First Language Transfer in the Acquisition of English Object Pronouns by Sinhala-Speaking ESL Learners

CHANDEERA GUNAWARDHANA[1]

University of Kelaniya

chandeera@kln.ac.lk

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2586-4051

ABSTRACT

The current paper reports on an empirical study investigating the unlearning of null object pronouns by twenty-four English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from Sri Lanka. Further, the ESL learners are native Sinhala speakers. One of the main cross-linguistic differences between Sinhala and English is that Sinhala allows null object pronouns, whereas English does not. Previous studies have investigated the acquisition of object pronouns by ESL learners, and they report that the acquisition of object pronouns could be problematic for ESL learners due to first language transfer. However, there have been no empirical studies that investigate the unlearning of null arguments by Sinhala ESL learners. Therefore, the present study intends to fill the gap in the research by investigating the unlearning of null object pronouns by Sinhala ESL learners. The data were collected via an audio acceptability judgement task (audio AJT) and a production task (PT). In the audio AJT, the ESL learners accepted null object pronouns to a certain extent, whereas in the PT, they had a strong preference for null object pronouns. Therefore, based on the overall results, I suggest that Sinhala ESL learners have difficulty in unlearning null object pronouns in English.

Keywords: object pronouns, Sinhala ESL learners, null arguments, topic-drop languages, first language transfer

---

1

Introduction

Argument omission in second language (L2) has provided an important testing ground for researchers (Zyzik 110; Yuan 497). It is clearly demonstrated that there are crosslinguistic differences in the expression of arguments (Zyzik 110). For example, some languages allow null object pronouns (e.g. Chinese, Tamil, Japanese, Sinhala, Spanish, Portuguese), whereas others do not (e.g. English, French) (Thampoe 360; Grüter 391; Adiv 142; White 368; Paradis 137; Zyzik 110). Further, previous studies have investigated the acquisition of object pronouns by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, and they report that the acquisition of object pronouns could be problematic for ESL learners due to first language (L1) transfer (Schwartz and Sprouse 172; White 440; Zyzik 110; Yuan 497). Sinhala allows both null and overt object pronouns. Therefore, previous studies do not provide enough evidence to determine whether L2 learners could select the facilitative structure when there has access to both facilitative and nonfacilitative structures. Therefore, the present study sets out to investigate whether ESL learners whose L1 is Sinhala can unlearn null arguments in L2 English.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. First, I will explain the crosslinguistic differences between English and Sinhala with respect to object pronominalization, and then previous studies on object pronoun acquisition will be reviewed. Research objectives and predictions precede the quantitative study, which is followed by a discussion in which I discuss the results in relation to the predictions.

Object pronominalization in Sinhala and English

Among many linguistic differences between Sinhala and English, one main difference is that Sinhala allows null object pronouns, whereas English requires overt object pronouns (Thampoe 360; Gair 143; Gair and Karunatillake 774). As illustrated in (1), referential object pronouns (her) are expressed overtly in English. Further, as exemplified in (2), null objects are ungrammatical in English. On the contrary, Sinhala allows overt and null referential object pronouns, as demonstrated in (3-b) and (3-c), respectively.

1. Did you see Mala?
   Yes, I saw her.

2. Did you see Mala?
   *Yes, I saw ø.

3. a. oyya   Mala   dækk-a   də?
      you   Mala   see-PST.1.SG   Q
      'Did you see Mala?'

   b. ow   mame   eyya   dækk-a.
      yes   I   her   see-PST.1.SG
      'Yes, I saw her.'

   c. ow   mame   ø   dækk-a.
      yes   I   (her)   see- PST.1.SG
      'Yea, I saw (her).'

