Null/ overt subject realization in Spanish heritage and L2 children

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In null subject (NS, *pro*) languages, mastery of null/overt subject (OS) use is late learned and may require prolonged acquisition (Montrul, 2016; Tsimpli, 2014) because complex syntax often involves maturation of extra-linguistic pragmatic-discourse interface faculties. To investigate such a late discourse-pragmatics phenomenon, we examine subject realization in spontaneous production data from Spanish heritage (HL) and second (L2) language children (9-10 years).

Monolingual Spanish adults prefer omission when the topic is not changed or focused, e.g., 80% NSs to OSs in Spain and Mexico (Carvalho et al. 2015). First and third person (Ip, IIIp) differ in rate of OSs (Lastra & Martín Butraguño, 2015; Shin & Erker, 2015; Travis & Torres Cacoullos, 2018), a trend reflecting a range of variables (e.g., dialect, discourse strategies lexical choice). Younger (2-3 years) and older (8-10 years) monolingual children gradually approximate adult usage of NSs (Paradis & Navarro, 2003; Sorace et al., 2009), while English-Spanish bilingual children in an English dominant environment overuse lexical and pronominal subjects when compared to monolinguals (Montrul & Sánchez-Walker, 2015; Silva-Corvalán, 2014). HL and L2 learners often use discourse inappropriate OSs whereas monolinguals prefer NSs (Montrul, 2004; 2016). Past research on Spanish L2 and HL verbal domain has focused mainly on adults, whereas this study compares subject realization by Spanish HL and L2 children following a 50:50 Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program. It aims to determine the impact of this rich input setting on the acquisition and maintenance of these verbal phenomena by L2 and HL learners.

Participants were 21 HL and 41 L2 children in a DLI program of a medium-size US city. A control group of 15 children born and raised in a Spanish majority L1 setting also participated in the study. All children completed the same meaning-based writing production task, a letter to a penpal, intended to elicit spontaneous production. Results are scrutinized for discourse appropriateness of NSs/OSs and I/III person distribution.

The results for IIIp lexical subject realization were comparable for the three profiles, but the overall findings for pronominal subject expression reveal significant differences between all three groups (see Figure 1). Although *HL children* did not lose the prodrop feature, they produced a significantly lower rate of NSs (39%) than L1 children (61%) ($t = -3.0677$, $df = 32.44$, $p = .004$). *L2 children* produced a significantly lower rate of NSs (27%) than both L1 (61%) and HL (39%) children ($t = 6.5526$, $df = 25.425$, $p < .001$; $t = 3.0161$, $df = 36.786$, $p = .004$). They produced a similar rate of lexical subjects (41%) as HL children (42%), but a significantly higher rate of pronominal subjects (32%) than both HL (19%) and L1 children (1%) ($t = -3.7404$, $df = 48.296$, $p < .001$; $t = -11.903$, $df = 43.455$, $p < .001$).

A different picture emerges upon the comparison of Isg and IIIsg, the two most frequent forms in the data. There were no significant differences between the two groups for IIIsg subject realization in topic shift and topic continuity contexts. NSs in topic continuity contexts were favored by L1 (100%), HL (96%), and L2 (94%) children; and overt lexical subjects were preferred in topic shift contexts (L1 children 90%, HL and L2 children 93%). However, the three groups behaved differently in their realization of Isg subjects (see Figure 2). HL children produced significantly more pronominal subjects (47%) than L1 children (3%) ($t = 4.7582$, $df = 35$, $p < .001$). L2 children produced significantly more pronominal subjects (83%) than both L1 and L2 children ($t = 10.813$, $df = 52$, $p < .001$; $t = 15.976$, $df = 58$, $p < .001$).

In sum, our data show that despite the DLI setting, HL children have difficulties with the pragmatic distribution of null and overt subjects, as also noticed in previous similar research with adults (De Prada Pérez, 2020; Montrul, 2004; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012) and children (Montrul & Sánchez-Walker, 2015), but only for Ip singular. We argue that the differential distribution of NSs and OSs is related to the complexity of this syntax-pragmatic interface area (Sorace et al., 2009) and the influence of English, and explain the preponderance of Isg pronominal subjects in HL and L2 production in relation to frequency in the input (Shin & Erker, 2015; Travis et al., 2018).

FIGURE 1. Subject realization

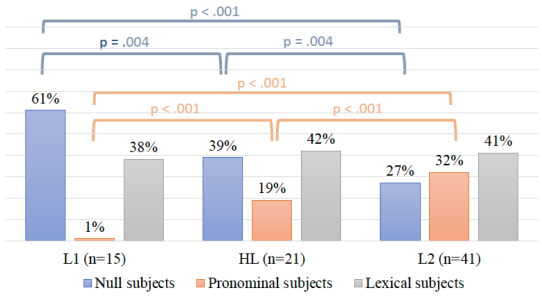
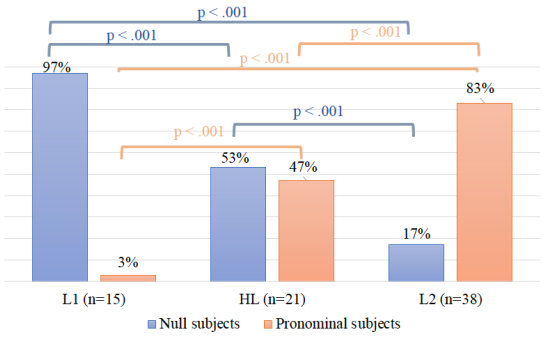


FIGURE 2. First person singular subject realization



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