believe that our findings raise interesting questions with regard to the influence of age on language learning. When analyzing our data set, age seems to play a role as far as what to choose to fill in a syntactic position but not as far as the syntactic position itself. Of course, there are questions that remain to be answered. For instance, it would be important to investigate (a) whether or not participants in Group 1 use placeholder *he* in later stages of their morphosyntactic development, (b) when and how placeholders disappear, and (c) when and how restructuring of the syntactic projection of the L1 occurs (see García Mayo, Lázaro Ibarrola, & Licerias, 2002; Lázaro Ibarrola, 2002). Finally, it would be interesting to ascertain whether the use of placeholders can be found among participants whose languages have the structure of English TP or among learners whose L1 does not have any explicit morphological marker (e.g., Chinese) or whether it is just the case that placeholders are found only among learners whose L1 marks agreement explicitly.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>We have decided to refer to the structures illustrated in (2) as placeholder *he* because this is the pronoun overwhelmingly used.

<sup>2</sup>The examples in (3) are mentioned in Radford (1988, p. 297), but they first appear in Akmajian and Heny (1975, p. 17), where the authors report having observed a 3-year-old girl regularly producing those utterances. Akmajian and Heny, and Radford argue that examples like those in (3) seem to provide strong evidence for the idea that children learn languages by constructing their own grammars.

<sup>3</sup>In minimalist terms we would say that those positions need to be filled in so that features can be checked.

<sup>4</sup>German children learning English as an L2 are also reported to insert *is* before a lexical verb (K. Lauer, personal communication, September 30, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Although we are familiar with the work by Wong-Fillmore (1976) on formulaic speech and the more recent research by Myles et al. (Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998; Myles, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1999) on the topic, in this article we follow the proposal by Bottari, Cipriani, and Chilosi (1993/1994) that these elements are actual placeholders.

<sup>6</sup>One of the article's reviewers pointed out that Spanish is a language with object clitics and no morphological verb-object agreement, and therefore it would be a language with a mixed system that does not really privilege only one type of weak form.

<sup>7</sup>In the minimalist program (Chomsky, 1995), agreement phrase as such disappears: All verbs are born in the numeration fully inflected, with a head being able to check more than one feature.

<sup>8</sup>The view Speas adopted was the one proposed by Rohrbacher (1994), who claimed that in languages that have strong agreement, each agreement morpheme has its own lexical entry, whereas in languages that have weak agreement, the morphemes do not have independent lexical entries. Rather, verbs in weak-agreement languages are listed in the lexicon in verbal paradigms, and hence agreement has no independent lexical entry in such languages. Speas's proposal implies that agreement morphemes are lexical items in the numeration and that in that respect, they are not different from free morphemes. Functional categories, both phonetically realized as bound or free morphemes, are bundles of features but this does not prevent them from having content.

<sup>9</sup>Following several researchers (e.g., Cinque, 1990; Olarrea, 1996; Ordóñez, 1997) we assume that both DP subjects and overt pronouns have the same structural representation: as adjoined positions.

<sup>10</sup>In Spanish free morphemes appear before the verb (cf. (29a)) and bound morphemes after it (cf. (29b)). In Basque just the opposite applies: Bound morphemes appear before the verb (cf. (30a)) and free morphemes after it (cf. (30b)), although in negative sentences free morphemes move before the verb (cf. (30c)).

- (29) a. *ha*                                  *venido*  
           have (3rd p. sing.)    come (past participle)  
           S/he has come
- b. *vin-o*  
           come (3rd p. sing./past)  
           S/he came
- (30) a. *g oaz*  
           3rd p. pl.–come  
           S/he came
- b. *etorri zen*  
           come 3rd p. sing. past  
           S/he came
- c. *ez    zen                                  etorri*  
           neg. 3rd p. sing. past    come  
           S/he did not come

The English interlanguage of the bilingual participants in our study chooses just one of the options available in their L1s: free morphemes placed before the verb (as in Spanish), which is also the option that most closely resembles the English input they receive.