It is noteworthy to understand how null object pronouns are licensed in Sinhala as the present study investigates the L1 transfer effect from Sinhala. Languages that allow subjects of finite sentences to be null and those that do not is an important cross-linguistic variation that is related to a single parameter of Universal Grammar (UG), the pro-drop parameter (Chomsky 310). According to Chomsky, null subjects are licenced in languages like Spanish (as in 4), Portuguese and Italian because of their rich subject-verb agreement systems (20-310. In these languages, verbs are inflected for person, tense, number and mood (Huang 574; Rizzi 557). Therefore, Huang maintains that in these languages, null subjects can be recovered from the inflections of the verb (544). Some languages like Chinese (as in 5) and Japanese accept null object pronouns, in addition to null subjects (Huang, 574). However, they do not have a rich subject-verb agreement system (Huang 574; Rizzi 557; Thampoe 360). Further, Chinese and Japanese are known as radical pro-drop languages because, in these languages, null subjects and null object pronouns can be retrieved from the discourse and not from grammar (Yuan 497; Thampoe 360; Jaeggli and Safir, 44). As noted previously, Sinhala allows null object pronouns (as in 3c). Additionally, it allows null subjects, as in (6b). Further, it does not have a rich subject-verb agreement system (Thampoe 360; Gair 143; Gair and Karunatillake 774). Therefore, Thampoe argues that Sinhala is also a radical pro-drop[2] language (1-360). Radical pro-drop languages allow discourse topics to be dropped as they can be retrieved from the discourse (Thampoe 360; Huang 574: Yuan 497). In (3c), the object *eyya* "her" is the discourse topic, and it can be dropped because it can be retrieved from the discourse. Therefore, Gair argues that Sinhala and Chinese display the same

---

[2] Radical pro-drop languages are also known as super pro-drop language

behaviour with regard to the occurrence of null arguments, and they conclude that Sinhala and Chinese are topic-drop languages (123).

4. a. ø   vivo   en Texas
   (I)   live-1SG   in Texas
   'I live in Texas.'

  b. ø   vives   en Texas
   (you) live-2SG   in Texas
   'You live in Texas.'

  c. ø   vive   en Texas
   s/he live-3SG in Texas
   'S/He lives in Texas.

  d. ø   vivimos   en Texas
   (we)   live-1PL   in Texas
   'We live in Texas.'

5. a. Zhangsan   kanjian   Lisi   le ma?
   Zhangsan   see.PST.3.SG   Lisi   le ø
   'Did Zhangsan see Lisi?'

  b. ta kanjian   ta   le.
   he see.PST.3.SG   him   le
   'He saw him.'

  c. ø   kanjian   ta   le.
   (he)   see.PST.3.SG   him   le
   'He saw him.'

  d. ta   kanjian   ø   le.
   he   see.PST.3.SG   (him) le
   'He saw him.'   (Huang 574)

In sum, Sinhala allows both null and overt object pronouns, while in English, object pronouns are expressed overtly, and it does not allow null object pronouns. Thus, with respect to the topic-drop parameter, English has a setting of [– topic-drop] and Sinhala [+ topic-drop]. As mentioned previously, the present study aimed to investigate how this typological difference affects the acquisition of English object pronouns by Sinhala ESL learners.

6.   a. oyya Mala dækk-a   də?
   you Mala   see-PST.1.SG   Q
   'Did you see Mala?'

b. ow ø eyya dækk-a.
yes I her see-PST.1.SG
'Yea, I saw her.'

Previous research on null object pronouns in L2 acquisition

In the field of L2 acquisition, researchers are interested in investigating whether L2 learners from a null argument language background are able to unlearn the L1 native setting when they acquire an L2 that disallows null arguments (Zobl 196; Yuan 497; Kong 265; Zhao 196; Namtapi and Pongpairoj 157). Further, previous studies suggest that learners whose L1s allow null object pronouns have difficulty acquiring an L2 that requires overt object pronouns (Yuan 497).

One of the first seminal studies on the null object phenomenon in L2 acquisition was done by Zobl (196). His study examined the unlearning of null object pronouns by ESL learners from different L1s Chinese, English and Japanese) The data was collected via a judgement task. Zobl reports that the rejection rate of null-object English sentences by the Chinese ESL learners was lower than that of the non-Chinese ESL learners (180). Yuan carried out a similar study by examining the null argument phenomenon by Chinese ESL learners (196). He investigated the unlearning of null subjects and null object pronouns by adult ESL learners. One hundred and fifty-nine ESL learners from China participated in the experiment. He divided the participants into seven groups based on their English proficiency. The data was collected via an acceptability judgement task which was designed to test the unlearning of null subjects and null object pronouns in English. Interestingly, the results showed an asymmetry of null subjects and null object pronouns in L1-Chinese–L2-English interlanguage. Yuan found that most of his ESL learners were able to detect the ungrammaticality of null subjects in English, while it was difficult for them to detect sentences with incorrect null object pronouns (186). He concluded that the Chinese ESL learners were unable to detect the ungrammaticality of English sentences with null object pronouns because the setting of [+ topic-drop] in the learners' L1 Chinese was transferred to their English. Further, he argues that the [+ topic-drop] setting remains active even at advanced stages.

