Null objects in L2 English: Referentiality, proficiency, and discourse-based inference

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Abstract ID: 461
Event: Linguistics 2026 Paris
Subject: 9. Pragmatics
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Abstract

English is generally characterized as a non-object-drop language, yet object omission is possible in restricted discourse-pragmatic environments (e.g., Fillmore, 1986; Goldberg, 2005). Generic null objects are licensed with certain lexical verbs (e.g., *They build _ for a living [= They build homes for a living*]), while referential nulls are more constrained and depend on discourse salience and conversational implicature (e.g., Do, 2024). This pattern contrasts with Slavic languages, where discourse-linked referential object drop is substantially more productive (e.g., Ruda, 2017). Previous L2/L3 studies largely focused on the syntactic/semantic restrictions of object omission in English (e.g., García Mayo & Slabakova, 2015; Guijarro-Fuentes, 2024; Yuan, 1997). The present study examines whether L1-Slavic/L2-English learners acquire semantic/pragmatic constraints on object omission in L2 English and whether sensitivity to them develops with proficiency.

Participants were 98 adults: 52 native speakers of American English and 46 L1-Slavic learners of English divided by proficiency into Native-like (n = 20), Advanced (n = 18), and Intermediate (n = 8) groups. The learners had mixed instructed and immersion learning histories and substantial experience using English in the United States (≈ 20 years). All participants completed an online acceptability-judgment task consisting of short dialogue exchanges. Experimental items manipulated object realization (null vs. overt) across three discourse conditions (6 items per condition): Generic (no antecedent, non-referential), Specific Indefinite (+antecedent, referential), and Definite (+antecedent, referential). For example, in a generic context participants evaluated response alternatives such as *We could start cooking _ at home* versus *We could start cooking meals at home* to the question 'How can we save more money?'; in a referential context, they compared *When are we going to play _?* with *When are we going to play it?* to the question 'I love this card game!'. Responses were rated on a 7-point scale. Mixed-effects analyses examined effects of object type, discourse condition, proficiency, and experiential variables. The task also included 18 distractor dialogues.

The results reveal a statistically significant generic>referential asymmetry. Across proficiency groups, learners rated null objects more highly in Generic than in referential contexts, demonstrating sensitivity to the pragmatic licensing of object omission. Native speakers preferred overt objects in Definite and Indefinite contexts but did not categorically reject referential nulls. Native-like learners most closely approximated this pattern. Advanced and Intermediate learners were more conservative: they under-accepted referential nulls relative to native speakers. Importantly, this pattern runs counter to a straightforward L1-transfer prediction. Age of onset, age of arrival, and years of residence in the United States did not reliably predict object ratings; only proficiency level did.

These findings show that the developmental challenge is not simply learning that English requires overt objects, but learning when omission is pragmatically natural. More broadly, null objects provide a useful testing ground for the development of syntax–discourse interface knowledge, showing that the structure of pragmatic intuitions varies by proficiency. From an applied perspective, the findings suggest that instruction can profitably draw learners' attention to contrasts among overt, naturally implicit, and discourse-supported object interpretations, thereby promoting more context-sensitive pragmatic competence.