<sup>11</sup>As rightly pointed out by one of the article's reviewers, the movement could simply involve the percolation of tense and agreement features from V to T.

<sup>12</sup>It should be mentioned that with the exception of third-person pronouns, pronouns in Basque add *-k* for ergative case. As third-person pronouns do not exist in Basque, demonstrative pronouns with different forms of ergative and absolutive cases are used:

Ergative case	<i>honek</i>	<i>horrek</i>	<i>hark</i>
	this	that	that
Absolutive case	<i>hau</i>	<i>hori</i>	<i>hura</i>
	this	that	that

The remaining pronouns add the suffix *-k*, as do nominals in transitive constructions.

<sup>13</sup>As already mentioned in the text, the participants in our study do have access to tense with a strong or weak [D] feature, as this is a UG option. But their L1s have a weak feature, and we therefore assume that this is the one being transferred. The participants' interlanguage is constrained by UG in the same way that their L1s are, but the parameterized tense value differs.

<sup>14</sup>We would not expect to find placeholders in postverbal position, as in *the boy come he*, because we hypothesize that these learners restructure by making adjustments and, therefore, it is the English word order (and the English lexical items) that their L2 grammar aims at adopting. They restructure on the basis of the L2 input.

<sup>15</sup>Questionnaires to control for this variable were given to all participants previous to any testing. Those who took extracurricular English classes or who had visited English-speaking countries were also excluded as participants in the larger longitudinal study that has been under way since 1996.

<sup>16</sup>As mentioned above, the data belong to a larger longitudinal project. The subset of the bilingual corpora that we have analyzed in this study was collected from participants who were first exposed to English in a formal setting at different ages (4 years old, 8 years old, 11 years old) as a result of legislative changes that affected the age of first exposure to foreign languages in general. Thus, from the longitudinal study we selected those students who had been exposed to English for the same number of years (and hours) but who belonged to different “age of first exposure” groups in order to be able to analyze the impact of starting age on the acquisition of English as a foreign language.

<sup>17</sup>One of the article’s reviewers suggested that it would be relevant to consider data from native-speaker controls (i.e., children in the similar age range). We have accessed the CHILDES database (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/data>), and we have found narrations of the frog story by native speakers of English in the 6- to 9-year-old range. No instances of placeholders were found.

<sup>18</sup>The contexts that appear in Table 4 (244 for Group 1, 457 for Group 2, and 521 for Group 3) refer to the total number of sentences produced by the participants. These sentences were categorized as follows:

---

Lexical verbs

With inflection:	the boy goes/went
Without inflection:	the boy go
Placeholder <i>he</i> :	the boy he go

Verb *be*

Copula:	the boy is on the rock
Auxiliary:	the boy is looking
Placeholder <i>is</i> :	the boy is go

---

We should add here that the final count of placeholder *is* for Group 1 is 22. Table A.1 shows that a single participant (number 8) accounted for 37.14% (13/35) of all placeholder occurrences. We have considered this participant an outlier. The contexts in Table 5 (Group 2: 53, Group 3: 193) refer to the total number of pronouns used by the students in those groups (see also Table 6).

<sup>19</sup>A two-sample binomial test with the normal approximation to the binomial distribution was used.

<sup>20</sup>By a significant decrease from a qualitative point of view, we understand that participants go from a stage in which they produce nonnative sentences with a separate placeholder element (*is*, *he*) to hold inflection to another stage in which they use independent lexical verbs without



placeholders and inflection increases (see Table 9). Pronouns and DPs used in this later stage would remain in the adjunct position in (13).

<sup>21</sup>As correctly pointed out by one of the reviewers, the use of placeholder *is* is very low even in Group 1. However, it should be borne in mind that the children in this group (unlike those in Groups 2 and 3—see Table 8) never use inflected forms. The rest of their production (90.98% of their utterances) consists of structures with copular *is*, auxiliary *is*, or uninflected independent lexical verbs. Even though the percentage of use of placeholder *is* is low, we believe that that structure is providing important evidence as to how the children's interlanguage is organized.