Kong also investigated the acquisition of obligatory overt arguments (subjects and object pronouns) in English by Chinese ESL learners (265). He tested null subjects and null object pronouns in matrix and embedded sentences. The overall results showed that the participants performed significantly better on matrix sentences than on embedded sentences, regardless of whether null subjects or null object pronouns were involved. However, Chinese ESL learners performed significantly better on null matrix subjects than on null matrix object pronouns

across the two conditions. Therefore, the results suggest that null matrix object pronouns are generally difficult for Chinese speakers.

Namtapi and Pongpairoj examined the unlearning of null arguments by Thai ESL learners (157). Null object pronouns are used in Thai more frequently than overt object pronouns (Namtapi and Pongpairoj 145). The experiment involved 120 Thai ESL learners. Based on their English proficiency, the participants were divided into two groups: intermediate and advanced. The data was collected via a grammaticality judgement task (GJT). The GJT included null subjects and null object pronouns in matrix and embedded clauses. The results showed that the advanced group detected the ungrammaticality of null subjects. Further, the researchers found that the intermediate participants accepted null embedded subjects at a higher rate than null matrix subjects. Based on the overall results, interestingly, the authors conclude that both groups had difficulty recognizing null object pronouns in matrix and embedded clauses.

Previous research also demonstrates that French as a foreign language (FFL) learners also have difficulty unlearning null object pronouns due to L1 transfer (Chinese or Spanish). Grüter and Crago investigated L1 transfer effect on the production and comprehension of object clitics by FFL learners whose L1 is either Chinese or Spanish (549). Spanish has object clitics which are similar to French (Grüter and Crago 549). As noted previously, Chinese allow overt and null referential object pronouns. The data was collected via an elicited production task and a truth-value judgment task. The findings suggest that the Spanish-speaking learners performed better than the Chinese-speaking learners in the production task. Production of preverbal clitics was significantly higher in the L1 Spanish group (68.6%) in comparison to the L1 Chinese group (42.3%). Therefore, this study also shows L1 transfer plays a significant role in the acquisition of object clitics in L2 French.

In the literature, it has been shown that L1 transfer plays an important role in L2 acquisition (White 368). Moreover, the discussion so far shows that L1 transfer also plays a significant role in the acquisition of object pronouns by ESL learners.

Research objectives

As mentioned before, knowledge of object pronouns in L1-Sinhala–L2-English interlanguage has not previously been studied. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap in the research by investigating the unlearning of null object pronouns by Sinhala ESL learners. The studies discussed previously show that learners whose Lls allow null arguments have difficulty acquiring non-null arguments in English.

The following research question and hypotheses will be investigated in this paper:
- To what extent is the acquisition of English object pronouns of Sinhala-speaking ESL learners is influenced by their L1?

Hypothesis 1: Sinhala ESL learners will assume that LI parameter settings are appropriate for the acquisition of English object pronouns. The setting of [+ topic-drop] in Sinhala speakers' L1 will be transferred into their L2 English. As a result of L1 transfer, Sinhala ESL learners will accept null object pronouns in English as in (7).

7.   Question: Do you see your friends?
        Answer: *Yes, I often see.

Hypothesis 2: Sinhala ESL learners will assume that LI parameter settings are not appropriate for the acquisition of English object pronouns, and they will not transfer the setting of [+ topic-drop] in L1 Sinhala into English. This means that they will accept object pronouns in English as in (8) and reject null arguments in English (as in 7).

8.   Question: Do you see your friends?
        Answer: Yes, I often see them.

Study Participants

Forty-one participants took part in the study. There were two groups: a native group and a non-native group. The non-native group (hereafter ESL learners) included twenty-four participants (female: 20; age mode: 21; range: 20-24). They all speak Sinhala as their L1. The control groups included seventeen L1-English speakers[3] (female:15; age mode: 19; range:17-28). The native group was recruited from the University of York, UK, whereas the ESL learners[4] were undergraduate students from the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Participants' information are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of participants information

Group	Age		Gender			
	Mode	Range	Male	Female	First Language	Additional Languages
Native speaker	21	20-25	01	29	English	n/a
ESL learners	21	20-24	04	20	Sinhala	English

---

[3] The control group was recruited to ensure the validity of the test instruments (see Mackey and Gass (43)) and also to understand the effect of L1 transfer (see Larson-Hall, 120)

[4] They only had English as an additional language

This study is situated within the field of second language acquisition research. Following the formal L2 acquisition studies, I included a control group of adult native speakers of English. According to top-notch researchers Mackey and Gass (43), a control group of adult native speakers must be included to ensure the validity of the test instruments. Mackey and Gass maintain that "Formal SLA studies nearly always include a control group of adult native speakers of the target language. The control group is expected to perform at ceiling on all test categories. Pilot testing the test instrument with a small group of native speakers is a must: if native speakers are not performing at or near ceiling (45)." A seminal study on the acquisition of object pronouns by L2 English speakers was done by Yuan (478), and the present study employs a similar research design with adult native speakers as a control group.

The ESL learners completed a Cambridge English proficiency test (University Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate). The English proficiency test assessed the participants in reading, comprehension and grammar through sixty multiple-choice questions. The results are given in Table 2. The ESL learners were all educated at mainstream Sri Lankan schools where English is introduced as a second language and the participants did not speak a third language. The Cambridge English proficiency test provides a mapping from this test to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). The results indicate that the ESL learners have intermediate low proficiency in English.

Table 2: Proficiency test scores

	Minimum	Maximum	Test mean score (SD)
English proficiency scores (out of 60)	32	42	32.79 (4.25)

Materials

The study included two test instruments. The data was collected via an audio acceptability judgement task (audio AJT) and a production task (PT). The participants completed the audio AJT first and then the PT.

Acceptability judgement task

The audio AJT was designed to test the unlearning of null objects in the acquisition of English by Sinhala speakers. The audio AJT was built in PsychoPy.v3.0 (Peirce, 2007). The audio AJT involved listening to audio-

recorded two-person short dialogues in English as in (9) and (10). In the audio AJT, the participants judged the answers given by the second person in the dialogues. The judgments of the participants were measured on a seven-point Likert scale of 0 to 6, where 0 means completely unacceptable and 6 means perfectly acceptable. The audio AJT tested the grammaticality contrast between S-V-ObjPro and *S-V-ø as in (9) and (10). The AJT included twenty tokens and thirty fillers. The twenty tokens were divided equally (10 grammatical and 10 ungrammatical). The grammatical tokens focused on the S-V-ObjPro structure as in (9), whereas the ungrammatical tokens tested the *S-V-ø structure as in (10). The fillers focused on adverb placement as in (11) and (12). The design of the audio AJT is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Design of the audio AJT

|		**Example**	
			N
Grammaticality	**Structure**	**(Context question in italics; sentences for judgement in plain text)**	
Grammatical	S-V-ObjPro	*Do you see your friends?* Yes, I often see **them**.	10
Ungrammatical	*S-V- ø	*Do you see your friends?* *yes, I see often.	10
Grammatical	S-Adv-V-X	*Which musical instrument does Simon play?* He **frequently** plays the guitar at school.	15
Ungrammatical	*S-V-Adv-X	*Which musical instrument does Simon play?* * He plays **frequently** guitar at school.	15

I made the following predictions regarding the ESL learners' behaviour on the audio AJT. If there is an L1 transfer effect, then the setting of [+ topic-drop] in the ESL learners' L1 would be transferred into their English. This means that the ESL learners would accept null objects pronouns in English, and they would attribute a high mean rating to the ungrammatical *S-V-ø structure. However, if the ESL learners' set the appropriate L2 value of the parameter [-topic-drop] in English, then they would reject *S-V-ø structures in English. Further, they would attribute a high mean rating to the grammatical S-V-ObjPro structure.

9. a. Question: Can you buy the gifts today?
    b. Answer: Yes, I can buy them today.   S-V-ObjPro

10. a.. Question: As in (9), Question
    b. *Yes, I can buy today.   *S-V-ø

11. a. Question: Which musical instrument does Simon play?
    b. Answer: He frequently plays the guitar at school.   S-Adv-V-X

12. a. Question: As in (10), Question
    b. Answer: *He plays frequently the guitar at school   *S-V-Adv-X

Production task

The production task aimed to elicit object pronouns in English. The production task included twenty-five tokens. There were ten tokens and fifteen fillers. The tokens elicited the production of object pronouns in English, whereas the fillers focused on adverb placement. The procedure for presenting each token was as follows (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Production task test item
Simon has bought a sandwich this morning.
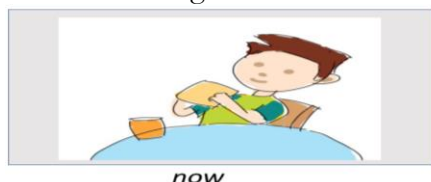
What is he doing with the sandwich?