<sup>22</sup>It should be pointed out that the fact that Basque is an ergative language does not seem to have influenced the children's use of DPs: All DPs analyzed were in the nominative case; there were no instances of accusative pronouns in subject position or of pronouns with suffixation that could have been hypothesized to come from Basque.

<sup>23</sup>Rispoli (1994) examined pronoun case errors, or overextensions, like *\*me want it* in the acquisition of English as L1. He hypothesized that the morphological structure of the pronoun influenced the pattern of these errors. As Rispoli reported (1994, p. 159), overextensions of *me* for *I* are extremely frequent in the child language literature (Menyuk, 1969), but the reverse overextensions (*I* for *me*) are exceptionally rare; also, overextensions of *my* for *I* are well attested (Brown, 1973), but the reverse is very rare. Rispoli blamed these errors on the morphological markedness of the target adult form. Thus, nominative forms such as *I* and *she* would be irregular in the sense that *I* does not contain the stem *m-* and *she* does not contain the third-person-singular stem *h-*. According to Rispoli, regular forms will appear before the more marked irregular forms irrespective of the pronoun's case.

Pensalfini (1995) examined the transcripts of the speech of four children from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney & Snow, 1985) and showed that these errors are not random but correlate closely with both the presence or absence of inflectional elements (Radford, 1995; Vainikka, 1994) and the morphological markedness of the target (adult form) within its paradigm. That is, the nature of the errors and their distribution "demands an explanation of pronoun errors with both syntactic and morphological components" (Pensalfini, 1995, p. 312).

Muñoz (1994) studied the nature of an error that is extremely common among Spanish learners of English: confusion between the masculine singular personal pronoun and the feminine singular form. The analysis of written data showed that errors significantly consisted of an overgeneralization of the masculine form at the expense of the feminine one. Muñoz provided an explanation in terms of frequency-based markedness.

<sup>24</sup>The contexts for independent lexical verbs for each of the groups (Group 1: 161, Group 2: 354, Group 3: 444) represent the total number of sentences with independent lexical verbs produced by the participants. As for the

contexts for *is* default in Group 1, these were obtained out of the number of contexts that allow for its use, that is, sentences with non-third-person-singular subjects (e.g., the boy and the mother *is* going). It would not make any sense to obtain the percentage of use for *is* default out of the total number of sentences produced. The contexts for *he* default were obtained out of the total number of sentences in which *he* could have been used as default, that is, those in which the subject was not masculine third-person singular.

<sup>25</sup>One of the article's reviewers expressed doubts about the generic-meaning interpretation of this example. The use of present tense in the English interlanguage of the participants is clearly influenced by its use in their native languages in a narrative context; that is, the present tense is used instead of the target (English) present continuous.

<sup>26</sup>Tonin and Wexler (2002, p. 104) pointed out that "at the time of the study, all 20 children were able to *speak and understand English* [italics added] but were not entirely comfortable speaking English. Out of the 15 children who attended school (ages five or older), all but one received special help with English through ESL or Russian bilingual classes or special tutors."

<sup>27</sup>The percentage of irregular and regular forms in Group 3 was 23.81% (30/126) and 76.19% (96/126), respectively. The omission of inflection was high in both Group 2 and Group 3:

Group 2	Inflected forms:	15.12% (31/205)
	Uninflected forms:	84.88% (174/205)
Group 3	Inflected forms:	43.15% (126/292)
	Uninflected forms:	56.85% (166/292)

However, when these L2 learners use finite forms, they almost always use them with the appropriate tense/person/number specifications (cf. similar results in Ionin & Wexler's [2002] study). This information is provided for both groups in the following table:

		Third -s	Past tense	Auxiliary <i>is</i>	Copular <i>is</i>
Percentage of inappropriate use	Group 2	3	2	5	3
	Group 3	2	1	3	1

The data in the table provide evidence against the syntactic impairment hypothesis (Beck, 1998; Eubank 1993/1994; Meisel, 1997), which states that L2 learners' use of nonfinite verbal morphology is due to an impairment of the functional categories and/or features in L2 grammar.