The participants first saw context sentences on a slide. Two seconds later, the participants were presented a picture of a person or people doing an activity while the context sentence remained in view. The context sentences helped the participants to understand the picture. The picture was immediately followed by a prompt word while the picture and context sentence remained in view. Finally, two seconds after the prompt word, the participants were presented a question to which the participants provided answers orally. Further, they were instructed to include the prompt word on each slide. The answers were audio recorded. The design of the production task is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Design of the production task

Type of tokens	Example	N
	(Context statement in plain text; *Question in italic)*	
Object pronoun tokens	Simon has bought a sandwich this morning. *What is he doing with the sandwich?*	15
Adverb tokens (fillers)	Charlotte loves music *Which musical instrument is she playing?*	10

The following predictions were made regarding the ESL learners' behaviour on the PT. If the ESL learners assume that LI parameter settings are appropriate for the acquisition of English, they will then assume that the *S-V-ø structure is grammatical in English. This means that the ESL learners would use the *S-V-ø structure predominantly in the PT. However, if the ESL learners are able to set the appropriate L2 value of the parameter [-topic-drop], they will then use the S-V-ObjPro structure predominantly in their responses.

Results

This section reports the results for object pronouns across the two tasks. Before turning to the results of the PT, I present the audio AJT results.

Acceptability judgement data

The descriptive statistics of the audio AJT are presented in Table 5, and the data is further illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Table 5: AJT mean ratings on object pronoun condition (scale =0-6)

Structure	L1 English		L 2 English	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
S-V-ObjPro	5.43	0.73	4.85	0.90
*S-V-ø	0.66	0.82	3.93	0.88

Figure 2: Means acceptability ratings (scale = 0–6) on grammatical S-Cl-V versus ungrammatical *S-V-ø structures by English natives with 95% CI bars
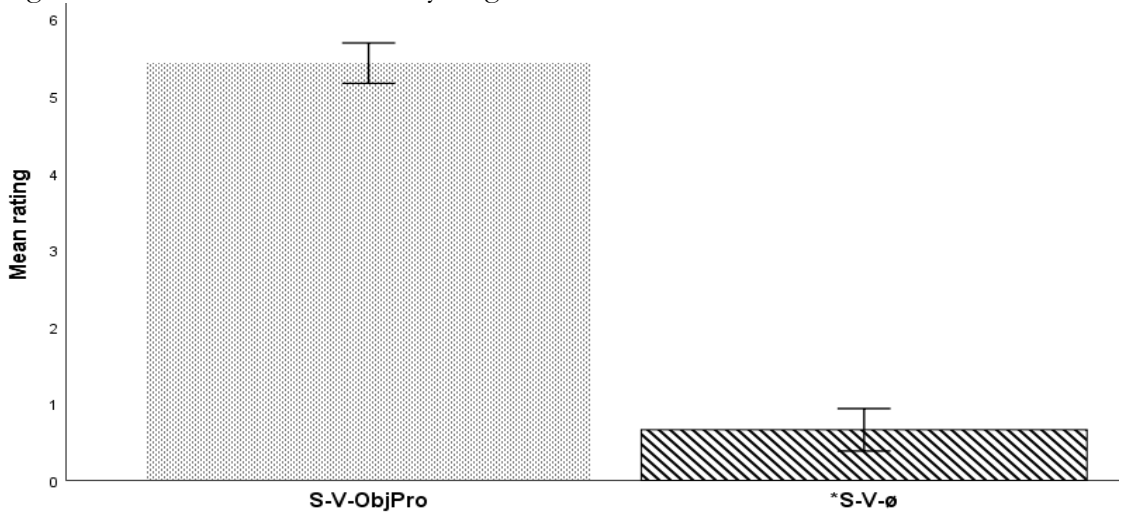
Figure 2: Means acceptability ratings (scale = 0–6) on grammatical S-Cl-V versus ungrammatical *S-V-ø structures by ESL learners with 95% CI bars
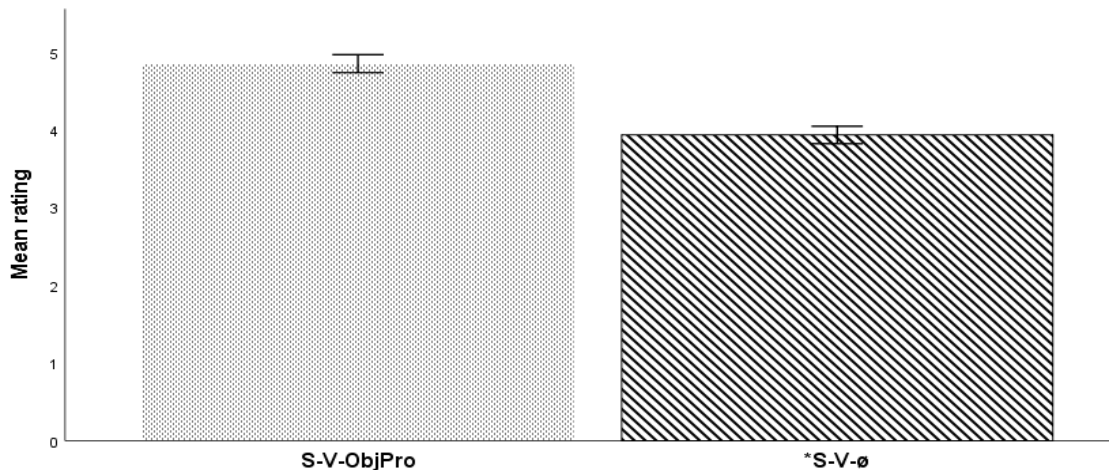
As expected, the English native group differentiated greatly between S-V-ObjPro and *S-V-ø structures with a mean of close to the maximum of 6 for the grammatical structure and a mean of close to the minimum, zero, for the ungrammatical structure. However, differently from the native speakers, the ESL learners did not make a strong distinction between grammatical S-V-ObjPro structures and ungrammatical S-V-ø structures. Nonetheless, the confidence interval bars do not overlap within the ESL learners. This indicates that this difference is not statistically significant (Larson-Hall 85).

A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the Audio AJT data with Grammaticality (grammatical vs. ungrammatical) as the within-subjects variable and Group (ESL learners and English native speakers) as the between-subjects variable. For the inferential statistical analysis, the alpha level was set at .05 in accordance with the typical practice in the field (Larson-Hall 86). The results of the repeated measures ANOVAs are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Results of repeated measures ANOVAs

	f	df	p	partial $\eta 2$	Power
Grammaticality	978.29	1.00	<.001	.70	1.00
Group	188.10	1.00	<.001	.31	1.00
Grammaticality X Group	444.23	1.00	<.001	.52	1.00

Table 6 shows that there is a significant main effect of Grammaticality ($F(1, 00)$ = 978.29, P= .001, partial η^2 = .70, power = 1.00). The results also showed a significant main effect of Group ($F(1, 00)$ = 188.10, P= .001, partial η^2 = .31, power = 1.00). This suggests that the judgements of the two groups are different. Finally, the results also revealed that a significant interaction of Grammaticality

by Group ($F(1, 00) = 449.22$, $P = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .52$, power $= 1.00$). I will revisit these results later in the paper.

Production task

The results are shown in Table 7, and the data given in Table 6 are illustrated in Figure 3.

Table 7: Percentage (raw number) of each structure produced in the production task, by group

Structure produced	Group	
	English Natives (*n=17*)	ESL Learners (*n=24*)
S-V-ObjPro	66.47 (113)	09.17 (22)
S-V-NP	33.53 (57)	27.50 (66)
*S-V-ø	00.00 (00)	63.33 (152)

Figure 3: Percentage of each structure produced in the production task, by group
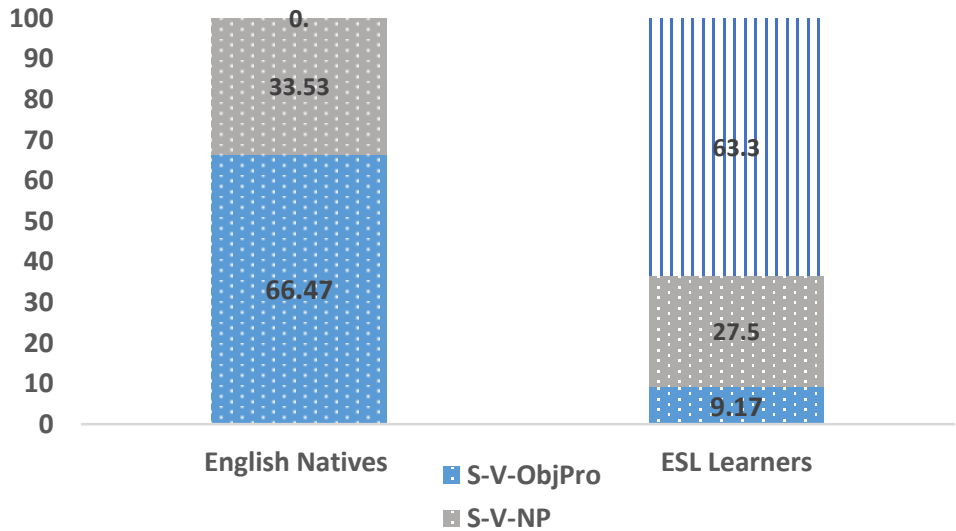
The responses of the ESL learners included three structures: S-V-ObjPro, S-V-NP and *S-V-ø. As expected, the English native speakers did not use *S-V-ø structure. The ESL learners looked very different from the English native group.