<sup>28</sup>One of the article's reviewers argued that, as there are no instances of null subjects or of postverbal subjects in our database, it would be difficult to make a case for learners' keeping their native syntactic structure in the L2. However, we believe that null subjects and postverbal subjects would be instances of

superficial transfer that does not happen to occur because interlanguage speakers require referents—they will produce DPs but rarely empty subjects if the verb does not carry personal markers. Both Spanish and Basque always mark the referent, and therefore our bilingual participants also do the same in their English interlanguage. The literature on transfer (cf. Gass & Selinker, 1992, among many others) provides numerous examples in which subtle and nonsuperficial transfer is well documented. Transfer is the use of previous knowledge, which does not need to be an exact copy of the L1 structure. Besides, we should not disregard the learners' capacity to use UG principles to build up their interlanguage grammar.

<sup>29</sup>One could think of examples in the fields of both physical and psychological development that would illustrate this point as well. For example, not all children crawl, even though this is taken as a milestone in their physical development.

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## Appendix

## Individual Counts of the Data in Tables 4–6

Table A.1

*Group 1: Grammatical structures by learner in Table 4*

Learner	Lexical verb	Auxiliary <i>is</i>	Placeholder <i>is</i>	Copula <i>is</i>
1	1	3	0	0
2	0	0	2	4
3	0	6	0	3
4	2	6	3	6
5	0	7	2	11
6	1	5	0	4
7	0	14	3	2
8	0	8	13	3
9	0	10	4	6
10	4	2	0	1
11	2	2	0	4
12	8	4	1	4
13	5	5	1	0
14	7	0	0	1
15	0	1	0	0
16	0	2	0	3
17	1	3	1	3
18	11	3	3	9
19	1	1	1	7
20	1	0	1	12
Total	44	82	35	83

Table A.2

*Group 2: Grammatical structures by learner in Table 4*

Learner	Lexical verb	Auxiliary <i>is</i>	Placeholder <i>is</i>	Copula <i>is</i>
1	5	5	1	18
2	26	1	0	3
3	11	1	0	3
4	13	14	0	7
5	7	1	0	2
6	4	1	3	5
7	6	3	0	1
8	16	2	0	0
9	11	3	0	1
10	25	0	3	8
11	14	13	0	4
12	28	0	1	9
13	25	2	1	2
14	28	0	2	1
15	9	0	1	6
16	6	4	1	8
17	14	0	0	7
18	8	5	6	5
19	3	2	0	3
20	8	8	3	10
Total	267	65	22	103

Table A.3

*Group 3: Grammatical structures by learner in Table 4*

Learner	Lexical verb	Auxiliary <i>is</i>	Placeholder <i>is</i>	Copula <i>is</i>
1	18	3	0	12
2	14	7	0	5
3	35	0	0	2
4	31	1	0	7
5	24	3	0	4
6	22	5	2	7
7	15	1	1	2
8	17	5	0	1
9	31	1	0	3
10	30	2	0	10
11	27	2	0	4
12	14	0	0	2
13	16	10	0	7
14	24	6	0	2
15	11	12	1	2
16	15	2	1	4
17	19	0	0	3
18	13	3	0	0
Total	376	63	5	77

Table A.4

*Placeholder he: Counts by learners in Table 5*

Learner	Group 2	Group 3
1	0	3
2	3	0
3	0	1
4	9	1
5	0	1
6	0	5
7	0	0
8	1	0
9	0	0
10	0	0
11	1	0
12	1	0
13	0	1
14	0	0
15	0	0
16	0	0
17	2	0
18	2	2
19	0	
20	3	
Total	22	14

Table A.5

*Subject pronouns: Counts by learners in Table 6*

Learner	Group 2	Group 3
1	0	13
2	3	5
3	0	9
4	16	17
5	0	20
6	0	22
7	1	2
8	1	6
9	0	13
10	0	19
11	1	14
12	2	5
13	0	6
14	0	14
15	0	0
16	1	11
17	10	8
18	11	9
19	0	
20	7	
Total	53	193