The English native speakers have 66.47% use of V-ObjPro structures, suggesting their strong preference for that structure (see Figure 3). However, the ESL learners have only 9.17% use of S-V-ObjPro structures in their responses. Unlike the English native speakers, the non-native speakers predominantly used the *S-V-ø structure (63.33%). Therefore, following Rogers (2009), I suggest that they used null object answer at above chance level. Further, they also used the alternative grammatical S-V-NP structures in their responses (27.5%).

Discussion

In this section, I recall the hypotheses, and then I consider whether they are supported by the findings. Hypothesis 1 states that ESL learners will assume that LI parameter settings are appropriate for the L2. Therefore, they would assume that the [+ topic-drop] setting is appropriate for the acquisition of English object pronouns, and they will accept null object pronouns.

Turning to Hypothesis 2, it claims that ESL learners will assume that LI parameter settings are not appropriate for the acquisition of English object pronouns, and they will not transfer the [+ topic-drop] setting of Sinhala into their L2 English. This means that they will not accept null object pronouns in English.

In the audio AJT, the English native speakers made a robust distinction between grammatical (S-V-ObjPro) and ungrammatical (*S-V-ø) structures. However, the ESL learners did not do it with such stark differentiation as the native English group because the mean ratings that ESL learners attributed to the ungrammatical structure are above the mid-point of the scale. Further, the data showed a significant interaction of Grammaticality by Group. This clearly shows that the two groups differ from each other with regards to the extent of their differentiation between grammatical and ungrammatical structures. The significant main effect of Grammaticality along with the non-overlapping confidence interval bars within the ESL learners suggest that they make a distinction between the grammatical and ungrammatical structures in the judgement task. Therefore, the overall results support Hypothesis 2.

In the PT, the English native speakers predominantly used the S-V-ObjPro structure in their responses. As expected, they did not use the *S-V-ø structure in their responses. Instead, they used the alternative S-V-NP structure. Turning to the ESL learners, they used three structures (S-V-ObjPro, S-V-NP, *S-V-ø) in their responses. Unlike the native group, the non-native group has 63.33% use of the S-V-ø structure. Interestingly, the ESL learners have only 9.17% use of *S-V-ø structure. Following Rogers (2009), I argue that if the ESL learners choose null object pronouns at above chance levels, then it is reasonable to conclude that

ESL learners do not have an underlying representation for object pronouns in English. Furthermore, based on the PT results, I suggest that ESL learners were unable to set the appropriate L2 value of the parameter [-topic-drop] in English. Consequently, the PT results are compatible with Hypothesis 1.

The overall results show that the ESL learners' performance in judgement task differs from that of the PT. As noted previously, in the audio AJT, the ESL learners distinguished between grammatical and ungrammatical structures. However, they do not make a robust distinction between the two structures. This suggests that the ESL learners' mental grammar for English allows null object pronouns to a certain extent. In the production task, the ESL learners predominantly used *S-V-ø structure (63.33%), and the use of S-V-ObjPro structure is low at 9.17%. As I have argued in this paper, Sinhala ESL learners have the setting of [+ topic-drop] in their L1, and they have to unlearn this setting in their acquisition of English.

The overall results of the study provide substantial evidence to believe that transfer of L1 [+ topic-drop] setting causes Sinhala ESL learners problems in unlearning null object pronouns in L2 English. The results reported in the present paper are also compatible with the results reported by Yuan (497). Yuan reports that Chinese ESL learners had difficulty unlearning null object pronouns in English due to the lack of positive evidence. As mentioned earlier, the ESL learners in this study had low-intermediate proficiency in English (496). Therefore, the findings suggest that the unlearning of null object pronouns is problematic even for low-intermediate Sinhala ESL learners.

Conclusion

The study reported in this paper attempts to fill a gap in the research by investigating the unlearning of null object pronouns by Sinhala ESL learners. Based on the previous research, I predict that the unlearning of null object pronouns would be problematic for Sinhala ESL learners. Further, it was argued that to unlearn null object pronouns in English; the Sinhala ESL learners need to set the appropriate value of the parameter [-topic-drop] in English. The results suggest that the low intermediate Sinhala ESL learners accept null object pronouns in English. This shows that the [+ topic-drop] setting is active even in low intermediate L1-Sinhala–L2-English interlanguage. Therefore, the results suggest that due to L1 transfer, the learning object pronominalization in L2 English is problematic for native Sinhala speakers.

Bibliography

Adiv, Ellen. "Language learning strategies: The relationship between L1 operating principles and language transfer in L2 development." *Second languages: A crosslinguistic perspective* (1984): 125-142.

Chomsky, Noam. "Lectures on government and binding. Dordrecht, Foris, 1981." *Studies in generative grammar* 9 (1981).

Council of Europe. Council for Cultural Co-operation. Education Committee. Modern Languages Division. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Gair, James, and Shirley Karunatillake. "Lexical anaphors and pronouns in Sinhala." *Lexical Anaphors and Pronouns in Selected South Asian Languages:*. De Gruyter Mouton, 2010. 715-774.

Gair, James. "Some aspects of finiteness and control in Sinhala." *2005*. De Gruyter Mouton, 2005. 117-143.

Grüter, Theres. "Comprehension and production of French object clitics by child second language learners and children with specific language impairment." *Applied psycholinguistics* 26.3 (2005): 363-391.

Grüter, Theres, and Martha Crago. "Object clitics and their omission in child L2 French: The contributions of processing limitations and L1 transfer." *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 15.3 (2011): 531-549.

Huang, C-T. James. "On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns." *Linguistic inquiry* (1984a): 531-574.

Jaeggli, Osvaldo, and Kenneth Safir. "The null subject parameter and parametric theory." *The null subject parameter*. Springer, Dordrecht, 1989. 1-44.

Kong, Stano. "The partial access of Universal Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: an investigation of the acquisition of English Subjects by L1 Chinese speakers." *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 14.3 (2005): 227-265.

Larson-Hall, Jenifer. *A guide to doing statistics in second language research using SPSS and R*. Routledge, 2015.

Mackey, Alison, and Susan M. Gass. *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Routledge, 2015.

Namtapi, Itsara, and Nattama Pongpairoj. "The acquisition of L2 English non-null arguments by L1 Thai learners." *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 37.3 (2016): 140-157.

Paradis, Johanne. "Are object omissions in Romance object clitic omissions?" *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 4.1 (2001): 36-137.

Rizzi, Luigi. "Null objects in Italian and the theory of pro." *Linguistic inquiry* 17.3 (1986): 501-557.

Peirce, Jonathan W. "PsychoPy—psychophysics software in Python." *Journal of neuroscience methods* 162.1-2 (2007): 8-13.

Rizzi, Luigi. "Null objects in Italian and the theory of pro." *Linguistic inquiry* 17.3 (1986): 501-557.

Schwartz, Bonnie D., and Rex A. Sprouse. "L2 cognitive states and the full transfer/full access model." *Second language research* 12.1 (1996): 40-72.

Thampoe, Harold Dharmasenan. *Sinhala and Tamil: a case of contact-induced restructuring.* Diss. Newcastle University, 2017.

University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate, (2001). Available at: https://pdfslide.net/documents/quick-placement-test-university-press-and-university-of-cambridge-local-examinations.html

Wang, Yu and Yu, Zao. (2012). "The Study of Null Subject and Null Objects in English Syntax of Chinese Students". *Modern Foreign Language, 4(1), 36–37*

White, Lydia. *Second language acquisition and universal grammar.* Cambridge University Press, 2003.

White, Lydia. "Clitics in L2 French." *Language Acquisition and Language Disorders* 14 (1996): 335-368.

White, Lydia. "Markedness and second language acquisition: The question of transfer." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 9.3 (1987): 261-285.

Yuan, Boping. "Asymmetry of null subjects and null objects in Chinese speakers'L2 English." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 19.4 (1997): 467-497.

Zhao, Lucy Xia. "Interpretation of Chinese overt and null embedded arguments by English-speaking learners." *Second Language Research* 28.2 (2012): 169-190.

Zobl, Helmut. "Prior linguistic knowledge and the conservation of the learning procedure: Grammaticality judgments of unilingual and multilingual learners." Language transfer in language learning (1992): 176-196.

Zyzik, Eve C. "Null objects in second language acquisition: Grammatical vs. performance models." *Second Language Research* 24.1 (2008): 65-110.